GRETCHE N’S FAMILY

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by
Barbara A. Soard
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[Signature]
Director of Thesis

Master's Committee

[Signature]
Chair

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GRETCHEN'S FAMILY

Barbara A. Soard, M.A.
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Director of Thesis: Chris Holcomb

Gretchen's Family is a novella that is broken up into two books. Book One: Return to Heath Hollow, concerns Gretchen's attempts to reconnect with her family after being estranged from them for three years. While stranded in her hometown, Gretchen discovers things about her family and learns to love and accept the very people she had tried to avoid. In Book Two: Thanksgiving Family Reunion, Gretchen is still making the effort to accept her family for who they are. The matter is complicated more when her friend and boss, Joe McDermen, Jr., comes with her to Heath Hollow to celebrate Thanksgiving. Told through third person limited, Gretchen's Family mostly deals with Gretchen's perspective of family interaction and her reactions to characters and events; in Book Two the perspective goes back and forth between Gretchen and Joe's experiences with the family members. Overall unifying elements of this work include the settings, which are split between the city (a representation of Gretchen's life in a rut) and Heath Hollow where everything is unpredictable,
unifying and universal themes such as love, discovery, belonging, and acceptance, and comical characters some of which readers might be able to recognize in their own families.

Accepted by: 

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Chair

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Book One:

The Return to Heath Hollow
I

After spending about two hours in traffic, it was almost seven when Gretchen returned to her apartment. It was a small apartment good for a single person, but no more than two could possibly live in it. Gretchen kicked off her red pumps, took off her red faux-suede jacket, and hung it up in the closet next to the front door. She entered the small parlor area and flopped down on the couch. She checked her messages on the answering machine.

"You have 5 messages: First message, 'This is Mr. Douglas calling to remind all tenants that rent is due at the first of the month with no exceptions.' Second message, 'Miss Mills, this is the Make a Wish Charity we will call you back concerning your decision to donate.' Third message, 'I got the wrong number, but your voice sounds sexy on this answering machine would you like to go out with me? My name is Chas Flannery my number is 297-8848.'"

Gretchen got a disgusted look on her face. The poor desperate idiot, she thought.

"Fourth message, 'I am holding your cat hostage. If you don’t pay me ten thousand dollars I’ll kill it!'" a drunken man threatened. Gretchen broke out laughing.

"I don’t even own a cat!"

"Fifth message, 'Gretchen, this is Joe, Sr. I’ll need you to stay late tomorrow. It’ll be just a couple of hours. I have a report on the Peterson trail that needs to be typed out and filed. Thanks! See you tomorrow.'"
Gretchen erased her messages and went to the kitchen to make her dinner.

"I don’t mind having to work late tomorrow. As soon as work is finished for the day, I am going on a weeklong vacation. I’m going to just sit around and read, rent movies, and relax that whole week," Gretchen told herself as she waited for the water to boil. She looked around at her empty apartment. "I wonder why I talk to myself. I guess if there is no one else to talk to the self makes good company."

Gretchen sat down on the couch, propped her feet, and turned on the television to Entertainment Tonight. She watched the latest scandals in Hollywood while she ate Maruchan’s lunch-in-a-cup. She was getting sick of all the Lindsey Lohan junk.

"Leave the poor girl alone," Gretchen mumbled through a mouth full of ramen noodles. After the gossip show was over, Gretchen took a bath and went to bed. Sadly, all of Gretchen’s days were just the same. It was like a never-ending routine. If anything ever went out of routine, Gretchen’s whole day would be messed up.

The next day, while Gretchen typed Joe, Sr.’s report, the phrase ‘defendant pleads insanity’ brought back memories. She thought of her mother, Rachel, who sang and danced around the house for no reason at all; her uncle, Sal, who was determined that the government was going to come and take his guns so he and his arsenal stayed locked in his bedroom; her great aunt, Midge, who was convinced that she had every disease she saw on the news; and her cousin, Jess, who when Gretchen
last heard was in her Gothic phase and claimed that Satan talked to her. She had been thinking about her family and Shelton Valley frequently that whole week. As Gretchen typed, Joe, Jr., who had a thick file in his hand, passed by her desk for the fifth time that day.

“It’s rather odd that you pass this way so often considering your office is on the other side of the building,” she said. She never looked up to see Joe’s expression; she just kept typing. Joe stepped over to her desk.

“So, you finally noticed,” he said. Gretchen did not reply; she just kept typing the report. Joe, who was still standing there, had an uncomfortable look on his face. “I hear you’re going on vacation next week.”

“Yep,” Gretchen replied, but still never took her eyes off the report.

“Since you’re going to be free, why not have dinner with me tomorrow night?”

Gretchen stopped typing and looked up at him. “Are you serious?” she asked. She was a little nervous no one had ever asked her out before. She was afraid he was joking. Joe nodded affirmatively with a handsome smile on his face. Gretchen was feeling so overwhelmed at the moment. Joe’s smile made her weak in the knees. A smile, which rarely ever surfaced on her face, slowly grew.

“All right, I accept,” Gretchen replied.

That evening when Gretchen returned home from work, she got her mail out of her mailbox. As she stood waiting for the elevator, she flipped through the small
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pile of mail: two pieces were bills, one was junk mail, and the last a circular from Wal-Mart. When she got up to her apartment, she checked her messages. In the first message, she heard her mother’s sing-song voice:

“Hi, Sweetie, Momma loves you. Anyway, you are invited to attend your Grandma Mildred’s funeral. The viewing will be from three to four at the Shelton Valley funeral home on Saturday and the funeral at four the same day with the burial following. Come if you can. I’ll have food at the house after the burial. I hope to see you. The family says ‘Hi.’ I love you, bye.”

The news hit her hard, and Gretchen had to take a seat. “It’s so hard for me to believe that she’s gone. The last time I saw her she seemed so healthy. I loved that old woman; she seemed like the only sane person in the family. I’m going to miss how she always told me she loved me. Sometimes, she’d even say she loved me more than her children and even Grandpa. I’m sure she said that to all the grandkids though, but she showed it. She’d give me hugs, bake cookies, and give us presents just because she wanted to,” Gretchen said, and she wiped the tears from her cheeks. “I need to go back and see her one last time.”

After packing, Gretchen built up the nerve to call home. Gretchen slowly went into the parlor and reluctantly picked up the phone. Gretchen hesitated before dialing the number. “This is ridiculous. Why am I so scared about calling home? They are the same people they were when I left. It’s not like I’m calling strangers. I’m calling family. Although I wish I was calling strangers. Mom will ask why I haven’t called, and why I haven’t come home in three years, why I’m avoiding them. I’ll have to
make up a lie. I can’t flat out say ‘because I’m embarrassed to be around you.’ No, that’ll hurt their feelings. She may even tell me not to come home if I told her that. Oh, stop stalling and dial!” She dialed the number and the next thing Gretchen heard was a ring and Rachael’s high-pitched voice saying, “Hello?”

“Hi, Mom, it’s me, Gretchen—”

“Finally! We haven’t seen you in three years. You only gave us your phone number, but hardly called. I was starting to feel like you were ignoring us!”

“Mom, I’m coming back to Shelton Valley for Grandma’s funeral, all right? I’ll be leaving around six in the morning since it’s a four-hour drive. I’ll probably get there about 10:30-ish depending on traffic and how many stops I have to make.”

“Okay, I’m so excited. I’ve got to tell everyone—”

“Yeah, well, if I’m getting up that early I’d better turn in for the night,” Gretchen quickly interceded.

“But it’s only eight thirty,” Rachael said.

“I know, but I have to get my rest. You know what a bear I am if I don’t get my rest. Bye,” and Gretchen hung up the phone. She did not want to get stuck explaining her story to every member of the family; leave that for tomorrow morning.

Gretchen was now relieved that the whole ordeal was over. She sat down in her chair “Oh no, I just realized if I go home then I have to break off my dinner date with Joe. I really hate to have to do this. I’d rather have my molars pulled out than cancel this date.” Gretchen picked up the phone and dialed Joe’s number. After three rings, Joe answered the phone.
“Joe, this is Gretchen. I am sorry to do this, but I’m going to have to cancel our dinner date. My grandma died and the funeral is tomorrow. I have to leave town,” Gretchen said.

“I see,” Joe replied. He sounded let down. “Maybe some other time.”

Joe hung up first. Gretchen sighed and hung up the phone.

II

The next morning, Gretchen arrived in Heath Hollow. She drove up the sloping dirt road leading up to the head of the hollow where her family lived. After making it over the final small hill, the tops of the four white houses appeared. The hollow was like a rustic cul-de-sac. The four houses were the only houses in the hollow and on the north, west, and east sides the houses were cradled by lush hillsides. Gretchen took in the view.

“Nothing has changed at all since I left three years ago. It’s like I’ve gone into a time warp back into the past.” Gretchen pulled into her parents’ driveway and got out of her car.

“Halt! Who goes there?” Uncle Sal called. Gretchen looked across the road. Sal was in his second story window, dressed in camouflage, and had a hunting rifle in his hands. “If you’re with the government I’m not giving over my guns!”

“Uncle Sal, it’s me, Gretchen!”

“State your purpose in military code!”

“I don’t know military code!”
“Hold on.” Sal ducked back into his room. Gretchen guessed he was looking for an Army manual to teach her how to talk in code. She didn’t stand around and wait but went inside the house. Gretchen noticed not much had changed inside her parents’ house either. Her father, Bert, was in shorts and an undershirt and sleeping in his La-Z-Boy while the TV was blaring commercials. Rachael, who was dancing around the kitchen, peeked out and saw Gretchen standing by the front door.

“My baby’s home!” she sang and she ran over and gave Gretchen a hug and a wet kiss on the cheek. Rachael certainly did not look like a woman in mourning. She had a large white toothy smile on her face and a cheerful twinkle in her light-blue eyes. She did not look like she was going to a funeral that day either: she wore a pink terrycloth robe and blue, fuzzy slippers. Her graying hair was frizzed and stuck out everywhere, and she did not have her make-up on.

Following Rachael out of the kitchen was Gretchen’s younger brother, Ralph. Ralph was as tall and wide as a building. He towered over Gretchen. She nervously smiled up at him.

“Hug me!” he said. His arms swooped around Gretchen. Her feet no longer touched the ground. He squeezed her so tightly that all the breath was crushed out of her chest.

“It’s good to see you too, Ralph. Now let go,” Gretchen managed to say. Ralph let Gretchen down and went back to the kitchen to finish off his bowl of Cocoa Puffs.

“Go on upstairs and unpack. I’ll make you some lunch,” Rachael said.
Gretchen carried her suitcases up the stairs. It was quite a struggle since they were so heavy. "Why did I pack so much stuff? I've got enough here to last me two weeks and I'm going home tomorrow. I guess it is better safe than sorry." She put down her heavy luggage and opened the door to her bedroom. She stepped inside and besides a musty smell from not being used; everything looked like it did when she left. Gretchen dragged the suitcases into the room and threw them on her bed. The suitcases sank in the foam mattress. She had quite a work out. Gretchen sat down on the vanity bench and looked up. Standing in the threshold of her room was Great Aunt Midge. She was dressed in black and looked sad.

"Your mom told me you were up here," Aunt Midge said.

"Hello, Aunt Midge, are you ready for the funeral?" Gretchen asked.

"Oh, Sweetie, I'm dying. I'm waiting for my own funeral. I've got heart disease. Sometimes I can't even get out of bed I'm so weak," Aunt Midge replied.

"You poor thing," Gretchen pretended to sympathize.

"Why it took just about all my strength to come up these stairs and see you."

"Thanks for thinking so much about me that you'd risk your own health to greet me."

"I think that deserves a hug, don't you?" Gretchen gave Aunt Midge a hug, and then Aunt Midge left. Gretchen was left alone to unpack. She opened her closet to get some hangers for clothes that needed to be hung up. She looked upon the top shelf of the closet and saw a ragged old teddy bear with a dirty yellow bow around its
neck. Gretchen reached up and took the bear. She held it in her hands treating it like it was some historical artifact.

"I remember the first day I got you. Grandpa and Grandma Mills took me with them to Mennonite country. They were there to buy lumber for an outbuilding Grandpa was going to build. While we were in the Mennonite country store, I saw you sitting on the shelf with other handmade toys. Your bow was what attracted me. I asked Grandma if I could have you. She didn’t even hesitate. She went over to the shelf and handed you to me. I remember that warm smile on her face when I hugged her and thanked her. Oh, bear, I’m going to miss her." Gretchen then put the teddy bear back on the top shelf of the closet, and put her clothes in the closet too.

Gretchen came down the stairs wiping tears from her eyes as Bert stirred from his nap.

“How are ya, Sweetie?” Bert asked.

“Tired, I’ve been up since five and drove five hours. So far I’ve only encountered part of the loony bin,” Gretchen replied as she sat down on the couch. At that moment Jess came in the house. She was dressed for a funeral everyday. Today she wore a long black dress with tattered long sleeves, black lipstick, black eye shadow, black fingernails, a spiked dog collar, and black combat boots. Gretchen looked at her and wanted to laugh, but she kept a straight face.

“You finally decided to come out of your room. You and your dad are one of a kind. I’ve never met two people so out of touch with society,” Bert said.
“I came over to see Gretchen,” Jess answered in a flat tone as she sat down on the couch beside Gretchen. Gretchen felt a little uncomfortable with Jess’ look.

“How have you been, Jess?” Gretchen asked.

“Fine, Gretch, Satan hasn’t been talking to me as much at night as he used to.”

“I’m surprised that Grandma died. She always seemed like such a healthy old lady.”

“Everyone has a time to go. I hope my time is soon.”

“You don’t mean that, Jess.”

“She’s already tried to kill herself twice,” Rachael said as she went upstairs with an empty laundry basket. Gretchen looked over at Jess with a shocked look on her face.

“How?” Gretchen asked.

“The first time I cut my wrists, of course I cut them the wrong way and didn’t cut deep enough. The second time I overdosed on sleeping pills and Ibuprofen.”

“If you’re going to kill yourself at least do it right with guaranteed permanent results. Your dad has a whole room full of guns,” Bert said.

“Dad!” Gretchen exclaimed with a tone of rebuke in her voice. Gretchen looked over at Jess, who looked apathetic and depressed. This Gothic thing wasn’t just a fad it was a reflection of Jess. Gretchen was starting to believe that her cousin needed psychological help. Of course, she believed that everyone in her family needed psychological help.
That afternoon the family went to the Shelton Valley funeral home. From the outside no one would have thought that the building was a business let alone a funeral parlor. From the outside it looked like a private residence. There were four parlors in the funeral home; Mildred was in the first parlor on the right. Her funeral was the only one taking place that day. Mildred was laid out for viewing. In her casket she wore a lavender satin nightgown, and her hair fixed up in a bun the same way she always wore it in life. All around the parlor were wall-to-wall brightly-colored flower arrangements, houseplants, and reefs. Over the intercom system funeral dirges were played to give a solemn mood to the place, but that was of no effect.

“Oh, it looks just like her,” Aunt Midge said as she and Gretchen looked at Mildred. To Gretchen it looked more like her grandmother was asleep than dead.

“I’m going outside,” Gretchen said and she left Aunt Midge’s side to get some air on the front porch. It seemed like everyone in Shelton Valley turned out. Gretchen greeted familiar faces as they came in. She had not seen these people in years, yet they all seemed the same. From inside she could hear laughter. Was she the only one that felt like crying? Even the day did not seem appropriate for a funeral: the sun shone bright there was hardly a cloud in the deep blue sky; the temperature was just perfect. This was a day for a picnic or a fair not a funeral. Gretchen took a seat in one of the rocking chairs on the front porch. Across from her were Ralph and Cousin Joshua, Don, Bert’s older brother’s son.

“I know karate and I bet I can break this post with my bare hand,” Joshua said.
"I bet you can’t," Ralph replied. Joshua gave him a sour look and then karate chopped the porch rail only to jerk his hand back in pain. He held it to his chest and sucked in air the way people do when they hurt themselves. Ralph started laughing at him and Gretchen couldn’t help but laugh too.

“It’s not funny. I’m telling my dad on you!” Joshua said and he ran inside the funeral home.

“Why am I left to baby sit the little heathen?” Ralph asked as he got up and went after Joshua.

Gretchen was left alone. She rocked to and fro being hypnotized by the creaking of the wooden chair. She turned her attention to the road that was leaving downtown and saw a Mary Kay-pink Ford Mustang enter town. The car parked right in front of the funeral home in the no parking zone. From out of the car came Claire, Gretchen’s cousin.

“Oh, Gretchen!” Claire sobbed. Her heavy eye make-up caused black tears to run down her face.

“Are those real tears?” Gretchen asked skeptical that Claire was really that sorrowful. The tears stopped flowing.

“I’ve got to put on a show for everyone. I mean, come on, it’s my grandma’s funeral,” Claire replied. Gretchen smiled. She always knew when Claire was acting because she always overacted.

