The Women of Middle Fork

A Thesis
Presented to
the Faculty of the Caudill College of Humanities
Morehead State University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
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December 9, 1999
Accepted by the faculty of the Caudill College of Humanities Morehead State University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree.

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Date

December 9, 1999
The strongest women I've known were Appalachian women. My grandmother, for instance, went to work as a maid at the Hatcher Hotel in Pikeville when she was 12 and dreamed of being a dancer like the ones who put on shows on the steamboats that went up the Levisa Fork of the Big Sandy at the turn of the century. Instead, she married a scholarly coal miner/farmer and raised eight children of his, as well as several of his brothers and sisters, some of their children and a few of her own grandchildren. A grower of vegetables, flowers and people, she died the year after I left home, I've always believed, because she had no one else to grow.

These strong Appalachian women survived — and survive — by sheer will. "You do because you have to, no ifs, ands nor buts about it," my grandmother would say. When they're lucky, these women survive with joy.

Yet, the weakest women I've known were Appalachian women. My grandmother, for instance, as a widow in her forties turned down a marriage proposal that would have made her life easier when her bullying eldest daughter disapproved. One son, a perpetual ne'er-do-well, suckled her money and her emotions. I learned just a few years ago
that the woman whom I considered the strongest person in the world had a nervous breakdown when I was a child.

These weak Appalachian women spend their lives as subjects to their men, their children and cultural expectations. Like Joyce's Irishers, the things they believe sustain them — the family and the church — are links in their shackles. Female Jobs, they pray and their suffering does not abate.

These women — strong, weak, blended — are the focus of this collection of loosely connected stories, The Women of Middle Fork. The fictional locale ties the women together. From this common root they branch, as similar as all women, as diverse as the mountain streams that feed Middle Fork, some spring-fed and everlasting, some free-ranging and unanchored, some dried up and endangered.

While I hope the commonalty is perceived, I am also interested in diversity. I want to show that there is no one prototype for the "mountain mama." I want these stories to present individuals, rather than stereotypes. I want them to reflect the diversity I see in the mountains. On Middle Fork are old women and young women, poor women and well-off women, proud and abashed, beautiful and imperfect, aggressive and reticent, dreamy and despairing. They are Appalachian women, but first they are women. These stories, however, are not written from a strictly feminist perspective. Rather, they are about people who happen to be women. They are not intended to make a political statement, although some may.

In Loyal Jones' essay "Appalachian Values," he includes family and a sense of place as strong values in this region. Without intending to — subconsciously perhaps — these two concepts figure prominently
in the Middle Fork stories. Each of the women is centered in her family. Dessie, for example, is drawn to the family cemetery on a snowy day, and her heritage is keenly felt as she rests on a tombstone. The place — the mountains — is vital in most of the stories, "Libby" and "Alene," in particular, where the women relish the physical characteristics of their home.

These stories are about my people. They are about me. They are written and presented with love, joy and sorrow.

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The day Opal Isaacs went to the Cushaw Festival, she left the house at 8, left Freddy slamming tools and doors in the shed where he was trying to get Billy Wayne's old Mustang running again.

She carried the baby on her hip and pulled Mary B. and Chuckie in Chuckie's red wagon. She moved quickly, driven by a combination of anger, determination and spite.

"I ain't a goin'," he'd said. "Ain't no way I'd try to drive into town tomorrow. Have t'park five miles away and walk and then be swallered in all them people."

"But I want to go," she'd whined. "We ain't been since the first year we's married. Fact, we don't go nowhere."

"I ain't goin'. That's all I want to hear about it. Case closed," he'd said.

"Well, I am goin'," she'd said.

"Well, I'd like to know how. You goin' to walk to town or," he'd laughed, "you goin' to drive?"

"I'll walk if I have to," she'd said. Freddy had hit a nerve -- and he knew it -- with the driving remark since she hadn't been behind the wheel for four years, not since she drove the pick-up into Middle Fork, trying one last time to learn to drive. The comment had hurt, but it made her mad, too. She'd hoisted her shoulders straight, stuck out her chin and made up her mind.

Opal was replaying the scene and not paying attention to the road. She let the right front wheel of the wagon fall into the hole-that-won't-go-away. It was a big old crack in the blacktop coming out of Add Stapleton's
holler. No matter how many loads of gravel and mix the county put in it -- and that wasn't really many over time -- the hole sucked it up and retained its form. Opal agreed with Great-aunt Dessie's theory of long-standing that where they put Middle Fork Road was never meant to be a road. It either had an Indian curse on it or Mother Nature wanted the road on the other side of the creek, laid into the bottom instead of clawed into the side of the hills.

The sudden bump caused Chuckie to slide forward into Mary B., setting off a pinching, punching, crying scene that didn't fully abate until they were jiggling up Almira's gravel driveway. And, of course, the baby didn't hesitate to chime in, screaming loud enough to set off a series of dog alarms up and down the hollow.

Prewarned, Almira held the door open for the testy team. "My Lord, Opal, you're the only person I know who could wake the dead just walkin' up the road. I reckon I'll have t'go up on the cemetery d'rectly and calm everbidy down."

She let out a laugh and her large belly rippled under an off-white sateen night gown. In a smooth, practiced motion, she shifted the baby from Opal's hip to her own. "How's my pretty baby? Yeah, yeah, Mammaw's got you now. Yes, my punkin."

Turning to Opal, she said, "What'd Freddy say when you left? That low-life heathern. I tried to git you not t'marry him, didn't I? But, no, you had to go on. What's your mommy know anyhow, huh?"

Opal interrupted, knowing that was the only way to stop Almira's repetitive stream. "Freddy didn't say nothin'. He don't care."
"If Freddy had his way, you'd never lay eyes on another soul. All them Isaacs is turned that way, closed up tight. They seal their women off, keep 'em pregnant -- like you -- 'til they're used up and ain't got no will to git out, and so ashamed of how they've come to look and what they've come to, period, that they jist hide away 'til they die. Mercifully, that don't take long." Almira was stating what to her was fact, based on a knowledge of her neighbors that was part of her inheritance.

"Thank God you still got a little bit of gumption left. I don't like the idee of you goin' into town by yourself, but I druther you do it than set up there and rot away like some ol' Junebug with a string tied around its leg. Come on and git a bite to eat."

She yelled for Mary B. and Chuckie to get out of her beauty shop, an added-on room beside the kitchen, and to take a seat at the table. She gave the baby back to Opal and began to shuttle platters of eggs, biscuits, sausage, margarine and apple butter to the table.

"I can't eat too much, Mommy," Opal said as she slit open a biscuit, one-handed, buttered it and put a piece of sausage between the halves. She let the baby nibble on a biscuit and mashed up a fried egg almost to liquid and fed it to him with a spoon. "I been thinkin' about them funnel cakes and cushaw pies all week."

"You better eat if you can't git a ride and have t'walk all the way," Almira said, leaning over to retake the baby. "Here, you'll git your blouse dirty before you start. Lord, it's what, seven miles at least? Course, when I was young, we didn't thank nothin' a'walkin' ..."
"I better git," Opal cut in. "It's almost nine a'clock." She looked at her watch, rose, kissed each child on the head and then kissed her mother on the cheek.

"Wait just a minute." Almira lifted her heavy body with the baby firmly attached and moved to the counter. She opened a drawer, fished around for a few seconds, and folded a couple of bills together into a narrow strip. She pulled open the left pocket of Opal's tight jeans and tucked in the money.

"Now, Mommy," Opal started.

"Don't 'now Mommy' me. Take it. Bring me back some cotton candy or somethin'." Almira sat back down at the table. "Don't worry none about the younguns. They'll be fine. Jist have a good time."

Opal paused at the kitchen door. "Thank ye, Mommy."

Almira waved her off with a nod and continued to feed and wipe faces.

Opal waited until she was out of sight of the house to check on the money in her pocket. Two twenties. She allowed herself to bask for a moment in her mother's warmth. She had only $10 left from the yard sale in August, and she couldn't bear to ask her husband for money under the circumstances, although she knew he would have given it to her if he had it and if she had asked. Now she felt she could spend a little more freely, although she had never been one to waste. She clipped coupons, bought most of her and the kids' clothes at yard sales and managed to stretch Freddy's parts-store pay check farther than it ought to go.
She occupied her walking time by mapping out her route through town, visualizing the crafts exhibits and the food vendors, the carnival and the car show.

She got about a half mile past the Belcher place with four cars and a pick-up in the front yard, just past the Simpsons where Marvin waved from the porch, before Junior Fitzpatrick stopped his truck and asked her if she needed a ride.

She hoisted herself into the high cab as Junior, ever grinning, asked, "Where ye headed, Cuz?"

"Into town," she replied, fastening her seat belt.

"Me, too," he said. "I'm pullin' the 4-H float. One-a my younguns is goin' to be on it. Philip. Thanks he wants to be a farmer er somethin'." He laughed. "That'll change. You goin' t'be in the parade?"

"Nah, not this year." Opal grinned and leaned her head against the seat back.

"Well, now, I thought maybe they's havin' a reunion of all the ol' Cushaw Queens."

Opal bristled. "I ain't old. I'm just 23." She turned to the window and rested her chin on her arm.

Junior sighed and put his rough hand on her shoulder. "Sissy, you know that ain't what I meant. Come on, now." He put his hand gently on her chin and pulled her face toward his. "If you'd entered this year, you'd a won agin. Hands down. Ain't nobidy around here as pretty as you when you git dolled up."
He saw the hint of tears in her eyes, put his hand back on the wheel and faced forward. "So, where's your ol' man?" He skewed the sharp features of his face, made a snapping noise with his mouth and slapped his fist on the steering wheel. "Whoops. I done it again. I didn't mean to say ol'. Figure a speech. Where's Freddy?"

Opal had to laugh. "You're crazy." Nobody could stay mad at Junior for long. "He's at home working on Billy Wayne's old -- really old -- car. I just decided to go by myself."

"You wuz goin' to walk all the way? Whyn't you call me?"

"Oh, I figured somebidy'd come along and give me a ride," she smiled, "and here we are."

The pair made small talk, mostly about the families they shared. Traffic was still light, but in an hour or so it would become stifling as the locals and the thousands of relatives down from the North roused, ate breakfast feasts and began the pilgrimage to the annual festival. In town, Junior parked in the Bottom where harried organizers were trying with frustrated results to get the attention of the parade entries. Junior told Opal he'd give her a ride home after the parade. "I'll be around somewheres," he said.

On her own, Opal walked quickly around the antique cars near the parade starting point. She looked more at the license plates than at the cars. Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, Pennsylvania, Georgia, and dozens more. The owners, busy dusting and shining, had left here long ago, she knew, and were back not only to see their families, but also to subtly show off their affluence.
She walked by the carnival where workers were just beginning to warm up the rides and uncover the game booths, expecting to rake in a small fortune on this sunny climax to a week-long affair, thanks to country kids who had no knowledge of theme parks.

Festival workers had already taped off the bridge and the four downtown blocks to keep out vehicles and give free rein to the walkers who would soon flood in.

Opal turned left at the light at the end of the bridge and concentrated on the displays in the store windows, many of them empty the rest of the year. When she was a little girl hanging on to Almira's hand, the windows were full of goods that people came to town to look at and buy. Few people came into town any more unless they had business at the courthouse or needed to see a lawyer or doctor. Instead, they went to the Plaza out by the four-lane where the Wal-Mart alone held just about all that had once filled the stores in town.

For the festival, some of the windows were mini-museums, crammed with quilts and crocheted doilies, antiques and newer versions of old pieces for decoration rather than necessity. Some of the windows today were filled with historical pictures and family trees that paid homage to the early scions who had left inheritances ranging from wealth to repute to imagined glory. Opal recognized that some of the families intermingled with her own blood, although the trees seemed to lean only toward the most prominent branches. Some of the windows featured the festival star -- the cushaw and its cousins, pumpkins, squashes and gourds. Self-taught artists had painted faces on the crusted vegetables, bulbous, misshapen families of faces. On
some were painted churches and schoolhouses and quaint villages that had never existed in these parts, other than in mistaken fantasies.

She zigzagged across the sidewalk to peek into each of the food booths, savoring the mixture of aromas and looking for familiar faces. She got a free funnel cake, smothered in powdered sugar and steaming hot, from a cousin who was working with the Flat Rock Church of Christ -- barely managing to escape a sermon. She ran into an old boyfriend cooking hot dogs for the Rotary Club and, for a moment, worried about how she might have changed until he pulled out a string of pictures of his family.

While she was looking at the schoolchildren's art display in the drab windows of the empty White Oak Five and Dime, she got a surprise hug from her best friend all through high school. Opal had not seen Dimple since they parted after the wedding, Dimple to return to Richmond and Opal to Middle Fork via Gatlinburg. At first, they had written at least once a week and then once every three or four months, Opal continuing to write long missals about her daily life and Dimple dashing off a few lines on a funny card. Now they exchanged canned greeting cards and a signature at Christmas. Opal listened as Dimple described her job in Columbus and her boyfriends and her gym and her clubs.

"So what are you doin' these days?" Dimple in her designer togs stopped to breathe.

Opal knew she couldn't top her old friend's exciting life, so she went with what she had. "Well, me and Freddy's paying on a piece of property we bought from Mommy's Aunt Dessie. I guess you got our Christmas picture, but I got some more." She pulled out the pictures she'd shared with Randal at
the Rotary booth. "Aaron'll soon be nine months and Mary Beatrice -- we call her Mary B. -- is two-and-a-half, and Chuckie is goin' on 20." Opal suddenly realized she was talking twice as fast as usual and she didn't know why.

"Freddy still workin' for Pack's?" Dimple asked.

"No, he's at B&R Auto Parts at the Plaza. Fact, he's next in line for assistant manager. He works hard, and they like that. That's what they said on his last evaluation. It was real good." Opal hated to brag, but she felt the need.

"Where's he now?" Dimple looked around at the milling crowd that surrounded them.

"He's workin' on a car for one of his buddies," Opal responded quickly. "Has to get it done today. Told me just t' come on, so I did."

"I haven't seen him since you all's married. Is he still as good-lookin' as ever?" Dimple tapped the air and laughed.

Opal giggled and covered her mouth with her hand.

"I'll never forget how he looked at you when you won the Cushaw Queen," Dimple put her hand on Opal's shoulder, just like old times. "He was runnin' all around there takin' pictures of you, grinnin' like he'd won the lottery. Didn't leave any doubt about how he felt about you."

Opal remembered and shivered. "Well, when you goin' t'get married?" she asked.

"Me? Shoo." Dimple waved away the thought. "I'm havin' too much fun. Got too many things I want to do before I settle into oblivion."
Both women stepped into embarrassed silence. "Well, I got to get back to Mommy and Daddy," Dimple said, taking a step backward. "I told 'em I'd be back in a minute. They're over there workin' the Boone's Spring Volunteer Fire Department booth. You know Daddy. He lives for the fire department. Stop by if you get a chance."

Opal stood still for a few minutes in Dimple's wake. Then she went quickly through the flea market area, crowded with entrepreneurs hawking Indian jewelry made in Taiwan, sequined T-shirts, velvet pictures of blond Jesuses, knife sets, herbal medicines, and ceramic whatnots. She bought a set of blue work clothes for Freddy and a tiny matching set for Chuckie. For Mary B. she got two Barbie doll outfits and a tiny charm bracelet. For herself and Almira she bought T-shirts that said "25th Annual Cushaw Festival, White Oak, KY" superimposed over a drawing of the large squash-like vegetable.

At the crafts tents, she bought a large handmade basket to carry her purchases in and paused at each exhibit admiring the work, complimenting the crafter and wondering to herself if she could make something that she might be able to market. She'd taken Home Ec for two years in high school and still made some of the kids' clothes on Almira's sewing machine, and she'd won a prize in art when she was a junior, but she never did much more than doodle any more.

A little before 11, she wandered to the courthouse and looked over the cushaws local farmers had brought in for display. She picked out two small beauties, paid for them and added them to the basket. She found a place in the crowd to watch the ceremonies at which the Cushaw royalty would be
introduced. She clapped as the Cushaw Baby Girl and Boy were exhibited, squawling, by proud mothers. She watched the parade of Little Miss, Little Mister, Junior Miss and Junior Mister, all suited or frilled and prompted by family. When the Cushaw Queen sashayed to the front to make her speech, Opal could not resist scrutinizing. This girl had a wealth of self-confidence, which Opal knew she had lacked. In fact, Opal had been scared to death and could hardly speak above a whisper. This girl walked as if she'd had modeling classes, smiled broadly as if she were Miss Kentucky, and gave her speech as if she had taken elocution lessons. Her deep blue, shimmering gown was strapless and form-fit, in contrast to the modest, homemade dress Opal had made with the help of Mrs. Meade, her Home Ec teacher, and now kept wrapped in plastic in the back of the closet.

Opal evaluated the girl's every move and determined she would have voted for her had she been a judge. For the life of her, she couldn't imagine why she had won six years ago nor why she had even entered the contest. The whole affair seemed to Opal to have happened to someone else or, if to her, in a different lifetime. She wasn't necessarily sad, nor was she envious of the girl addressing the crowd as festival royalty. Instead, she felt something like loss, a loss of something she couldn't even name, the loss of something she hadn't realized she had until it turned up missing.

Opal left the courthouse area before the cushaw auction, bought a hot dog, a Pepsi and a cinnamon-flavored, deep-fried cushaw pie from someone she didn't know, and made her way back to the carnival. She walked around the midway which looked tiny compared to the ones in her memory. She spent $5 on the ring toss before giving up. The baby would do without a new
teddy bear today. The exotic-looking hawker flirted with her in a soft, cloudy voice and gave her a tiny, stuffed panda, declaring that she shouldn't tell anyone or he'd get in trouble. She smiled, stuck the animal in her basket and walked away.

The ferris wheel, Opal saw in her rounds, was being run by one of her second cousins. Chalmer's people lived over on Pigeon, close to the lake, in a rundown, filthy house that shamed the rest of the family. He had blond hair falling into clumps below his shoulders, and grease from the giant machine mingled with the natural oil of his ruddy face.

"What're you doin' here, Chalmer?" Opal asked.

"What the hell's it look like I'm doin'. I'm runnin' the damn wheel." Chalmer's voice had an icy edge of anger, the same tone he used in any situation, good or bad, as long as Opal could remember.

"How'd you know how to do it?" she asked, a little bit in awe.

"Ain't much to it. I come in Monday evenin' to help 'em set up, make a few bucks. They ast me if I wanted to work all week. I said 'Shore.' Here I am. Dig it."

"Yeah." Opal stared at him with her mouth open. This was the longest she'd ever heard Chalmer talk at one time in her life and the most expression she'd ever known him to use. She stood there silent, feeling the wind of the circling ride.

"Must thank I'm doin' a good job," Chalmer said as he stopped the first car. "Ast me to help 'em tear down in the mornin' and go with 'em."

"You mean go with the carnival?" Opal asked.
Chalmer hopped onto the platform to let a huggy teenage couple off and a 30-ish mother and child on. "Hell, yes, the carnival," he snapped as he jumped back to the controls. "Might as well. Somethin' different. Somethin' to do," he said, flipping the switch allowing the next car to alight. Opal could think of nothing to say, so she just watched. Up, out, in, down, he went.

"Figured it's time I done somethin'," he said, standing beside her again. "Ain't nothin' happenin' here fer me. Ain't doin' nothin' but hangin' out, gittin' older, and smotherin' to death."

Chalmer gave Opal a free ride. The wind tangled her hair and each downward circle took her breath. She'd long ago determined ferris wheels tame, but she found the ride exhilarating. She looked at Chalmer on one of the rotations. He looked different, powerful in a way. She felt proud and happy for him, kind of like she'd felt for herself when she'd had the guts to enter the Cushaw Queen pageant or kind of like she'd felt when she went against Almira to marry Freddy Isaacs. She'd felt that way when her kids were born, but the feeling was getting harder to come by.

When Chalmer finally stopped Opal's car, she gave him an impulsive, ungainly hug and wished him well.

It was a little after 12 when she walked back over to the Bottom where the floats were being readied for line up. Shriners dressed like everybody's idea of hillbillies were doing wheelies on decorated motorcycles and bicycles. Plumed majorettes were daubing on thick layers of makeup. Tiny float riders in pioneer costumes were being primped and cajoled by mommies and daddies and mamaws and papaws.
She found Junior in the middle of a group of men huddled around the bed of a Toyota pick-up in an empty lot that had been commandeered for parade parking. He had his hand around a can of beer and was leading the raunchy laughter.

The noise lessened as Opal moved quietly to the truck. "You all know my cousin Opal, don't ye?" Junior said as she approached. "She's runnin' away from home today. Runnin' away to join the circus, huh, babe?"

"I ain't runnin' away from home and I shore ain't joinin' no circus," Opal said, punching him in the belly.

Laughing, he grabbed her in a headlock and rubbed his knuckles in her hair. "Boys, this is my favorite cousin and I got dozens of 'em."

Opal wrested herself out of his arms. "Come here. I need to talk to you." She walked a few yards away from the truck and Junior followed.

"What's up, honey?" he asked.

"I just wanted you to know I'm goin' on home." She made a visor of her hand to shield her eyes as she looked up at him.

"You ain't even seen the parade yet." Junior took off his cap, smoothed his hair and put it back on. "You can't go."

"I seen everything I come to see," Opal said. She looked down and shifted the basket from one hand to the other.

"How you gittin' home?" he asked.

She lied, "Oh, I run into a girl I went to school with and she's goin' back up on Lick Fork. She said her kids is wearin' her out and she wants to git home."
"Who?" Junior kicked his boot into the loose dirt trying to dislodge a tuft of grass.

"I don't thank you know her." Opal started moving away. "I got to be goin'. I told her I'd meet her at the Dairy Queen. You be careful now. Don't wreck with them young 'uns on that float."

"Be careful," Junior said. "I'll stop by this evenin'."

"Sure," Opal said, knowing full well that by this evening Junior was liable to be passed out in somebody's apartment or buying drinks he couldn't afford for everybody at some Godforsaken juke joint.

Opal did stop at the Dairy Queen and bought a big Coke to sip on as she walked. She had decided to take the railroad track out of town instead of the highway. The track hugged the river at the base of the hills most of the way. The shoot that veered off at Boone's Spring crossed Middle Fork Road at the church, just a mile or so from Almira's. The road, on the other hand, went up two steep hills with a ditch and cliffs on one side and guardrails and a drop off on the other. Pavement filled the road bed leaving no berm.

Opal didn't want to admit it, but she had other reasons for favoring the rail route. She didn't want to be seen by the people in the stream of cars that were still inching toward the festival. She had no desire to be seen either by people she might know or by people she didn't know. She didn't want to risk being thought a pathetic figure as she might have thought if she'd seen someone like her. Plus, she found herself cherishing the idea of being alone to look and to think with no one to ask what she was thinking and no tiny tug at her pants leg for attention.
She walked past the Colonial-style depot that she had always admired. Now used for rail company offices, it had not welcomed passengers in her lifetime. Its original life existed only in the memories of older generations. With dozens of tracks to choose from, most never used anymore, she chose a set in the middle, figuring the others would either diverge or converge from that position. She felt small and fragile amidst the steel, wood and gravel.

The line she took turned out to be one of the two that formed the main Big Sandy corridor that had once been the lifeline of the region carrying the coal out and supplies in, people out, people in. Opal knew that today the track would pretty much be hers alone, but being in this place she couldn't help fantasizing about phantom steam engines and long stretches of passenger-filled cars, nattily dressed coal barons, ladies in fine hats, ghosts gleaned from passed-on stories.

For a while, Opal was in awe of the hidden scene into which she wandered. Ragged crags formed a high wall to her right. Above her, blocked from sight, was the winding road benched by the upper half of the hill. On her left was the river, muddy, slow-moving, its mustard tinge contrasting with the brown and green of the bush fence between it and the tracks. Across the river, she glimpsed the other world on the high bank, a subdivision of sprawling executive houses occupied by people to whom Opal was inconsequential. She recognized, though, that they were so far removed from her by time and place that they were inconsequential to her as well and their dim presence did not threaten.
She fell into the measured steps of the track, her body seeking the rhythm of the rails. Once, after instinctively checking to see if anyone was looking, she tried balancing on a rail, one step in front of the other, arms outstretched. The basket of festival goodies kept her off balance, so she put it down and walked unencumbered for several yards, pretending she was on a high wire. She gave a repeat performance on the other rail back to the basket, pleased with her accomplishment.

When she became accustomed to — and even comfortable with — her own smallness against the river, the tracks, and the mountains, the soothing lines of the scene seemed to nudge out the untidy thoughts that had been filling her mind.

She smiled at the idea of Chalmer breaking out of his one-track life. The carnival life was not something she would have chosen. She saw it as unsavory, unstable, perhaps unethical. But she was smart enough to know that her perceptions were not always correct. The important thing, Opal reasoned, was that Chalmer was willing to make a change. The important thing was that he was doing something. Rather than settling for the rest of his life, he was acting.

She realized that all day, and for some time before, her emotions had been wrestling. She had no doubt of her love for Freddy and her children. She had no doubt that she wanted them to be a family forever. But she was terrified of continuing on her current track, specifically of becoming one of the Isaacs women characterized so finely and, as Opal knew all too well, so truthfully by Almira. She must determine not to go there, to that place she appeared to be headed. Going to the Cushaw Festival by herself had not
really been fun, but she likened it to Chalmer's joining the carnival. She knew she, like her dirty cousin, still had the ability to act.

She left the river, the hill and the double tracks reluctantly at Boone's Spring, taking the side track and emerging into the community of a store and a dozen houses. She realized that her decisions from now on would not always be fun, sometimes not even wise. But she determined to make them nonetheless -- with Freddy's help if she was lucky or without it if that was her lot. She would do something -- she'd have to think more on the possibilities -- to show Freddy and Almira that she was more than an Isaacs woman. One thing for sure she would do is learn to drive despite her past failures. This walk, along with going to the festival, was something she had needed to do, but it was a one-time thing. The next time, she would drive.

Turning onto the narrow road at Middle Fork Church, Opal grinned when she realized she must seem funny to anyone looking. Here she was in the middle of the road, swinging a basket that seemed to get heavier with every step, whistling to a head-bobbing beat without earphones. Surprisingly, she discovered she didn't mind if someone thought her funny. She made her movements more exaggerated and switched from whistling to singing. After all, she had been the Cushaw Queen -- still was and always would be.
Libby

It's a little after 10. On the radio, the pock-faced, oily boy who calls himself the Night Owl is beginning his show. His deliberately deep voice occasionally snaps mid-word. On another night Libby and Elbert Lee might have laughed at the teenage d.j.'s futile attempts, like those of his minimum wage predecessors, to sound sexy and sophisticated.

Tonight, though, Libby doesn't feel like laughing. She makes watchmanlike rounds of the house. Make sure the commode isn't stuck again. Re-fasten the windows. Scan the darkness. Pace the front porch. Pace the deck at back. Check on the baby. Check on Amber. Wish on a star. Pray.

She knows Elbert Lee is out there. Most likely sitting on a cliff watching the lights dim up and down the road, his rifle across his lap, ready to shoot at shadows.

It is his weakness to face problems from a distance, leaving Libby to occupy the center. It is her weakness to carry on in his stead, to be there when the crisis climaxes and to clean up the debris.

This time she's not even sure what the problem is. He was already gone when she got in from work. Amber, their granddaughter and a proven unreliable witness, said she was watching a soap opera when he came in. He didn't say anything, she said, just burst through the door, grunted, and a few minutes later went out the back door, none of which is unusual. The two have barely spoken for six months, since the girl told her grandparents she was pregnant. It isn't enough that she'd done just like her mother. Almost worse to Elbert Lee is the fact that the misdeed makes him a great-
grandfather before his 50th birthday. Libby hasn't been too pleased either with the idea of the 16-year-old being a mother. She knows that, as with Amber, the child-raising will likely fall to her and Elbert Lee, and neither of them will voice the suspicion illuminating the air like a bare light bulb that, despite trying, they haven't been especially good at it. But, like her own mother, Libby carries a coping gene and, though she has no illusions about Amber's sense of responsibility, doing what has to be done is what Libby does.

Elbert Lee went off to the hills when Amber first dropped her news, but his encampment did nothing to revert time to when the new mother was a naive little girl. Nor did a similar foray change the reality of their daughter Angela's dilemma when Amber was born.

What reality has sent her husband into hiding this time, Libby can't imagine. Two weeks out of the hospital, Amber cannot be pregnant again. Their daughter Angela is not likely the problem — not anymore at least, not now that she's married and the mother of two sons who seem more like Amber's nephews than her stepbrothers. Their eldest child long ago ceased to be Elbert Lee's problem, long ago ceased to be Daddy's sweet pea. The other kids are fine, as they've always been, predictable, self-directed, as if Libby and Elbert Lee were merely on the periphery of their upbringing and their lives.

Libby doesn't relish having become a grandmother at 32 or now a great-grandmother at 48. When she is in a particularly optimistic mood, the absurdity amuses her. Though she is wiser now, she could still have a baby that would be a great-aunt or -uncle to her granddaughter's child. Libby's
mother, feisty at 67, is a great-great-grandmother, and Libby's grandmother, 83 and still keeping house for herself, is a great-great-great-grandmother. And in a family where women live a long time, the eldest could easily add a fourth great.

The math makes Libby's head hurt. Just a couple of days ago, she and Elbert Lee had sat over coffee laughing at the configuration. He'd drawn an elaborate family tree, sketching the lineage with curricules and flourishes, a weak but valiant tribute to ancient scribes. His art is exhibited on the refrigerator, held up by two tacky magnets, Mother's Day presents years ago from one of the kids and symbolic to Libby of the element that keeps families together, not always attractive, but attracting.

Libby sits at the kitchen table and picks up a crossword puzzle book, one of several she has placed throughout the house to allay a lifelong fear that time wasted is time lost. She falters on 15A. She knows a four-letter word for WADING BIRD, more than one, in fact. But all she can come up with are egret and heron, neither of which she has ever seen that she knows of and both of which are as unfit for the role as she feels now.

She shoves her chair away from the table and walks to the window again. In the semi-circle of vision, the leafless hills menace. The summit trees, as familiar as old friends, look to Libby tonight like eerie skeletons clumping their way down the slopes toward her unprotected and indefensible home. She shivers, hugs her arms and turns away.

At the counter, she silences the young d.j. and switches on the television, riveted like a ship barnacle to the bottom of the seafoam cabinet. It's teaser time for the evening news. "An Eastern Kentucky manufacturer
is taking its business elsewhere and a Logan grand jury votes to indict," the slick West Virginia announcer reads. "Details at 11 on your Tri-State News." Libby sweeps the channels searching for a comedy, preferably an old one, Andy Griffith, perhaps, when everything was younger, or Green Acres, something mindless and effortless. She compromises on a M*A*S*H episode she's seen dozens of times. Hawkeye is holed up with a Korean family. He can't understand them, nor they him, so he launches into a one-sided conversation, but no communication takes place. It's funny in a painful way or painful in a funny way, Libby can't decide which, but she recognizes its abiding relevance.

As the credits roll, Libby opts for the news. She needs to know how cold it will be tonight. Did Elbert Lee wear enough clothing to repel the spring chill? Tri-State News reruns its earlier lead-in to the promised details.

"Oh, my God." Libby claps her hands against her head. "Oh, my God," she repeats, as the waves of her false optimism evaporate. Every time the plant has cut back in the last six years, Libby has grabbed her husband and wrested him from the depression that threatens to pull him under. She has hidden her own gasps for air until he can breathe on his own, and when the tide goes out -- always temporarily -- she silently resuscitates herself.

As well as she knows she has yet another baby to raise, Libby knows the announcer is talking about USSystems. It is the only "manufacturer" in an area where money comes from one of four other sources: coal, which is dying; service -- Welcome to Walmart; professions, restricted to the lucky ones; or the dole, thanks to the rich Uncle. The plant opened when Elbert
Lee got out of the service, promising to allow him to grow old at home rather than in Ohio or Michigan or Indiana where his and Libby's people had been migrating for two generations. It promised to be a harbinger of other industries to the hills where Father Coal was wearing out both himself and his subjects. But the promise was never fulfilled, and Libby senses the slick newsmen will foretell its end.

"The news is bad tonight for viewers in the Big Sandy Valley. USSystems, which at one time employed right at a thousand workers, announced today it's closing its White Oak plant. The news was delivered this afternoon to some 200 day shift workers and this evening to 126 second shift employees." The reader adopts an appropriately, but empty, somber tone.

"Plant manager Green Tackett, reading a prepared statement from company headquarters in Pittsburgh, said the refrigeration works will be moved to Vietnam by the end of next month. Employees say rumors have abounded for several years that the plant would close, but the relocation site came as a shock to many. Tri-State newsmen Andy Perry is at the plant talking with angry and anguished workers. Andy..."

The fresh-faced reporter, a year or two out of college, wears a pained look, perfected in covering the coalfields. Libby recognizes all the interviewees. "This is the lowest blow," says Eddie Ward, Libby's second cousin. "It's adding insult to injury. It's not been too many years since some of us fought in Vietnam and ever' one here knows boys that died there, and now they take our jobs, too. I never once imagined this company would do this to us."
Bea Ramey, who lives down the road from Libby's daughter Angela, can't keep from crying. "We've all worked hard and they ..." She covers her face and then recovers. "I lost an uncle in Vietnam and I just find this hard to believe." She closes her eyes tightly and tilts her head back while the camera pans in on her grief. "I'm sorry," she says, her voice cracking. "I feel like I been beat up."

Libby stares at the TV, terrified. She knows the family can survive. Both she and her husband grew up with boom-and-bust times. Their early years together were touch- and-go many times. They've discussed the possibility of the plant closing. Elbert Lee can expect some severance pay and he's worked long enough to draw a modest retirement. The house is paid for and they always save to pay cash for appliances and even vehicles. Libby has a steady, though not outstanding wage, at the Dollar Store. Even as a great-grandfather, Elbert Lee is young enough to get some kind of job. It's not the financial picture that worries Libby all that much. What worries her is where the company is relocating. Neither she nor her husband ever discussed anything like this. Neither could have ever guessed.

Elbert Lee volunteered for the service when he was laid off at Frigidaire. They'd gone to Dayton two days after their wedding. Angela was born there, just after they'd saved up enough to move from his brother's cramped tract house in a subdivision that, despite its modernity, reminded Libby of a coal camp with its closed monotone, just bigger. Their tiny apartment was part of a divided-up house in a segregated section of the downtown called Little Kentucky. There, they were crammed against people
who looked, spoke, acted and hoped like they did in a white Protestant ghetto
that shielded them, at least while they were in it, from the whispers and
sneers of the locals who needed their immigrant labor but despised their
alien culture.

They were in Germany when Gunnar was born. Libby took the name
from their landlady's son. She'd regretted the name for a long time when
they came back home. But he turned out to be a strong, optimistic boy who
never took the ribbing as seriously as his mother did. Elbert Lee re-upped,
which was fine with Libby. She liked the austerity of the southwest, where
they were stationed. It was a dramatic contrast with the closedness and
plushness of the hills. Then he volunteered for a tour in southeast Asia
which was not fine with Libby. His argument was that the extra money
would go toward buying a place of their own. Before he went across, they
came back and bought this hollow from Mammaw Dessie and an old trailer
from Junior Fitzpatrick who was into buying and selling when he was still a
teenager. Libby was to stay there while her husband was overseas, and if El
decided to stay in they would rent it out until he retired.

She was alone and 19 when Brett was born. The baby was three
months old when the letters stopped, four months old before Libby found
out her children's father was missing. The baby was 15 months old when he
first saw his father. Libby had thought she would never see Elbert Lee
again. She learned some months later that she was in many ways right. The
man she kissed good-bye in Cincinnati was not the same man she flew to San
Francisco to bring home. She had expected him to be thinner, to be tougher
perhaps, to be saddened by what he had witnessed. She did not expect the extent of the change, nor did she expect its subtlety.

Some things she was allowed to share -- things like body temperature, the shivering in sweat that led them to buy a king-sized bed so she would not have to drown in his dreams, or the jumpiness which taught her to talk or make noise before going near him when he was alone. What Libby could not adequately adapt to was the impenetrable aura he wrapped around himself that often made her feel like an interloper in his life, an exile from her own country. Over the years she had stopped asking questions; she had come to accept that she must adjust her life to his malady.

The first time he disappeared into the hills was when his father died, a little over a year after he came back. Libby left the kids with Mammaw while she and her brother Alvin searched the ridges along the hollow. They followed the sounds of gunshots. Libby had sobbed all the way, wiping her nose on her sleeve, convinced Elbert Lee had killed himself, sure his brain would be splattered on the rocks and tree stems.

The second time was almost as scary, but by the fifth or sixth time, she and Alvin began to take it in stride. Depending on their own take of the crisis, they sometimes waited half a day or so before starting out, sometimes laughing at Elbert Lee's shenanigans.

When Libby calls Alvin tonight, though, he agrees that this time may be more serious. He gets out of bed, dresses, and drives 45 minutes to sit with her and listen for the directional gunshots. They both lament that this night the atmosphere is pitch-black, the stars seeming farther away than usual, the mountains and trees pulling a tarp over the sky. They drink black
coffee, take turns dozing off, and talk about Elbert Lee's past positions. There is no pattern; he seems to ramble at random stopping at whatever overhang feels right to him.

At daybreak, Alvin calls Elbert Lee's brother Palm, who's younger, more agile, and just this side of brash. Palm arrives a few minutes before seven with his new wife who isn't dressed for tracking. She readily asserts her willingness to stay with Amber and the baby, which is a relief for Libby, who doesn't quite trust her granddaughter's maternal instincts yet. Libby shows her through the house, settles her at the kitchen table with numbers to call if they're not back by evening. She then excuses herself to the bedroom where she exchanges the sweatsuit for jeans, sweatshirt, flannel jacket and hunting boots. She's done this enough to have a routine, but she never seems to get used to the unease, and today it is particularly rampant.

As the sky gradually lightens, the three head up Middle Fork toward Angus Hannah's place. Alvin believes he heard scattered shots from that direction earlier. They have to hope it's not Jim Kestner or one of the Fitzpatricks hunting out of season. Palm, who grew up next door, steps onto Angus's porch, pats the matted-coat collie on the head, knocks on the door and hollers for the old man.

"Uncle Angus," the young man says as a stooped figure peers through the door window. "Uncle Angus, it's Palmer Reed. I just wanted to let you know we need to go up your holler here to look for Elbert Lee." He sweeps his arm to the left.

The old man doesn't hear.
"Elbert Lee. We thank he's up on them cliffs, freaked out, y' know."

Palm's voice is loud but gentle, and more pointedly accented than normal.

"We're goin' up there to look fer 'im -- if 'at's all right with you."

"Why, shore," Angus says as he steps onto the porch, dressed in his trademark overalls but still in house slippers. "Elbert Lee's gone back t' the hills, eh? Howdy, Libby, Alvin."

Libby is shivering from the wind which seems trapped in this flat patch of awakening earth. She pulls the hood of her jacket over her ears.

"Howdy, Uncle Angus. You all right?"

"Is 'ar anythang I kin do to hep?" the old man asks, closing the door gently behind him. "I shore wish I could still git around like I used to. I'd a had 'im back down hyar by now."

"Wish you could too, Uncle Angus, but we'll bring him back in a little bit," Libby says, as she follows the men heading around the house toward the slit in the hills. She knows she is not as strong or as optimistic as she wills her voice to sound.

In silence Alvin and Palm, with Libby trailing a few feet behind, walk up the holler, pulling back briars, stepping over rotting logs. The ground is boggy around the springs that wend from the hills to the branch that cuts the holler. Sticky seed pods in scores of mountain flora varieties attach to the interlopers' legs and arms, hitching a ride to other locations, assuring their prolificacy. Leaves from a dozen autumns are underfoot, creating new soil on old land. Libby, as well as the two men, can remember when Angus, with help from his children, kept this deep holler cleared for
pasture, for more than a mile to the point where the hills merge and form a natural fence.

Now the trio must pull off the tricky maneuver of watching their step in the overgrowth as they scan the ridges for sight of their quarry. Palm, in the lead, slips on the edge of a crawdad hole and catches himself halfway into a fall. He slaps the mud and wet leaves off his pants leg. "Shit," he says. "My brother is F-in' crazy, you know that? This shit is ridiculous."

A huge lump seems ready to burst in Libby's breast. It crowds her lungs, cutting off her air and causing her eyes to water. She swallows hard to make it lighten.

"Ay, Buddy, I know," says Alvin, "but he's seen things we can't begin to comprehend, you know. I reckon we'll never know -- Good Lord willing -- just what horror he has to live with day after day. People do strange things because of the things that's been done to them."

"Shit, man, I know," says Palm, turning to face his follower. "I know he's been through hell, but he ought sometimes to think about how other people are affected."

"We all have our demons," Alvin responds, "and we all have to face them the best we know how and we all have to do what we can to help the next feller."

My sweet Alvin, Libby thinks. She wants to hold fast to her brother who embodies all the good that Libby believes people can aspire to. When she looks at him, she sees her mother and her grandmother who choose to see the good, who accept that each person strives in his own way, who believe that what is right will triumph despite the twists and turns that it
must take. Libby is not so sure. She wants to grasp Alvin and absorb his aura into her weary soul.

 Truth is, she's beginning to agree with Palm. She'll never understand what makes Elbert Lee go off like this, but Palm's right. Her husband obviously has no concept of how his outings affect other people. He always chides her for worrying, saying there's no sense in it, leaving Libby feeling wrong for being concerned and for traipsing through the damp, dark hills in search. But she can't not worry, she tells him, and that's where they always leave the matter, hanging in the air like a fine net that covers and restricts without appearing to.

 Libby trudges on as the hills compress the hollow into a narrowing strip. She feels her own body sinking into itself like the layered cliffs that occasionally expose their sagging age, looking as if the slight touch of a finger could start an avalanche. As she steps over a fallen, rotting log, the shots explode again. Pop! Pop! Pop! She rights herself from the shock. Alvin was right. Elbert Lee is nearby.

 "Sounds like it's coming from that ridge back there where Daddy used to take us when we went hunting," Palm says in a half-turn toward Alvin. "You probably been up there. There's a big flat rock with an overhang. We used to camp under it. Found a lot of arrowheads in there."