“I better get inside,” Claire said as she straightened her extremely tight black dress-suit. She took in a deep breath and the tears started flowing again. She left
Gretchen alone and stepped inside. Gretchen took a peek inside at all the smiling faces. It was more like a happy social gathering than a funeral. Gretchen got her handkerchief out of her purse to dry her tears. Hers were for real: she loved her grandma.

"Aw, foot!" Gretchen heard. She looked up and saw a police officer standing by Claire’s car. "I forgot my citation book," he griped.

"Just leave a post-it!" Gretchen called to him. She got a pad of post-it notes out of her purse and tossed it to the police officer. Now that she thought about it, it was odd that she had all of her office supplies in her purse. No wonder it was the size of a diaper bag. The police officer wrote on the post-it note, stuck it to Claire’s windshield, and then he went inside the funeral home. Gretchen was alone once more.

Before she could break down and cry, Rachael stuck her head out the door.

"Come on in, Sweetie, the funeral is about to start," Rachael said. Gretchen nodded in reply and followed her mother into the funeral home.

Everyone gathered in the parlor. Gretchen took her seat between Ralph and Jess. Her parents, Aunt Midge, and her uncles sat in the front pew. The pastor took his place at the podium, which was situated behind Mildred’s casket. He began by reading the obituary:

"Mildred Rhymes Mills born October 31st 1931 in Norton, Virginia; died August 19th 2004 in her home in Heath Hollow, here in Shelton Valley. She is survived by her sons: Don, Bert, and Sal Mills, her daughter Jeanne Mills-Vaughn, her older sister, Midge Rhymes-Thatcher, and grandchildren: Gretchen, Ralph,
Jessica, and Joshua Mills, and Claire Vaughn.” Gretchen thought this man was about as exciting as watching paint dry.

He droned on through a sermon of sympathy and condolence, and hope: “It is always hard on a family when they lose a person they so dearly loved. But it is human’s eternal curse that we are born, we grow and toil all our lives for our meat, and at the end when we are weary we slip away into death. Mildred is no longer with us, but we can be well assured that she is at rest. That she will never be in pain again, she will never grow old, she will never be sick, never be hungry, never be cold, or in want of anything. And that she will bask in the eternal sunshine of our Lord. As many of you know Mildred was a—”

Gretchen had grown bored with the preacher’s droning. She lost his voice amongst her thoughts. She looked at the casket with her grandmother laying in it. Somehow it did not seem real to Gretchen that this could be happening. Who is that person in the casket? That can’t be my grandma. Wait I thought I saw her breathe. Maybe this is just a joke and she’ll hop out of that casket at any moment and tell me this was a ploy to get me to come home. That’s what I want to believe, but that’s not what’s really going to happen. You’re gone, Grandma. You’re really gone. Gretchen wiped the tears away from her eyes and then looked away from the dead body in front of her to see how the rest of her family was reacting during this sorrowful time. She saw that Bert fell asleep; Uncle Sal brought a book on artillery from home and was reading; Uncle Don was folding his funeral pamphlet into a paper airplane; Aunt Midge was crying, but Gretchen could hear her mumble on about her own death.
Ralph was trying his hardest to stay awake. Gretchen looked over at him and saw him jerk himself awake. Claire was crying out loud putting on a show for everyone, but Gretchen knew she was most likely thinking about what type of inheritance she would get from Grandma.

Gretchen tuned in to the pastor just as he was finishing his sermon: “And so it is with a heavy heart that I offer my deepest condolences to the Mills family and hope that their pain and grief will soon be relieved.” The townspeople then got up and shook hands with the family, took one more look at Mildred, and went out the door. The family members were the last to see Mildred before the funeral home directors came in and closed the casket. Bert, Don, and Sal all looked at Mildred shook their heads and went on. Rachael helped Midge up to the casket.

“Good-bye, Sis,” Midge said through a sob. Rachael gently patted the dead woman’s hands and they walked on. Ralph looked down and went on; Joshua and Claire both ignored the casket and headed out the door.

“Good riddance, you old bag,” Jess whispered to the corpse. Gretchen couldn’t believe she heard her cousin say that. Gretchen was the last to see Mildred.

“So long, Grandma, I loved you,” she said and she went out the front door with her cousins. The funeral directors then came in, closed the casket, and rolled it over to the back door where it would be loaded into the hearse.

“Why don’t you ride with me to the cemetery?” Claire said to Gretchen as they stepped out onto the front porch.

“I don’t know if I want to ride with a deviant driver,” Gretchen replied.
“I would,” Jess said with a twisted smile on her face. Claire looked at both Gretchen and Jess with a questioning look on her face. Claire saw the post-it. She looked confused. She walked over to investigate.

“It’s a parking ticket on a post-it note!” she exclaimed. Gretchen and Jess started laughing.

The town’s people stood around the gravesite as the pastor performed graveside rites: “Mildred, we now inter your body to the earth where you will rest until that final Judgment Day when all the graves will open and the dead in Christ shall rise.” The pastor gave the signal and someone turned on the crank to lower Mildred into the ground. As the casket was lowered into the ground, the crank broke and the casket fell cock-eyed into the grave. Many of the people gasped. Rachael covered her face it was hard to tell if she was laughing or crying.

“Of all the rotten luck,” Bert mumbled under his breath. The pastor tossed some dirt into the grave and then walked away. The individual family members tossed their single roses into the grave.

“May you rest in peace,” Gretchen whispered and she threw her rose into the grave and walked away.

As the family headed towards their cars, they heard someone’s car horn honking. An old-model, gray Buick pulled up the drive and stopped in front of the family. Out of the Buick came Rachael’s mother, Gretchen’s other grandmother, Granny Julie Meade.
“Am I late too for the funeral?” Granny Julie asked.

“Very late, Momma, they just put Mildred in the ground. Of course I’m glad you came. Since Daddy died you never stay at home anymore. I thought it was a miracle that I could get in contact with you to tell you that Mildred had passed,” Rachael replied as she gave her mother a hug.

“Well, I’m sorry. You know me. I’ve been traveling across country with Papaw,” Granny Julie explained. Everyone looked perplexed. Gretchen looked in the passenger’s seat of the Buick and saw a mannequin with an 8x10 headshot of Papaw’s face taped on it. Papaw had been dead for five years, but Granny Julie would not accept that fact. Gretchen realized that insanity was not just from the Mills side of the family, but the Meade side too.

“Even if I’m late, I’m glad I could be here. I’m going to be staying with you for a few days before heading north. I’m going to go up to New England to tour the colony towns, historical districts and such. I also have some videos of my travels out west that I’d like everyone to see.”

“That would be great,” Rachael said.

“Yes this will give me time to visit with you just a little bit before I leave tomorrow,” Gretchen said.

“What, you’re not going to stay?” Rachael asked.

“You should at least stay for the reading of the will. Who knows Mildred may have left you some money,” Claire said.

“I don’t really care about that,” Gretchen replied.
“Would you do it anyway?” Rachael asked. Now Gretchen was feeling guilty about wanting to leave. She sighed and nodded. A large smile grew on Rachael’s face, and Gretchen knew that her mother was contented.

That evening, Granny Julie had everyone come over to Bert and Rachael’s to watch her videos. Julie showed the family her most recent video of her trip to the Grand Canyon. The picture was bouncy: one moment she had a shot of the Grand Canyon, the next shot was of the sky. She did a 360-degree turn with the camera that made the viewers’ heads spin. She didn’t know how to use the zoom so she ran up to a sign that explained the canyon’s history in order to get a close-up. The picture bounced as she ran. She didn’t know how to pause her camera so the family had a five minute stare at her aqua-blue skirt while she talked to someone they couldn’t see. Gretchen had heard that The Blair Witch Project caused seasickness, but to watch Granny Julie’s movies was even worse.

“I think we’ve all had about as much as we can take,” Bert said and he pressed the stop button on the VCR.

“You know who else shot bad videos, Mom,” Don said.

“Yeah, if there was a contest for worse home movies you would have had quite the competition, Julie,” Bert told her.

“I’m gonna miss her,” Sal said and then sighed. Everyone else was quiet after that. No one felt much like seeing any more videos after that. Sal and Jess, Don and Joshua, and Aunt Midge went to their homes. Everyone in Bert and Rachael’s house
decided to turn in for the night. Granny Julie stayed in the guestroom, and Claire, who stayed for the reading of the will, slept on the couch.

Gretchen rested in her overly-soft bed. She sank down in the middle and could not get out. She looked around at the girly, pink walls, the frilly curtains, and the doll-cluttered shelves. All the porcelain dolls stared at her. She watched them long enough and she thought she saw the dolls' eyes move. Gretchen was spooked in her own room. She closed her eyes and tried to sleep, but the dogs barked outside, and she could hear her father's snoring from down the hall; Granny Julie, in the adjoining room, snored so loud that the wall vibrated.

III

Monday morning, Rachael whistled “Good Morning Star Shine” as she prepared cold cereal and heated up frozen pancakes for breakfast. The breakfast table seemed crowded. Usually it was just Rachael, Bert, Ralph, and occasionally Aunt Midge; but this morning Gretchen, Granny Julie, and Claire were at the table too.

“Hey, are you gonna eat those Rice Crispy’s?” Bert asked Claire.

“No, I’m trying to watch what I eat I need to lose some weight. I’m so grossly overweight it’s sickening,” Claire replied.

*Your attitude about your appearance is sickening. You’re the size of a beanpole,* Gretchen thought. She was a little jealous that her cousin was so thin.

Gretchen couldn’t lose weight no matter how much she dieted and exercised.
"Yeah, I watch what I eat too. I watch it as I put it in my mouth. If you’re not going to eat that cereal can I have it?" Bert asked. Claire ate a couple of bites of her cereal and gave it over to Bert.

"Well, breakfast was great but I better hit the road. Papaw and I are going to spend the next few months traveling around New England, and return home with the changing of the leaves," Granny Julie said as she got up from the table.

"You drive carefully, Momma," Rachael said and she gave her mother a hug. Julie then hugged Ralph and Gretchen.

"See you at Thanksgiving, Granny Julie," Ralph said and then he gave his grandmother a kiss on the cheek.

"Bye, Honey, I love you, and I’m gonna miss you," Julie told him. She then addressed Gretchen: "It was good to see you again, Gretchen. You take care of yourself, and I love you."

"I love you too," Gretchen said and gave her a hug.

"Let me see you out to your car," Rachael said and she went out with her mother. As Rachael and Julie left the kitchen, Aunt Midge came in. She wore another black dress and a black veil over her head. She was crying, as usual.

"What are you dying from today, Aunt Midge?" Bert asked.

"Oh, Honey, I’ve got cancer! I’ve only got three days to live!" Aunt Midge bawled.

"We’ll just see about that," Gretchen said under her breath.

"Where is your cancer?" Claire asked.
“All over my body!”

“Wow, it’s amazing that you can even walk if you have cancer all over and only three days to live,” Bert said.

Aunt Midge’s tears turned to aggravation. “Quit laughing at me, Boy, I’m dying. You don’t laugh at the terminally ill, it’s disrespectful!” and then she stormed out of the house so frustrated that she didn’t stay for breakfast.

At noon, the family went to the office of Cletus Milton attorney at law. He was an old country lawyer who had a hunched back and wore his pants up to his chest. The family was stuffed into his small wood-paneled office. The old man looked a little displeased.

“It’s good to see y’all came out. Let me be the first to give you my condolences. As y’all know I’m Mildred’s attorney, but for some reason she didn’t entrust her final will and testament to me. She hired some big city lawyer to handle her assets. Anyway, he’s here today with Mildred’s final wishes.”

In stepped Joe, Jr. Gretchen about choked to see him there.

“He’s hot,” Claire said in a whisper to Gretchen.

“Gretchen, I didn’t know that Mildred Mills was your grandmother. Of course, now it makes sense you both have the same last name. Anyway, I’m sorry for your loss,” Joe said. Gretchen could not say anything. There was an invisible hold on her throat preventing her from speaking to him. She hoped that no one in her family would embarrass her in front of one of her superiors.
"You know that guy?" Jess asked.

"He's one of my bosses," Gretchen replied.

Joe cleared his throat and got everyone's attention. "My father, Joseph McDermen, Sr., was Mildred's attorney. Unfortunately, he had to go to court today. He left it up to me to read—rather play—Mildred's will." Joe turned on the television and put the tape in the VCR. Mildred, wearing her favorite lavender dress, and her gray hair in a bun, appeared on the screen. It was a comfort for Gretchen to see her alive again. She sat engaging in friendly conversation until the cameraman told her she was on. Mildred then looked at the camera. The warm smile on her face turned stern.

"If you're watching this, then I'm dead, and good riddance to the lot of ya. I, Mildred Mills, being of sound mind and body leave to everyone in my family my final assets. They are in individual envelopes, which my lawyer—not knowing the contents—will pass out." Joe gave everyone an envelope. Claire being overly anxious ripped open the envelope. Inside was a piece of paper.

"It's a bill!" Claire exclaimed as she jumped to her feet.

"That's right; the only thing left to my name is my debt. Did you think I was going to leave you anything good? You're probably the one's that killed me," Mildred continued. Claire got mad and stormed out of the office.

"But, Mom, what happened to all of your stuff?" Don asked the television as if Mildred was really there.
“The last years of my life, I’ve secretly been giving away my belongings and money, and I’ve been buying lavish gifts for charities. If nothing I hope my philanthropy gets me a seat in Heaven. Now, get out of here and go pay my debts, you crazy people!” the tape ended. Everyone, even Joe and Cletus, looked shocked. Gretchen felt heartbroken. She remembered a warm and loving Grandma: a sane Grandma. She saw a mean old woman on the video and began to wonder if for all those years she had been deceiving herself. It all made sense now to see why no one was sad when Mildred died. It made sense to her now why Jess said what she did at the final viewing. All the grief she once had over Mildred’s passing turned to grief that the grandmother she once thought she knew was not real. She could no longer mourn for the death of such a wretched person.

Gretchen left with her parents. She did not want to bump into Joe, which would lead him to coming to Heath Hollow, and discovering the dark underbelly of the Mills family. Besides, what happened in the lawyer’s office was embarrassing enough. Gretchen already had her things packed in her car at her parents’. As soon as lunch was through, she was leaving Shelton Valley again, for good.

After lunch Gretchen got into her car. Rachael and Bert stood there beside her car to watch her off. Gretchen waved farewell to them and turned the key. Gretchen put her car into reverse and tapped the gas but the car would not move.
“What the heck?” Gretchen exclaimed. Her confusion was quickly turning to frustration and anger. She turned off the engine, popped her hood, and looked to see what was wrong, but she did not know what she was looking for.

“What’s wrong?” Bert asked.

“My car shifts gears, but it won’t move!” Gretchen replied.

“It’s the government! They’re sabotaging all our cars and keeping us here at our homes so they can ambush us and take away our guns!” Sal said from his bedroom window. The three looked at him with puzzled expressions on their faces.

“Or there could be a logical explanation,” Bert replied. “It sounds to me like your transmission is messed up.”

“That’s just great. I haven’t driven my car at all since I arrived in Shelton Valley, so I never suspected the trouble. Now that I think about it, my car did make funny noises Saturday morning coming up the hollow. It figures. It’s the ten-year-old curse. My car turned ten last month and now it’s falling apart.”

“I have a friend who can fix your transmission for you,” Bert said. He went inside and made some phone calls. Gretchen stood impatiently on the front porch steps and waited for what her dad had to say. After a while, Bert came out with a smile on his face.

“Stinky says that business is slow and he can get your car fixed by Thursday afternoon,” Bert said. Gretchen moaned like she was in pain to know that she would be entrusting her car to a man named Stinky, and that she would be spending her
entire vacation week stuck in Shelton Valley. All her quiet private time was gone. She was stuck with the Addams Family all week.

“Since you’ll be here for a while, why don’t you spend the rest of your vacation with us? Your father is on vacation this week and we’re going camping for a couple of days,” Rachael said.

“I have no choice,” Gretchen replied and then sighed.

“I’ll come too,” Jess said from behind. She had silently sneaked up behind Gretchen and scared her out of her skin.

A short time later, Rachael was on the front porch sweeping, and Gretchen was sitting in the rocking chair silently mourning her lost vacation when the tow truck came up the dirt road. The truck backed up into the driveway, the driver got out and hooked up Gretchen’s car. He tipped his dirty baseball cap to the two ladies on the porch and then got back into his truck. He drove off taking Gretchen’s car with him. Gretchen watched as her car left the hollow.

“Come on, Sweetie, we need to start packing for our camping trip tomorrow,” Rachael said as she broke Gretchen from her trance.

IV

It was the perfect afternoon for the family to set up camp at the local state park. The sun shone in the sky, but it was cloudy enough for shade, and the humidity was low so the temperature was not too bad. Rachael and Bert set up the pop-up
camper. Ralph set up the dining canopy around the picnic table and then spread the red and white-checkered tablecloth over the picnic table. Gretchen and Jess got the luggage out of the back of the van. As usual, Gretchen over packed, but so did the rest of the family. Now, she knew where she got that bad habit.

When camp was set, Ralph set up the television in the camper, and sat in the air conditioning watching movies that he brought from home. Gretchen and Jess sat outside in lawn chairs.

“We ought to take a walk and see what the park has to offer,” Gretchen said.

“Maybe later,” Jess replied.

“Come on you blasted thing!” Bert was struggling with the grill. He attempted many times to get a good fire going, but to no avail. Bert went over and opened up the back of the van to look for lighter fluid. While he was busy looking, Rachael came out of the camper.

“Your dad is having such a hard time getting that grill going, but I know what will fix that. Just a little tiny bit of gasoline will get that fire going,” Rachael said to Gretchen and Jess. She poured a small amount of gasoline onto the grill, set the can aside, and went back into the camper to finish heating up the rest of the dinner, which consisted of canned green beans, canned corn, instant mashed potatoes, and packaged rolls. Bert found the lighter fluid bottle in the back of the van and came back around to the grill. He squirted an excessive amount of lighter fluid on the grill.

“That should do it,” he said. He set the bottle aside and got the box of matches off the picnic table.
We better get out of harm’s way,” Gretchen said to Jess in a whisper.

Gretchen and Jess got up from their seats and went inside the camper. Bert threw a lighted match on the grill. From outside the camper flashed a light followed by a whoosh. Bert stuck his head in the camper. He smelled of burnt hair. His mustache and eyebrows were singed and smoking and he had an angry look on his face.

“You put gas on the grill, didn’t you? I saw the can!”

“Sorry,” Rachael sweetly sang. “I just wanted to help.”

“Leave the grill to me!” Bert said in a harsh, demanding tone. He slammed the door and went back to the grill. Once he was gone, everyone broke out laughing.

“Let’s go for that walk now,” Gretchen said to Jess.

“Don’t be gone too long an hour and a half at the most. The food should be ready by then,” Rachael said. Gretchen and Jess nodded affirmatively as they left the camper. Outside Bert was mumbling under his breath as he threw the steaks on the grill.

“Just be glad she didn’t kill you, Dad,” Gretchen said as she and Jess walked away.

While Gretchen and Jess walked they looked at the all the expensive campers. Some campers even had decorated fences and satellite dishes. As they passed a campsite, they saw clothes hanging on the line. One article of clothing earned a second glance: a pair of women’s briefs the size of a classroom standard U.S. flag. The girls broke out laughing to see such a gargantuan pair of underwear.
“I wonder if that person is actually that big or if the underwear is a joke,” Gretchen said. The girls continued up the road and found the playground and miniature golf course.

“We’ll need to play golf while we’re here.”

“Gretchen, you know that golf’s a spoiled, rich person’s game.”

“I only see campers playing,” Gretchen replied. Jess faintly smiled. In a way, Gretchen was relieved to see her cousin acting like a normal human being again. She wondered if her being there had an affect on Jess’ mood.

The girls walked on further and passed the amphitheater and walked out to the main road. They traveled along on the side of the highway and saw the lake. From the distance they could see the dock and all the expensive houseboats and pontoons.

“You know the Kiwanis’ trail is supposed to be haunted. You wanna walk it?” Jess asked. Gretchen wondered if Jess was being serious. She looked at her cousin who wore a long black velvet dress, a black hooded cape, and high-heeled boots. Jess definitely was not dressed for a hike.

“All right, but I don’t think that you’ll find any spooks on the trail in broad daylight,” Gretchen answered. The girls walked along the trail. It was wonderfully shaded. It was a well-traversed trail, paved and everything. It smelled of trees: that familiar wooden, moldy smell. The bugs were rampant.

“I wish I had some bug repellant. These stupid bugs must know that I hate them and just to annoy me they take pleasure in fluttering around in front of my face,” Gretchen said as she swatted a fly away.
“Suck it up, you big baby,” Jess replied. They were half a mile along on the trail when the trail forked. “This fork looks spooky. Let’s go down it,” Jess said.

Gretchen looked farther down the alternative path. The trail was rocky, and tree roots ran across the path. The thick tree canopy above made the way darker. All in all, the path looked ominous.

“I don’t know,” Gretchen said with some hesitation.

“Come on, if anything happens then I’ll take the blame,” Jess said. Gretchen, willing to appease her cousin, went along after Jess. As they walked along the trail, Gretchen noticed that the birds stopped chirping. The only noise she heard was the sound of their feet pounding the dirt path. It was creepy that life stopped along this path.

“Could this be the haunted path?” Gretchen asked.

“It could be. They say that the ghost of a witch haunts it. She used to do her spells in these woods. Then, back around the early nineteen hundreds, they rooted her out and killed her. They say her spirit still roams the woods, sometimes chanting incantations, getting hikers lost, or just enjoying nature,” Jess replied.

“I’m not even going to ask how you know all that stuff,” Gretchen said. Jess suddenly stopped dead in her tracks and Gretchen bumped into her. Jess took in a deep breath and screamed at the top of her lungs. She turned and hid behind Gretchen. Gretchen looked ahead. In their path was a spider web and in the middle was the largest black spider she had ever seen.

“Kill it!” Jess cried loudly in Gretchen’s ear.
“I can’t believe it, Goth Girl is afraid of spiders.” Gretchen picked up a stick and eased over to the spider web. Jess stayed in her place bawling. Gretchen poked the spider with the stick. The spider quickly jumped on the stick. Gretchen threw the stick to the ground and repeatedly stomped on the spider. Its guts and juices stained the ground. With the heel of her white tennis shoe, Gretchen rubbed the spider into the dirt. With her stick she cleared the spider web from the path.

“Come on, Jess, let’s keep going,” Gretchen said. Jess was still crying, but she was calming down. She took hold of Gretchen’s hand, and Gretchen led her along like a mother and a child. They continued forward, Gretchen almost tripped on tree roots three times and almost twisted her ankle on a rock. It was becoming hard for her to watch the ground at her feet and watch ahead for spider webs. The path soon ended and the girls were standing on the edge of a cliff that looked out over the lake.

“Isn’t it beautiful?” Gretchen asked with deep admiration. The sight was sublime. The trees were so green it looked like the never-ending hills were draped with green shag carpeting. The lake was calm and deep and beautiful shade of blue. This was a serene landscape untainted by man. Gretchen felt like she was the first person to ever see this beauty. Now, she knew how the first natives felt when they overlooked the lake from this view. The beautiful sight of nature stirred happy feelings within Gretchen. She did not want to leave: she could have stayed in that spot in time forever.
"Nice," Jess said with a hint of apathy. "Come on, Gretch, I want to get back to camp." She had not been the same since the spider scare. Gretchen sighed and followed her cousin back. As the girls walked back, they came upon another fork.

"I don’t remember seeing that fork," Gretchen said.

"I don’t remember it either, but I was too busy watching my feet."

"Which way do we go?"

"I don’t know!"

"We’re lost!"

"Well, now what do we do?"

"I remember from watching a survival thing on television that if we stand here and keep calling for help then someone eventually will come along and help us out."

"I don’t think so! Not with some stupid witch’s ghost screwing up trails and spiders at every turn. If you think I’m staying here one more minute then you are sadly mistaken. I’m going straight. Straight is the way!" Jess said and she hurried up the hill. Gretchen watched. She really wanted to stay in place and not get lost any worse than what she was. Gretchen heard Jess shriek and hurried up to her. When Gretchen caught up with Jess, she was flaying her arms around her head and frantically wiping at her clothes.

"What’s wrong?" Gretchen asked.

"I walked into a spider web. Do I have any spiders on me?"

"There’s a huge one on the top of your head."
“Get it off!” Jess started beating her head. She was going hysterical. Gretchen started laughing, and Jess calmed down. “There isn’t a spider on me, is there?” Jess asked.

“No, but you should have seen yourself when I said you did. That looked like a new dance. What do you call it the Hop-around-and-hit-yourself?”

“Be quiet!” Jess said. As she turned around she walked into another spider web. “I hate nature!”

Gretchen, who was busy laughing at Jess’ misfortune, did not watch where she was going, tripped on a rock, and fell sideways into the bushes. Jess helped Gretchen out of the bush. By the time they were both on their feet they had burs all over their clothes and twigs in their hair.

“I think we’re on the wrong trail,” Jess said. “There weren’t this many spider webs in the way, and there is no way that those things can build a web that fast.”

“Let’s try the other trail and see where it leads us.” The two walked to the other trail and followed it up the hill. Although it was as rocky and root-ridden as the other trail it did have less spider webs in the way. But to Gretchen nothing seemed familiar about the setting. Everything looked the same. Everything looked like endless woods all around her.

“Hey, I remember that tree!” Jess said.

“Of course you remember that tree it looks like all the other trees in these forsaken woods!”
“No, it has a big heart that says ‘Tim loves Erin’ carved on the other side of its trunk.”

When Gretchen looked on the other side of the tree there it was: the large heart proclaiming Tim’s love for Erin. “This means we’re on the right track and we should be back at camp before sundown.”

“Good, I’m getting tired, and these high-heeled boots are killing my feet.”

The clouds were multicolored in the sky when Gretchen and Jess finally arrived at camp. They were tired, covered in spider webs, burs, twigs and thorns. They looked like they had been through heck and back. At camp, Bert, Rachael, and Ralph sat around the picnic table. Their food was ready and getting cold as they waved away hungry flies.

“It’s about time,” Ralph said as Gretchen and Jess entered the campsite and sluggishly sat down at the picnic table.

“From now on we’re staying on the main path,” Gretchen said exhausted from their walk. Jess only nodded in reply.

That night, Gretchen lay sleepless and stared up at the canvas ceiling. The combination of Bert’s snoring, and Jess’ kicking kept Gretchen from sleeping. Without any hope of sleep, Gretchen crawled over Jess and sneaked out of the camper. She sat down at the picnic table. It was so dark that all she could see were fires here and there, and the multicolored flower lights that people hung from their
campers. The midnight air smelled of smoke. There was a calm silence blended with the sound of singing frogs and crickets.

Gretchen lit the kerosene lamp on the picnic table, and noticed that Ralph had left his playing cards on the table. Gretchen attempted to shuffle the deck and took the top card from the deck and looked at it: it was the Queen of Hearts. The second card she drew just so happened to be the King of Hearts. Gretchen studied the card. The King of Hearts had a knife. She had once heard that the reason the King of Hearts had a knife was because he was going to kill himself because the Queen of Hearts would not reciprocate his love.

Gretchen’s thoughts turned to Joe. She thought that he probably felt like the King of Hearts sometimes the way she ignored him. She thought that he probably felt bad the day of the will reading when Gretchen rushed out of the office instead of talking to him or even inviting him to her folks’ house. Gretchen would have gladly invited Joe back to Heath Hollow if her family was sane. She did not want to embarrass herself or her family in front of one of her superiors.

“Perhaps I should be nice to Joe from now on and show him that I respect him,” Gretchen resolved. “Then again after that last display at Cletus’ office, Joe might just move on. I shouldn’t have run out like I did. Why should I be embarrassed over my family? They are my flesh and blood after all. People all over the world do crazy things. I’m no exception. Why should I be embarrassed? If all of Shelton Valley can accept the Mills Family for what they are, then I should accept them too.”
Gretchen started feeling sorry for the sour way she treated the family, and for the sour way she treated Joe.

V

Through the course of the night, Gretchen managed to finally fall asleep. She woke up the next morning to the sound of a diesel truck revving. She slept outside at the picnic table all night and was sore from being bent over. Gretchen went inside the camper. Everyone was still asleep so she grabbed her suitcase, quietly left the camper, and went to the bathhouse to change clothes. As Gretchen walked to the bathhouse, she noticed other campers just like her out and about in their pajamas. Gretchen didn’t feel as embarrassed after that.

The bathhouse was rather quiet: it was too early for some people. Gretchen went into one of the changing stalls and began to change clothes. She listened to the sound of the early birds, and the buzzing of bugs.

*Listen to those bugs. Sometimes I wish none of them ever made it to the ark,* Gretchen thought. As she pulled her shirt over her head, a large Lunar Moth flew down from the ceiling and flapped right in her face. Gretchen screamed as she tried to get away, but the moth persisted to stay in close proximity of her face. She darted out of the stall half dressed and waved the moth away. The moth flew towards the window. Gretchen regained her senses and saw a mother and a little boy standing there staring at her with their mouths agape.
“Moth,” Gretchen embarrassedly stated and then she went back into the changing stall.

When Gretchen returned to the campsite, Rachael and Bert were up making breakfast. For once it was something besides warmed canned foods or cold cereal: Rachael and Bert were making a heart-clogging breakfast of bacon, fried eggs, sausage, and pancakes.

“Breakfast smells wonderful,” Gretchen said, and she took her seat at the picnic table. “I’m actually amazed that you two still know how to cook. Everything I’ve eaten since I’ve arrived home has been microwave or canned foods.”

“Very funny,” Rachael said sarcastically. She sat down plates before Gretchen and Ralph. “Eat up, we plan to go touring later, and then swimming in the lake.” Jess then came out of the camper looking like death warmed over. “What’s wrong, Sweetie?” Rachael asked. Jess did not answer. She covered her mouth and ran around to the back of the camper. Gretchen and Ralph, who were really enjoying their breakfast, heard Jess’ spewing and lost their appetites. Jess soon came around to the front.

“I’m sick,” she said. She sat down at the picnic table and laid her head down.

“Scratch that idea,” Bert said, “We better go home.”

When the Mills family arrived home, Joshua came running towards the house.

“Here comes the Little Heathen,” Bert mumbled under his breath.

“Guess what!” Joshua yelled.
"What?" Bert asked.

"Dad got the wildcat that’s been leaving messes in the backyard."

"This I’ve got to see," Ralph said. He and Bert left the unpacking to Rachael and Gretchen, and went to see this wildcat. Jess went back to her house across the road. Gretchen and Rachael totted the luggage and camping gear into the house. When Rachael opened the door she and Gretchen saw Aunt Midge sitting on the couch and crying.

"Hi, Aunt Midge, thanks for house-sitting for us," Rachael said and she went over to give the crying old lady a hug.

"I’m dying for sure this time!" Aunt Midge said as she cried into her handkerchief. "You never taught me how to turn off the air conditioner and I’ve been freezing for the past two days. I’m getting pneumonia."

"We’ll just have to take you to the doctor," Rachael said.

"That quack? He always tells me it’s just in my head," Aunt Midge replied. "He wouldn’t know an ailment if it hit him."

Gretchen cracked a smile and proceeded upstairs with her stuff. She was dismayed that she took a week’s worth of stuff for only two days of camping.

VI

The next morning, Gretchen tried to sleep the early hours of the morning away; but while she slept she got the feeling that she was being watched by something more animated than her porcelain dolls. She opened her eyes and saw Aunt
Midge standing at her bedside and staring at her. It was like Aunt Midge was using telepathy on Gretchen by staring her awake.

“What do you want?” Gretchen asked. She looked over at the clock, which read six thirty.

“Your mom’s making me go to the doctor’s. I’m a walk-in so I need to get there as soon as the office opens—at eight,” Aunt Midge replied. She sounded frustrated like she did not want to go.

“Then why are you waking me up to tell me this?”

“Because you’re the one who’s taking me.”

“Why me?” Gretchen called out, but Aunt Midge was already down the hall. Gretchen grumbled under her breath and rolled out of bed. She had other things to do than sit in a doctor’s office all morning like laundry and getting her car back from Stinky. Gretchen dressed and then went to wash her face. She came downstairs and saw Rachael dancing around and humming while she was dusting. She saw Gretchen come down the stairs and she immediately stopped.

“Surely, you’re not wearing that to the doctor’s office,” Rachael said.

Gretchen looked at her clothes. She wore a brand-new pair of blue jeans and a brand-new olive green cotton sweater. “What’s wrong with what I’m wearing?” Gretchen asked.

“You look frumpy. It’s a doctor’s office for goodness sake.”

“Mom, I don’t have to dress up. It’s not church!”
“Fine, look bad for all I care,” Rachael sighed. Gretchen knew this old trick. Gretchen knew Rachael was pretending to give in to make her feel guilty and get her to do what her mother wanted. Instead of fighting with her mother, Gretchen decided to give in and went back upstairs to change.

“Why does she always disagree with what I wear? At least I dress conservatively not like Jess, who dressed like a gothic girl, or Claire, who dressed like a prostitute,” Gretchen said in a mumble as she went up to her room. Gretchen closed her bedroom door and undressed. She came back down the stairs wearing a pants suit: something she would wear to the office.

“Now, you look professional,” Rachael said with approval. Aunt Midge came out of the kitchen with a banana. She saw Gretchen and cracked a smile.

“My word, where are you going dressed so fancy?” Aunt Midge asked.

“See? Now, you look fancy,” Rachael said as she walked Gretchen to the front door. She gave Gretchen the van keys and a hug and saw Gretchen and Aunt Midge out the door.

“I didn’t want to say anything, but I think you’ve over-dressed,” Aunt Midge said with a laugh as she got into the van. Gretchen sighed and closed the van door behind Aunt Midge.

It was seven-thirty in the morning. Gretchen sat in the extremely cold, sterile smelling waiting room. She kept nodding off while Aunt Midge sat by the receptionist window determined to be the first to see the doctor. Others started
coming in. They certainly weren’t dressed so formally. Some people even looked like they just rolled out of bed.