 Alvin stops with Libby directly behind him, her hand lightly touching the back of his shoulder. "I think I know the one you're talking about. You can see the river from the upper end," he says.

 "Yeah, that's it." Palm veers to the right and starts up the hill. "We can go up here and walk on around at the top of the hill."
The trio weaves around the steep hillside, walking sideways to ease the climb. The leaves are deep and slick. Blackberry bushes and razor-like shoots of wild roses puncture their clothes and hands. Alvin stomps on the vines and holds them back for Libby.

Where the top of the hill begins, they stop to catch their breath. The two men squat and smoke a cigarette. Libby walks to where the slope starts down the other side and looks out over the series of knobs that interlock and double back on each other until they meet the horizon. Turning to the right, she can see Middle Fork, little more than an eely line trying to find its way to the river, carrying gifts of tires and plastic jugs. Her house, warm and safe, looks like a piece on a game board, a piece that can be picked up, dropped, lost, trampled by a careless player.

Pop! Pop! Pop! The shots carom against the hillsides again. Libby's body automatically recoils. What is he shooting at? she wonders, her pulse thumping. If they were to find him dead, she allows herself to think, it would be over. She could mourn and then put herself back together, reconstituted, without the constant suspense.

Alvin is at her side, his arm around her shoulder to interrupt the reverie. "It's going to be all right, honey. Don't worry. OK?" Libby leans into his underarm, hoping to absorb some of his strength, hoping he has enough to spare.

"Yep, that's where he is. Just where I thought," says Palm. "Come on. I'm about to give the sonofabitch a piece of my mind. You all are going to have to stand in line." With renewed energy, he stomps off, following the ridge toward the sound.
Here along the ridge the rock heart of the hills is exposed. Eons of rain and snow have slowly washed all but the hardiest vegetation onto the slopes toward the narrow hollows. It occurs to Libby that the dirt on which her house stands may have once covered this hill top. As she treks behind Alvin again, she is aware of the many crevices that eat into the rock. She wonders for the first time about the geology of these old mountains. She grew up playing on them, but she always regarded them superficially. They were just there. She cannot remember ever having a class in school that covered what the hills were made of or how they came to be. The fissures fascinate her. The image of cracked glass comes to mind, jagged lightning bolts cutting through the hard stone, making passageways for all manner of creatures, some big enough for danger.

Palm's halt at the foot of an incline interrupts Libby's thoughts. "My opinion, he's down there under that cliff," he whispers, pointing to a flat rocky surface about a hundred feet away. "Be quiet, and when we get a little closer, I'll holler at him. I sure don't want to surprise him. No telling where his mind is."

"He wouldn't hurt us," Alvin says.

Libby tugs at her brother's jacket. "No, let's do like Palm says." She lets out a needed sigh, puffing air out of her cheeks. "When he's like this, he's not the same person we know. He's somebody else, somewhere else."

A couple of yards ahead, Palm turns, spreads his outstretched hand into a stop sign and puts a finger to his lips. Libby and Alvin stop as Palm hunches over and creeps to the place where the rock surface flattens and thins. To the west, toward the river, the underpinning has been eaten away
in a deep swath. Libby has heard the old people, like Uncle Angus, refer to
the spot as Rockhouse because of the evidence that Indian and white
hunters have taken shelter in the semi-cave, a cultural legacy manifest in
arrowheads, beer cans and soot. Though the land is silent save for the wind,
Elbert Lee's presence is sensed.

Libby laces her arms around one of Alvin's and leans her head face
forward into his shoulder, trying to ground the electric charge that pulses
her body. A shiver, not from the air, implodes. She clenches her teeth to
stop their chatter and grasps her brother to keep her legs from buckling.

Alvin pats her hands and touches her head with the side of his face.
"Honey, it'll be all right," he whispers. "We've done this before. It'll be all
right."

Libby's body twitches. "I know," she answers, "but I'm getting too old
to do this. It can't go on."

"El, it's me, Palm." The sound causes both Alvin and Libby to jump.
Palm is squatting atop the overhang. "El, I got Libby and Alvin with me. We
want you to come on out and come home. Okay?"

Libby holds her breath. She hears only the sad sound of emptiness.
Palm stands up. "All right, El, you can come out peaceably now, and
nobody gets hurt." He laughs and shakes his head. Cupping his hands, he
shouts, "Come out with your hands up and maybe I can get the judge to go
easy on you."

There is still no sound.
Palm swings his fist. "Ah, hell, brother, this shit is ridiculous. Enough
is enough. You've got people who care enough about you to traipse up these
goddamn hills, freezing to death, tromping through mud up to our ankles -- I ruined these damn boots, and you're going to buy me another pair, that's for damn sure." The brother stomps his feet. "Got jabbed by briars. Got so many damn burrs on my clothes I'll never get them off. You sorry sonofabitch, get your ass out here."

"You can just go back down the way you come up." The deep voice rises from below like a train warning before it rounds the bend. "Leave me alone."

Libby lets go of Alvin and runs to the animal trail that winds down the knoll and onto the flat area where her husband's voice is. "Put down that dern gun. I'm coming down," she says, her voice thin with anger. The path is steep and she has to step sideways to keep from tumbling forward.

"Palm's right," she says when she reaches the bottom and sees Elbert Lee sitting crossed-legged in the dirt, his hand on the rifle that lays across his lap. "Enough is enough. Come on."

"Just leave me alone, Lib," El says, gesturing with the rifle.

"What if I did really leave you alone?" she asks, her voice low and distant-sounding. She's shivering again, but she realizes this time the shiver has its roots in nearly three decades of egg-walking fear. "What if I was to go away, just walk back down off this hill, get in the car and go away, far away. Just leave you here to starve to death, to fall and lay dying on the side of the hill, to get snakebit, to shoot your fool self. Just leave you here to dig that deep hole of disappointment, jump in and pull the self-pity in on top of you." She pauses, determined not to cry. "That's what I want to do -- just leave you alone."
Alvin slips behind her and puts his hands on her shoulders. "Calm down, Sissy," he whispers in her ear, the sound of a father trying to soothe an unruly child.

Libby wrests herself away from his touch and walks around to the other side of her husband. She is aware of her brother-in-law perched on the cliff above. She crosses her arms and asks her husband, "Is that what you want me to do? Just leave you alone?"

Elbert Lee looks out at the horizon, his eyes red, his body sagging. "You hear what they're going to do?"

Libby focuses on a point on the rock wall. "They're going to close the plant. So what? We'll manage. It's not the end of the world."

"Damn it, Lib, they're taking it to Vietnam!" He rises, clutching the rifle in his hands. "Vi-et-nam!" He shouts in her face, close enough for her to feel his dry, smoky breath.

"And there's not a damn thing you can do about it!" she shouts back. "So you deal with it and you go on." Libby knows she cannot wince or back away. "Whatever it is, you deal with it. For once, face it instead of running off."

Elbert Lee moves back, waving the gun in front of him like an Indian villain in an old western movie. He shouts, "You think you know so much. You think you know so much. You don't know it all. There's more."

Libby observes that the scene her husband dominates fits perfectly. Every prop is in place as if it had been carefully laid out by a set designer who knows this actor even better than she. Elbert Lee stands wildly, tall and movie star lean in his spotted hunting garb, his long legs spread apart, his
arms stretched outward, aligned before the feral backdrop of stone and grass tufts, all angled for a creative cinematographer. Only she is out of place.

"What you don't know," her husband is shouting as he pounds the air with the gun, "is that they told me they want me to go. Want me to be a trainer. Want me to show them people how to do the job. People who tried their dead-level best to kill me. What's worse, people who are taking jobs away from my friends and my family."

"Well, then, just go." Libby isn't sure whether she said it out loud or kept the words inside her head, but she realizes the command, said or unsaid, will give her the respite she needs. When Elbert Lee stops his gesturing, she concludes she must have spoken aloud.

The silence fills her, piercing the inner seams of the rockhouse and exploding onto the hills like the belch of a volcano. She is aware that Palm and Alvin, though intricately tied to the script, are merely part of the crafted scenery, offstage presences serving, at best, as notaries.

"You don't get it," Elbert Lee says as he slips back into a yoga position on the ground. Quietly, his rage spent, the gloom descending again, he adds, "You just go."

Libby turns and heads back down that trail. She walks past Alvin, impotent and still in the midst of the unquiet silence. On the periphery of her vision, her brother-in-law squats on the edge of the overhang. They can follow or they can stay, she reasons. She knows the way back home, through the briars and around the cliffs. She thinks of Hawkeye prattling to the Korean family, refusing to acknowledge that they can no more
understand him than he can understand them. They do the dark dance of language, talking but not connecting, drawn together by universal signs that cover basic needs but go no higher. Eat, sleep, work, play, yes, no, stay, go.
Ruby

This morning Marvin got saved -- again.

His eyes are swollen slits, red where white should be. Sitting on the porch waiting for Mommy to fix dinner, he sporadically shivers, deep-bone waves that start at his spindly shins, careen along his spine and end in uncontrollable head shakes. Cigarettes shimmy in his fingers and he coughs violently when he inhales. The spasms lead him to crying again.

Maltie leans into him, one arm around his waist, the other rubbing his shoulder. Periodically she takes her hand off his arm to dab his eyes and squeeze his nose with a white hanky. The lilac roses embroidered in the corner prick the tenderness.

Aunt Sarie sits on his right in the glider. She strokes his free hand and whispers about the Lord and Satan. "The angels in heaven are rejoicing today over another lost soul who's been brought to Jesus," she cries.

Uncle Amos provides a backup chorus of Amens.

The kids are unusually quiet for a Sunday afternoon in April when the greening hills beckon and the snakes are still drowsy. Maltie's oldest, Mildred, tries to get someone to catch a foam volleyball but gets no response save for a don't-make-me-get-up-from-here-and-come-after-you from her mother. Charles Keith, who is almost never still, sits quietly on the steps, punching holes in the soft ground with a stick and stealing glances at his uncle.
The dog, a yellow cur with a thick tail that curves in on itself, lies at Marvin's feet, whimpering in unison with the sobs. Two of the bolder cats, the striped one with the white tail and the one with black and white patches, curl far back near the banisters, shifting their weight every few minutes but keeping their eyes on Marvin.

Inside, Ruby hopes -- again. She wipes her eyes on a patch of bibbed apron as she turns the chicken in the iron skillet. Like her son's, Ruby's eyes are streaked and her already fat cheeks are swollen. She regrets not hearing Marvin's confession. The last thing she remembers is her baby squeezing past her on the way to the altar and the sound of Brother Kennard shouting "Praise the Lord." Then the spirit overtook her. Somebody said she jumped over the pew. That must be how she tore her dress, the new one she got last week at Wal-Mart. She sometimes wishes the spirit would be a little easier on her, and then she asks forgiveness for such a wish. Be careful what you wish for, she chides herself.

Into the oven as she checks the cornbread Ruby whispers a prayer. "Precious Jesus, help my baby to be strong this time. Give him the stren'th to shun temptation. Foller his every footstep and shield him from the old devil, who, as you know, has hounded him since day one." Her tears sizzle on the hot oven door.

She shuts the oven door, wipes the sweat and tears from her face and gets a cabbage out of the refrigerator. As she pulls away the outer leaves, the thought occurs to her -- maybe it's God speaking to her -- that she, too, needs more strength to keep the devil off
Marvin's back. The thought tells her she's been too easy on the boy. She thinks of how many times Herman and the girls have told her. "If we'd done that, Mommy, you'd have busted our butts." "How come Marvin gets away with that and we never did?" "Ruby, mark my words, you're ruinin' that boy." She'd never really paid any attention to what they said. Now, it's all clear, as plain as the cabbage her hands automatically chop. Perhaps, it's her fault that Marvin wastes his money on whiskey, running back and forth to the juke joints in Sharpe County, laying out for nights at a time, Lords know where or who with. It's her fault that he lives a life of wantonness and sin. She shakes her head and recounts his shortcomings.

The burden weights Ruby and makes her lay aside the cabbage chopper and sink to her knees. She folds her hands in front of her upturned face. "O, dear Jesus, I been askin' for the wrong thang." She sighs heavily. "Lord, give me the stren' th to keep Satan away from my young'un. Arm me, Lord. Give me your swift sword to fight him and to defeat him." Her voice rises and her folded hands form fists which she pounds on her chest making a dent for the spirit to wend its way back into her soul, producing shouts of fierce joy. Her body takes on new energy and she jumps to her feet, her torso shaking like the tail end of a wormy dog, her feet stomping rhythmically on the creaking floor.

The cats and dogs shoot off the porch when they hear the sounds, known but unknowable. Maltie, Aunt Sarie, Uncle Amos and the kids jerk out of their seats and bump each other at the door. Aunt
Sarie backhands Charles Keith when he steps on her feet and nearly knocks her off balance. Maltie rushes to her mother's side and tries to put her arms around her, but Ruby flails her away. The children, though they have spent their lives in church being tromped on and hit by people who are "happy", instinctively step back to the wall and one by one begin to cry. The adults watch the eerie play, back a ways and trancelike themselves. Ruby continues, her mouth sending out signals known only to God, her arms and legs, her whole body moving in a primitive beat to music only it can interpret, reaching a screaming climax before it begins to slow, the powerful energy deflated in a whoosh! like a puffball you step on in the woods. Bracing herself on the countertop, Ruby alights slowly, sinking at last into a heap on the kitchen floor.

Silence has time to settle in before Maltie and Aunt Sarie muster their wits and kneel beside her, Aunt Sarie grunting as she lowers first one knee and then the other. Maltie cradles her mother's head, pushing back her hair and cooing softly, "Mommy, are you all right?" Ruby's wild-wide eyes focus in the distance, far beyond Maltie's face. "Mommy?"

"I see the old devil," Ruby says weakly. "He's determined to reclaim my baby, but he'll not get him this time, not now that he has me to reckon with."

On the porch, Marvin sits, looking as if he wants to follow the others inside but unable to will himself to stand. He lights another shaky cigarette and brushes back his hair. He stares across the
meadow and into the road. Jim Kestner's rusted van eases by. Jim
throws up his hand, and Marvin returns the motion. The dust in the
van's wake reminds him for some reason of the Reds' game. He looks
at his watch. The game has been on for 45 minutes. Perhaps he has
some money on it, but he can't remember how much or with whom.
He tries to divine if it's a sin to watch baseball on Sunday, but he
cannot latch on to the thought long enough to decide. He yawns and
the sweet taste of a beer sits on his tongue. He knows that's a sin. And
he knows it's a sin to dwell on Arizona Belcher's big breasts and loud
laughter, but the harder he tries not to think about her the more he
does and the knot in his trousers itches and aches. He wonders what
he has gotten himself into. Tears begin to slide down his face again.

The screen door slams and Ruby bursts out.

"Is dinner ready?" Marvin asks, looking over at her.

"Maltie and Sarie's tending to it," she answers. "It'll be ready in
a few minutes." She bounds toward him with an energy and force that
frighten him. He winces as she sits beside him and pulls his head to
her age-flattened chest.

"No, Mommy's goin' to set right here with her baby, her new
child of Christ," she says, raking her hand through his hair and
kissing it. "Baby, the Lord has done told me that I'm supposed to shield
you from the devil, and I'll be danged if I don't do it." She fills her
hand with his hair and shakes it hard. Marvin groans. She kisses his
head again and shoves his body upright. She turns his face toward
her with a fleshy hand on each cheek. "Now you listen to me," she
says. "We've been through this before. The Good Lord has saved you and the old devil has pulled you right back into his evil clutches. I've watched it happen, and I've prayed, and I've watched and I've prayed, and I've watched and I've prayed. And I'm tard of it."

Her hands have turned into a steel trap that digs into Marvin's face. His neck hurts from the clamp. "Mom-my," he whimpers.

"Don't Mom-my me. I'm dead serious. The Lord has showed me that I've got to help you to overcome the mighty temptations of the devil who's as much alive and real as you and me." Marvin shrinks. "But I ain't goin' to let him. Trust in the Lord, son. Let the Lord be your companion, and I'm goin' to be there ever step of the way. Jist as long as the Lord gives me stren' th and I'm able, yore goin' to walk in the path of righteousness. Pray with me, baby."

She lets go of his face. She puts one hand over his hands and with her other hand she grabs his hair and pushes his head down to his chest. "Precious Jesus, we thank you for the love that passeth understanding. We thank you for answering a pore mother's prayer."

She straightens her shoulders and grasps his hair more firmly. "Now, dear God, we ast that you give us both stren' th to ward off the sinful urges of the most evil one." Her voice rises in waves. Marvin shivers. "Ah, Lord, when this boy is weak, let me be there to blast old Satan from his heart. Let me be your agent to lead this boy on his journey to his heavenly home. Thank you, Jesus. Amen."

She jerks Marvin's hair. "Say Amen."
"Amen," Marvin gurgles. As Ruby lets go of his hair, a spasm overtakes him and he starts to sob again. Mucus and salt tears sliding into his mouth, he cries, "Mommy, I want to do right!"

For the first time in Marvin's life, he fears his mother. She's threatened before. She's cried and prayed. But there is something about her eyes now, an aura that stings to the quick. Her hands have gained an almost hurtful power, like those of a man who's worked hard labor all his life, as strong as Jimmy Joe Stambaugh who's been on the winning end of many a fight with Marvin. No, Ruby is different today. Marvin tingles from a strange sensation that this time he's in for a major change, and the sensation is not particularly pleasing.

The next morning before it's good and light, Ruby goes in to wake Marvin. Her rude hands shake him to life. He starts. "Mommy, what's wrong?"

"Git up," she says as she walks over and pulls up the window blind.

"It ain't hardly daylight yet," he whines, stretching the sheet over his head.

"Git up. Eat you a good breakfast. I fixed gravy and biscuits and there's fresh eggs I just picked up this mornin' Now git up."

Marvin's nose rouses. He sniffs the soulful aroma of the meat. Tantalized but wary, he asks, "Why you cookin' so all-fired early?"
"Cause yore goin' to git yerself cleaned up and I'm takin' you to town to the unemployment office and git you a job." Her arms folded over her belly, Ruby stabs Marvin's drowsiness with her eyes, splitting it wide open and pouring the sleep out.

They reach the employment office before it opens. They sit in the car, Ruby behind the wheel checking her watch every few minutes, Marvin leaning his head against the passenger-side window.

Inside, Ruby does all the talking. "Looks to me like if people really wanted to help a body git a job, you'd be here at a decent hour," she tells the receptionist. "That's why they's so many people outta work. Ain't nobidy tryin' to help 'em. My son here wants work and he's here early to prove it."

The receptionist, a heavy-set girl with bobbed hair and big dangling earrings, shrugs. She knows that nobody is happy with the employment office, neither those who want help nor those who get it. She hands some forms to Marvin, but Ruby grabs them.

With the counselor, Ruby provides the answers to all the questions. Marvin starts to answer a couple of times and finally gives into the stronger force. He slumps deeper into the seat, hoping to disappear, wishing the day to be over, wanting more than anything a drink.

By 11, the two of them, mother and son, are at a construction site, being interviewed by a burly, hard-hatted foreman. "No, he don't
have no license now, but I'll see to it that he's here first thing ever mornin', one way or another. You can count on that," Ruby tells the man. "We just live right over here on Middle Fork. He could walk far as that's concerned."

"Well, have him here by 7:30 in the morning and we'll give it a try," the man says, taking his hat off to reveal a two-toned forehead. "I don't really care how he gets here. It's what he does when he's here, you know what I mean, ma'am?"

Marvin looks around. He doesn't mind working. He just doesn't like the feel of having his mother chauffeuring him and talking for him. Before this last time he got saved, she just moped and cried and pouted when he started to backslide, and she left him pretty much alone. Oh, she prayed a lot for his soul and she took his business to the other people in church to ask for their prayers. But when he came in drunk or when he decided to spend a night or two out or when he needed money, she'd just shake her head, cry a little, maybe recite a few Bible verses and try to talk him into going back to church. He'd promise to do better, she'd cook one of his favorite meals, he'd clean up and go to church with her a time or two, and things would get back to normal.

Until yesterday. It was all so normal. She'd given him five hundred dollars Saturday. He couldn't remember now what for. But he'd promised her he'd get up and go to church the next morning, something about an evangelist from over at Fearmore or somewhere. The fourth time she'd come in to wake him, he'd figured it was easier
to pacify her and go. Maybe it was the heat in the church, or the
mournfulness of the preacher or the guilt over the money. Whatever
it was, something had touched him deep down in his gut and moved
him forward to the altar. And Marvin was sorry. Sorry for all the
grief he'd caused Ruby, sorry about the drinking, sorry about the
money he'd lost, sorry about the baby Venus said was his, sorry about
the way he wanted to get lost in Arizona's privates more than
anything in the world. He loved it all. But he knows she is right, it is
all the devil's work. He's been sorry before, and he'll probably be
sorry again.

Yet, he still can't explain, can't even comprehend what has
come over Ruby, how she's latched onto him, how in a few short
hours, less than a full day, she's taken over his life. Marvin's feelings
scare him. Why, who knows, he might come to like living a clean life.
Might stop drinking and throwing away his money, might get his
license back, might even marry Venus and give the kid a name. As
his mother and the foreman lapse into talk about working in the
mines and about granddaddies and great aunts and second cousins.
Marvin's eyes scan the hillsides, really seeing them for the first time
this spring. The different shades of green exude freshness and
energy. He stares at the budding trees and says a silent prayer,
asking that the new growth inject his being. He is smiling and
refreshed as the foreman reaches to shake his hand. "See you in the
morning, buddy," he tells Marvin. "You're lucky to have a mama like
you've got. I hope you know that."
"Yes, sir," are the only words Marvin can find.

Ruby drives Marvin back into town and treats him to a double cheeseburger and fries which they order at the drive-through and eat in the car. She'd seen Junior Fitzpatrick's pickup in the parking lot, at least it looked like his, and she wasn't about to go inside to let him have a chance to talk to Marvin.

Later as mother and son watch a cable western, Junior calls. Ruby -- thank you, Lord, that I can still run, she whispers -- gets to the kitchen wall phone at the beginning of the second ring. "I'm sorry, but he can't come to the phone right now. Thanks for calling. Bye now," she says breathlessly and hangs up.

"Who was that?" Marvin asks, as she settles back into the recliner.

"Nothing important." Ruby smoothes down the skirt of her print house dress and looks straight into the TV. "Wonder whatever happened to him," she nods at the actor on the screen.

She turns off the TV after the 11 o'clock news. Over the last few months, Marvin has gotten used to staying up late if he's home. "Better go to bed, baby. Got to get up early," Ruby says, nudging him from the couch. "Let's pray, first," she says and motions for him to kneel beside her facing the coffee table.

Marvin leaves the blinds up and lies in bed looking at the dark hills. He counts stars to keep from wondering who's with Arizona tonight, what she's wearing -- or not, what Junior and Billy Wayne
are up to, who's at the Hillbilly Heaven tonight, but his mind
wanders. He falls asleep curled up like a tired dog and dreams about
the devil.

Tuesday morning Ruby establishes the pattern. She cooks a big
breakfast, eggs over easy, gravy, canned biscuits and meat -- bacon,
ham or sausage. It's ready when she rousts Marvin out of bed, a cup of
coffee to put in his hand as he makes his way to the bathroom. She
takes him to work, arriving exactly at 7:25, enough time, she says, to
read a Bible passage and pray the devil will leave him alone until
lunch time when she pulls up alongside the foreman's truck with
three sandwiches, one for her, two for Marvin, potato chips in a
plastic bag, a piece of fruit, two cans of pop and a fresh jug of water
to last him through the afternoon. "Here's your mommy, Mar-vin,"
one of the men yells. Marvin takes off his hard hat and tucks it under
his arm, rubs his forehead, looks quickly at the co-worker then away,
and heads for Ruby's car. Ruby has spent an hour in the morning
trying to find the precise passage that God wants Marvin to meditate
on this afternoon.

At five minutes to quitting time, the '85 Buick with Jesus Saves
on the front plate and a Follow-Me-To-Middle-Fork-Church decal on
the back bumper stops abruptly in a dust storm in the middle of what
will be the north lane on the new road. Ruby punches the horn and
sticks her hand out the window in a long, easy wave, her eyes lost in
a grin like a queen in a parade float. Some of the workers wave back
and some hoot, "Hey, Ruby!" They begin to jump down from their machines or lay aside their tools. Marvin lags, while Ruby watches him and repins some of the straggly hairs in her beehive do.

On Wednesday, Marvin's muscles ache from new use, and he's moving slowly, but Ruby tells him to rub on some liniment and get cleaned up for church. Marvin just wants to sit on the porch, dirty, and watch the hill. He's so tired, he can't even conjure Arizona's thighs.

Ruby knows Fridays can be hard. After work, she takes his paycheck directly to town to the drive-through bank and deposits it in her account, taking out a hundred dollars in cash and marking a notation in a yellowing ledger book she bought at a yard sale over on Rockhouse. Marvin doesn't even know how much he made. Using her own money, she buys them a burger combo and heads to Lick Fork. At Venus Caudill's mother's trailer, Ruby puts the car in park, gets out and walks to the door, her head plunging in front of her feet, the five twenties in her upraised hand and a receipt book in the right. Venus' mother, a top-heavy woman with pink curlers in her hair, cracks the door, sees Ruby and motions for her daughter. Venus, who's grown to chunky since the baby, steps off the tiny porch, sees Marvin, smiles and waves. The sight of her, despite the dirty t-shirt and tummy bulge, stirs some action in Marvin's groin. He opens the car door and starts to get out.
"Just git back in, Marvin. We ain't goin' to be here but a minute." Ruby pushes him back with a gesture. "Venus, honey, here's some money for the baby. It ain't much but it ort to help." She hands the bills to the girl and changes to a prim tone. "Now, this don't mean I think the young'un belongs to my boy. It's just that the Lord tells us to 'suffer the little children.'" Seeing Venus' flirtatious head movements and sidelong looks at Marvin, Ruby positions herself between him and the girl. She pulls the book from under her arm. "Now, here, I want you to sign this receipt sayin' Marvin give you this money on this day." She hands Venus a blue ball point pen etched with gold letters, God Is Love. The girl signs her name, still trying to send a signal to Marvin, who remains half in, half out of the car seat.

"You want to see the baby, Marvin," Venus says, sidestepping Ruby. "He's almost walkin'. Gittin' into everthing. Lookin' more like you ever day."

"Why, shore," Marvin says, pulling himself up by the car door. Ruby grabs the girl's arm. "Honey, we'd love to see it, but we got a million things to do. Now you go back in and tend to it." She motions Marvin back into the car and lets go of Venus' arm with the hint of a shove. She rushes to the driver's side of the car, opens it, starts to get in, then straightens back up. "Venus, honey, we'd love to see you in church Sunday. Bring the baby and bring your mommy. We'd love to see you all come to the Lord, like Marvin, bless his heart, has done."
Before Venus can answer, Ruby is scratching the wheels in the dirt and jerking the car out of the driveway. Marvin barely gets the door closed before they jump onto the road. He looks back and returns Venus' wave with a weak flick. Going up Middle Fork, they come upon Junior's truck. Junior stops, expecting them to do the same, to talk across open windows in a custom that has replaced neighborly chats on front porches. Marvin leans forward to acknowledge his party buddy. Ruby steps on the gas and lurches past the truck, sparing scarcely a foot between the two vehicles.

"Mommy," Marvin says, still leaning forward, his hand in a half wave, "why ain't you stoppin'? That was Junior."

"I know who it was." Ruby's shoulders stiffen and her nose tilts upward. "It's the devil in the form of Junior Fitzpatrick. We ain't got no time fer sich as him."

"Mommy, Junior's my best friend. He ain't no devil." Marvin slumps into the seat. "Least I could do is say Hi-dee, but you won't even allow that."

Ruby reaches over and places her hand on Marvin's leg. "Honey, the devil lurks all around us, just a'waitin' fer a crack in our armor. That's all he needs, just one little chink, and then he takes over our lives again." Marvin rolls his eyes and turns his head to the window.

"Don't you turn away from your mommy. Now look here, you know it's the God's truth. I said look here." With her right hand, she pulls Marvin's face around by his chin. Her head goes back and forth
from the road to him. "Ever time you been in trouble, who's been alongside you? Junior Fitzpatrick, that's right. Junior has been with you in them nightclubs, as they call 'em, ain't nothin' but the devil's waiting room." Her voice takes on a hissing sound. "He's been right there with you when you meet them ol' girls with faces painted up like some red heathern and them short shorts that don't begin to cover what ain't suppose to be seen."

"Ah, Mommy," Junior says, trying to wrest his face out of her grip.

"No, the only thing we're goin' to have to do with Junior Fitzpatrick, or any of them other so-called friends of yourn from now on is to witness for the Lord. Once the Lord lays his hands on them and they turn from the devil's wicked ways, then they can deserve to be your friends." Ruby stomps on the accelerator and turns loose of Marvin's face.

"Mommy, I'm a grown man. I can't stay locked up all my life." Marvin rolls his head around to get the crick out of his neck.

"You may be a man in years, but yore still a babe in the Lord," she says, striking her hand on the steering wheel. "And the Lord has showed me, as clear as you settin' there, that I am responsible for you, responsible for plantin' your feet on higher ground, and I wasn't put here to fail the Lord."

Marvin sighs and digs a deeper hole in the seat.
Saturday morning, Ruby lets Marvin sleep until eight. After breakfast and Bible study, she makes him help her rearrange the living room furniture. Maltie and the kids stop by on their way from town. The kids show off new toys and ride Marvin's back around the house. Aunt Sarie calls to give her nephew what she calls "words of encouragement."

When his sister loads her tribe and their booty into the old Ford and takes off up the road, a lull sets in. Marvin scans the TV channels, then turns off the set and goes to the porch. He sits in the glider, chain-smoking and rocking himself nervously to a missed beat.

In the kitchen, Ruby momentarily panics, wondering what she can think of to keep Marvin busy today, to keep his mind off devilment. She's already mowed the grass and cleaned out the warm house this week. She chides herself for not saving some chores for him. She determines that come Monday, the Lord willing, she'll go all over the place, inside and out, and make a list of projects. But for now, she sits down at the kitchen table, rubs her face, tucks up some loose hairs and says a silent prayer.

The Lord answers her with a vision of the creek. She stands up, rushes out the back door to the shed, gets a mattock, a saw and a shovel, and carries them around the house to the front porch steps, smiling to herself. "Marvin, here, there's somethin' I want you to do fer me," she says as she sets down the tools and wipes her forehead with the apron. Marvin comes out of a nap. "What, Mommy?"
"Your daddy would just cry if he knewed how we've let the creek grow up. Them ol' willers taking off ever which way, honeysuckle vines and grapevines suckin' the life out of them big ol' walnut trees." The words come rapid-fire, forming a breathless crescendo. "That's how come we catch all that ol' garbage from them heatherns up the creek. Why your daddy'd whip us both if he's still alive to see what shape that creek's in." She stops to catch her breath. She holds up the tools, cocks her head and puts on her prettiest smile. "Can you do it for me, honey?"

"Ay, shore, Mommy. Least I can get started today." Marvin rises stiffly.

"I'll come out and help you as soon as this ham I've got in the oven for Sunday dinner gets done." He walks down the steps, and, as he takes the tools, Ruby plants a kiss on his cheek. "Thank ye, honey," she says.

"Anything I can do to help, Mommy," he answers.

Ruby watches as Marvin walks down the driveway, kicking his legs to straighten out his jeans. She feels a glow. "Thank ye, Lord. I think we just about got 'im."

In the kitchen Ruby sings a medley, her voice breaking on the high notes, as she peels potatoes for a salad to go with tomorrow's ham. She's on the chorus of "Bringing in the Sheaves" -- "we shall come rejoicing" -- when she hears a car horn. She goes to the living room window to look out. She lets out a gasp when she sees Junior's truck down by the creek. A tall, skinny boy with the leak of a beer
paunch over his low-slung Levis, Junior jumps from the high-wheeled pickup and shimmies down the creek bank to where Marvin has stopped his sawing. Ruby runs out of the house, leaving the screen door to flap and causing the cats to leap over the banisters and scatter across the yard.

She stops in the drive and yells, "Mar-vin! Mar-vin! I need you in the house."

Marvin is leaning on a tree, one ankle crossed over the other, his arm on his hip. Junior squats a few feet away. They laugh, and Ruby's ire rises.

"Mar-vin! Did you hear me? Come up here. Now!"

"Just a minute, Mommy," he says, looking around and waving the air.

"Now! I said now!" She's screaming, her eyes wide, her face red. She stomps her foot. "Now!"

"OK, OK, I'm comin'. Don't have a stroke." Marvin hits Junior on the arm and they both laugh. Marvin hops onto a rock in the middle of the stream, balances gracefully on one foot and then jumps to the other side. His friend follows. They come up the bank by the culvert and amble up the driveway.

Ruby stands at the head of the drive, lips pursed, hands forming fists.

"I want you in the house this minute," she shouts.

"What's wrong, Mommy? That ham ain't caught afire, has it?" Marvin laughs and nudges Junior with his elbow. Junior staggers
sideways and puts his hand up to his mouth, giggling like a prankish boy.

Ruby calms down as they get closer, but her face remains determined.

"Junior, what're you doin' here?" Ruby asks, trying to remember that a Christian is not rude.

"Ay, Miss Simpson, I's just passin' by and thought I'd stop and shoot the breeze with Marvin fer awhile. Ain't seen him in a week."

Junior's broad grin cuts to Ruby's heart. Such a likable boy, she thinks. In some ways a good boy, looks after his parents, pays for his kids, works pretty steady, always doing for somebody, got a big heart. She shakes her head. But the devil most often is likable, sometimes deceptive in good works, sometimes a joy to be in his company. The most beautiful angel, she remembers.

"Yessir, I'm keepin' him close," Ruby says. "Takes all me and the Lord can do, but we keep tryin'. I ain't giving up, nosir. I ain't lettin' the devil have him again." She fakes a laugh. "Nosir, ain't lettin' him have him, if I have to kill him first."

"For Chrissake, Mommy, you ..."

"Marvin! I don't want to hear no such blasphemy come out of your mouth again." Ruby's face is red, her breath quick.

"I'm sorry, Mommy, but this just can't go on like this. Hel ... er, heck, you don't let me outta your sight. You can't keep sayin' who I can speak to and who I can't, and ... and ... watching me ever minute."
You make me feel like some young'un in diapers." Marvin stiffens his back and tucks his t-shirt into his pants.

"Son, I'm only doin' what the Lord has told me to do," Ruby says, sticking her hands in her apron pockets and arching her back in response. "Last Sunday, you walked to the altar and you asked the Lord's forgiveness of your sins and He worshipped you white as snow."

She stiffens even more. "And it ain't like this was the first time you've gone forth, no, not by a long shot," she adds, her voice up an octave. "No, n-o-o."

She looks at Junior. "I ain't got nothin' against you, Junior, except that you ain't saved. But I don't want you in my boy's life, and I'd be pleased if you didn't come back here again until you straighten out your life." She accents her words with a flick of her head.

"Now, wait a minute, Mommy," Marvin says, stepping forward and putting his elbows on his hips. "This here is my friend, and I ain't lettin' you talk that way to him. In fact, if he ain't welcome here, then I ain't neither." He pulls at his belt and flexes his shoulders. "In fact, I'm goin' with him right now. Come on, Junior." He touches his friend's arm and turns to go down the driveway.

Junior takes a few steps back, avoiding Marvin's arm. "Hey, wait, Buddy. I don't want to see nothin' like this. Maybe you ort to stay here."

Marvin stops and motions to his mother, whose hand is over her mouth. "No, man, I ain't goin' to take this shit. Treatin me like some baby. Might as well be in prison. Let's go."
Ruby stands in the driveway, unsure of her legs. The sound of a low sob pushes through her mouth. She acts like a stiff wind is sweeping behind her. It whisks between her legs and makes her jump, a soft "ooh" coming through her lips. It swoops into her armpits and under her breasts, causing her arms to jerk up and out. A loud, primitive wail rises, and a force sets her to running down the drive, like a person on fire and trying to outdistance the blaze.

The screams curdle in the spines of the two men. As both start to turn, Ruby is on them, one arm tightly holding each neck, her legs around both of them, strong as a vise wielded by a giant presence, her apron and dress skirt flying in the air.

"Mommy, for God sakes, what's the matter?" Marvin cries, trying to fend her off.

Junior manages to break free, but not before Ruby butts him in the nose, hard, with her head. He slinks off, catching the spurting blood with his shirt.

She climbs full onto Marvin's back, slapping him, one hand after the other on each side of the face, binding herself to him with her legs. "You can't have him," she shouts with each blow. "You can't have him."

Junior knows Marvin has been tested in dozens of fights, that he needs to grab the wrists and throw the attacker around his shoulder onto the ground. He's restrained apparently by the thought that this is his mother, leaving him to bear the brunt of her rage.
With no answers, he sinks to the ground and begins to cry like a sissy boy who can't take up for himself.

Ruby does not let up. Astride him now, she pulls his hair and beats his head on the dirt, relentlessly, a machine stuck on drive. Sweat drops off her and blinds him. She moves back a little and, without losing force, punches his chest with her fists. Marvin is like a piece of dough in the hands of a baker. All sense of resistance has gone. Ruby hits and Marvin cries.

Nursing his broken nose, Junior eases over to the pair. "Miz Simpson, Miz Simpson, you better stop. Marvin, are you all right?" He feels like he ought to do something, but he can't think what. "God, man, do you reckon she's havin' a nervous breakdown? Do you think I ort to call a ambulance?"

Junior sits down wearily just outside the action ring. Tears run down his cheeks mingling with the blood. "Ah, come on, Miz Simpson, please stop," he sobs, wiping his nose. "Marvin, Buddy, say somethin'."

Junior rests on the ground and watches, looking around at space and sighing, until finally Ruby's energy flags. She rolls off Marvin and lies on the grass beside him, panting, her clothes pasted to her with sweat. Junior can't stifle a grin when the thought occurs to him that they both look like snow angels he used to make when he was a kid.

Junior rises to a squat. He looks to make sure both mother and son are breathing. Ruby's jellied chest heaves. Her eyes are open and
focused heavenward. Marvin's breaths are slighter, coming from light waves in his belly. His eyes are closed, but Junior can see tiny streams of water oozing from the corners.

Junior stands and looks around at nothing in particular. The air is as clear and still as the first moments after a spring shower. "Well, Miz Simpson, Marvin, I reckon I'll be goin'. Go into town, maybe stop at the hospital. Check this nose out." He wants to laugh and works hard to control the need.

He starts to walk up the driveway toward his pickup, but turns. "Marvin, you still want to go with me?"

Without moving, Marvin answers softly, "No, I reckon I'll just stay here."

The corners of Ruby's mouth twitch and she closes her eyes.
"Heard yer boyfriend’s been — humm — uh —." Gary Wayne Castle rolls his eyes and rubs his chin, pretending to search for a word. “What am I lookin’ for? Somebidy help me out here.” He snaps his fingers. “Ay, I know, I know — de-tained.” He spreads the word giving full play to both syllables. “Penned up, held back, se-questered, re-cup-er-atin’ at home so to speak.”

Junior Fitzpatrick, his head retreating into his neck like a big old mud turtle, utters his characteristic “Tee-hee.”

Everyone else on the porch lapses into laughter, Arizona Belcher as loud as any, throwing back her long, red hair and slapping her purple Spandex thigh.

“What ye go’n do now, Ar-i-zona?” Gary Wayne loves playing the good-natured antagonist, especially standing here on the steps where he gazes down at the soft, full roundness ballooning out of Arizona’s halter top. Flashing a gold-toothed grin, he takes off the Little Wonder Coal cap, rakes his hand through his hair, repositions the cap and takes another good long look.

“Yep, who’s go’n be yer boyfriend now, Arizona?” asks Peewee Cantrell from his seat astraddle the porch bannister where the view isn’t all that bad.

“Well, hell, I’ll volunteer,” says Jimmy Joe Stambaugh. He rises from a mauve plastic chair, pulls at his belt and walks up beside Arizona who is sitting on the top step, leaning against the wall.
"In your dreams," she says, pushing his leg. "Get real."

"Well, what are you go'n do?" Junior asks. "You go'n fight his mama?" He rubs his swollen nose and laughs. Everybody joins in.

"Ain't goin' to do nothin'," Arizona replies, her eyebrows emphasizing each syllable. "Marvin's mommy can keep him. Guess she needs him worse than I do." She takes a drink of beer, her head tilted to the wall, her back arched, her neck and breasts thrust out like a model in a pop commercial. All the men look.

Iwilda sits close to the door, on the periphery, sipping slowly on a light beer, observing.

There isn't a man on the porch or in most of Shawnee County for that matter who doesn't want Iwilda's perfect daughter, from the construction crew working on the new road at the mouth of the holler to the doctors at the hospital where she's the shift supervisor of nurses. Arizona Belcher is a hell of a woman. Even grown-up men who love their wives and go to church three times a week own up to admiring her. Like Gary Wayne has been heard to say on numerous occasions, "There ain't a movie star can hold a candle to Arizona."

She is one of those people who can carry off a name like Arizona. It's a name that just wouldn't be appropriate for a mousy little woman with pimples on her face, flaps under her arms and maps on her legs. Iwilda believes that names define some people and defeat others. She says sometimes they dictate what a person will be and sometimes they challenge beyond ability.
Iwilda, who loves geography and the sound of “uh” on the end of a word, missed miserably with her first five daughters. Georgia, who was supposed to be a demure little lady with a sweet temperament, a la Sweet Georgia Brown, turned out to be a lazy whiner whose favorite words are “But, Mom-my.” Carolina, whom Iwilda envisioned to be regal and beautiful, a pageant winner for sure, came out a shy, scared girl who watches television all day and is married to a boy as backward as she is. Florida had to be a flashy, outgoing cut-up with a sunny disposition, Iwilda thought when number three was born, but Florida became an angry hurricane, the school bully whose husband left her because, to put it bluntly, he was afraid of her. The fourth girl, Virginia, was going to be the Old South revisited, a belle in lace and silk with lots of boyfriends who would marry a professional man and be president of the Ladies Garden Club, but Virginia, from day one, was a tomboy, never wearing a dress and now living with a mannish woman named Cliff who looks just like her. Iwilda’s hope waned with the fifth pregnancy by Herbert Belcher, but she had established a pattern. Alabama, it turned out, was brain-damaged, a beautiful child with lively green eyes and a laughing, easy-going disposition who died just after she turned three.