“Mommy, does that woman work for the President?” a little boy asked his mom about Gretchen.

“No, Sweetie, she just has an important job,” his mother, who was dressed in denim shorts and a No Fear tee-shirt, replied as she looked at the pictures in a Better Homes and Gardens Magazine. Gretchen cracked a smile: she could only wish it were true.

When the receptionist opened the window, Aunt Midge jumped out of her seat, pushed everyone aside, and was the first to sign the list. She couldn’t care less if the teenage girl behind her was fasting for a blood test, or if the old man beside her had an appointment: Aunt Midge wanted to be first. When her name was called, Aunt Midge hopped out of her seat and headed towards the back with the nurse. She certainly was energetic. She didn’t seem like a woman suffering from pneumonia. In fact, she had no problems breathing whatsoever.

Gretchen sat in the waiting room and read a Country Living Magazine while Aunt Midge visited with the doctor. Gretchen was growing bored reading about how to give her living room that welcoming touch. If only she had a living room to decorate, but her little parlor in her apartment was only big enough for a couch, a table, one chair, and a place to put her television. As Gretchen looked over some of the popular colors of the year 1999, Aunt Midge came storming out to the waiting room.
“What did the doctor have to say?” Gretchen asked.

“That man is not fit to be a doctor. He said I was the healthiest seventy-five-year-old woman he’s ever seen. He can’t tell a dying person when he sees ‘em. I have to pay fifty bucks for him to tell me I’m healthy!” Aunt Midge replied, “Let’s go home.”

“Great, because I have no desire to sit here any longer and hear people cough up lungs.”

When the two got home it was about nine-thirty in the morning. As they came in, Gretchen noticed that Bert had moved from his bed to his La-Z-Boy to sleep. The television was set on the Outdoors Network where a man was demonstrating a duck call. Ralph was in the kitchen dressed in his Scooby Doo-print boxer shorts and his dark blue housecoat. He was half awake as he ate a bowl of Cocoa Puffs for breakfast. Rachael was in the laundry room doing Gretchen’s laundry for her.

“We’re back!” Gretchen called.

Bert stirred from his sleep and saw Aunt Midge with a bag of McDonald’s food. “Why didn’t you get me anything?” he complained.

“What did the doctor have to say?” Rachael asked as she came out of the laundry room.

“That quack said I was as healthy as a horse.”
"I’d rather you be healthy than ill. Oh, and Gretchen, while you were gone, Stinky called and said that your car is ready and that you can come by anytime and pick it up."

"Great, I’ll do it now. Dad, would you take me there?"

"Why me?"

"You don’t look busy, and besides Stinky is your friend. He might cut me a break if you come along."

Bert mumbled under his breath, got out of his chair and went upstairs to put on a pair of pants.

When Bert and Gretchen arrived at Stinky’s garage, Gretchen got out of the van, but Bert stayed put.

"I’m going to stay here in the van. If I go in there, Stinky’ll talk my ears off. I’ll never get away from him," Bert said. Gretchen got out of the van and entered Stinky’s garage where three heavy-set men in overalls stood in the corner watching a repeat NASCAR race on a television set that was sitting on a stack of used tires.

"Hey, Dale, Jr. is in the lead," Gretchen commented. She didn’t like NASCAR, but she had to get those Rednecks’ attention somehow.

"Whatcha need?" Stinky asked never taking his eyes off the television.

"My car, the transmission job," Gretchen replied.

To Stinky’s good fortune, the station cut to a commercial break. He hurried over to his desk and gave Gretchen her keys. Gretchen had to sign a few papers, and
paid Stinky quite a hefty amount of money; luckily, he accepted checks. He ran back over to the television as Gretchen backed out of Stinky’s garage. Once out on the street, she put her car in drive, and everything was working perfectly. Gretchen rejoiced, and she and Bert started off for Heath Hollow.

“I’m telling you, you should have asked Stinky for those old transmission parts I could have used them,” Bert said as he and Gretchen entered the house.

“Sure you could have used them just like you use all those other parts from lawn mowers, cars, grills, and other various machinery that are piled up in your three outbuildings in the backyard.”

Rachael came downstairs. She looked like she was going to cry and gave Gretchen a hug. “Are you going to be leaving us today?” she asked.

“No, I’ll leave Saturday morning,” Gretchen replied.

“Yea, I get my baby another whole day!” Rachael said and she squeezed Gretchen tighter.

“A little tighter, Mom, I can still breathe,” Gretchen managed to say.

VII

The next day, Gretchen actually got to sleep in past ten in the morning, and she had a peaceful night of rest. When she woke up she felt rested, and she felt much better than she had felt for the past few days. She came downstairs for something to eat. It was too late for breakfast but too early for lunch. She reached the foot of the
stairs and saw Joshua running around the family room making a mess because Jess would not let him watch cartoons. Jess sat on the couch watching some dark sitcom about monsters and people with special powers.

“What are you two doing here?” Gretchen asked. “And where is the rest of my family?”

“I’m here to see you since you’re leaving tomorrow morning. I decided to spend our final hours together,” Jess replied. Gretchen didn’t like that our final hours part.

“And what are you doing here, Little Heathen?” Gretchen asked Joshua.

“Ralph is watching me!” Joshua exclaimed as he beat the stuffing out of a pillow. “Dad and Uncle Bert are up in the hills tracking down the coyote that was in our backyard last night!”

“Land’s sakes, your backyard is like an attraction for wild animals,” Gretchen said. Then she addressed Ralph, “Where’s Mom?”

“At the store with Aunt Midge,” Ralph answered as he came out of the kitchen with a bowl of ice cream.

Joshua tackled Ralph. “I want ice cream too! Get me some!”

“Would you please be quiet for five minutes? This show is almost over,” Jess said to Joshua in a harsh tone. Joshua shut his mouth, and Jess went back to watching her show. After the dark sitcom was over, Gretchen and Jess went outside for a walk. They walked along the dirt road that led out of the hollow. Gretchen and Jess were both unusually quiet towards each other. Gretchen looked up at the green hills, which
looked like giant heads of broccoli towering over her. She looked over at Jess who looked extremely depressed.

“What’s wrong?” Gretchen asked.

“I’m empty,” Jess answered as she kicked a rock and it bounced into the field of tall green grass and weeds.

“Nonsense—”

“The voices quit when you came along. They’ll probably come back when you leave again.”

“What is wrong with you? You had such a happy disposition when you were little—”

“You would be messed up too if you had a family like mine!”

“But we do have the same family,” Gretchen reminded her.

“No, your family is in no way like mine. My mom hated Dad and me so much that she ran away with her brother to live a miserable life God knows where. My dad stays locked in his room all the time with his guns and books. He couldn’t care less about me. I was raised by a crabby grandma, who demanded that I do everything her way, and yet across the street was a happy, loving cousin I adored and wished I could be with all the time. You were my best friend. And then you grew up, went to college, and quickly left us all, especially me! And like Mom, you never came back and never called for three whole years. You called your parents occasionally, but you probably forgot I existed. Now, you’re back and I’ve been deceiving myself into thinking that you’ll stay. You’ll leave again and never come back until somebody else in the family
dies!” Jess spoke with more life than she had in a long time. Her voice was full of
pain. She started crying. Gretchen felt sorry for her and gave her a hug.

“You never even came back on the holidays or gave me a phone number or
anything!” Jess sobbed.

Gretchen realized that her embarrassment and wish to be totally away from
her family had deeply hurt those who were involved. She always thought that they
were too caught up in their own problems to really care if she stayed. It donned on
Gretchen like the sun rising over the eastern hills, and she realized that a family is a
unit, and when one is hurt, everyone is hurt. Families did things together, stuck up for
each other, and tried to stay together against the odds. Gretchen knew that she
had a
new life now, but she had to make up for the terrible sin she had committed towards
the members of her family. She decided she would start righting her wrong
immediately.

The rest of the evening Gretchen devoted all of her time to her family; not
begrudgingly or out of necessity, but to make up for lost time and to learn to love
those crazy characters again. She sat at the picnic table that evening as everybody
tried barbequed wildcat.

“It tastes like pork,” Ralph said as he chewed on the tough meat.

“Nah, it tastes like chicken,” Aunt Midge replied. Don nodded his head in
agreement with her.

“You’re all wrong. It tastes like beef,” Sal said.
“How can you all tell? I can’t taste anything but barbeque sauce,” Gretchen said.

“We’ll settle this argument. Everyone agrees it tastes like something,” Bert said. Everyone nodded in agreement; it did taste like something.

Gretchen sat back as she ate and listened to her family go on about their experiences, amusing anecdotes, and even their own theories on certain ideas. She didn’t take her family seriously like she used to, and now she was enjoying their company. She enjoyed their jokes, listened to them bicker, even told some amusing stories of her own. She decided that it was time to share with them. She was starting to feel like she was no longer the stranger or outsider in the company of strangers; she was starting to feel the way she did when she was younger. Gretchen listened, shared, laughed, and started feeling like she belonged again.

VIII

The fateful morning came. It was Saturday morning and Gretchen was going to go back to her apartment in the city. The family gathered around the picnic table for breakfast that morning. Rachael took the time to make a breakfast rather than pour cereal in a bowl.

“This is great, Rachael,” Don said as he slopped gravy over his biscuits and then laid his bacon over it.

“I’m glad you like it,” Rachael replied with a smile.
Ralph sat at the end of the picnic table. He wanted a biscuit, but they were at the opposite end.

"Can I have a biscuit?" Ralph called. Instead of passing the basket around the table, Bert grabbed a biscuit and threw it to Ralph. Unfortunately, Bert’s aim was terrible and he hit Gretchen on the side of the head. She took the biscuit off her shoulder, handed it to Ralph, and excused herself from the table to pick biscuit flakes out of her hair. By this time, everybody at the table broke out into laughter.

After the meal, Gretchen went around to the front where her car sat parked in the driveway ready to go. Gretchen embraced everyone.

Rachael cried and squeezed Gretchen. "I don’t want you to go!" she cried.

"Don’t worry; I’ll be back on the holidays. I promise," Gretchen said. She handed Jess a post-it note. On the post-it was her phone number and mailing address.

"Call me whenever you like."

Jess smiled; her off-white teeth really stood out being surrounded by black lipstick. She didn’t say anything but her facial expression said thank you.

"Well, everyone, I must be going now!" Gretchen said. She got into her car, waved farewell to everyone, and then she pulled out of the driveway and drove away.

Gretchen got back to her apartment around three in the afternoon. She looked around at its plainness and seriousness. It didn’t seem homey. She unpacked and then sat down, picked up the phone, and called home to let everyone know she arrived safely. After getting off the phone with her mom, Gretchen turned on the television.
A commercial for Celebrity Poker was on, and Gretchen thought about the King of Hearts and that night at the campgrounds. She picked up the phone and dialed Joe’s number. She hoped he was home. She wanted to make up with him. After three rings, Joe answered the phone.

“Joe, this is Gretchen. I finally got back from Shelton Valley. I wanted to know if you still wanted to go on that dinner date.”

“I sure would.” he answered.

“I want to apologize for hurrying out on you back in Shelton Valley—”

“I understand. After watching such a weird tape like that, I would have hurried out of the office too,” Joe replied. Gretchen let him believe that. She didn’t want him to know that at the time she was embarrassed of herself and her family.

“When do you want to go on this dinner date?” Gretchen asked.

“How about tonight? It’s only three-thirty, and we both have plenty of time to prepare,” Joe replied.

“That sounds fine, and I know just the place.”

Gretchen and Joe met at The Olive Garden. They were seated in a huge cushioned booth that made both of them sink when they sat down. A skinny waiter wearing a red vest came to their table and took their orders.

“How were you this week?” Joe asked.

“A lot of stuff has happened, but I feel different,” Gretchen replied.
"I can tell. You’re actually smiling. You seem happier than usual. What else happened? Surely a funeral can’t bring about that kind of change."

Gretchen began to explain to him the whole ordeal of what happened that week. She also built up the courage to overcome her embarrassment and told him about her family.

"My, it sounds like your family is a bunch of odd characters," Joe said.

"They may be odd characters, but they’re my family and I love them."
Book Two:

Thanksgiving Family Reunion
At seven forty-five, Gretchen unlocked the office doors, got coffee ready for the other employees that would soon be coming, prepared her workstation, and quickly checked for messages and e-mails. The closer it got to eight o’clock the more people started coming into the firm. Gretchen checked Joe, Sr.’s schedule and she noticed that he had gone through her black appointment book and marked through every day until next Monday.

“He must be taking off the whole week for Thanksgiving,” she said to the black book as if it could talk back. She looked up as Joe, Jr. was coming up the hall.

“Good morning,” he greeted as he fished his pockets for his keys.

“When did your dad decide to take the week off? He never told me anything, and I’m his secretary.”

“It surprised me too when he called Saturday morning and told me that he and Mindy were going to Florida. I guess I’m in charge until tomorrow evening. I guess I’m also alone for Thanksgiving too.”

“I blame your twenty-three year-old stepmother,” Gretchen said.

“It’s crazy having a stepmother old enough to be my little sister. But if she makes the old man happy then I won’t complain.”

“I’m sorry that you’ll be alone. No one should be alone on Thanksgiving.”

“How are you spending it?”

“Ever since I made amends, I’m going back to Shelton Valley. The whole family is gathering.”
"It sounds nice."

"Mom makes all the food fresh. She bakes a turkey and smokes another turkey so the family has a choice. We have so much food that we have leftovers for days. This will be my first one in three years. Before that I was usually sitting alone eating a cold ham sandwich and watching the Macy's Parade by myself, but not this year. Thanksgiving is one of my fondest memories of home. Oh, I wish you could be there to see it."

"I'd love to come so when are we leaving?"

"Excuse me?" Gretchen asked coming back to reality from the trance of past Thanksgivings.

"Well, you did just invite me so I accept. When are we going?"

Joe seemed so enthusiastic and Gretchen felt so sorry for him. She didn’t want to see him in her old situation sitting alone on a day when he should be among family.

"I’m leaving Wednesday morning around nine."

"Great, I’ll be at your place at a quarter till," Joe said and he opened his father’s office door and went in. As the door closed, Gretchen sighed. She instantly regretted inadvertently inviting him.

"What is everybody going to think when I bring him home?" she said, "Claire brought guys to Thanksgiving before and she tried her hardest to keep them from being scared off by the others, but they never came back. I hope that the family won’t scare Joe too much that he won’t be my friend anymore. I can’t uninvite him so I
hope my family will maturely receive him into their home. But still, I have no idea how they’re going to act about my bringing Joe home.”

II

Wednesday morning at eight forty-five Gretchen had two large duffle bags and a toiletries bag (all three stuffed as full as possible) sitting by the door. She sat at the bar that separated the kitchen from the sitting area. From the bar she watched the morning edition of Headline News as she finished eating Corn Flakes. The news was featuring some of the things that Bush was doing.

“I wonder what the country will be like after four more years of Bush,” Gretchen said when there came a knocking at the door. Gretchen knew it was Joe. She turned off the television and got up to answer the door.

“Good morning,” Joe greeted when Gretchen opened the door.

“Hi, come in,” Gretchen said. Although she and Joe had gone out a few times before, this was the first time he ever stepped foot in Gretchen’s apartment. Dates usually ended at the door.

“Nice little place you have here,” Joe said as he looked around. Gretchen noticed he only had one large suitcase, which made her feel like she may have over-packed, but then again Joe could have under-packed.

“Let me unplug some of my stuff and I’ll be ready to go,” Gretchen said. “Put your suitcase down and have a seat. I won’t be long.”
Joe sat down his one suitcase next to Gretchen’s three bags. “I thought we were only staying until Sunday afternoon.”

“That’s right,” Gretchen answered as she unplugged her toaster, and then her microwave. Joe continued to look at all the stuff she was taking on the trip.

After Gretchen finished unplugging electrical appliances she put on her shoes and then she gathered her stuff. She and Joe left the apartment and went to the parking garage located behind the apartment building. Gretchen unlocked the two doors and the trunk.

“You go ahead and get in, and I’ll put our stuff in the trunk,” Gretchen told Joe. He sat his suitcase down by the car and got in on the passenger’s side. He watched from inside as Gretchen assessed how she was going to fit it all in. Like a life-game of Tetris, Gretchen set things in the trunk and moved them around until they all fit perfectly. Not one piece of luggage had to ride in the backseat.

Gretchen came around and opened her door. Without thinking she tossed her large diaper-bag-sized purse into the car before her hitting Joe in the face. She then got in and saw Joe sitting there holding her purse.

“I’m sorry. It’s a habit. I normally just toss my purse in the passenger’s seat and go,” she said as she took the purse and put it in the backseat.

“It’s heavy that’s for sure. What’s in there anyway?”

“Just a little of everything,” Gretchen replied. “Buckle up and we’ll be on our way.” Gretchen started the car and they were off beginning their journey to Heath Hollow.
“So tell me about who I’ll be meeting this weekend,” Joe said.

Gretchen thought about it. She had told Joe before about how odd her family was, but he never saw it personally. She was hesitant to answer. “Where should I begin?”