Iwilda realized by the last time Herbert got her pregnant that the South had let her down. She needed to move somewhere else on the map. She considered Asia, a pretty word, she thought, simple, easy to pronounce and pleasant to look at. But her brother Virgil had just come back from Vietnam. He said “Absolutely not!” In fact, he got so
mad when Iwilda mentioned it that he vowed to have nothing to do with the child or any of his sister's family again if she named this one Asia.

Virgil's preference was America, which is what he did name his baby girl who was born two weeks before he jumped off the spillway at the dam and killed himself. Iwilda, however, thought that name somewhat old-fashioned and unhip. She had once known an old woman named America, Miz America England, in fact, who was ugly and scary, and Iwilda couldn't separate the image from the name. She also ruled out Nebraska and Alaska because she didn't like the "ass" sound. California, she decided, would be too much for a child to learn to spell and, besides, the "Cal" was too close to "cow" to suit her. She couldn't get through Las Vegas and the gambling, of which she disapproves, long enough to consider Nevada. Iowa was pretty, but maybe too bland. Montana, Minnesota and Dakota were contenders. They had the right number of syllables, they flowed softly off the tongue, but they didn't feel completely right, kind of cold, in fact.

That left Arizona. Iwilda liked the "A" start, kind of a tribute to little Alabama. She liked the "z", too, different but not unpleasingly so, like an "x". She thought of the magnificence of the Grand Canyon, the striking landscape she'd seen in books, the strength of the sun, the solid placement on the national border with anchors on all four sides, and the exotic aura of the southwest.

And Arizona did not disappoint her namer. As a baby she seldom cried. She never needed much sleep. She occupied herself in
the well-used bassinet by grabbing at butterflies on the wallpaper or blowing bubbles with spit or kicking out rhythms on the mattress. Sometimes, Iwilda watched her in silence from the door, marveling at the child's ability to spend hours entertaining herself, while the other girls dreamed up problems for their mother to solve. As Arizona grew, Iwilda's time was filled with Georgia's whining voice always in her mother's ear, with Carolina's lack of interest in anything, with stormy Florida's constant battles, with Virginia's vain attempts to be a girl, and with her own dissection of what she may have done to make Alabama the way she was. In this time, too, Herb died in a mine explosion and Iwilda went in and out of two sorry marriages.

Still Arizona grew into a beauty who taught herself to read before turning four, who was the prettiest, smartest, most popular girl in every class. Iwilda's life was cemented by neediness, and Arizona was grown before her mother realized she could not recall her baby ever uttering the words “I need” or “I want.” Arizona had become a state unto herself, independent, self-governing, self-fulfilling, flying her own jolly flag, bound only by the loose confederation of the Belcher name. Iwilda, much like everyone else, is in awe.

The mother shakes herself free of reverie and reclaims her observatory role.

“Well, I think it's a shame,” says Lib Skaggs, a wildly painted, top-heavy woman who works at the hospital, “the way Miz Simpson done. Marvin's not a little boy no more. She cain't jist, what, beat him
up — ain’t that what you said, Junior? -- and force him to stay at home.”

Junior gives the wise nod of a witness, his lips pulled back, his head barely moving.

“She’s just doin’ what she thinks is right,” Arizona says, turning the beer can around in her hand. “I don’t hold it against her.”

“Don’t sound to me like no Christian thing to do, if that’s what she claims,” Lib says with a harrumph in her voice.

“It don’t really matter,” Arizona says. “Anyway, I can live without Marvin Simpson. I don’t need him.”

“Well, Arizona, honey, you know you allus got me.” Jimmy Joe sniffs big, pulls down the bill of his cap a notch or two, puts on his best shit-eating grin and then laughs. Everybody knows he’s really not clowning.

“Go for it, Jim,” yells Peewee.

Iwilda giggles and shakes her head. Truth be told, if she were a few years younger and he a few years older, Iwilda would have her sights set for Jimmy Joe. For some inexplicable reason, she has always fancied men like him, big old country boys with good hearts who are just outside the circle and never know it. Iwilda listens for her daughter’s reaction.

“Jimmy Joe,” Arizona says, rolling her eyes up at Gary Wayne, “rest assured that if I was to take a notion I wanted you, I’d call you. But don’t hold up your life on account of me.” She grins and winks at
"Truth is I don't need any man," she says, adding so as not to hurt anybody's feelings, "right now."

The statement bothers Iwilda. It's the need thing, she observes. This porch is full five nights out of seven, but the truth is Arizona would be just as happy if nobody showed up.

This porch is kind of Arizona's capital, even though it's on her mother's house. Iwilda's second husband, Matt Pratt, built it halfway across the front of the doublewide from a kit he bought at Lowe's. He called it a deck, but all the Belcher kids insisted it was a porch, especially after some of Arizona's suitors put a roof over it for free because they got tired of having to leave whenever it rained and Arizona didn't go to any pains to ask them inside. Here, from the first mild day in spring to the last one in fall and during any warmish day in winter, they congregate. Iwilda loves having the young people around. The men like Arizona for obvious reasons; they want to lean into her curves, climb her mountains and drive up her hollers. But because she doesn't invite the attention and because she's generous with leftovers, women come here as well.

Iwilda is sure that very few of the men get the favors they seek from Arizona, but they keep returning, perhaps to fire their dreams and to rev up their fantasies when they settle for someone else. She knows some of them, particularly the good-looking ones like Gary Wayne, often wonder just what colors Arizona's choices in men. Iwilda grew up with brothers and she's an eyewitness to their vanity and need to imprint. She knows Arizona's suitors study themselves in
the mirror, straight on and from side to side, and talk to their reflection as if to her. When the young woman said in passing one day that she liked long hair on a man, Iwilda noticed that Gary Wayne began to let his grow. When her daughter noted that she liked the sound of an acoustic guitar, Iwilda was not surprised when Junior bought one at the flea market on John's Creek and signed up for lessons at the community college. When the girl put her nose up against Peewee's neck one night and said she liked the smell of his cologne, the whole yard reeked of it the next evening so bad that Iwilda had to go inside or be sick. So few have gotten past the porch that the would-be's have had the opportunity to analyze the made-it's. In high school, Arizona went out with Kelso Minix for a while. He was just an ordinary boy, pimply, kind of awkward, about half a head shorter than Arizona, who stands right at six feet tall -- six-two according to the men who wear boots with heels and lie about their height. Iwilda liked the boy. When Arizona was in nurses training at the college, she went out with a philosophy teacher who was divorced and had kids older than she was. Iwilda didn't like him and didn't hesitate to say so, but she was never sure if Arizona drifted away from him because of that or simply because she was tired of him. When Arizona first started work at the hospital, she ran around with a male nurse from Magoffin County who was overweight and flabby, had pasty hands and combed a few scraggily hairs over the front part of his bald scalp. Iwilda puzzled many a night over that choice.
There were a few others, no more than you could count on both hands, none that would be seen on a Marlboro poster or in an exercise infomercial. Then there was Marvin Simpson. Marvin was more of a good old boy than any of the others Arizona had taken into her “stateroom” in the little, frame house behind Iwilda’s doublewide where she has lived ever since her Mammaw Belcher died. Everyone likes Marvin, and nobody begrudges him his good luck, but they are puzzled by it. He is a small man, so skinny Gary Wayne asks him repeatedly if he has to walk around to get wet in the shower. Though no one remembers him ever being any heavier, all his clothes seem too big, his belts always pleating his pants with too much belt left over. Though he’s only a few years older than Arizona, Iwilda points out if you look at his face you’ll think he’s 40 years old. Cigarette smoke has wrinkled the skin around his eyes and mouth, and the sun has tanned him like leather. He has a devilish grin that accentuates the wrinkles, and when the others want to make fun of him, they roll their head around and say, “Ay, hell, now, boys.” He lives with his mother, works sporadically, and has an even bigger thirst than his daddy had when he was alive. His third DUI left him without a driver’s license, but he can always count on Junior or one of the others to take him where he needs to go, including to Arizona’s.

On the porch, Arizona never seemed to pay any more attention to Marvin than to the others. No cuddling, no lovers’ glances, no private jokes. As far as Iwilda knows Marvin never took Arizona out to a show or out to a bar or anywhere. Nobody even knows exactly
when the affair started. One evening when everybody was getting ready to leave, she simply told Junior she'd take Marvin home. Junior still swears Marvin looked as surprised as he did, but Marvin never would go into it, which Junior says hurt his feelings a little bit.

Of course, Iwilda has seen her daughter and Marvin a little closer. She would have preferred Marvin to be a bit more handsome, just a tad livelier, somewhat stronger. And, naturally, she'd want him to show a little more self-control when it comes to alcohol. But in spite of everything, she likes Marvin. He's a sweet boy with just enough devilment to be interesting. She thought Arizona had liked Marvin, too. She'd been having him over for three, going on four, months, which was a couple of months longer than most of the others. Of course, Iwilda didn't like the idea of her daughter letting him stay overnight, sometimes two or three days when she was between shifts at the hospital. But Iwilda also considered that Arizona is a grown woman, making a good living that helps everybody in the family.

Now, Arizona acts like it's nothing that Marvin's mother won't let him come over anymore, afraid he won't be saved, won't be a child of God any more. It's not really the Marvin thing, though, that bothers Iwilda. It's that whole business of Arizona not needing Marvin, or any man, or anybody, for that matter. The idea is totally foreign to Iwilda, like a Spanish channel on the cable. Since she was 14 and started dating, Iwilda has needed a man around. For 21 years Herb was there, her prop, her adviser, her wallet, her bedmate, her
listener. Oh, they had their problems, but Iwilda couldn’t imagine not having him around. That’s why she married Matt Pratt less than six months after Herb got killed, and Jess Williams a month after the divorce from Matt was final. If something happens to Jess that he doesn’t come back, Iwilda knows she will put on her paint and find somebody else quick.

Sitting here listening to Arizona and her friends, Iwilda realizes that she doesn’t understand her daughter. She realizes, too, that Arizona’s lack of need goes beyond men, or even friends. It may go, the thought hits Iwilda, beyond family, perhaps beyond mother. And that thought sends a shiver from the bottom of her spine up through her neck. Somewhere in the recesses of her soul, Iwilda senses maybe she should be grateful, especially when she dwells on the needs of her other daughters, which all but consume her. Still, Iwilda believes this to be a flaw in Arizona, the downside of the mysterious desert that she should have considered when she named her youngest daughter. Not to need, as Iwilda interprets it, is to be arid and infertile and somehow unhuman.

Iwilda sits in her mother’s old wicker chair and watches.

“The Brass-ass Band is up at Hillbilly Heaven this weekend,” Gary Wayne is saying.

“Yeah, I heard ‘em on that dance show on YMT a couple a weeks ago,” Arizona says. “That guitarist is pretty good.”

“I’m go’n bring my guitar over here some evenin’,” Junior pipes in.
“This old boy at work said he heard they’s go’n to Nashville, get a record contract, play some gigs down there,” says Jimmy Joe.

“Wanna go up there, Saturday, maybe, listen to ‘em?” Gary Wayne looks at Arizona.

“Y’all wanna go?” Arizona looks at the others, not at Gary Wayne.

Iwilda takes note. The girl is not even willing to make the least commitment to the man though he’d asked her specifically.

“Why’d you do that?” she asks Arizona after the others leave.

“Why’d I do what?” Arizona empties the overflowing ashtrays into a pink, scented garbage bag half full of beer cans.

“You know what I mean.” Iwilda jerks the garbage bag away from her daughter and ties a knot in the top. “Why’d you act like you didn’t know Gary Wayne was askin’ you to go out with him this weekend?”

“Mommy, he didn’t ask me, he asked everybody.”

“No, he didn’t and you know it. I got eyes. I could see how he said it. Looked right at you.” Iwilda feels an uncharacteristic fit of hatefulness rising in her and she is helpless to stop it. “Now, don’t be a smart ass.”

Arizona puts her hands on her hips, tilts her head to the side and looks at her mother, puzzled. “What’s the matter with you? How many beers did you have?” She starts to put the sheet of plastic over the wicker chair so the cat won’t curl up on the cushion and leave
hair on it during the night. "You know one's your limit or you start actin' silly."

"Silly? Silly?" Iwilda jerks the plastic off the chair and sits down. "Silly?" she says again.

"Mommy, are you all right?" Arizona the nurse puts her hand on her mother's forehead. Iwilda slaps it away. She looks out over the yard which glows under the pole light at the end of the driveway. She is reminded of Canada with its aurora borealis, and she thinks that may have been a better name. Her eyes move to Arizona, who squats by the chair not knowing what to do, and Iwilda wonders where this is going.

"Do you want me to go out with Gary Wayne? Is that what this is about?" Arizona the good daughter asks, searching for a piece to the puzzle.

"No, that's not it. I don't want you to go out with nobidy you don't want to." Iwilda looks at her daughter and sighs. "I just wonder about Marvin. Looks like you'd call him or somethin'. Let him know you think about him. Care about him or somethin'." She sighs again.

"Mommy, if you want me to call Marvin, I'll call Marvin."

"No, no," Iwilda moves her head from side to side, almost crying and not sure why. "No, I don't want you to call him if you don't want to."

"Well, what is it?"
Iwilda sighs again, a heavy bewildered gesture that ends with her body slumped in the chair. “You just need a man. You need to find somebody and get married and have some kids and . . .”

“Mommy, I don’t need a man,” Arizona says, rolling her eyes and sitting back on the porch floor. “I do fine.”

“Honey, every woman needs a man, or somebidy. Even your sister Virginia needs somebidy,” Iwilda shakes her head, “even if it’s somebidy like Cliff.”

“Why, Mommy?” Arizona crinkles her brows and leans slightly toward her mother. "Look at Daddy. I loved him, you know that, but let’s face it, he wasn’t no real prize."

"Don’t speak ill of your daddy. He was a good man." Iwilda stiffens.

Arizona rolls her eyes again, and Iwilda wants to put a fist between them.

"Earth to Mother," Arizona mocks. "He had some major faults and you know it if you’d let yourself think. And that flat-asserted Matt didn’t give you anything but grief. And Jess, hell, you don’t even know for sure where Jess is or when -- if -- he’s comin’ back. What do I need with a man?” Arizona starts to count on her hands. “I have a good job. I have a place to live. I have a good car. I have a lot of friends. I have . . . .”

Iwilda takes the girl’s hands in hers. “Yes, honey, but you don’t understand. You’ve never needed anything.”
“Ah, mommy, there’s lot of things I need.” She stares up at the ceiling, gives a short laugh and starts to count again. “I need some new tires for my car. I need to hoe the garden, I need to find some new curtains for my picture window.”

“No, no,” Iwilda says, waving her hands. “You’re talking about things. I’m talking about people. You’ve never needed anybody. Not even when you was a baby. If we don’t need anybody, we jist dry up. We’re jist empty. We’re like . . .” She can’t find the word, and, anyway, she isn’t sure she knows what she’s talking about. Maybe she did have too many beers.

Arizona sits there, looking for clues in her mother’s face. Finally, she says, too brightly, “Why, Mommy, I guess I need you.” She leans over and hugs her mother, says goodnight and leaves for her own house in the back.

Iwilda turns her head to the side and stares at the worn, green carpet. She knows her daughter well enough to know she said what she thought Iwilda wanted, needed to hear. Maybe 24 years ago, she saw the Grand Canyon as something more than just a big, empty hole in the ground. Maybe three years ago she saw Jess Williams as something more than the scoundrel she knew he was. Maybe Marvin was not worth needing. Iwilda knows she has a lot to think about.
Dessie

Dessie awoke to blackness, and a tinge of panic drew a tiny bubble around her heart. She could not see the familiar glow of the yard light through the drapes, nor the shadow cast by the ever-burning lamp in the hallway. She could not see the ember of the night light Angie had given her — as if she needed a directional mark to the door that was as common to her as the mole beside her lip. She could not make out the outlines of the yellowed family pictures on the wall although she had long held every detail in her heart.

She sat up in bed and instinctively put her fingers on her eyes. Hard and fast like a biscuit maker, she kneaded the balls that shaped her thin eyelids. She opened her eyes and trained them on the doorway until the molecules of the room reconstructed themselves. "Yes, there it is," she said, as she drew a bead on the room, aiming at the quilt rack, the low-slung dresser with its tall mirror, the narrow chest of drawers and the spiraling bed posts.

She tenderly swung her legs off the side of the bed and felt for her house slippers with her feet. She shuffled around the bed, anchoring it with a slight touch, pulled back the curtain and put her face up to a slit in the blinds. "Aah," she said as a smile arched upward on her face. As black as the inside was, the outside was white, the total colorlessness of just before daybreak on an earth painted while its inhabitants slept. She raised the blind and spread open the curtains. "Aah, yes," she purred.

Dessie took small quiet steps into the memory-sighted living room, her fingers drawing an invisible line on the wallpaper. "The power must be
out. No biscuits today, sweetness, but we'll find something." Two cats encircled her legs, bowing their backs and walking sideways to enhance the contact.

"Buster'll be mad at me this mornin'," she said as she hugged her flannel-coated arms and felt her way to the kitchen door. "I guess I didn't pay no attention to the weatherman last night. I knowed we had to git a good snow sometime, but I didn't have no idee we'd git it this mornin'," she told the cats. She took a frayed gray sweater from a hook on the wall, pulled it over her shoulders and opened the back door. The snow had ignored the porch roof and strewn wispy drifts across the floor, coating the metal chairs, turning the ragged reminders of potted flowers into bizarre goblins, and filling Buster's basket.

"Ooh!" Dessie covered her mouth with her hands. "Would you look at that! Lawdy, lawdy, pore little Buster." She looked toward the barn and saw the big red hound leaping through the snow, his ears flopping in rhythm. "Come on, sugar, come on. Mommy's sorry. She didn't know, she didn't know," she said as she stooped and clapped her hands. The dog hopped onto the porch, his nails clicking on the cold plank floor as he slid into Dessie's legs. Quick to forgive last night's oversight, he jumped joyfully, reaching to her chin and pushing her into the door frame. The thrust of his weight, more than half her own, almost knocked her down and she grasped the door knob to balance, but she continued to stroke his snow-covered fur.

Lightly shoving him down, she flicked her hand toward the door and held it open as if beckoning a welcome visitor. "Come on in. We'll stoke the
old stove and see if we can't find some candles and jist have us a high ol' time."

Inside, she opened all the curtains and blinds to use the light of the snow's brightness as dawn evolved. Buster and the cats in tow, she put some blocks of coal into the old heater she'd fought Willard to keep when he'd insisted on putting in an electric heat pump. She had reminded her son how often the power failed here in the wintertime. "As long as I have the old coal stove, then you can rest easy I won't be freezin' or starvin' to death," she'd told him.

"Well, now," Dessie said when the fire came to blaze, "I 'spect we don't have no water neither, don't you?" She looked at the animals who tailed every step. "Now, if I had my old well all I'd have to do is draw me up a bucketful and we'd be set. I should'a thought a'that when them boys with all that big machinery dug that new well and put in that 'lectric pump."

She pulled out a wooden chair and sat at the table. "Lawd, fellers, we keep a-gittin' new stuff, but it don't allus mean better, does it, now?" She stroked Buster's head and nuzzled the cat that had jumped into her lap. "Ay, that ain't really the truth, now is it, sugars?" She threw back her head, the lone, white plait falling from her shoulder. The smile turned into a soft laugh. "No, no, we like our heat early of a cold mornin', don't we? And we like our hot water - shore beats havin' to haul it off'n the stove, don't it? And a heap more, huh?" Dessie's eyes laughed along with her voice and she reached to include the second cat in her circle of warmth for a few silent seconds. She rose gently so as not to discomfit the lap cat. "Least we could do,
I 'spect, is heat us some coffee on the ol' coal stove. I've done it many a time, many a time. Come on, now."

She searched for the seasoned blue canner in the cold pantry, which had been made from the house's original back porch and was lined with shelves full of glass-preserved vegetables and fruit. With a second thought, she also picked up the shiny aluminum soup kettle her granddaughter Libby had given her and which had never been used.

She put on her black oxfords with the ridged soles. "Don't want this ol' bag a-bones to fall down and bust open, do we, honey?" she asked Buster, who responded with a more intense tail wag and a slobbery lick.

On the back porch, she laughed at the cats as they tried to jump over the snow walls only to find new ones at the end of each leap. Judging from Buster's tracks in the yard, she estimated the snow was close to a foot deep, so she made her way in a stiff-legged shuffle to where she knew the cement step to be. Holding on to the porch post, she eased her feet into the yard and felt the snow fall into the hole between her shoes and feet and engulf naked legs at the bottom of her nightgown. She shivered and let out an "ooh" followed by a laugh. "I swan, fellers, this was a lot easier a few years back."

She filled both containers with snow, skimming off the top, ladling the middle layer with her hands and tamping it with her fists. She lifted each pot, now heavy, onto the porch and gave it a strong shove toward the door. "Hee, hee!" she yelled, "this ol' bird ain't so dumb, is she?" Buster's tail complemented her spirit.