“Tell me about your parents and your brother.”

“My parents...My mom, Rachael, is a homemaker. She’s got a cheery personality, but she’ll be a little testy Thanksgiving Day because she’ll be cooking. Stay out of the kitchen. Mom tends to get mean if anyone bothers her when she’s cooking. Dad’s retired. He retired in September from his job after working for 32 years with the federal government. He’s been taking it easy by lounging around and watching television. He likes hunting, and the Mills men try to stay out of the way by going rabbit hunting Thanksgiving morning. Who knows they might take you.”

“Oh boy,” Joe said sarcastically. “I don’t even know how to hunt.”

“My dad’s also a packrat. He’s got a bunch of small buildings in the backyard full of stuff like old grills, wood, old tools, and parts off of who knows what. Mom asked him why he doesn’t throw that junk away. He replied that he never knew when he was going to need something. My brother Ralph...well, all I can say is he’s nice and loveable. Some of the others you’ll meet are my dad’s brothers Sal and Don both are gun enthusiasts. You’ll also meet my cousins Joshua, the devil, and Jess who goes through phases. The last time I was in Shelton Valley she was going through her Gothic phase and was convinced Satan was speaking to her. You’ll also meet my great aunt Midge. She lived with her sister, my grandma. Aunt Midge is a super-
hypocondriac. Some of the family members that will be coming in are my aunt Jeanne, my dad’s sister, her husband George, and their daughter Claire. You saw Claire at the will viewing. Jeanne and George are both retired and moved to Florida in late August. That was one of the reasons she didn’t make it to Grandma’s funeral. You’ll also meet some of my family from my mom’s side like Granny Julie Meade. She likes to travel around, but lately her hearing has been getting really bad so you’ll have to shout when you talk to her. You’ll also meet my cousin John Meade. I have no idea what he’s been up to. The last I heard he was a radiologist by day a rock band guitarist by night."

“That sounds like an interesting bunch. I hope I can remember everyone’s name and face. I hope we all get along.”

*Me too*, Gretchen thought. Gretchen could only think about the aftermath of meeting her family after the first hour. If Joe didn’t lock himself in the guestroom, he’d go to the nearest hotel and find transportation back to the city. But this was the worst-case scenario; on the other hand, the opposite could happen and Joe could totally come out of his shell and turn out to be like the rest of her family. Gretchen shook that thought out of her head. As long as she had known Joe he seemed to have a stable head on his shoulders. She looked over at him with respect for his sanity.

Both were silent. Miles and miles went by before anyone said a word.

“You know the way you acted about your family it seems odd considering how excited you get about Thanksgiving. It seems kind of contradictory that you stayed away from home for three years.”
“Sometimes it takes getting back to your roots to realize that no matter how strange your roots are they’re still a part of you and deserve your love and respect.”

“That might be so,” Joe stated and he looked out the window at the cow pastures. “I have to admit the way you explained Thanksgiving at your house sure sounded better than any Thanksgiving at my house. Thanksgiving was usually going to a fancy restaurant to eat. Mom and Dad weren’t very family-like in my perspective. They bitterly divorced when I was six. Mom died nine years later of uterine cancer. Dad played the field. I can’t count how many girlfriends he’s had until he married Mindy. But we were never close. It was always Mom and me until she died. When I went to live with Dad he seemed to put himself and his work before anything else. I suppose I became a lawyer just so I could get closer to him. But anyway, despite what you say or think, I’m very interested in meeting your family.”

Gretchen nodded.

As the miles passed, Gretchen and Joe sat in silence, but enjoyed the scenery. It was a nice day for traveling; the sky was clear, the sun was out, and for such a late autumn day the temperature was rather warm. There were many travelers on the highway, which caused Gretchen to be a cautious yet defensive driver. She realized that this being the beginning of the holiday season traffic would be bad, but Gretchen never lost her cool with Joe there. She didn’t want to embarrass herself by letting her aggressive-driving nature show through. She looked over at Joe who sat silently looking out the window at the sloping hills. It seemed that the further East they went the less flat the terrain became. Gretchen knew she was getting closer to home. Deep
down Gretchen was getting excited about being home. She was still trying to put away all the guilty feelings of shame that she once harbored. She accepted and loved her family for who they were. She wasn’t as much ashamed of her family as she was afraid of what an outsider, a stranger would think about them. Gretchen only dreaded the arrival not for her sake, but for Joe, and the fact that she never told anyone in the family that she was bringing him along. She did not want to give her family any big ideas, but wait until they both arrived to let the family come up with their own conclusions.

It was quiet, but Gretchen could take it. She was never one to hold up a conversation with anyone. Her speech was always yes, no, something about herself and it was dropped. But she enjoyed company with someone even if no words were exchanged between the two of them. Joe turned on the radio to look for a radio station. The only stations that they could pick up were country-music stations.

“I’ve had about all of this that I can take,” Joe said and turned off the radio.

“Thank you,” Gretchen said.

“You’re welcome. You know I can take about any genre of music out there, but there is something about country music I just can’t stand. I think it’s the singer’s whinny voice combined with the whining of the steel guitar that just makes an unpleasant sound for my ears. That and the content of the songs seem to be too corny. But I guess if I listened to the lyrics of other genres the lyrics would stink too.”

Gretchen just nodded. The two fell silent again.
“The last time I was in Shelton Valley I thought it was a nice place to be,” Joe said to spark a conversation. “Granted, I was there for only a day, but it was small, quiet, and seemed peaceful to me.”

Gretchen smiled. “Ah, that is the appearance the town gives to outsiders. Just wait until you have to live there.”

“I suppose it’s where I lived in a city all my life that attracted me to Shelton Valley. The city is fine to live in for a short time. It’s loud, crowded, and things are smaller, more expensive, and the people have put up with that kind of stuff for so long that they have become rude, jaded, and voluntarily impersonal. I think any small town like Shelton Valley would be a nice place to live.”

“Yes, but even in a small town one is scarce for privacy. Everybody knows everything about everyone in a small town. If one truly wanted to maintain privacy and anonymity they would have to move away.”

“I see. So you wanted to be anonymous in the big world, huh?”

“Well, I just wanted to get away from being under the scope all the time. I mean my family is nuts anyway and I didn’t want to become that. I never intended on staying in Shelton Valley all my life anyway. If people ever want to make something out of their life, they have to leave Shelton Valley. The only job opportunities available are teacher, doctor, lawyer, fast-food employee, or drug dealer. I wanted to be something more. I know being a secretary for a law firm isn’t all that great, but I still find it rather fulfilling.”
"That’s good to hear because we enjoy having you with us," Joe said. Gretchen smiled. He cleared his throat and then continued, "How did your family react when you told them you were bringing me to dinner?"

"Well…"

"You didn’t tell them?"

"No, I didn’t tell anyone you were coming for Thanksgiving dinner. They’re going to think oh, the next member of our family."

"Is that so wrong?"

"Yeah, we’re not engaged. We don’t even date anymore. We’re just friends."

Joe was silent. He liked Gretchen and still wished that they had continued dating. But Gretchen, who had never been an experienced dater, didn’t know how to act. Joe was the first man ever interested in her. Her shyness got the best of her and prevented her from ever taking any strides to make the relationship work beyond friendship. Finally she lost all interest and the two stopped trying to become something more. Joe was surprised that she even agreed to let him come along with her to Shelton Valley after he purposely twisted her words to make it seem like she invited him. He guessed she was too kind to hurt his feelings.

After two more hours of awkward silence and persistent yet futile radio searches the couple finally saw a sign that read “Welcome to Shelton Valley Population 2000”

“We’re here. There are only a few more miles to go,” Gretchen said. They continued on the commerce stretch that bypassed the down town area. Joe looked
around at the usual features of a small town’s commerce district: side-by-side shops, mom-and-pop restaurants, Wal-Mart, other big-name, national stores like Lowe’s, K-Mart, and some of the chain restaurants like Kentucky Fried Chicken (one of the Mills family’s favorite restaurants), and McDonald’s where since the 1980s the majority of people in Shelton Valley have been employed at least once in their lives. The grade school was one of the last buildings that the couple passed before they moved into residential areas. Joe was under the impression that Gretchen’s family lived in one the nice houses in the neighborhood, but they kept going. Soon they were out of the residential area and in the hilly country again. Along the side of the road there was a sign that read Heath Hollow. Gretchen turned onto the dirt road and headed up the hill to the head of the hollow. Joe watched the scenery as they traveled farther into the sticks and farther away from civilization. This was the first time Joe had ever been in a hollow. He had always gotten the impression that hillbillies only lived in hollows. Seeing Grétchen beside him he knew that the impression had to be wrong.

III

Over the next slope the white houses appeared. Gretchen’s stomach started to turn the closer they got to her home. Before she knew it, she pulled the car into the driveway and parked the car under the carport. She got out of the car expecting to be greeted by her uncle Sal like she was the last time she arrived in Heath Hollow, but to
her great fortune he wasn't there. She and Joe proceeded onto the front porch uninterrupted or intercepted by any member of the family.

Gretchen took a deep breath as she opened the front door and stepped inside. The television was blaring, and Bert was in his La-Z-Boy sleeping. Gretchen had no idea how long he had been asleep, but she figured if he could sleep with the television on that loud her shout wouldn't wake him.

“Mom!” Gretchen called. Bert immediately stirred from his slumber and looked over at the front door to see Gretchen standing in the entryway.

“You're home,” he said as he stretched. Joe then came in the door with his suitcase in hand. “Who's that?” Bert asked in a more serious tone.

“This is Joe. He's my friend, and I work with him at the firm. In fact he's my boss' son. Well, truth be told, he's one of my bosses too. His father and stepmother went to Florida for Thanksgiving and left him alone. I thought it would be a shame to leave him alone on Thanksgiving so I invited him,” Gretchen said.

Bert just looked at the two of them sourly.

“Did you two get engaged and not tell us?” Ralph said as he came down the stairs. He then swept Gretchen up in a big hug.

“No,” Gretchen replied with a defensive tone to her voice as Ralph put her down.

Rachael came out of the kitchen with a joyful glow on her face. She grabbed Gretchen up in a hug and kissed her on the cheek. “I'm so glad you're home.” She then looked over at Joe who stood behind Gretchen. “And I see you brought a friend.”
“Yes, this is my friend Joe,” Gretchen said. She put extra emphasis on the word friend. “He was going to be alone on Thanksgiving so I invited him. I didn’t think you would make such a big deal out of it.”

“Joe is welcome to dinner. We have plenty of food to go around even with the big crowd we’re going to have,” Rachael said and she gave Joe a hug and a kiss on the cheek. “By the way did you brief him on who all is coming? I don’t want him feeling scared and confused in a room full of strangers.”

“Yes, Mom, I told about who all is coming.”

“Good. Well, take Joe on upstairs and show him to the guestroom. I don’t think your Granny would mind sleeping on the couch for a night or two. If she does we can always place her at Midge’s house. Ever since Mildred died poor Midge has been coming over here all the time. If not here she’s always calling wanting Ralph to go over there and keep her company. If he won’t do it then she calls for Jess. Oh, and has Jess told you about the new phase she’s going through? She’s out of her Gothic phase.”

“Really?” Gretchen asked. “Jess hasn’t talked to me in a while.”

“You’ll find out in a little bit. She’s bound to come over knowing you’re here. Go on and show Joe to his room,” Rachael said pointing towards the stairs. Gretchen picked up her duffle bags, and Joe picked up his suitcase and they headed up the stairs.

“I suppose that was a good start. You’re family seems a little mixed about me. They appear to be both accepting and apprehensive about my being here,” Joe said.
"This is real good, Joe. I never know how they're going to act, and considering that I never told them I was bringing you, they're handling everything quite well."

Gretchen opened the guestroom door. The guestroom was adjacent to Gretchen's room. Joe stepped in and noticed the heavy smell of potpourri that filled his nose. He looked around him at the flowery décor of the room. The bedspread was white with large red rose print. The wallpaper matched the bedspread. All the furniture was stained a dark cherry red. The room was spacious and the sun poured in the window. Joe had expected something more neutral so that visitors of either sex could sleep in the room without reservations.

"It's kind of feminine, but I guess it'll do."

"You'll have to overlook all the flowers. No one sleeps in there but Granny Julie when she comes," Gretchen replied. "Now, to lay out some ground rules: Mom has a strict no eating upstairs rule. You can eat in any room downstairs, but no food beyond the first step. The bathroom is at the very end of the hall. There are some rules there too. If the door is closed the bathroom is occupied. It doesn't matter if it's brown or yellow always put the toilet seat down and flush. And because my Mom is a major germophobe everyone uses their own toothbrush, their own bar of soap, their own towels, their own sponge, their own razor, and their own shampoo."

"Even shampoo?" Joe asked.
Gretchen took him to the bathroom and showed him the shower. There were at least six different bottles of shampoo and conditioner. "If you didn’t bring any don’t worry you can share mine. You don’t mind smelling like chamomile, do you?"

"I don’t even know what chamomile is," Joe replied.

"Flowers."

"Oh, again with the flowers."

"It’s supposed to be soothing which is something we might both need this weekend. I better leave you alone to unpack," Gretchen said, and she went into her room. She sat down on her bed and sunk into the foam mattress. Gretchen let out a sigh and ran her hand over her face. She could already tell that Joe was uncomfortable about being there.

After unpacking Gretchen went downstairs and saw her father making casual conversation with Joe. It was a question and answer session between the two to try to get to know one another. Gretchen took a seat beside Joe on the couch. Bert gave the two a discerning look. Bert then looked over at Joe long and hard.

"You look so familiar. Are you from around here?"

"No, sir, I’ve met you all before in August. I came in my father’s place to show your family your mother’s video will."

Bert nodded. "Oh yeah, I remember. Why in the world did you let us see that? That was embarrassing for her to treat the whole family like that in front of her lawyers."
“Sir, I’m sorry. I had no idea what was on the video tape. I wasn’t her lawyer. I am sorry that she didn’t leave you anything but bills—”

“Yeah, yeah, enough with that,” Bert said cutting Joe off. “We paid off her twenty-dollar debt to the Breast Cancer Foundation and that was that.”

“Did anyone get anything?”

“She left Midge the house, but that’s about the only person who got anything. Of course we didn’t expect anything from Mom anyway. We’re not that kind of people. We don’t fight about money and material possessions. We’re happy with what we got underneath this roof.”

“That’s good to hear, sir. There are some people in this world that are never satisfied they just want more and more.”

“Are you one of those people, Joe?”

“No, sir, I think I’m not. When I first started in the firm, I guess you could say I started with rose-tinted glasses. I wanted to be that lawyer that fought for the underdog and won justice for the suffering and underprivileged. But after a while the job gets stale. One gets jaded fast in that business because the people you represent are corrupt themselves. I’ve only worked for a few years. I wonder how a seasoned veteran like my father feels, what all he’s seen—”

“Or how many lies he’s had to tell,” Bert said.

Joe lowered his head. His face turned a little red from embarrassment. Gretchen gave her father a bitter look. Bert shrugged his shoulders and went back to watching television. Gretchen and Joe could hear Rachael humming from the kitchen.
"I need a glass of water. Is it all right to go in there?" Joe asked as he stood to his feet.

"Sure. You just don’t want to be in there tomorrow. Mom is like the Incredible Hulk on Thanksgiving you don’t want to see her when she gets angry—"

"The Incredible Hulk is an understatement try demonic. I came home early last year. I went into the kitchen to ask her if it was ready yet, and she turned around and yelled ‘Get out of my kitchen!’ and threw a wooden spoon at me," Bert said.

"At least it was a wooden spoon. That’ll teach you to pester Mom. You should have stayed out rabbit hunting longer."

"Oh yeah, we’re going rabbit hunting tomorrow. I’ll wake you early so get plenty of sleep tonight, Joe," Bert called to Joe who was in the kitchen.

"Thanks for including me, sir, but I’ve never been hunting before in my life, so I don’t think it would be a good idea to take me," Joe called back.

"There’s always time to learn."

The front door opened and in stepped a figure unfamiliar to Gretchen. Gretchen had to look hard at the person wearing construction boots, tattered jeans, flannel shirt, and Marine-style hair cut before she finally realized that it was her cousin Jess.

"Jessica Mills, is that you?"

Jess sat down on the couch on the opposite side of Gretchen. Even her walk and the manner in which she sat down exuded masculinity. "Yeah, it’s me," Jess replied in a deep and rugged voice.
Joe came back from the kitchen and saw whom he presumed a boy sitting by Gretchen on the couch. "Oh, is this your cousin Joshua?" Joe asked.

"No this is my cousin Jessica," Gretchen replied. It was hard for her to get those words out of her mouth.

Joe stood speechless for a moment and then pulled himself back. "Okay, nice to meet you, Jessica," Joe said.

"It's Jess."

"What in the world has happened to you?" Gretchen asked.

"I've come to realize my true self. No more of that Goth stuff. Now, I've realized the best way to be comfortable with myself and who I really am—"

"Yeah, a flaming lesbian," Bert said.

"Are you absolutely sure you are?" Gretchen asked.