The pots of snow crackled and spit on the hot iron stove top. Dessie rubbed her red hands rapidly on the waves of heat that wafted from the
stove she and Millard had bought four decades ago. "Yessir, you been a good ol' stove," she said. "I'd kiss ye, but I'm afraid y'd burn my lips." She stumped a foot, laughing at her own joke. "Lawd, I'm s' silly sometimes, ain't I?" She looked at Buster, who had settled in front of the heater to clean the snow from his paws.

With the melted snow, Dessie brewed coffee on top of the stove in an old percolator and made instant cream of wheat which she shared with her companions. She sipped coffee and sat, wrapped in a homemade afghan, in the padded rocking chair so she could watch the sun sprinkle crystals across the snow-covered yard and field. Her extended family of winter birds flew onto the front porch feeder. "Eat up, babies," she told them through the picture window as they perched warily, unsure of the cats' whereabouts.

A pick-up truck with a snow plow on its bumper turned into the driveway at about eight-thirty. Dessie rose from her chair, the throw doubled around her thin frame. Buster raced ahead of her to the back door where friends always came, and the cats scattered to corners where they could see without being seen. Dessie opened the door as her great-nephew Junior stepped onto the porch and began stomping the snow from his boots.

"Aunt D! You okay?"

"Oh, honey, you goin' to freeze to death. Come on in." Dessie held open the storm door and waved him in. "It's so good to see you, honey," she said, putting her hand on his shoulder. "Ain't this somethin'? I swan I believe this is the prettiest snow I've seen since I was a youngun."

"It's shore pretty all right," said Junior as he pulled off his cap and shook out his pony tail. "But it's cold and it's deep. Nobidy ort to be out in it."
"Then, why for Pete's sake are you out here? Why ain't you takin' yore own advice?" Dessie clapped her hands together and laughed. "Come on in and set down by the fire and I'll git you a cup a'coffee."

"Thank ye, Aunt D, but I can't. I got that old snow plow goin', and I reckon I ort to use it. They's people needs to go to work, needs to go to the store, and that white stuff's s'deep a man's askin' to git stuck 'less he's got a four-wheel drive. Plus, they's a lot a-trees broke off cause the snow's s'heavy. I already had to shove some off the road up by Mommy's." Junior lifted his hair off his neck and pulled the cap down over it.

"Yore a good boy, Junior," Dessie said, patting him on the back. "How is yore mommy?"

"She's doin' fine. But I jist wanted to make shore you's okay. You got the coal stove goin'?"

Dessie nodded. "Yessir, and it's good and warm, too."

"You got 'nough coal to do ye?"

Dessie laughed. "Now that depends on how long the power's off. I got 'nough in here I reckon for the rest a' the day, and I got plenty out by the old smokehouse. I'll walk out there and git me a few bucketfuls when the sun gits up full."

"Now, no you won't. Don't you dare go out there, Aunt D." Junior stepped back and pointed his finger at his great-aunt. "There's a foot or more a'snow out there and it ain't supposed to git but 25 degrees all day. You stay in this house, and I'll stop and brang in some coal fer ye when I come back through here this evenin'."
"Son, you ack like I ain't never got out in no snow." Dessie scowled at Junior and pulled her chin flush with her chest.

The big, baby-faced man rolled his eyes. "Ay, I know you seen a snow er two, Aunt D. And you know what I mean. Ain't no need fer you to git out when y' don't haf to."

Dessie chuckled. "Yessir, all you Fitzpatricks is jist alike. All's tryin' t' boss everbidy."

He grinned and gave her a hug, leaving to the admonition, "Now, you be careful, honey."

Through the window, she followed the big truck as it pulled onto the road, methodically shoveling a passage through the white mound. When the truck had gone around the curve and out of sight, she reclaimed her chair from a cat. "Now, we'll jist set here and pretty soon people'll start travelin', soon's word gits around that Junior's clearin' the road."

Throughout the morning, Dessie watched the snow and nodded off in the comfort of the rocking chair which had been handmade by her grandfather.

"Pshew!" she roused herself with a shiver. "If I ain't careful, I'll let the far go out." She rose and pulled her body in on itself. "Why'n't youns nudge me that it's gittin' chilly in here?" She emptied the remains of the coal bucket onto the waning embers. "I better git me some warm duds on and go git some more coal, don't you think? No tellin' when Junior'll make it back this way. That boy's liable to be plowin' all the way into town."

Over nylon hose that she normally knotted at the knee, she pulled a pair of Willard's thick wool socks that she'd saved for the coldest days, and
over the sweat suit one of the great-grandchildren had given her two
Christmases ago, she put on a pair of bibbed overalls that fit her about as
well as their original owner. Then she added a green and blue checked
flannel shirt. She dug her late husband's work boots out of the hall closet
and tucked in the overall bottoms before pulling the laces tight around her
ankles.

"Lawd, if I's to fall, I reckon I'd have to git in a position to roll back
down the hill, fer I shore couldn't stand up. Buster, you might have to go
fetch somebidy to pick me up." The dog danced to the rhythm of her laugh.

After buttoning her coat, putting on two pairs of gloves and tying a
wool scarf around her ears, she flushed her walking pole from under the
porch snow and began the trudge to the old coal house. Halfway, she stopped
and tilted her head into the piercing blueness of the sky. "Uumm, just feel
that ol' sun," she announced to her entourage. "Thank ye, Lord." She closed
her eyes and savored the sun on her cheeks for several minutes. The
animals, unsure of her intent, hovered around her legs. "Ah!" she said,
coming back to earth and carefully moving her body to take in the snow-
filled hollow on her right. "Ohh, fellers, don't it look like a picture!" The
snow was a feather mattress completely covering the opening in the hills
from one ridge to the other and clear to the top of the farthest point that
separated Dessie's land from her brother's. Even the trees were hard to
distinguish from the crags that dotted the hillsides. Clusters of evergreens
dipped almost to the ground with the misleading weight of snow which in
Dessie's small hands felt light and airy. Dazzled by the utter whiteness, the
old woman squinted and blinked her eyes in an effort to find traces of the
familiar. She mapped the scene and noted that near the mouth of the hollow one of the trees, older perhaps than even she, had given up the attempt to withstand the weight and had snapped near its base. It lay dying, a long, scraggly arrow failed in its reach for the sky. It formed a lump along the path where she had played, had herded cows, had hoed rows of corn, had walked with husbands and children, and, lately, had marched in a parade of Busters and Tabbies.

And, over the years, she had followed a succession of funeral wagons and hearses as they made their way to the final home of generations of her. Dessie's thoughts went to the cemetery where a family of pine trees had prospered since the last of the cows had been sold. "C'mon, boys, we can git the coal later. Let's go see if them ol' pines has done any damage to the graveyard."

Buster, always eager to race up the hollow, plowed through the snow, leaving a wake of tiny storms. The cats lagged behind to make their way in the boot prints. The land began its slow ascent at the end of the plot that had been tended as a vegetable garden for as long as Dessie could remember. Now a small section near the house provided her needs and matched her strength. Having to take such big steps seemed to suck up her breath and she could feel the strain on the tight muscles in her legs. She fussed at herself for not getting around more in the winter and for allowing herself to grow weak.

"Law, children, I got to stop for a minute. Pshew. Shore do." She put the walking stick, a slick, straight cherry shoot, in front of her and folded her hands over it and leaned forward. "I'm old, sweetheart. Next thing y'
know they'll be carrying me up this path." The cats gathered at her heels and Buster, who was several yards ahead, turned to inquire about the stop. "Ay, now, don't worry. I ain't got no plans to leave ye, not just yet anyways." She reached down to pet one of the cats who was stretching her front paws on Dessie's coat tail.

Slowly, with intermittent rest stops, Dessie made her way to the fenced-in clearing. "Well, hid-dee," she said when she reached the cemetery gate and saw that, though bowed, none of the pines had fallen over the graves, some marked with rough hillside slabs of rock and others, the newer ones, with shaped marble etched with hearts, flowers and names. "I reckon you'ns is still here." She giggled, then covered her mouth. "Y' see I ain't changed none."

She pushed the gate open through the snow just enough for her to squeeze through. First with the stick and then with her hand, she raked the snow off a shiny tombstone near the fence. "Aunt Maltie, I hope you don't mind, but I just got to set down fer a minute." She sat carefully on the stone and stretched her legs. "You ortn't to mind. Lord knows you set on yore share when you was alive." She laughed again. "No disrespect, though. I hope you know that. I all's liked you, sometimes envied you yore brass."

She sat silently for awhile. Buster and the cats had retreated to the shelter of a large pine where the snow was not as deep to clean the snow from their paws. Then she rose and began sweeping the snow from each marker, pausing to speak to some.

"Uncle Ephraim, are you still chasin' them rebs?" she said as she dusted a flat, shaped stone with the hint of hand-etched lettering.
"Great-great-granddaddy, how ye be? You still got that great long beard like you wore in the picture with Miss Nanny? Poppy said you's a rounder, said you come here from Carolina with yore Indian wife and won this place from a judge in a poker game. I love that story. It's my favorite next to the one about Uncle Ephraim, down there, shooing off them confederates with a shotgun. Oh, sho, they's a lot of stories right here. And you started 'em."

"Great-aunt Iwildie, I think I would've liked you a whole lot. Walked across the hill to go to school. Defied yore daddy to do it. And then taught school, and then had 15 children and outlived three husbands, all brothers. Shows where the strength is, don't it?"

"Oh, Mommy, I still miss you," she said, raking her hand gently back and forth over a plain stone. "After all these years, I still miss you. Sometimes I think I see you settin' at the end of the table, sayin' 'Pass them beans this way, Bee. These youngun's got to have somethin' to eat, too.'"

"And you, too, Poppy. I don't think a day goes by that I don't hear you say, 'Go on, sweetheart, you can do it.' I swear to God, them's the sweetest words I believe I ever heerd."

A row back, she stood and stared at a faint marker that seemed almost alone with no other graves on either side. "Ay, Pappaw, I'll dust yore grave, but I shore don't miss you, not by a long shot. If Ralph Blair hadn't a'killed you, I reckon I'd a'had to myself, or one of us anyway."

Dessie continued to wipe away the wet snow, moving slowly to the corner section. Her hand came up to her heart and then slowly down to a slick gray marker with a flag etched in it. "Oh, Berry, my sweet, sweet
Berry." Her voice wavered and tears brimmed in her eyes. "If I'd a'knowed, I'd a'never let Mills sign them papers. He had no right. That's the only thing he ever done that hurt me." A sound that crossed a sigh and a whistle seeped from her mouth. "If I'd a'knowed, I'd a'held on so tight, so very tight that you couldn't go." Her voice trailed off.

She shook her head and moved on to the next stone where she bent and traced the name with an index finger. "And, Rosie, my poor girl. You had a hard, hard life, didn't you, honey? You's one of them troubled souls that can't never seem to find no peace. I tried to give you some a' mine, but it don't work that way, does it?"

She straightened up and stroked her back. Her features bunched into an uncharacteristic expression, sorrow tinged with rage. Buster rushed to her side and whined. "Oh, I'm all right, boy. I jist can't help wonderin' at why a mother can outlive her younguns. It seems counter to the nature a'things, don't it?" She gave the dog a pat on the head and moved slowly to a large shiny gravestone. It marked three burial spots. The left side held the words WILLARD BUTCHER 1908-1940 in deep, block letters. Dessie ladled the snow off in broad sweeps. "No disrespect, Willie, but I'm shore glad I outlived you." The smile was back. "I raised yore younguns — the only good things you ever give me. Lawd, I tell ye, ye shore fooled me back when you's tryin' to court. I didn't have no idee what I's in fer. Pert near let us starve to death a time er two, er three, er four, now that we're at it. And you ol' scoundrel, I still wear that 'bracelet' you give me on my arm here." She rubbed her left elbow. "Like to never healed over."
She turned away and then back, cocking her head. "I'm almost ashamed to say it, but that coal gon probly saved my life when it tuck yourn." 

She took a deep breath and moved past the middle part of the triple stone, with the lettering ODESSA RUTH FITZPATRICK BUTCHER WARD 1912--. On the right side she carefully brushed the snow and nodded toward the grave. "Here, Willie, here was a man, a real man, a man who knowed how to treat people like they's people. He loved me and he showed it ever day of his life. Whar you tried to kill me, he give me daisies 'n sweet days." Her fingers traced the words JAMES MILLS WARD 1915--1991. "Thank ye, Mills. We miss ye," she said, patting the dog as he nuzzled her hip. "Don't we, Buster?"

Dessie folded her arms around her padded body. Her shoulders and chest rose in a quick sigh. Her gaze, fastened over a returning smile, swept across the remainder of the family plot. The sun's reach had begun to melt the snow, and wet, tearlike streams appeared on the marble slabs in its vision. The snow still lingered on the rough stones, looking to the old woman like bubbles on churning milk. In her four-score-plus, she had known most of the people buried here, even the babies. Those she had never met, she still knew. She had been an avid pupil of family teachers, listening to stories, some that spanned the ocean, and taking part in -- and then leading -- reunions at the cemetery every Decoration Day. Years ago, with Mills' help, she drew a map of her family's burying grounds, showing the names and dates, as far as she could remember, of every grave. She included, partly for fun, but not totally, the family pets, generations of dogs and cats and even an old sow she had bottle-fed and refused to eat. For her,
every once-living thing here was eternal. She could not be sure that her legacy would last, but she was content that she had done her best to pass it on.

She stood a few minutes longer at the foot of Mills' grave, lightly tapped the stone and moved carefully down the slight slope. She pulled the gate close behind her and looked out at the unblemished white of the strip of earth that rolled miserly to the nameless branch. Once filled with rows of feed corn, the narrow valley floor now tried to give itself back each summer to briars and scrub trees, save for Will Jr.'s stubborn bush hog. The corn was a distant, though clear, memory as Dessie soaked up the snow scene.

She startled the animals when she clapped her hands. "You know what, fellers," she said, looking around at her admirers, "I ain't made no snow angel since my younguns was little, and I reckon I'm due one, don't you?"

Dessie's eyes searched for a gentle place, found it and, with the help of her walking stick, started for it. In an afterthought, she turned to her "shadows", as she often called them. "Now, you stay here, all three of ye, er you'll mess up my angel." She waved a pointed forefinger at them. To Buster who often misread her signals, she issued a single, emphatic point. "Jist stop that hind end from prancin' and set down." He obeyed unwillingly, his feet lightly pawing the ground like a racehorse eager to join the race.

His mistress reached the chosen spot, anchored the stick and gingerly lowered herself onto her knees. Her hands in front of her, she eased her body onto the snow and rolled over. Excitement and exertion left her breathless, so she lay on her back for a few seconds, taking in
replenishing air. The brilliance of the blue sky ringed by the white hills brought the accustomed smile, perhaps more radiantly. She laid her arms straight and stiff beside her torso and began the upsweep. A pain in her left shoulder where the arthritis most often settled caused her to wince, but she continued to push the heavy snow away from her body. One leg at a time, she made small triangles on the lower half. The image made, she let go a hearty laugh Buster could not resist. He bounded to her and planted a sticky kiss on her face. "Oh, you rascal," she said as she slowly sat up. "Now you've done it. You've messed up my angel." But she gave him a hug anyway and maneuvered onto her knees, using the dog for support. With the stick, she pulled herself haltingly upright. "Pshev! That was hard work."

She took a minute to allow her legs to regain their rigidity and her head its equilibrium. Slowly, she walked a few yards and turned to see her artistry. "Well, it don't look much like a angel, thanks to you." She gave Buster a weak frown. "But; hey, it ain't too bad. Jist looks like a angel with a string attached." She laughed and clapped her hands. "A angel with a string attached. Now, don't that beat all?" Buster, his tongue hanging out, seemed equally proud. The cats, who had retreated to the tamped snow near the cemetery gate, decided to join Dessie and the dog. They circled her feet. Dessie studied the creation and looked at her friends. "Well, fellers, we better git back to the house 'fore we all catch the pneumonie."

The trip home was slightly downhill and the sun had enlarged their tracks. Dessie moved slowly but with less effort, stopping every few yards to rest and to marvel at the beauty of the land she had inherited for a time. At the coal house, she filled the wheelbarrow with coal. The handles of the
carrier gave her welcome support for the last lap. At the house, she put blocks of coal into the coal bucket and, grasping the post, pulled herself onto the porch.

Beside the door, she dropped heavily into a snow-filled chair and tugged at the wet boots. She squeezed the toes of her sock. Both pairs were wet through. "Pshew-ee," she said, as cold water squirted onto her arm.

She raised her body slowly. The exuberance of the day had swept away her reserves of energy. She moved as if she were separate from her soul, two distinct entities and she occupying only one.

Inside the house, with the animals close by, she flipped the switch by the kitchen door out of habit and the ceiling light brightened the room. A slight smile made her eyes glow. Nonetheless, she dragged the heavy bucket into the living room and put the largest chunks of coal into the stove. She took off the coat, heavy from melted snow, threw it onto the back of a straight chair and let her body fall into the rocking chair. She removed the damp socks, stretched them out in front of the stove and wriggled her cold toes. Buster and the cats nestled together at her feet.

Dessie's shoulders found her shape in the chair. The stove's warmth lulled her into a quick sleep and dreams of another day that the Lord had made just for her.
Daddy asked me to go with him to find a wreath. We went first to Wal-Mart where the manager offered to give us any one we wanted. He said it was the least he could do since Mommy was one of his best employees and since she’d been on her way home from work when it happened. But Daddy didn’t really like any they had. He couldn’t say why. He just knew the one he wanted wasn’t there.

Then we went over to Kmart where we ran into one of Iwilda’s girls who showed us what they had and offered to make one for Daddy herself if he’d tell her what he wanted. But he said he couldn’t tell her exactly. He said he’d just know it when he saw it.

I didn’t say anything, but I was kind of surprised when we started hitting the flower shops. I mean, Daddy has never really shopped before that I know of. Mommy always bought all of his clothes and everything. She could hold up a pair of pants or a shirt and know how it would fit him. He never went on about anything she bought for him. He just wore it. She bought everything for the house and everything for us, too. Sometimes, we’d spend the whole day going from one store to another. She’d feel fabrics with a special sense in her fingertips. I doubt I’ll ever be able to do that, especially now. She’d compare prices and double back, usually until Molly and Danny started to whine and cry. Then we’d sit down for a hamburger or a pizza and then go at it again.
Daddy, now, if he needed anything, any tool or something, he'd go to River City Hardware and if they didn’t have it, they’d order it for him or he’d do without. For Christmas or special days, he’d give Mammaw Newsome some money and tell her what he wanted and she'd get it and wrap it for him to give. Mommy knew he didn’t buy it himself, but she just said that as long as he remembered that’s all that mattered.

So for Daddy to be going from one store to another struck me as being out of character. But I didn’t say anything. This is one of those times, I suspect, when the world sort of turns in on itself and actions oppose expectations. We rode around in a great black silence, the same one that had draped us since last Monday. I’ve tried to think of something to say. I feel like there’s a lot I’d like to talk about, but I don’t know how to start. I guess I’m afraid I’ll start crying and never stop, ever -- or, worse, that he will.

At McKenzie’s he saw a wreath he almost bought. The salesman was nice enough to leave us alone after he saw that we needed to look around. The one Daddy settled on was a big heart with yellow and red silk roses all over it. Daddy held it up and turned it around and around. He poked among the flowers to see how they were attached and felt the stand to see how strong it was. I couldn’t help but think that’s what Mommy would have done.

I guess it didn’t pass his inspection because he just put it back and said, “Let’s go.” After we got into the truck, he almost changed his mind. He struck his open hand on the steering wheel, gave a big
sigh and said, “Ah, shit.” Then he opened the truck door and stepped out. But as he started to close the door, he shook his head and hopped back in. “Let’s look at some more.”

He finally saw what he wanted at Williams’ Roses Etc. We walked in the door and he went straight to it. It was on the second step of a platform display, surrounded by pedestal arrangements with every color in a fancy crayon box. The one he chose was not as big as I thought it would be, but the minute I saw it I knew it was the one she would have picked. Like the one before, it was heart-shaped. But it was solid red, the same shade as Mommy’s favorite rose bush. Crossing the heart diagonally was a white ribbon with “Beloved” written on it in script. Daddy lifted it from its perch without even examining it like he did the one at McKenzie’s. He carried it to the counter, took a $50 bill out of his wallet and gave it to Mr. Williams, and motioned me to come on.

“Wait, you got some change comin’,” said Mr. Williams, waving the bill.

“That’s OK,” Daddy said, as his hand on my shoulder led me out of the store.

Outside, before we got back into the truck, he looked at me and it felt like being called on in math class when you don’t know the answer. “Your mommy loved red,” he said and quickly turned away.

I thought we would take the wreath to the cemetery, but we went to Mammaw Newsome’s to pick up the kids. Molly and Danny came running out of the house when Daddy honked the horn. I got
out so Molly could get in, and I helped Danny, although he tried to push my hands away, saying he could get up by himself. Daddy put the wreath on Molly’s lap and she nuzzled under his arm, burying her head in his ribs.

“Daddy, I saw a snake!” Danny shouted. He always shouts.

“Hey, Buddy, were you scared?” said Daddy, his eyes wide and shiny.