"Yep, I've already been on a date with a girl named Samantha. We had a really fine time. It was that moment that really opened my eyes—"

"Okay, I get the point," Gretchen interrupted. Gretchen was a little heartbroken of how her cousin turned out, but was accepting of the lifestyle that Jess had taken on. Gretchen knew it was only a matter of time. Jess was raised by her father, and never had a mother to teach her feminine roles. Jess had always resisted when Grandma Mildred tried to teach her. Gretchen always had her suspicions. Since she was little, Jess portrayed tomboyish attributes, and never liked to wear dresses until her Gothic stage. Ralph came from upstairs and saw Jess sitting on the couch.
“Hey, Pal, how you doing?” Ralph asked her and gave her a light punch on the arm.

“Fine, Pal,” she replied and hit him even harder. Ralph laughed and rubbed his shoulder and then went into the kitchen.

Gretchen noticed how Jess looked at Joe. Deep down Gretchen hoped that Jess’ new-found lesbianism was another of those phases that Jess was known to go through, but if in fact Jess was and always would be a lesbian, then Gretchen would learn to deal with it.

“I'm going to get some ice cream,” Gretchen said getting up. “We do have ice cream, do we, Dad?”

“Of course. This house is never without ice cream. Like milk it is one of the staples that we Mills live on. While you're getting yourself some ice cream, bring me some please.”

“What about you two?” Gretchen asked Jess and Joe.

“None for me,” Jess answered.

“I don’t want any thanks. I don’t want to spoil my dinner.”

Gretchen went into the pantry where the freezer chest was. That was the usual place where her mom kept the ice cream. Gretchen lifted the lid and saw a deer head wrapped in clear plastic looking up at her. Startled at the unexpected animal head in the freezer Gretchen shrieked.

“What?” Rachael asked as she rushed into the pantry.

“Why is there a deer head in the freezer?” Gretchen cried out.
"Your dad is supposed to be mounting that for a friend of his, but you know ole procrastinating Bert hasn’t gotten around to it yet," Rachael said this rather loud hoping that Bert would hear and take the hint. "I kept asking him when he was going to get that deer head out of my freezer. I really needed the freezer space especially these past few days with those turkeys."

"I felt like that guy on the Godfather that woke up with the dead horse in his bed," Gretchen said as she closed the lid. "So where’s the ice cream?"

"It’s in there underneath the antlers. Just keep digging around you’ll find it."

"Isn’t that a little unsanitary?" Gretchen asked.

"It’s wrapped in plastic, and whatever germs were on that deer head have probably frozen to death by now. It’s been in there since late October."

Gretchen came out of the kitchen with two bowls of ice cream. Gretchen handed Bert his bowl.

"Thanks, doll," he said laughing. With her free hand Gretchen smacked Bert on the shoulder.

"Why didn’t you tell me there was a deer head in the freezer?"

"Good scare, huh?"

Gretchen huffed and took her seat on the couch. While they sat there Gretchen and Jess grew impatient with Bert’s channel surfing. He only stayed on a channel long enough for the person on screen to get one word out.

"Come on, Uncle Bert, find a channel and stay on it," Jess said.
Gretchen felt so embarrassed that she began to sink down into the couch as Jess and Bert exchanged sharp words. The argument came to an abrupt cease as the front door came open. Everyone looked towards the door as Midge stepped inside. She was wearing her usual mourning attire.

“Howdy, Midge,” Bert greeted as Midge closed the front door behind her. Midge casually nodded in Bert’s direction.

“I thought that was your car in the driveway,” Midge said to Gretchen. “Get up here and give me a hug.” Gretchen got up and gave Midge a hug. Midge then saw Joe sitting on the couch. Joe nodded greetings to Midge. “Who’s he? Is that your boyfriend?”

“Oh no, Aunt Midge, this is Joe. He’s my friend and also my boss, or one of my bosses.”

“Joe’s dad and stepmom up and left him to go to Florida,” Bert said, but Midge pretended like she didn’t even hear him.

“I hope you two patch things up before Thanksgiving tomorrow,” Gretchen said.

“Oh, I’ll forgive him if he’ll quit laughing every time I tell him I’m dying—See there he goes chuckling. Quit laughing at the dying, it’s disrespectful you uncaring—”

“Midge, what are you dying from?” Joe asked before another fight could break loose in the living room. His lawyer instinct and interrogative nature was starting to come out a little more.
“Oh, honey, don’t get me started. I got so many things wrong with me I could kill over anytime.”

“This is interesting. Tell me, what are some of the diseases that you’ve been diagnosed with?”

“Well, I got arthritis real bad and diabetes. I can’t have no sugar—”

“But she eats carbohydrates like crazy,” Bert said.

“You shut up!” Midge yelled at Bert.

“The doctor hasn’t told her she’s diabetic either,” Jess said in a whisper to Joe. Midge then directed her attention back to Joe. “I got arteriosclerosis from all those years of eating fried foods and other bad things. I also got Alzheimer’s—”

“You do not! She’s got a memory as sharp as a knife,” Bert said.

“I forget and you know it!”

“It’s called getting old,” Gretchen said.

“Have the doctors diagnosed you with Alzheimer’s?” Joe asked.

“No, but I got a quack doctor. Here I am on my deathbed--on my last leg--and he tells me I’m in pretty good shape for a woman my age. Can you believe that? I think he wants me to die.”

“Tell him about the cancer you have all over your body,” Jess said.

“Oh yeah, that too, osteoporosis, and a bad heart.”

“You know some of the ailments that you have are very common among elderly people,” Joe said.

“Well, I ain’t no spring chicken now ain’t I?”
"No, ma’am, in fact I feel rather sorry for you."

"I like you. Gretchen, you bring him to my funeral when I’m dead, but leave your good-for-nothing father at home," Midge said and then went on into the kitchen. Bert laughed out once Midge was gone, but so did all the rest.

As Aunt Midge went into the kitchen Gretchen sank down into the couch. She and Joe had not been there more than two hours and already she was embarrassed. Her family was acting the way they normally do, but she wished that for once they would not act like themselves especially with an outsider coming to dinner. She would have thought that with Joe coming to dinner they would act with some type of formal decorum. Gretchen accepted the fact that people don’t change, and it would be nonsensical for her to ask her family to be something they weren’t. Television has taught her that once someone asks others to be something they are not it will always end in disaster, but right now Joe was receiving a firsthand look at the Mills family in all their honesty and Gretchen still felt like it would end in disaster.

"So, Joe, how long have you been a lawyer?" Jess asked.

"Going on three years."

"Ah, you’re not a seasoned liar yet," Jess said. Gretchen looked over at Jess with a look of disapproval on her face. She couldn’t believe that her cousin would say such a thing about her boss. Even if that was stigma for lawyers, Gretchen did not think it was in good taste for Jess to say what she thought about lawyers to a lawyer.

"You know there was a lawyer around these parts who had a fitting last name—"
"No, Dad, please."

"His name was Conn. He sure would con people out of almost everything if they won a case," Bert said. "He had billboards all over the tri-county region. One day I was over in the other county going to the office and I saw one of his billboards had a devil’s beard and horns painted on it. It was the funniest thing I ever saw. Then last year before Conn retired he had a life-size doll of himself sitting on one of his billboards on the county line. Well, one day on the radio I heard him offering a reward for any information or the return of his stolen doll. It seems that somebody climbed up that billboard and stole that doll probably out of revenge for him cheating them."

"It sounds to me like he was one hated guy around these parts," Joe said.

"People like for the person that’s representing them to be honest in court and in distribution of the rewards. I hate to say this to a lawyer, but I have yet to meet one that’s honest," Bert said. "I hope you’ll be the first. Tell me what kind of cases do you handle? You don’t go to court and lie for a living do you?"

"I’m mostly involved with handling people’s estates. I try my best to be honest with my clients as possible."

"I see, but didn’t you ever try to get more than just a lawyer’s fee?" Jess asked Joe.

"What is with you people? Are you trying to get me to lose my job by insulting my boss?"
“Exactly, so you can come home and live with us forever,” Jess replied.

“Well?” she asked Joe.

“No, I have not cheated any of my clients. I have received thank-you gifts on top of the usual lawyer’s fee, but that’s after I’ve honestly and successfully completed my job.”

“It must be nice to get thank-you gifts. As a federal employee I wasn’t allowed to accept gifts from others,” Bert said. “It was considered bribery or a type of conflict of interests to accept gifts, and you could lose your job for it.”

“Oh yes, I’ve heard that it’s a federal offence to bribe a federal employee,” Joe said. “But it seems that lobbyists get away with it all the time.”

“I know. There is hardly any noble profession anymore.”

“Hey, Mr. Noble Profession, get your pants on and go to Kentucky Fried Chicken and get the meat!” Rachael called from the kitchen. Bert grumbled under his breath, got up from his chair and went upstairs to change from his sweat pants into some jeans.

A short time later, Bert came downstairs still grumbling. He stuffed his wallet down the back pocket of his pants, fished the keys out of his jacket pocket, and went out the front door. He was off to Kentucky Fried Chicken to get the usual meal the family had when Rachael didn’t feel like cooking. Rachael never cooked the day before Thanksgiving so it was a Mills family tradition to eat poorly the day before, but on Thanksgiving Day to gorge on homemade goodness.

“Do you two want to take a walk around the hollow?” Gretchen asked.
“Yes, I thought you’d never ask,” Jess replied. The three put on their shoes and coats and headed outside. From the porch they could see Sal in his bedroom window innocently reading.

“Watch how I get Dad all excited,” Jess mischievously said. She then shouted, “Hey, Dad, some guy from the government’s come looking for you!” She then pointed at Joe.

Sal’s bedroom window quickly opened. Sal, with a loaded rifle, popped out. “You’ll never take me alive!” he yelled getting ready to aim.

Joe raised his hands above his head, but he was so scared he rushed back inside the house.

“Whoa, Uncle Sal, that’s just my friend Joe. Jess was pulling your leg,” Gretchen said.

Sal lowered his rifle. “So he’s not with the government?”

“No,” Gretchen replied. Sal went back in and closed his window. All the while Jess stood by laughing so hard her face was almost blood red and tears rolled down her cheeks.

“That was mean,” Gretchen told Jess in a harsh tone of voice. She opened the door and called for Joe. Joe slowly inched his way out the door keeping his eyes fixed on the house across the road.

“What is with that guy?” Joe asked.
“Dad reads too many conspiracy theory novels. He doesn’t trust anyone outside the family. He especially distrusts the government and is afraid they are going to get him and take away his guns,” Jess said.

“It’s rather odd that he is against the government so much especially since my dad worked for the government for so long,” Gretchen said.

“Yeah, that is odd.”

“Has he ever sought professional psychological help?” Joe asked.

“He hardly leaves the house. Besides he wouldn’t trust one anyway. They’d try to convince him that he hates his mother and is a repressed homosexual,” Jess went on to say.

Gretchen and Jess stepped off the porch. Gretchen looked back and noticed Joe’s hesitation to make any sudden moves. He kept his gaze fixed on the house across the street.

“Hey, he’s not gonna shoot you!” Jess called to him

“Come on, it’s all right,” Gretchen said as she reached out her hand to Joe. Joe slowly made his way to the front porch steps. To Gretchen it seemed like an eternity passed before he took his first step down. Never before had she met anyone who was utterly afraid of her uncle Sal. Even the pizza deliverymen never took Sal seriously. This is what Gretchen feared would happen. She only waited for Joe to make up his mind about whether he would stay or go. Joe finally made it to the bottom step and stood firmly on the ground.
“Finally, even on her worst day Grandma Mildred could move faster than you and she was eaten up with arthritis,” Jess said.

“Sorry, I just never had a madman pull a shot gun on me,” Joe replied.

“Let’s get going,” Gretchen said. The three of them tucked their hands down their pockets and walked towards the head of the hollow. Beyond the quad of houses the head of the hollow sprawled out into tracts of rolling pastures that climbed the sloping hills and disappeared into the woods. In the farthest reach of the property was an old barn: one of the few remnants of the first settlers of Heath Hollow.

“It’s pretty up here. I bet it’s beautiful in the spring,” Joe said.

“It’s pretty all right, but murder on the sinuses,” Jess responded.

The three of them walked around the wood’s edge instead of going straight through the middle and wading through shoulder high weeds. All the way around the wood’s edge they watched for logs, fallen branches, and roots. Jess fell once; Gretchen tripped twice but didn’t fall; and Joe kept a sharp look out and never tripped or fell since he was in the back. Walking around the perimeter of the pasture gave them a mile walk. The three took a break at the barn. Joe studied the old wooden structure and was surprised it still stood.

“So tell me has your family always lived in Heath Hollow?” Joe asked.

“The Mills have lived in this hollow for generations. Only Mills have lived up here too. The first of the Mills to settle this land was Heath Mills two years after the Civil War. He bought the property from the county and his family has lived here ever since. It was originally called Heath’s Hollow, but during the 1920’s the county
documented it as Heath Hollow and that's what it's been called ever since. Or at least that's what Grandpa Mills would tell us."

"Come on. Let's keep walking. Why don't we go down to the highway?" Jess proposed. That would be at least another mile of walking to the highway and a mile walking back. Gretchen and Joe were up for it. They found a path that took them back to the four houses. They passed Midge and Don’s houses, but as they approached Sal’s house Joe became uneasy. Gretchen decided to distract Joe’s attention away from Sal by going on about the family history.

"Where Aunt Midge lives now is where Grandpa and Grandma Mills used to live. That house sits on top of the site of the original Mills house, but after decades the house became too inhospitable, and they tore it down to build that one. Uncle Don lives in Grandpa and Grandma’s starter home. That’s where they lived until Grandpa got his parent’s house. Dad and Mom soon built a house here and Uncle Sal too. Grandpa was willing to give Aunt Jeanne some property for her and George to build a house here in the hollow, but she didn’t want to stay. Like me she wanted to get away. She stayed away only coming in on Easter and Thanksgiving. Now she’s even farther away by moving to Florida."

Before Joe realized it they were past Sal’s house and nothing bad happened.

"Is that your future plan to pack up and move to Florida?" Joe asked.

"Are you crazy? It’s a hot spot for hurricanes and it has bugs the size of birds. No thank you, I will never go to Florida," Gretchen replied.
The three stopped close to a large boulder that sat in the middle of the field. The boulder stood taller than any of the three. It looked like a miniature mountain, but all over it were man-made scratches and carvings. Around the boulder grew tall weeds, which suggested it hadn’t been approached in a long time.

“Remember how we used to think that was a mountain when we were little?” Jess asked.

“It was also a castle too,” Gretchen replied. “Jess, Ralph, and I used to play on that boulder all the time when we were kids. I remember taking an old flint rock and carving our names and silly little poems on that rock. I want to look for some of those. Do you want to come with me?” Gretchen asked Joe. Joe nodded and followed Gretchen over to the boulder. As Gretchen and Joe went behind the boulder to look for Gretchen’s childhood memories, Jess stood waiting by the side of the dirt road.

While Jess waited, Granny Julie pulled up in her Buick.

On the other side of the boulder, Gretchen found a little doodle that she and Jess drew of stick-figure men throwing spears at a stick-figure, four-footed animal.

“That was from the time we played like we were Indian children and we drew our brave warrior-fathers’ hunts on the rock,” Gretchen explained. She then found a poem that she had scratched into the boulder: “Roses are red; violets are blue; Jess is a pest, and Ralph eats glue.” Gretchen and Joe both laughed at that.

“We better get back to Jess and finish our walk before nightfall,” Gretchen said. She and Joe came out from behind the boulder. Granny Julie got out of her car, ran over to them, and gave them both a hug.
“Oh, I’m so relieved to know you’ve found somebody!” Granny Julie cried. Gretchen looked over in Jess’ direction and saw her standing by Julie’s car laughing. Gretchen thought it was a little funny when Jess told Sal that Joe was with the government, but she didn’t appreciate Jess lying to Granny Julie.

“Granny Julie, I’m not sure what all Jess has told you, but Joe isn’t my fiancé. He’s my friend from work; in fact, he’s one of my bosses.”

Julie’s countenance fell. She looked over at Joe. “So you’re a lawyer, huh? Well, even if you are good looking, you’re still a liar by profession. I’m glad you two aren’t engaged,” Granny Julie said as she headed back to her car. “Well, come on. I’ll give you a ride back to the house!” Gretchen and Joe followed Julie to her car.

“Why does everybody label me a liar?”

“That’s just their perception of lawyers. I’m really sorry for the poor reception you’ve been receiving from my family.”

“Oh, it’s all right. I assumed this sort of stigma when I took the job.”

“Now, you’re gonna have to all pile in the back unless one of you wants to stuff Papaw in the trunk,” Granny Julie said.

Joe looked in the front seat and saw the dummy with a headshot taped to its head. “Do you ride through the carpool lane with this thing?” Joe asked.

“Now that’s a silly question. Of course I don’t. Not after I got pulled over for it that one time in Maryland. But Papaw’s only here so I have someone to talk to while I travel,” Granny Julie replied. She unlocked the trunk and Joe stuffed the mannequin in the trunk.
“Be careful with him! He’s an old man!” Julie said. The trunk was so full of stuff that Joe didn’t know how he was going to get the doll in there.