“It was this big,” Danny said. He stretched his arms as far as they would go and knocked the wreath to the floor.

"Danny! Make him behave, Daddy." Molly is the little lady, always setting the standard.

“Sit down and be still, Buddy,” Daddy said. He didn’t scream at Danny, but Danny knew this was no time to be a little boy. Daddy picked up the wreath and put it back in Molly’s lap. “Here, little Sis, take good care of this.”

Mammaw came out of the house, the baby on her hip. She transferred him to me as he reached his arms toward my neck. He’s big enough to walk, but he dawdles, so lately we’ve been carrying him a lot.

“You all come in and let me fix you some supper,” Mammaw said as she pulled on her blouse from where the baby had wrinkled it.

I looked at Daddy before I got back in the truck. He was shaking his head. Mammaw had her hand on the open truck door. “In fact, Mike, why don’t you all just stay here again tonight,” she said. “You ain’t got no business going back to that house. Why don’t
you just stay here for a few more days." She looked at me and I could see the tears welling in her eyes. I looked back at Daddy while the baby pulled at my earring. I guess what I wanted was for Daddy to say OK, so we could all go into Mammaw's safe house, so I could be a baby again, too. I guess I wanted him to read my eyes, because I could never have said it. But Daddy just nodded, "That's all right, Mommy. You've done more than enough," he said. "I reckon we need to go home."

"I'll be right here, you know that, Mikie. I'll do anything I can," she said.

"I know, Mommy, but you got to tend to Daddy, and we got to tend to ourselves," he said. He looked straight ahead and shifted into reverse. "We'll manage."

I got into the truck and let the baby go in the floorboard until I could strap Molly and Danny together with the seat belt. Then I put the baby in my lap and fought his hands as I strapped us in.

"Daddy, put on your seat belt," Molly told him, looking first at him and then at me with a conspiratorial grin.

He ignored her and swung the truck around in Mammaw's yard.

"Daddy!" Molly hit him on the leg.

"Yes, ma'am," he said, pretending to jump. He fastened the belt, and I was glad to see the bare hint of a smile.

We didn't go straight home. Instead of turning left at Middle Fork, Daddy kept going on 113. I thought at first he was taking us to
MacDonald's or Hardee's for supper. But then I knew he wouldn't do that since we had plenty of food at home that people had brought in, ham and chicken and all kinds of salads. Mrs. Simpson had even brought a box full of complete dinners in divided containers and put them in our freezer. She said I could put them in the microwave and heat them up. Mommy never taught me to cook. She just always did it. I guess I always thought she'd show me sometime. The only thing I'd ever cooked in the microwave was popcorn, but I was ashamed to tell Mrs. Simpson that.

I hadn't been around to where it happened, but I began to realize that's where we were going. A queasy feeling crept into my stomach, a feeling I'd tried hard to put aside. It was a week ago that Mommy was coming home from work. They say the wreck happened about 3:30. I had track practice and was taking the late bus. I thought it was strange when I got home and nobody was there. I just sat on the porch and worked on my journal for English. I thought maybe Mammaw Castle had needed something and Mommy was over there. I didn't know what happened until about 6. Iwilda Belcher and Cousin Junior came by to take me to the hospital, but Daddy had already gone to the funeral home, so they took me there. One of Iwilda's daughters was keeping the kids, she told me. Nothing has seemed real since then. I'm in a dream, I keep thinking. Mommy is at work or out shopping or with some of the family. We'll go home and our life will be normal again.
Daddy stopped the truck at a wide spot on the shoulder where a driveway went to a trailer on the hill. He unsnapped his and the kids' seat belts and took the wreath from Molly. “Molly, hold Buddy's hand and come on,” he said. “Maggie, bring the baby,” he said to me.

I was afraid my legs would buckle. My head felt filmy like I'd been running for miles. But I hopped down with the baby in my arms. I figured he'd start screaming, but he didn’t. Instead, he clung to me as if he thought I would drop him, his head as deep into my neck as he could get it and his left hand filled with a hank of my hair. Daddy was holding Molly's hand and her other hand had a clamphold on Danny's. Daddy nodded to me to take Danny's other hand. In single file we walked on the edge of the road until we reached a place where tire tracks were embedded in the ditch. On the hillside a broken sapling was dying and fragile rocks were scattered.

Daddy told us to step off the road into the dry ditch. He straddled the ditch, one foot on the edge of the pavement and the other on the base of the hill which came straight into the ditch at that point. He straightened the wire legs on the wreath and stuck them deep into the dirt on the hillside. The muscles on his tanned arms stood out like topographical maps.

“Kids,” he said, looking straight at the hill, “I want you to remember this is where that drunken SOB killed your mother. I might not be doing the right thing, but I want everybody to see and remember.”
Molly began to whimper and Danny, a head shorter, wrapped his arms around her. I put both arms around the baby and closed my eyes, concentrating hard to stem the tears. Then I felt Daddy’s arm around my shoulder. Danny and Molly buried their heads in our legs and Daddy’s hands drew them in. This now was our circle.

I felt Daddy’s shoulders shaking and I waited to hear the sobs that would empty everything out of him. I can’t count the times I’ve heard the adults, even Mommy, tell Danny that big boys don’t cry, and at movies or when we see videos at school, the boys always laugh when a man cries. Whenever I’ve seen men cry on some TV program or in a movie, I’ve been a little bit embarrassed, like that wasn’t something real to me.

Daddy did not sob after all. The only thing I heard was a sharp sound as he sucked in air fast, a stifled sound that came from his chest, somewhere behind his heart.

I felt my own salty tears on my lips and I fought a hard battle myself not to cry out loud and I won. I kind of wish, though, that Daddy would have let go, but I guess he believed he couldn’t cry in front of us. I guess, too, that it really doesn’t matter. I’m fully aware of what kind of man he is, and, as much as I know things are going to change, I believe we’ll make it.
Alene

When the hills wore a paisley print of new green, dogwood and redbud and when the mayapples' waxy leaves unfolded in the secluded triangle where Middle Fork meets Joe's Creek, Alene moved from her temporary room at the Appalachia Inn to the farmhouse where she was born. During the two-month stay at the motel, she had supervised repairs to the old house: a new coat of paint for the tin roof and the outside walls, wallpaper on the interior, rewiring, cleaning of the chimneys on each end of the house, the addition of a second bathroom and updating of the old one, and gravel on the rutted, dirt driveway.

When the trout lilies at the head of the holler put forth their delicate blossoms, a moving van brought her furniture from storage in Dayton where she had gone to live after she earned her secretarial diploma from the Vo-Tech. The van deposited the antiques she inherited as her parents and other relatives died, along with an eclectic collection of possessions she had bought overseas as she followed the career airman she married when she was a 20-year-old stenographer. The souvenirs of their life together fitted nicely into the subdivision ranch house they purchased when he retired and took a civilian job at the base where they had met. It was the first house into which they had actually settled. Their children had been raised in houses owned or rented temporarily, places to wait for the next assignment. Alene expected to have the same return address on their Christmas cards for the rest of their lives, but she found herself
a widow even before David died. The illness cheated her of what they thought would be their best years. It took, first, his handsome looks, shriveling his muscles into limp cords, stealing his thick, salt-and-pepper hair in stringy wads, changing his smooth, clear skin into wrinkled, jaundiced hide. It took his good nature, making him angry at God and, she suspected, at her for living, paining him into uncharacteristic sharpness and sarcasm. It took all of the strength she had come to count on, leaving him whimpering as he drooled the food she hand-fed him and as he messed his clothes and sheets in the bed that became his world. Finally, it took his life, but not soon enough. “If you love me, if you really love me, help me die.” But, as much as she loved him, Alene could not make his last wish come true. She simply continued trying to keep him alive until he ceased to be.

Yes, you can.
No, I cannot.
You can.
I cannot. I will not.

Now, having seen all of the world that she cared to see, she was back to the first place she had known, the only place she had ever truly meant when she referred to “home.” As a young woman, she had thought only of leaving. Three of her older brothers, four uncles and two aunts had found a new world in Ohio. When Alene was a child, she visited her northern relatives every summer and tracked
their upward movement from shabby apartments and duplexes in Dayton's Little Kentucky to frame, lookalike houses on quarter-acre subdivision plots to split-level brick ranchhouses in developments named Willow Creek, Whispering Pines or Lakeside Estates. She begged her parents to sell the farm, with its outdoor toilet, demanding tobacco beds and incessant cornfields, and to move to the flat, factory-laden north. But her father had been adamant; his home was here where the hills closeted and cloistered, where he could do what he knew best to do, like his father and his father before him and his father before him: dig coal and farm.

It was not that Alene had ever really been unhappy here. Rather, she wanted more. What she saw of the outside world in the big console television set the family bought when she was in grade school seemed in half-hour segments much richer, much easier and much more exciting than what she had. The trips north only reinforced her suspicions. Having lived on three continents, she knew she was now even less able to define what it takes to satisfy a soul and, although she would not change much about her life, she realized that she probably could have lived a rich, full life right here on Middle Fork as her father had believed.

Returned, Alene looked out on the fields covered with wildflowers and longed to see them filled with corn. She looked at the brush and tree-lined hills on all sides of the house and remembered when they were cleared for pasture, remembered when she could climb to the top and see all the way into town, remembered the
feelings of invincibility and stability she had grown up with, remembered that she had no memory from then of aloneness or loneliness and no awareness of their difference. After more than 30 years, she was back, looking for her birth and preparing for her ending.

By the time black-eyed Susan's, daisies and butterfly weed colored the bottoms, Alene's vegetable garden was joining the reproductive fury. Having lain unturned for five years, the old soil was rich and ready to work. She consulted the Old Farmer's Almanac as her parents had done and took note of the signs and the moon as she put in sweet corn, white half-runners, cabbage, peppers, tomatoes, Irish and sweet potatoes, cucumbers, onions, squash and greens.

She had enough good days to keep the vegetables almost weed free. The task came close to obsession, just as it had been when she, her parents, brothers and sisters united to fight the morning glories and burdock and other choking, ugly intruders that beset their larger garden decades ago. When her sister and brother-in-law began to bring friends to see her clean, perfect rows, Alene's pride pushed her. During a rainy spell in late June, she put on a plastic hat, a rain slicker, and a pair of her father's old work boots to pull the weeds that seemed determined to defy her. Her feet sank in the mud between the geometric rows and the effort to pull them up caused her head to begin its familiar ache. She had to concentrate hurtfully and
strain at focusing her eyes to make sure she pulled the weeds and not the vegetables as every object doubled in front of her. The pain finally became unbearable and she lay down on the ground, rounding her body into a ball on her side, her hands clutching her head, the raindrops pelting like rocks from a slingshot. She lay there passing in and out of consciousness for half an hour, her body blending with the stream of water that ran between the two rows of beans.

The pain left as gradually as it came, and when the throbs lost their tension she rose and finished the weeding, made easier by the rain. At the faucet outside the pump house, she stripped and hosed the mud from her body and from her already soaking clothes, then went inside and slept until midnight when the headache began again.

On good days when she had done all she could do for the garden, she took long walks, sometimes following deer paths up one of the small landings that shot off the main holler of the property, sometimes climbing to the top of the hill nearest the house and walking the ridge as it horseshoed along the land that her great-great-grandfather Blair had marked off long, long ago. Sometimes she hiked the creek bank to the point where Joe’s Creek, having picked up the force of its three small forks, drained into the river. This time of year the river appeared tame, insignificant. Alene knew of places where a child could walk across it during the summer if she were agile enough to jump on the rocks that had been deposited by the hills eons ago. She knew, too, that the tranquillity was deceptive.
In late winter a spell of warm weather and rain, often after a heavy snow, could turn the calm river into a violent, destructive force. Then the mountains let loose their springs, branches rushed into creeks, and the creeks overflowed the scarce bottom land, forcing their accumulated power into the river. At the mouth of Joe's Creek, which was dry in spots during the summer, the river sucked the overflow into an eddy that thrashed and ate old tires, milk jugs, driftwood and all the debris that the creek could carry.

Alene had grown up with warnings about the whirlpool, as had all the children along the banks of Joe's Creek and its feeders. Her cousin, Arville Fitzpatrick, had drowned there when Alene was 10 years old. A good-natured teenager who always had a smile to flash and a joke to tell, he had rowed his fishing boat up and down the river and her myriad tributaries since he was a little boy. But that February when the water punished the banks and sent families from their low homes, they said he had gone too close to the hole and had been pulled in. Pieces of what was believed to be his boat were found 12 miles up the river. His body, or what was left of it, was not given back until May. Alene had come to respect and fear the river after that. Now, she sat and watched its mesmerizing movement with a sense of purpose.

By the time the Joe-pye weed, the ironweed and the goldenrod had painted the fields with mauve and yellow, more brilliant than a decorator would dare, Alene was well into the ritual of preservation.
She boiled hundreds of glass jars that her mother had reused for decades and bought shiny new caps and rings to replace those with rust and dents. She began with a fire in the backyard, setting the blue canner in its midst to heat-seal jars of tomato juice and beans. The August sun, combined with the intensity of the wood fire, proved too much for her, though. The heat's haze seemed to spur the headaches. So she abandoned the old way and transferred the job to air-conditioning and a pressure cooker.

She canned 80 quarts of green beans, the family favorite. On 72 of them, she affixed fancy labels that said "A gift of love from Alene Blair Holstein, 8/96." She would give two dozen apiece to the children. She also preserved the potatoes, squash, kale, mustard, and spinach. She turned the prolific cucumbers into pickles, sweet and sour, bread and butter, and dill, the clear jars revealing homegrown spices. The cabbage, onions and hot peppers became kraut and chowchow. The tomatoes which outdid even Alene's expectations presented the greatest challenge and the most pleasure. Some she canned simply as cooked tomatoes. With others she made thick, sweet juice and creamy sauces. Toward the end of the crop, she combined them with the last of the other vegetables and made huge cauldrons of soup which she then canned.

Each jar when it cooled was labeled and sorted into boxes and stored in the pump house to await dispersal.
When the ragweed rebounded and spread its dust throughout the hollers, filling her head with clouds, Alene escaped to Ohio to see her doctor. Nothing had changed, the diagnosis remained the same: inoperable, a year, two tops.

When the birds directed Alene to a cache of red-berried holly bushes in the third holler, she decorated the house with a frenzy. She paid one of the Kestner boys to search the woods for mistletoe and evergreen boughs. She found a perfectly-shaped spruce and had her cousin Junior cut it, haul it to the house and help her put it up in front of the big window in the living room. She wove the evergreen into wreaths, decorating one for the front and back doors and each of the five bedroom doors. She made a larger one for the driveway gate and smaller ones for the fireplaces. She hung three more, filled with sunflowers, nuts and berries, in trees for the birds who brought her soothing joy.

She put red and green ribbons on the assortment of dolls she had collected as her family traveled the world and placed them around the house, each with a tag bearing a grandchild's name. She pulled out the boxes of decorations that had not been opened for four years and covered the tree with the fragile ornaments from Switzerland, Germany, Italy, France, Korea and all the countries they had lived in or visited. She made seasonal candle arrangements for every room and knitted stockings for every family member, filling each with carefully-considered trinkets.
She baked bread, strudels, pound cakes and cookies and froze them, along with soups and meat dishes that she could quickly put on the table when the house filled. She wrapped the gifts she had been accumulating since summer and arranged them under the tree. She hired Florida Belcher to help her clean the house and ordered a cord of seasoned wood.

Alene had put in her request in June that her three children and their families spend Christmas at the old house on Middle Fork. She had not seen Patty and D. L. since they helped her pack in the early spring, and she had last seen Melinda, who lived in Oregon, when David died. But they talked regularly on the phone and exchanged cheery, upbeat cards, letters and pictures. None of them had ever lived in Kentucky, which they considered Mammaw and Pappaw's home. As youngsters they had loved the run of the hills and streams as all children do, but as they grew older they resisted the obligatory annual trips to a place they deemed boring and backwoodsy. All three agreed to their mother's request, partly to see her again and confirm face-to-face that she was surviving David's death and partly to share the homeplace's sweet memories with their own children.

Melinda and her husband, Felix, were the first to arrive with their children, stairsteps at eight, six and five. Eight-year-old Felicia was Alene's favorite, although she tried hard not to show it. Red-haired and freckle-faced, the girl was the spitting image of her mother and carried the Blair genes more prominently than any of
the others. Her temperament came from the Holstein side, compassionate, self-sacrificing and dreamy, the embodiment of David when he was whole.

“Gramma Alene, there’s a dog in the driveway and he looks sick,” the child said as soon as the hugs were done. “We need to help him, Gramma.”

“Oh, honey,” Alene responded, taking the opportunity to steal another hug, “that’s just an old stray that somebody dropped off on the road. I’ve been trying to shoo it away for two or three days now.”

“But, Gramma,” Felicia said, pushing away from Alene, “we’ve got to help him.”

“Honey, it’s not a ‘him’. It’s an old female dog, probably already pregnant. I can’t be bothered by no puppies.”

“Gramma!” The child’s voice rose and tears trickled down her cheeks. “You can’t let her die.”

She dashed out the door and up the driveway. The dog, bone-thin with white spots on black, backed away, its tail tucked between its legs, as Felicia darted toward it.

Alene, in a silk kimono and barefoot, took out after the child as Melinda and Felix tried to keep the boys in tow. The ground felt like cold steel under her feet, and she ignored the chill that ignited her brain stem. The dog cowered under a walnut tree, torn between the twin memories of human warmth and abandonment.

Alene reached Felicia. “Wait, honey,” she panted, “come back in and I’ll fix her something to eat and we’ll bring it out to her.”
“Gramma, she’s so skinny. She must be starving. We have to help her.” The child clutched Alene’s arm.

Tears formed in the corners of the woman’s eyes, but not for the dog. How can you know, child, she thought, that I can’t take care of a dog.

She hugged the child tightly. “Come on, we’ll fix her up,” she said.

In the kitchen, Felicia helped Alene microwave a package of wieners, cut them into bite-sized pieces and put them in a bowl of milk. Alene put on shoes and a coat and went with the girl to find the dog. The dog backed away as they neared, so they set the bowl down under the bare tree branches and walked backwards to the driveway.

“Come on, doggie,” Felicia said softly, “come on and eat, girl.”

The dog’s tail began to wag and she eased crookedly to the bowl and began to drink the milk, her eyes steadily looking at the two figures. She let down her guard to lap up the pieces of wieners and concentrated on the food. Squatting in the driveway, Alene stole glances at her granddaughter’s smiling face.

When the dog had cleaned the bowl, she looked at the two, her back part moving to the beat of her tail. Warily, she responded to Felicia’s soothing requests to come near. “Don’t move and scare her,” Alene heard herself saying.

“Come on, doggie,” Felicia said, her right hand outstretched. The dog moved close enough for the girl to touch her head and then stepped back. “Come on,” the girl said again, and the dog moved
forward and sat in front of her. The dog allowed Felicia to stroke her head and uneven whiskers.

"Be careful, honey," Alene warned.

"Oh, Gramma, she just needs some love, don’t you, girl?" The dog licked the child’s hand. Felicia turned to Alene. “We have to fix her a bed so she’ll be warm, Gramma.”

“Honey, there’s plenty of places for her to sleep out here. She probably already has someplace, in an old shed or something. We can’t have her in the house. She might not be housebroke.”

“Well, Gramma, we can fix her a bed on the porch. Please, Gramma.”

“Oh, all right, we’ll find her a box and some old blankets and she can sleep on the porch, I reckon.” Alene felt helpless in the face of this child, who reflected generations of love. When they’ve all gone, I can take the dog to the animal shelter, Alene thought.

The dog followed them to the house, its hind parts dancing along the way. She settled naturally into the doll box they prepared on the front porch. With a bath and food and the attention of Felicia and her brothers, the dog transformed herself into a handsome companion, drawing pats and hugs from the other adults and children who arrived over the next few days. With Felicia holding the dog in her lap, Alene drove to the veterinarian’s office for shots and a checkup. The vet confirmed Alene’s suspicion that the dog was newly pregnant, producing joy in the girl and dread in the grandmother. Because of the season, Felicia dubbed the dog Noelle,
eliciting approval from all who congregated at the farmhouse for the special season.

The days of her family’s last gathering were among Alene’s happiest. She staved off the pain with the pills the doctor had prescribed and with inbred will. All were impressed with what she had done with the old house. “I figured it would be worth more when I’m gone and you all sell it,” Alene said.

“Oh, Mom, hush. You’re still young. You’ll be here a long time” was the reply. Alene could not bring herself to enlighten them.

As they left she loaded their cars with the vegetables she had canned. When they protested, she insisted there was plenty more, although she had carefully planned the distribution of garden harvest.

When the house quieted again, the weather turned bleak. Temperatures dipped into the teens, and moved by Noelle’s shivers in the front porch box, Alene brought the box inside and put it in the kitchen. The dog, her coat shinier and the rear dance calmer, found herself at home. “What am I going to do with you?” Alene asked several times a day as the dog curled at her feet or followed her through the house, lying down outside the bathroom, stretching beside her bed, licking her hand when the headaches pounded.