Gretchen opened the back passenger door and saw that the backseat was just as cluttered with tissue boxes, McDonald’s bags, pillows, old church dresses, and two of Julie’s duffle bags. Gretchen pushed the stuff over as far as it would and put some of the trash in the floor. She made enough room for her and Jess to squeeze into the back. Joe got into the front seat, and Julie resumed driving.

“Hey, Granny Julie, why did you ask where Heath Hollow was earlier?” Jess asked.

“For some reason I just got real confused. I couldn’t tell where I was at, and I didn’t see a road sign so I didn’t know where I was.”

“There is a sign right by the road.”

“I know, but I couldn’t see it.”

Gretchen and Jess looked at each other with concerned looks on their faces. Granny Julie pulled into Rachael and Bert’s driveway and got out to open the trunk lid. Gretchen and Jess struggled to get out. Joe helped them both. Julie stood blankly staring at all the stuff in her trunk.

“Is there anything that I can help you carry in?” Joe asked her. Julie looked at him confused. She then took out her hearing aids twisted a knob and put them back in.

“Batteries must be getting low. Now, what did you say?”

“Do you need help taking stuff inside?” Joe asked a little louder.
“I need help taking stuff in the house would you please help me?” she said in a tone that suggested she never heard what Joe said.

As Gretchen entered the house, she saw Ralph and Joshua playing video games. Ralph was calmly sitting on the couch and Joshua was hopping up and down on the couch beside Ralph. Ralph won the match; immediately Joshua pounced on him, beat him on the arm.

“I want to win a game! Let me win!” Joshua said.

Gretchen went into kitchen where Rachael sat at the kitchen table humming hymns as she took sips of pop.

“Mom, Granny Julie is here, and she doesn’t seem right in the head.”

“Oh no,” Rachael said under her breath as she got up. She and Gretchen entered the living room as Julie and Joe—both struggling to keep hold of all Julie’s baggage—entered the house. Everyone saw Ralph hold Joshua upside down by the ankles like a bully shaking a nerd for lunch money.

“Let me down or I’ll kill you!” Joshua demanded.

“Ralph, don’t hurt him,” Rachael said. She didn’t seem too concerned to see such a sight in her living room. She went over and gathered her mother in a hug. “I’m glad to see you made it here all right. Did you run into any trouble along the way?”

“Well, there was road construction on the eastbound lane of the Interstate close to your exit. I had to take a detour. I’ve been on just about every country road in this part of the state and nobody seems to know where Shelton Valley is,” Granny Julie explained.
Joe looked over at Gretchen. Both had traveled that same road earlier that day and encountered no road construction whatsoever. They did see a small detour sign for Route 21, but that was for large trucks only. Gretchen held her tongue because she didn’t want to argue with her grandmother neither did she want to call her grandmother a liar.

“And to help you out I brought some food,” Julie said breaking Gretchen from her train of thought.

“Ralph, you and Gretchen go help Granny Julie bring in her stuff,” Rachael ordered. In the trunk of Granny Julie’s car were canned foods scattered all over the place where they came out of their plastic bags in transit.

“Oh my goodness, I’m not eating these,” Ralph said as he showed Gretchen a busted can of Grand’s Biscuits.

“Nor this,” Gretchen added as she held up a package of warm, green bologna.

“Bless her heart. Do you think she forgot her cooler on accident or did she just forget that some of this stuff needs to be refrigerated?” Ralph asked. Gretchen shrugged her shoulders as she gathered some cans and put them into a bag. Granny Julie mostly had canned corn, green beans, some canned tuna, and canned fruit-pie fillings.

“I wonder who she thinks is going to eat all these canned foods. Come tomorrow everything but the cranberry sauce is going to be fresh and homemade,” Gretchen said.

“What’s with all that food?” Jess asked as she came over from her house.
“It’s Granny Julie’s food,” Gretchen replied. At that moment Bert pulled into the driveway behind Julie’s car. He got out of the van carrying three bags of chicken, biscuits, and the fixings.

“Food’s here,” he said and he rushed into the house.

“You know I’m getting tired of poultry. When am I gonna get some red meat?” Ralph asked.

“That won’t be for a few days,” Jess responded. Gretchen handed her a few of Granny Julie’s bags. Although Jess never volunteered to help take things inside, she unconsciously helped Gretchen and Ralph take in the rest of Julie’s things.

At dinner everyone gathered around the dining room table and ate Kentucky Fried Chicken off of Dixie plates and drank from plastic cups.

“This is great. Thanks for going out and getting it, sir,” Joe said as he helped himself to another chicken leg.

“You act like you’ve never eaten fried chicken before,” Aunt Midge said.

“It’s been such a long time since I’ve had it that it tastes so good.”

“Well, Gretchen, at least you know that he’s easy to please when it comes to food,” Rachael whispered to her.

“Mom!” Gretchen was a little offended that even after she explained that there was nothing between her and Joe her family still wouldn’t believe her and thought that she and Joe were engaged.
After dinner Bert, Ralph, and Jess went into the living room to watch Westerns. Julie decided to walk Midge back over to her house. There was nothing leftover so Rachael dumped everything on the table into trash bags and gave Gretchen a plate of bones.

"Would you give these to the girls?" Rachael requested. Gretchen and Joe went out the back door and walked over to the dog lot where four beagles started jumping and yelping at the sight of humans.

"Hi girls!" Gretchen said. "Look what I’ve got for you!" Gretchen showed the beagles the bones and the dogs seemed to get even more excited.

"They won’t get out of there will they?" Joe asked. There was a hint of nervousness in his voice.

"They won’t, but there’s no reason to be afraid of them. They’re the friendliest dogs you’ll ever meet unless you’re a rabbit," Gretchen replied. She started to toss bones into the dog lot and like football players tackling the other team, the beagles charged at the bones. "They’re Dad’s rabbit hunting dogs. Annie, Becky, and Janie are all sisters, and Mandy is Janie’s daughter. I picked out Mandy because she was the smallest in the litter. She turned out to be the fastest runner and the easiest to train so we kept her. I had originally called her Baby, but Dad didn’t want to take her hunting and have to yell ‘Here Baby’ so he made me change her name. Do you want to pet them?"

"Oh no, I’ll just watch them," Joe replied with that same nervous tone in his voice. Gretchen knew there was something wrong, but she didn’t want to pry her way
into something that Joe didn’t want to openly share. She let the subject drop. Joe went
over and sat on the patio. He watched as Gretchen petted the hyperactive dogs and
talked baby talk to them. He thought it was funny to see his always-quiet, always-
serious co-worker actually acting that way around dogs.

IV

By 11:45 everyone in the house was bathed and ready for bed. Rachael and
Ralph pulled out the couch’s hid-a-bed and put the extra padding and sheets on it for
Granny Julie. By midnight everyone was in bed, but not everyone was sleeping. Joe
lay awake looking at the ceiling. He was unable to sleep because of Bert’s snoring
across the hall and Granny Julie’s loud snoring from downstairs. To make getting to
sleep an even more difficult goal to achieve the dogs outside started barking. Joe got
up to see what the dogs were barking at, but all he could see outside his window was
darkness. Since he was up, Joe decided to walk around the house. In the hall he
noticed Ralph’s bedroom door was closed. Joe assumed that was Ralph’s solution to
getting any sleep in this house. Joe noticed Gretchen’s door was open. He peeked into
her room and saw Gretchen had a box fan blowing at high speed in the floor at the
foot of her bed. Joe wondered if she used a fan to drown out noises in the city as well.
He then went downstairs and saw Granny Julie sleeping away.

“I wish I was like her right now: sleeping and too deaf to hear all the barking
and snoring going on,” Joe said to himself. He went into the kitchen and sat down at
the table. There were even more sounds in the kitchen. The refrigerator hummed, the
clock on the wall ticked, the dogs seemed louder, and Julie must have been dreaming because she soon started moaning between snores. Joe would have thought these noises wouldn’t bother him since he lived in the city all his life: a place of late night sirens, car horns honking, apartment neighbors yelling, and neighboring televisions blasting. This country silence made the slightest sounds seem ten times more audible than any of those city noises.

Joe got up from his seat and went over to the refrigerator and looked inside. There was so much food in there that he knew it would be impossible to find something small to snack on. He found some orange juice in the door and decided to have a glass before going back upstairs. He savored the orange juice and drank it as slowly as he could so he didn’t have to go upstairs. Joe looked around the kitchen. He couldn’t see much in the dark but he did see the smiling pig dressed like a chef standing on the refrigerator. Joe got up a little closer and noticed it was a cookie jar. Besides the pig, Joe noticed that Rachael’s kitchen was done up in a fruit motif. Her curtains had fruit print on them. The kitchen table had a fruit and checker tablecloth on it. The magnets on the refrigerator were little fruit baskets. Her sugar, salt, and flour jars were shaped like fruit crates.

“It’d be pretty sad to learn that Rachael really didn’t like fruit,” Joe chuckled. He got up to look at the other areas of the house he never visited. He went into the pantry where he saw the chest freezer to the left and wall-to-wall shelves overstocked with boxed and canned foods to his right.
"They sure do eat well," Joe commented. Joe walked to the other side of the kitchen and peeked into the dining room. Even in the dark the large dining room looked regal. He hoped that Thanksgiving dinner would be as good as Gretchen described. He pictured the family all gathered around the table hand-in-hand saying grace. Bert would carve the turkey and everyone would get a good piece. With smiles all around everyone used their manners and passed the food around the table. Everything was hot and fresh. Joe broke from his idea of the perfect Thanksgiving. He hoped it would be like the one he never had. He was not going to be celebrating another lonely day of thanks with Wan Cho at the Korean restaurant this year. It made him feel good to know that even though he was a stranger to them, they were accepting enough to welcome him in and even let him partake of their family meal.

Joe went around the large dining room table imagining where everyone was going to sit. He then left the dining room and went back upstairs. He got into bed and lay there. Joe rolled over, put his pillow over his head, but still he could hear the barking even though the pillow muffled the snoring. Joe threw his pillow off his head and looked up at the ceiling into the blank whiteness. He then got up and decided to write in his daily log.

"It is one thirty-four in the morning and I’m unable to sleep. I’m here at Gretchen’s house. The ride was kind of awkward and for the most part silent. She never was a very talkative person, but then when we arrived here she really opened up among her family. She and her cousin (who shocked Gretchen by coming out of the closet) took me on a tour around the hollow. I learned that this hollow had been the
homestead of the Mills family for generations. I saw the places where she, her brother, and her cousin used to play. Gretchen’s parents seem all right. Rachael is way too chipper for me. Bert...well at first I didn’t appreciate his attitude towards lawyers, but after getting to know him he seems all right. Some of the family members need to seek out psychiatric help though. I look forward to meeting the rest of the family tomorrow. I’ve never been part of a big family so I would like to witness one firsthand. I’m really glad Gretchen allowed me to come. I could tell by her attitude when I used her words to invite myself that she was uneasy about my coming. I don’t know if she even feels anything for me anymore besides just friendship, but I really wish it had worked out for the two of us.”

Joe started to yawn. His eyes were getting heavy. He looked at the clock, which now read 2:02 AM. Joe closed his log, put it in his suitcase, and went back to bed. He put his pillow over his head and in no time he was asleep. Joe felt like he had just gone to sleep when he was shaken awake. He took the pillow off his head to see Bert standing over him.

“We got to get a move on it if we plan on bagging some rabbits,” Bert said to him. Joe looked over at his clock: it read 5:32 AM. He was reluctant to move from his warm soft bed, but Bert yanked the covers off the bed.

“Hurry up. We’re already behind, and we’ll be even later waiting on you,” Bert said and left the room.

“Then why take me with you if I’m ruining your rabbit hunting schedule?” Joe asked, but Bert wasn’t there. Joe got up and rummaged through his suitcase. He
didn’t know what to wear rabbit hunting, but he knew it was going to be cold outside so he grabbed his angora sweater and a pair of blue jeans. Joe dressed and then put on his coat. He came down the stairs and saw Bert waiting at the front door. He handed Joe a pack of Pop Tarts.

“That’s your breakfast,” Bert said and then he handed Joe a rifle. “And here’s what you kill your rabbit with.”

“Thanks,” Joe said with a hint of sarcasm. He and Bert stepped out of the house as Don and Joshua came over.

“Finally, ready to go?” Don asked.

“Let me get the girls and we can go,” Bert answered. He went around to the back of the house and left Joe with Don and Joshua.

“Have you ever hunted before?” Don asked Joe.

“No, it is my first time ever even touching a gun,” Joe answered.

“Well, this is gonna be a learning experience for you,” Don said with a chuckle.

The sun was beginning to rise as they reached the head of the hollow. Bert unleashed the beagles and the girls went running. The dogs disappeared into the tall grass and the men soon followed behind. One of the beagles started up letting the guys know she was on the trail of a rabbit. Bert and Don got ready for any sudden prey running by. Joe didn’t know what to do so he stood there and held his gun. The
three heard Joshua quietly giggling. Don looked over at his son who had his back turned to him.

"Joshua, what are you doing, boy?" Don asked.

Joshua turned to face them and out of the top of his vest Mandy popped her head out. "Look, Dad, I'm a kangaroo!" he said and hopped around.

"Joshua, you let that dog go and let her hunt like she's suppose to!" Don said.

Joshua gave his father a sour look, but he unzipped his hunting vest and let the beagle fall out. Mandy got upon her feet and went running into the grass. Soon another beagle started calling out that she was on the trail.

"I hope that ain't Becky. She usually follows cold trails," Don said.

"That hoarse sounding one is Mandy, but the other one is either Janie or Annie," Bert said.

"Wow, you can tell your dogs apart by their yelping?" Joe asked.

"Well sure, it's kind of like how you can tell humans apart by their voice," Bert replied. Soon another beagle chimed in this one a little higher than the others.

"Now that's Becky," Bert said. The dogs sounded like they were getting closer. From some tall grass to their right a rabbit shot out with Annie and Janie on its tail.

"Joe, shoot it!" Bert called. Joe tried to remember what he had seen on television. He aimed his gun and shot. He shot the ground right at Annie's feet. Annie stopped and looked over in the direction of the hunters. Bert rushed over and took the gun away from Joe.
“The whole point of the hunt is to kill the rabbit not my dog,” Bert said. Don then took aim and shot the rabbit. Meanwhile behind them Mandy and Becky were still calling out that they were trailing a rabbit. Mandy soon chased out another rabbit out from the brush. Bert took aim and got the rabbit. Joe was already tired of rabbit hunting. He went a few feet away from the hunters and their dogs and sat down on the ground and drew in the dirt with a stick. He looked over in their direction and saw Joshua happily running around while Bert and Don had progressed further up the hollow.

When Joe woke up he was cold, stiff, and Bert and Don were both shaking him awake.

“Thank goodness, he’s alive,” Don said.

“Come on, we’re going to the barn,” Bert told Joe. Joe got up and followed them to the barn. When they got to the barn, Bert and Don had already made a fire in a metal barrel. Joshua was sitting on a bale of hay petting the beagles.

“How many rabbits did you get?” Joe asked.

“Don and I got two apiece, and Joshua got one,” Bert answered. “We thought you went home, but then we saw you sitting out there by yourself. We called out to you, but when you didn’t answer us we thought something was wrong. I’m sorry I yelled at you for almost shooting Annie. I know you didn’t mean to, but she’s part of the family. You wouldn’t like it if I shot your kid would you?”
"I didn’t know you felt that way about a dog," Joe answered. He took a seat on a bale of hay and the beagles left Joshua to go to him. They sniffed him and then tried to get in his lap. Annie and Janie hopped on the bale of hay next to him and sniffed him over. Mandy kept trying to dig at his chest. Becky also tried jumping on him.

"Could you please get them off of me!" Joe cried. That hint of nervousness was back in his voice.

"Ah, they’re just being playful," Don replied.

"You’re not afraid of them, are you?" Bert asked. "They’re not dangerous."

"No, I’m allergic to dogs," Joe answered. The beagles started yelping like they were on the trail of a rabbit.

Don and Bert looked at each other with concerned looks. "Hey girls, get off him come on!" Bert shouted. He clapped his hands and whistled. The beagles then left Joe and went to Bert. He fed them Vienna sausages to keep them away from Joe.

"What was wrong with them?" Joe asked. "They sounded like they when they were hunting."

"Don’t know but they didn’t like the smell of you. What are you wearing?" Bert asked.

"Nothing just an angora sweater and jeans," Joe answered.

"There you go. Angora is rabbit fur," Bert said. Don then passed Joe a package of beef jerky and a can of pop.
“Now you know our secret, Joe, we hunt for maybe an hour or two and then we spend the rest of our time here in the barn eating snacks and telling jokes,” Don said. “So do you know any good jokes?”

“Not really,” Joe answered.

Joe sat and listened as Bert and Don told jokes. Some of the jokes were really funny, and others were just gross. After telling jokes, Don pulled a pouch of Red Man chewing tobacco out of his vest pocket.