When the evergreen trees bent nearly to the ground, loaded with snow, Alene knew the time was near. She hitched her father’s old rowboat to the tractor and dragged it to the mouth of Middle Fork.
Noelle, her belly full of puppies, jumped in the boat and rode along. Alene knew that when the snow melted, the stream would turn wild and would easily carry her into Joe's Creek and then to the river. The memories of David's last year, which she replayed every day, gave her courage. An incessant planner, she tied it to a tree in preparation, and with Noelle running alongside drove back to the house.

The weather did not disappoint. Repeating the routine of millennia, temperatures rose, the rains came and the snow melted. Alene watched the water reassert its power, taunting and threatening to engulf the hills as it had done when the earth was still new, when it left sand and marine fossils on the mountain tops. The rising water both energized and soothed her. She vacuumed, mopped, washed curtains, scrubbed porcelain, dusted walls, cleaned appliances, and made final preparations. She set up a basket on the table and carefully arranged copies of her will, insurance papers, letters to her children and siblings, and the names and addresses of old friends and other people who should be notified, along with the key to her safety deposit box at the local bank. In the letter to her sister Elizabeth, she requested that good homes be found for Noelle and her puppies. Since her brother and sister called every day, she knew that one of them would check the house if she did not answer the phone after several tries.
When all the trees and bushes wore the same brown shade of wetness and the waters of Middle Fork reached the edge of the bank, Alene put on her blue rain slicker and high boots and set out on her trek to the mouth of the creek and her dad’s boat. She had tied Noelle on the back porch with a bucket of fresh water, a pan of food to last a day and a box with dry blankets. She had hugged the dog, kissed her on the mouth, and commanded her to stay. The dog whimpered and strained at the leash as Alene stepped off the porch onto the soaked ground. The whimpers grew louder as Alene sloshed through the mud away from the house. By the time she was out of sight, the whimpers turned into howls, high, mournful and rhythmic.

The trip was slower in reality than in plan. Alene dug a hole with each step in the saturated earth and felt the weight of shackles as she struggled to free her feet from the suction. The sounds of the sloshing water and creaking tree limbs added an eerie aura. Little tidal waves and pieces of debris bumped into her booted legs, sending unwelcome tingles through her body. She almost tripped on a rotting log new to the wet path, and the sight of a dead possum nestled in a briar thicket, its eyes open in terror, took her breath.

For months, Alene had savored the pleasing lightness of resolve, the excitement of preparation and its ensuing confidence. For the first time, the darkness of fear and doubt tinted her senses. She stopped, interrupting her mission, and allowed herself to consider options. But then she flashed the pictures of David’s last days on her mind’s collapsible screen, replaying the pleas, evidencing the
pain, and resenting the lack of control. Besides, Alene had never approved of waffling. It was her style to make a decision, to lay out strategies, and to move on. She lifted her right foot from the mire and took another step.

By the time Alene was within sight of Joe’s Creek, its dirty, rushing water crusted with tree parts and garbage, Noelle had somehow worked her way free of the leash and was at Alene’s heels. The dog’s sagging teats bounced from side to side, brushing the ground water. The rain plastered her hair to her frame. Alene tried to ignore the dog and continue on her plan, but her resolve was draining out in the tears that flowed down her face.

The upended vessel bobbed in the water that swirled under it. Alene wrestled with the boat to right it without filling it with water and with the wet rope to untie it. The water raced into her boots as Noelle dog-paddled, panting heavily at her master’s side. The dog let out a sad whimper to match Alene’s sigh as the boat pulled free and rushed toward the river.

When the trilliums and lady’s slippers and skunk cabbage put forth their early colors in the gray woods, Alene asked her brother Alvin to come and turn the ground for the spring garden. She blocked off a parcel for the crops that would withstand the frost and dropped seeds for onions, mustard, lettuce and spinach. On good days, she pulled unwanted weeds and with Noelle’s help tried to keep five frisky puppies from tromping and digging in the soft earth.
Cat

Cat saw the kids running across the field in their night clothes, so she was waiting with the door open. The noise had rousted her from a comfortable TV dream. It was a noise she had come to recognize from the opening creak of the first slammed door, a noise that seemed to fill the hollow as if everyone but God could hear. He would not or could not hear it, yet He was the only one who could silence it, and if He did hear it, He apparently chose not to act.

Cat had prayed hard, as she was doing now, but she couldn't seem to get through the static and tangles that Luther's rage created in the atmosphere, weighing down the sky, ricocheting off the hillsides, shooting a fog that rose from the creek and saturated every clear space.

She grabbed the baby from Little Luther's arms. Newly introduced to this cacophony, the youngest innocent bellowed, his hands fisted and flailing, his face red and contorted in screams, his body heaving and arching inside its flannel layette. She held him tight to her own shivering breast while the others tugged at her gown, tears and mucus weaving a new design on the silk blend. With her free arm she tried to shield and comfort them, but she felt inadequate for the task, completely powerless in the face of an evil that God would not address.

After the hugs and insincere assurances, she got her grandchildren slightly calmed and surrounding her on the flowered couch. Tammy and Kate clung to her, the heaves slowing to a minute or so apart. Little Luther, 10 going on 35, began pacing.
"I'm goin' to kill him, Mammaw," he said, his jaws clinched. "I'm goin' to git me a gun, and I'm goin' to kill him. I'm goin' to kill him."

"You're doin' no such-a thing," Cat said, although, Lord knows, she has prayed that somebody would. "He's liable to kill you first. And anyway, he's your daddy, and you just can't up and kill your daddy."

"Why, Mammaw? Why? Look what he's doin' to Mommy. He's goin to kill her, if not tonight then some other time." The warrior's strut slowed, and the boy wiped his eyes with the back of his arm. Cat heard the weak sound of an involuntary sob as he sniffed deeply. The sound sapped what little spirit she had left.

The boy faced Cat and pointed toward his house, exploding from the man's shouts and the woman's screams and the loud thumps and claps of her body bruising and cracking. "Can't somebidy do somethin'?" Little Luther asked as he sank onto the footstool in front of Cat.

She touched his shoulder, closed her eyes and bit down on her lip. In her mind, she tried to move her daughter and her grandchildren to a safer place, a refuge where they would laugh and dance and know only peace. She began to sing softly, "There will be peace in the valley ... "

"Mammaw, if Daddy kills Mommy can we live with you?" Tammy, with her quarter-sized eyes and long black lashes, looked up at Cat.

The facade of strength Cat had propped herself up against toppled. Tears ran down her face and her shoulders bounced up and down. She had long ago run out of things to say or do. The decade her daughter had been married to this man had slowly used up all hope, siphoning it off like a gas thief, exhausting all rational solutions.
At first, Cat had railed at Melinda to throw him out. Cat, in fact, had told him more than once in the early years to get off her property, but he always came back, honey-tongued, bearing gifts, promising the moon. During a peaceful spell, he borrowed money from his granddaddy Blair to buy the lower meadow and the old house from Cat who believed children should have their own place. He was a hard, resourceful worker -- Cat couldn't fault him there. He took advantage of every training program and moved up to mine foreman in only six years. Nights and weekends, he fixed up the little log house where Cat and Bartley had lived when they were first married. He planted a couple acres of corn and the rest in hay to sell. With the extra money, he took the family, including Cat, on vacations to Gatlinburg, Disneyworld, Mammouth Cave, and other spots closer by. He always went overboard at Christmas, giving Melinda money to buy the kids everything they asked for, including a pony one year for Little Luther.

He could be a good man, except for the three or four times a year he turned into the devil, wiping away all the points he had accumulated in between bouts. Melinda's body at those times, like tonight, reverted to a battlefield and the list of wounds grew: a kick in the belly that caused a miscarriage, two broken arms, a broken ankle, a detached retina, several bone sprains, ribs cracked over and over, a punctured lung, on and on until her frame, still shy of 30 years, appeared to be caving in on itself.

Cat had implored her youngest daughter to leave her husband, to move back in with her. But just a few years into the fray, Melinda had made it plain that leaving was not an option. "He will kill me, Mommy!" she'd yelled
at Cat's admonitions. "Can you hear me, Mommy? I said HE WILL KILL ME!"
She clearly believed he would and that was her reality.

Melinda's older brothers had beaten Luther up three times, to Cat's knowledge. But they had little effect on Luther's periodic darkness. When Melinda continued to stay with him, the brothers told her they were washing their hands of her. Anyway, all three lived away from here, far enough to assuage the urgency.

Cat's last attempt to solve the problem took place two years ago and ended in disaster, as Melinda had predicted it would. Cat had called the state police to come and get him. The two young troopers literally had to wrestle Luther away as he struck his wife repeatedly with his latest weapon of choice, a rake handle. Melinda was on her knees facing the ground with her hands bent back to shelter her head -- she did not regain full use of her hands for more than six months and the welts on her back turned into a tattoo-like map that resembled the state of Ohio.

Luther's daddy had him out of jail in two days, thanks to a political favor he called in from the judge. That night Cat's house, the one her late husband's great-grandfather built, with a porch all around and lacy woodwork along the eaves, burned to the ground, destroying all evidence of its existence and all record of the 35 years Cat had lived in it. At 54, she was forced to start over like a newlywed, and she had no doubt that Luther and his family were the catalyst.

Cat now caught only snatches of the perky, self-confident little girl who used to turn cartwheels across the yard, to climb trees and swing on ropes, to play house in the old shed Bartley fixed up for his baby before she
turned five. Cat suspected that very soon that girl would be seen only in photos, stopped in a better time. Bartley would not have stood for this if he'd lived. But Cat's bag of resources had come up empty; she had used all of them. There was no one to help, not even God.

Melinda's pleas were getting weaker. Cat rose and cracked open the door of her trailer. The pole light between the two residences shone like a spotlight on an outdoor stage. The couple was in the middle of the lawn. Each time Melinda managed to get up and escape, Luther ran after, halting her pace by hitting her across the back with what looked like a long rattlesnake. When she fell, he stood over her, lashing her with the cutting strip, which Cat took to be a leather belt. The man's grunts, the woman's whimpers, and the belt's Whump! resounded up and down the hollow.

Cat slapped her hands to her ears but the rhythmic sounds blasted through the tissue. They were joined by her own breathless cries. She felt like her head would explode. She started to pray, "Oh, God, help ..." But she knew the effort was pointless.

Instead, she gathered the children and shooed them into her bedroom and instructed Little Luther, over his protests, to stay there with his sisters and brother. She closed the bedroom door behind her and opened the hall closet where she kept extra towels, bed linens and things she couldn't find another place to put. She reached around behind the shelf of sheets and found the pistol her oldest brother Angus had made her take after the house burned.

Moving outside of time, she found herself under the walnut tree whose roots sank into the branch that separated the two pieces of property.
She had not thought to put on shoes, yet, she didn't feel the wet grass or the coarse gravel in the damp creek bed.

Neither Melinda nor Luther noted her presence in their drama. She was no more than 10 feet away, close enough to hear the now-whispy sobs and sighs emitted by her girl's spent body. Luther was bending over her, hissing near her ear. "Had enough yet? Huh? Answer me," he said as he used her hair as a pulley. "I said, have you had enough?" He grasped the belt more tightly and flung it back to launch another strike.

"Yes, she's had enough." Cat said the words calmly, all fear dissipated, worn out and fled.

Luther released his wife's hair and stepped toward Cat. "What the hell are you doin' here? Get your ass back to the house. This is none of your business."

Cat's feet stuck to the spot. Her only movement was the raising of her arms to eye level. Luther saw the gun and hoisted the belt. "You don't think I can't whip your ass, too?"

Cat pulled the trigger just as the cold, steely belt buckle hit her in the temple. As she dropped to the ground, she watched the splotches of red rain sprinkle the air.

Later, she had no idea whether the slap of the belt caused her finger to jerk the trigger or whether she did it unaided.
Elsie

Elsie didn’t move, but sweat rolled down her temples and clumped in the fine hair above her lip. She raked her hand through her hair and wiped the water from her neck. She pinched the front of her print blouse and pulled it away from her body, fanning the fabric in and out and cherishing the warm breeze on her breasts.

Through the wire fence she watched the boys playing in the road. How can they run and scream and roll in this heat, she wondered. She let go of the blouse and sunk back into the chair, aware of the dampness behind her knees, under her breasts, around her waist, on her face, between her legs. Inside the house was even hotter than here on the porch where the shadow of the hill was slowly increasing. Inside, a pot of green beans simmered on the fire and a pone of yellow cornbread rose in the oven.

When Elsie closed her eyes she could see the heat, wavy and blurred, engulfing, suffocating, trapping. She shook her head to cast off the image. A brown hen, startled by the sudden movement, cackled and jumped, panicking as it searched for the hole in the fenced-in porch where it had entered. Elsie swatted at the chicken with a funeral home fan and the bird flew in starts to the hole the dog had burrowed under the chicken wire at the top of the steps. Elsie followed the chicken to the wire gate, put her fingers through the holes and leaned her face into it. She felt like sinking and pulling the ugly fence with her.
Jim fenced in the porch one night in a drunken frenzy. A chicken, one of the flock of semi-wild ones that had come with the house and that multiplied in the woods, hiding their eggs in brush and weeds, had pecked him on the toes as he sat drunk and barefooted. In a rage at the chicken, at Elsie, at the boys, perhaps at life, he staggered to the rusty gray van, drove into town and spent part of the rent money on God knows how many feet of chicken wire. Leaving the chickens with the run of the yard and road and hills, he enclosed the porch, working frantically into the night, hammering the wire into the top of the porch posts and all along the edge of the floor. He pried thin slats from the dilapidated one-room schoolhouse across the road and fashioned a frame for a door of wire where the steps lay rotting.

Elsie and the boys had stood, cringing, just inside the door, watching the man stretch the wire, pound wildly and curse. With each beat of the hammer, Elsie shivered in sympathy with the nails and the old wood.

Standing here now, her fingers looped around the wire, the woman gasped involuntarily and tears mingled with sweat. This fence, she knew, signified her life, always enclosed, always looking out at a big world scared and living in a tiny one smothering. She collapsed into the chair. She tried not to dwell on what could not be changed, but she wondered still on what her life would have been like if her legs had been right, if she hadn't married Jim Kestner,
hadn't thought there would be no more chances, hadn't been scared of ... of just about everything.

Even Ruby Simpson, who owned this old place, had asked Elsie why she stayed here. "Honey, why don't you and your kids move into town into the housing project?" she asked one day when she came to collect the rent and found Elsie limping worse than usual and with a purple handprint on her face. "You could get around better. Why, you'd have a bathroom in the house and the boys would be close to school. Maybe they could even pick up some odd jobs around town." She offered to take Elsie in to talk to the manager and to get her boy, Marvin, to help them move. "You don't have to live like this, honey," Mrs. Simpson had said.

Elsie knew Mrs. Simpson meant well. The older lady had been her Sunday School teacher when she was still at home, had picked her up every Sunday morning, had given her clothes and books and had brought her family food baskets on Thanksgiving and Christmas. Mrs. Simpson had intended to tear the old house down before Jim went to her and asked her to let them live there, telling her he'd fix the place up. Elsie also knew that Mrs. Simpson, like most everyone else around here, knew that Jim spent a good bit of his time over at his cousin's at Swamp Branch, just like most everyone else knew he'd done that long before he married Elsie.

Mrs. Simpson had made it sound easy. Just move. "I'll think about it and send one of the boys over if I decide," Elsie had told her three months ago.
Elsie still thought about it, like a daydream. They wouldn't have to pry more slats out of the schoolhouse to feed the stove. They wouldn't have to be careful how they stepped in the kitchen lest a board break through. J.R. could be in the school band like he dreamt. Little Rex could walk to the library and read all the books he wanted to. They could go to parades and to shows. She wouldn't have to carry water in a pail and hoist it up on the stove just to fill the old wash tub for the boys to clean up or to wash out their clothes.

The thought of lying back in a real bathtub of clean water made Elsie smile. For the first time since early morning she felt cooler. The idea of cool water covering all the crevices of her body cheered her up. What if I just went over and sat down in the creek, she thought. She stood up as if to do it, but then she thought about how dirty the creek was with sewer lines running into it from half the houses on up Middle Fork. Might as well stick your foot in the toilet, she thought.

She remembered a place her family had lived when she was about 10, just around the hill from here, in fact. At the head of the hollow where the branch formed was a little waterfall. The water rolled off the rocks into a pool of clear, cold water. Her mother would pack lunches and Elsie and her brothers and sisters would walk up there on hot days, the crippled one hobbling or being carried. They'd take off their clothes and splash in the water, shaded by tall trees that let in only speckles of sunlight. The house had burned that fall and the family had to move. The land belonged to someone who long ago
had moved to Ohio. The fields and hills had grown over, hiding Elsie's sweet memory except to Junior Fitzpatrick and some of his friends who occasionally hunted there.

I want to be there, she said aloud, surprising herself. She rose from the chair, her skirt sticking to her buttocks and legs. She called the children who came reluctantly but who became excited when she said they were going on a picnic on the other side of the hill. Since their mother seldom went anywhere, they jumped up and down, slapping each other on the shoulders and dancing short reels. J.R. and Kenny swung on the clothesline pole and the dust clotted on their sweaty legs. Rex somersaulted across the dirt yard. Amos and little Ralph, just out of diapers, clung to Elsie's bent legs and pranced on her feet.

She went inside the hot, dark house, but a mental breeze made the heat tolerable. She ladled the green beans into an old lard bucket and sliced the cornbread and put it in a paper bag. She took a sharp knife from the kitchen cabinet and another bag to hold fresh tomatoes and cucumbers from the garden. She put the food and mismatched utensils in the plastic basket she used to carry clothes to and from the line and made assignments to divvy up the load. Going down the steps she grabbed the tree limb she used as a cane when her legs began to tire.

Elsie and her sons, followed by the shaggy hound that had taken up residence with them, walked on the blacktop around the curve to the adjoining holler, the two older boys carrying the basket
of food between them, the younger ones skipping in and out of the
ditch beside the hill, Elsie, the dog at her skirt tail, limping behind,
but with a discernible spring.

The weeds were high in the wide space that separated the two
mountains. Kenny, Elsie's natural-born leader, found a stick and
whacked a crude path for them to follow. When berry bushes crowded
the route, he held them back for the single file of hikers. At one
point, where the incline began to steepen, he waited patiently for his
mother and as she reached where he was standing, holding back the
briars, he stood on tiptoes and kissed her on the cheek. A rush of love
made the heavy feet lighter.

About a quarter mile into the hollow, Elsie had to rest. She was
not used to walking so far and fast without stopping. Panting, she sat
heavily on a tree stump. For a moment she chided herself for
attempting such a silly trip. Her feet, turned permanently inward,
ached and her knees creaked. Little Ralph, scarcely more than a
toddler, found a clump of daisies and awkwardly pulled them up, roots
and all. Presenting the flowers to Elsie, he smiled. "Heah, mommy, fo'
you." She could have sworn the child glowed, and she felt a jab at her
heart, a familiar ping that sustained her. She put her arms around
Ralph and hugged him to her. The others gathered in, each trying to
get closer and hug her harder than the other. She knew her legs
would take her to the waterfall.

Elsie and her boys walked for another ten minutes, following
the stream that sliced the mini-valley. The hills moved closer
together and the trees shielded the family from the sun. They now stayed in the branch bed, wading in the tiny pools captured in steps formed by the ascending earth. Occasionally, the older boys had to help Elsie climb over the rocks to a higher level, she hoisting herself up by one knee and rolling over on her side to bring the other leg up. The boys, trying to help, lifted her roughly under her arms to get her to her feet. They fretted about her, but, though she was in pain, she laughed and willed herself to go on.

They heard the rush of the spring water before they saw it. Almost as one, the children put down their loads and ran to the waterfall, stomping on the slick rocks and slapping their bodies with refreshment. The drop was not as tall nor the pool as deep as Elsie remembered it, but its wonder had not diminished. She stood drinking in her children's joy and reliving her own. Haltingly, afraid of the slippery stones, she moved the food to the small clearing beside the pool at the base of the tumbling water. She sat on the moist ground amid the wildflowers and watched the boys as they soaked up the clear water.

"Mommy, come on," one of them yelled. "Yeah, mommy, come on and get wet," another chimed.

Elsie unlaced her heavy black shoes. She pulled them off, along with her socks, and placed them next to the basket. She stood carefully and flexed her crooked toes. She walked to the edge of the pool which was no more than a foot-and-a-half deep at any point and sat down on a rock that flowed into the water. Her hands beside her
on the rock, she slid slowly into the coolness, her back against the rock on which she had been sitting. The boys crowded around her again. One of them shoved his hand through the water and sent a wave across her face. When Elsie laughed, all of the boys joined in splashing her until the cool water replaced the perspiration that had earlier covered her. J.R. grabbed her feet and pulled her farther in until her head rested on the rock. Her blouse billowed as the water rushed over her breasts and under her chin.

Elsie lay there as the boys tumbled and rolled over her, happier and more playful than she could remember seeing them. Soon their attention turned to one another and the exploration of the water’s source. She looked at the hills and watched the sun play with the tree branches. She felt the senuousness of the water as it slid down the seam in the hill and splattered on the flat rock at the base of the fall. The ache in her legs eased and her body seemed to heal itself as the water seeped through her skin. Here deep in the woods, submerged in water, cool to the bone, for the first time in a long time, Elsie allowed herself to be awash with hope.