“Here, Joe, have some,” Don said as he handed the pouch over to him. Joe thought that if he chewed he’d be one of them. He took a little and put it in his mouth. He chewed and chewed the foul tasting tobacco. Bert and Don soon started laughing. Joe couldn’t take it anymore he was feeling sick. He turned around and threw up in the corner of the barn, which made Bert and Don laugh harder.

“You’re all right, Joe.”

V

Gretchen woke up to the smell of food cooking. She looked over at her clock, which read 8:09 AM. She hopped out of bed, put on her house slippers, and hurried downstairs. She knew if she didn’t eat breakfast before the toddler gate went up then she’d never get to eat until Thanksgiving dinner at two that afternoon. In the kitchen she saw Rachael standing in front of the stove. Her hair was in curlers and she was still in her nightgown. Gretchen looked over at the kitchen table and saw Granny Julie
still in her nightgown drinking coffee and reading her Bible. The kitchen was filled with the diverse smells of coffee, baking turkey, and cooking vegetables.

“Good morning,” Gretchen greeted in a raspy morning voice. Rachael turned to face Gretchen and handed her a plate of pancakes.

“Eat those and then get ready. I’m going to need your help today,” Rachael said in an authoritative voice. The transformation had already begun: from happy, cheerful mother to dictator of the kitchen.

Gretchen took a seat at the kitchen table by Granny Julie. Julie opened her eyes from praying, smiled and patted Gretchen’s hand.

“Good morning, little Purdy, how are you?”

“Fine.”

“I don’t know how the rest of you slept, but I felt like there was a presence down here last night. I was sleeping real well, and then I got this feeling that something went by me and that it lingered down here for a while before it went away,” Granny Julie said.

“You were probably dreaming,” Rachael said. Julie shrugged her shoulders and went back to reading her Bible. Rachael fixed a bowl of Cocoa Puffs and took it outside. Gretchen got up from the table and looked outside. On the patio sat Ralph. He was in a lawn chair and bundled up in a parka, cap, thick gloves, and a quilt around him. Since he didn’t go hunting, he had been up since six that morning watching the turkey in the smoker. Rachael handed him the bowl of cereal, kissed his forehead, and hurried back inside.
"I hate for him to be out there. He’s sick again. He gets sick every Thanksgiving. It’s like a curse or something. But I can’t be out there with that turkey and in here cooking too. As soon as Bert gets back he’s going out there and Ralph is coming back in," Rachael said. It was as if she was talking to someone and yet no one at the same time. She directed her attention to Gretchen who was still at the kitchen window snickering at her brother, who was having a hard time eating with thick gloves on. “Now hurry up and finish eating. You’re going to do dishes today.”

“Oh, I hate dishes,” Gretchen complained as she sat down to finish her pancakes. As she ate she looked at the sink, which was already full of dishes. She looked at the dishwasher, which was sitting idle. She wondered why her mother never let her load the dishwasher instead of hand washing everything.

Once she finished her pancakes, Gretchen went upstairs to dress. She knew that with company coming Rachael would not approve of jeans and a sweater. Gretchen dressed in dress pants and a fine top. She looked more like she was going to work instead of having Thanksgiving dinner at home.

When Gretchen came downstairs, Julie was already changed into her day clothes. She and Aunt Midge were tidying the living room. Gretchen went into the kitchen where Rachael already had dishwater ready. Gretchen went over to the sink and dreaded sticking her hands in that hot soapy water. Rachael put up the toddler gate. The kitchen was now off limits to outsiders. Gretchen was trapped.
Around noon Bert, Don, Joshua, and Joe returned from rabbit hunting. Gretchen saw Joe in the backyard with Bert. He looked cold, dirty, and tired. Joe came inside, said nothing to anyone, went upstairs, and went to bed. Gretchen watched from the window as Rachael went out and told Bert to trade places with Ralph. She saw her father roll his eyes around, and watched as Ralph got out of the lawn chair and came inside.

“Go to bed, Ralph,” Rachael said as she came inside the house. Ralph immediately obeyed.

“We’re done with the living room now what do you want us to do?” Julie called from the other side of the toddler gate. Rachael opened the cabinet under the sink and retrieved two bottles of Clorox spray.

“Aunt Midge can clean the downstairs half-bath, and, Mom, you can clean the upstairs bathroom,” Rachael replied. The two old ladies reluctantly took bottles of chemicals went on their mission. Rachael then returned to her cooking.

As she washed Gretchen watched every move her mother made in the kitchen. Like some hypnotic spell Gretchen watched as Rachael made the dressing for the coleslaw. Once she was finished mixing up the dressing she gave it a taste test. It met her approval; she licked the spoon clean and then put it in the dishwasher. Gretchen watched as the plastic spoon sank to the bottom of the sink. She huffed and gave her mother a sour look when Rachael pulled another spoon out of the drawer to mix the shredded cabbage and carrots.
“Are you intentionally trying to dirty up everything so that I have to wash it all?” Gretchen asked. Her tone suggested she was frustrated.

“Young lady, don’t give me that attitude,” Rachael answered. “You’re the only one I can trust to get my dishes clean the way I want them. I can’t possibly wash dishes and cook at the same time.”

“How did you ever survive those three years I was gone?” Gretchen mumbled under her breath.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

While Gretchen washed, Rachael went about fixing other foods that did not require heating. Everything that Rachael could possibly cook was cooking. All four eyes of the stove were occupied in cooking some form of vegetable. The oven had the baked turkey. Rachael had the three-bean casserole in her toaster oven. Fresh green beans with fat back were in her pressure cooker. The only thing not cooking something was the microwave.

“Lord, don’t let the breaker kick,” Rachael said under her breath.

“Amen,” Gretchen said.

Around 1:15 Gretchen was still washing dishes as Rachael made deviled eggs. Rachael was still in her curlers and nightgown and Gretchen wondered when her mother was going to take a time out and get ready. From the living room Gretchen heard the front door open.
“Hello, hello!” Jeanne called as she came into the house. She sat down all her gifts for the family behind the chair by the door. Without a care, she stepped over the toddler gate and went into the kitchen leaving George and Claire to bring in the desserts. She gave Rachael a hug and then Gretchen.

“You still haven’t had time to dress?” Jeanne asked Rachael.

“Oh my, I better get ready!” Rachael said as she rushed out of the kitchen.

“Is there anything you need for me to do?” Jeanne called.

“Just set the tables and the buffet!” Rachael called back.

Without being told, Gretchen opened the cabinet above her head where her mother kept the special holiday plates. She made sure that she gave her aunt the plates with the autumn-leaf-print border and not the plates with holly-leaf-print borders. She gave her aunt the plates, special silverware, and cloth napkins to set the dinner tables.

“It sure smells good in here. I can’t wait to dig in,” Uncle George said as he peeked into the kitchen. Uncle George was as skinny as a beanpole, but he loved to eat. Gretchen envied him. He could eat as much as he wanted and whenever he wanted and never put on weight.

“Do you know what channel ESPN is?” George asked.

“I think it’s twenty six,” Gretchen answered.

George nodded thanks. The next thing Gretchen heard was the sound of a football game on the television.

Claire stepped over the toddler gate and came into the kitchen. She seemed very lethargic and she looked like death in leopard-print.
Why does Mom even bother with the toddler gate? It was meant to keep people out, but everyone simply steps over it and comes in anyway or they come in through the dining room, Gretchen thought.

Claire started looking around in the cabinets.

“What are you looking for, Claire?” Gretchen asked.

“I need some Tylenol, Advil, Ibuprofen, or anything,” Claire replied. Like Ralph, Claire also got sick around Thanksgiving. She usually spent most of the holiday sleeping on the couch or in one of the reclining chairs. Gretchen gave Claire a glass of water and bottle of Tylenol. Claire went back into the living room taking the glass of water and the bottle of pills with her.

Gretchen washed out the last pot and then took a seat at the kitchen table. She looked at her hands. Her fingers were pink and shriveled. The soapy water caused the tips of her fingernails to become soft and transparent. She sighed with relief. Until Rachael came back and resumed cooking, Gretchen was finished with the dishes.

Gretchen left the kitchen and sat down with George and Claire in the living room. The front door came open and in came Jess and Sal. Sal went over and sat down in Bert’s La-Z-Boy and went to sleep as soon as he reclined back. George and Claire both looked at Jess with shocked looks on their faces.

“When did you get a sex change?” George asked Jess.

“I haven’t gone that far yet,” Jess replied.

“I think it’s sick. God made Adam and Eve not Adam and Steve. Even the Bible speaks against what you’re doing,” Claire said.
"I'm pretty sure that Bible also speaks against dressing like a prostitute, but that's not stopping you," Jess replied. Claire was speechless and pulled her blanket over her head. Gretchen tried hard not to laugh or even crack a smile. She moved over on the couch to let Jess take a seat.

As the family watched football, Granny Julie came in the house totting her mannequin. She went into the dining room with surrogate Papaw. A little while later Gretchen heard Aunt Jeanne burst out laughing. Gretchen and Jess got up and went to see what was funny. In the dining room sat the mannequin in Mildred's usual spot. The mannequin was in a dress and a picture of Mildred was taped to its face.

"Granny, what did you do to Dummy Papaw?" Gretchen asked trying not to laugh.

"Jeanne was telling me about how she was going to miss her mom this being the first Thanksgiving without her so I decided to sacrifice Papaw for a while."

"Julie, you didn't have to do that," Jeanne said between breaths.

Rachael came downstairs dressed and her hair fixed. She heard the laughter in the dining room and went to see what was going on. She saw the replacement Mildred sitting at the dining room table and rolled her eyes around.

"Gretchen, back to the kitchen," Rachael said. Gretchen sighed and followed her mother back to the kitchen. Julie and Jeanne also followed.

"Jeanne, what kind of desserts did you bring?" Rachael asked.

"Peanut butter fudge and lots of it, cherry pie, pecan pie, peanut butter pie, cheese cake, Ewwy-Gooey bars, and store-bought cookies in the variety pack,"
Jeanne answered. “Is there anything else you want me to do like help Gretchen with the dishes?”

Gretchen smiled and looked at her mother with a pleading look on her face. “Everything is okay here so just take it easy,” Rachael replied. Jeanne went into the living room to watch football with George.

Rachael read off her list of foods that she attached to the refrigerator: “Okay, the mashed potatoes are done, fried corn done, fresh green beans done, stuffing done, coleslaw done, deviled eggs done, seven layer salad done, broccoli casserole cooking, three-bean casserole done, cranberry sauce—Gretchen, get a can of cranberry sauce out. The gravy is waiting on the baked turkey; the turkeys are almost done, and the rolls are waiting until last. We are almost ready to eat!”

Gretchen got a can of cranberry sauce out of one of the cabinets. She opened the can and shook the can until the can-shaped gelatinous blob dumped out onto the pickle dish. Gretchen looked at the cranberry sauce in disgust and wondered why her mother always insisted on having it since it only went to waste.

“Did you put a piece of lettuce on that dish for decoration?” Rachael asked.

“No,” Gretchen replied.

Rachael shook her head. Gretchen could tell Rachael was frustrated with her. She shoved Gretchen out of the way, got a head of lettuce out of the refrigerator, plucked a leaf off, and adjusted it under the cranberry sauce. Gretchen, in the meantime, sneaked out of the kitchen. She went into the living room, but found no place to sit. She went out the front door and found Aunt Midge and Jess silently
sitting and rocking in the rocking chairs. Gretchen took a seat on the steps. She sighed and ran her fingers through her hair.

"Mom’s starting to get mean. She got mad because I forgot to put a piece of lettuce on the pickle dish for the cranberry sauce. She actually shoved me out of the way."

"Her sugar must be getting low. People get mean when their sugar gets low," Aunt Midge said. In the distance they heard the sound of a car approaching. From over the hill appeared a black hearse.

"Oh my goodness, they’ve finally come for me. Oh no, I’m not ready. Maybe tomorrow, but not now!” Aunt Midge exclaimed. The hearse came to a stop in front of Bert and Rachael’s house. Cousin John Meade came out. He was only two years older than Gretchen, but he was already graying. He was tall, but not thin or heavy. He looked like he hadn’t had a shave in months.

"Hey, how ya doing!” he called as he got his suitcase and guitar out of the back of his hearse. He came up to the porch and gave Gretchen a hug.

"Do you like my new Cadillac? I had a friend who gave it to me for quite a deal."

"It’s fine, but it’s a hearse."

"Yeah, but it’s a Cadillac."

"Yeah, but it’s a hearse."

"I think it’s awesome,” Jess said.

"Whoa, what happened to you?” John asked Jess and then he gave her a hug.
“I’ve just discovered myself,” Jess answered.

“Good for you. At least you’ve discovered what truly makes you happy. I’m still trying to discover myself and my life’s true calling,” John said. “So is everyone inside the house?”

“Watching football or napping,” Gretchen answered.

“All right football,” John said in a hardy voice. He then went inside the house. Gretchen looked over at his hearse and shook her head. Before she could sit down the front door opened again.

“There you are. Don’t you ever run off on me like that again! Now, get in here and do the dishes!” Rachael said and she spanked Gretchen on the behind with a wooden spoon. Gretchen went back into the house and Rachael ushered her into the kitchen. Gretchen went over to the sink and saw Bert sitting at the kitchen table cutting up the two turkeys.

“Thank goodness it’s almost ready,” Gretchen said in a quiet tone. Bert nodded. While Rachael sat some of the food on the buffet, the smell tickled the noises of the sleeping inhabitants upstairs. Ralph and Joe promptly came down.

“It smells great down here,” Ralph said.

John looked away from the television long enough to see his cousin and a stranger come down the stairs. “Who’s that?” John asked.

“That’s Joe. He’s Gretchen’s fiancé or something,” Ralph answered through a yawn.
“Fiancé!” Jeanne said and she jumped up to her feet and turned to see whom this man was that Gretchen was going to marry. Joe was surprised, but before he could refute Rachael called out: “Dinner’s ready!” Everyone hurried into the dining room and gathered around the table. “Now, someone say a blessing over the food.” Ralph raised his hand. The other family members bowed their heads.

“Dear Lord, thank You for this day and for allowing us all to be together. Thanks for all You have blessed us with, and for this food. Bless it in Jesus’ name, I pray, Amen.” After Ralph had finished, everyone took a plate and lined up. They went along the buffet and gathered food on their plates.

“Gee, I feel like I’m at a restaurant,” Joe said to Gretchen. “This is not what I had in mind that Thanksgiving would like.”

“This is the way it has always been at our house,” Gretchen replied.

“Okay, since the dining room table only seats eight, parents get the large table; offspring eat at the kiddy table. That’s the kitchen table, Joe,” Rachael said to him.

“Every year it’s the same,” Claire complained. “I’m not a kid anymore!”

“Yeah, but if they didn’t put some of us at the kiddy table poor Joshua would have to eat alone,” John replied.

“Like that would be a bad thing?”
Seated at the kiddy table were Gretchen, Joe, Ralph, Jess, Joshua, John, and Claire. Jess was already well into her meal when Claire finally came to the table. She sat down across from Jess, but tried not to look or pay attention to her.

“Not eating again I see,” Jess said to Claire whose plate had only a deviled egg and roll on it.

“I don’t comment on how much you eat so don’t do it to me,” Claire replied in a harsh manner.

“I don’t know who gave you the idea that you’re fat, but you’re not,” Gretchen told her. Claire nodded thanks to her.

“Being a twig cannot be healthy,” Jess said.

“At least I’m not grossly overweight,” Claire said.

“Oh, okay, I think we’re wading into dangerous waters here. Let’s ease up before something bad happens,” John interceded. He might as well have saved his breath.

“Why do you have to be so thin? Is it so you can wiggle into those skin-tight hooker’s clothes you wear?”

“I might dress like a hooker, but I’m not, and at least I like men unlike you, you fat dyke!”

Everyone at the table instantly stopped eating. Ralph was so shocked that he even dropped his fork. They all looked at Claire with surprised looks on their faces. Everyone was taken off guard by that remark except for Joshua who didn’t know the
meaning of the word so he continued to play with his food rather than eat it. Jess slammed her fork down, got up, and walked over to Gretchen and Joe.

"Would a dyke do this?" Jess asked and then she planted a kiss on Joe's mouth. Gretchen felt her stomach drop to her feet. She was humiliated. She got up and left the table and ran up to her room.

In her room, Gretchen sat on her bed thinking of what just happened. Ever since she and Joe arrived, it had been a disaster for one or both of them. Gretchen finally let go, broke down and cried. She cried for her family who was now going to be horribly stigmatized by the outsider, but not just any outsider her boss' son, someone she thought could be her friend.

"Gretchen, is it all right to come in?" Joe asked. He opened the door and saw Gretchen. She immediately straightened up and wiped the tears off her cheeks.

"I'm sorry that had to happen to you," Gretchen said.

"It's okay," Joe replied and sat down beside her on the bed. He was taken off guard when he started to sink into the soft mattress.

"How are things okay?" Gretchen asked. "I would love to know how you can take such a thing so lightly."

"Well, aren't you relieved?" he asked.

"Relieved about what?"

"At least you know now that Jess likes men too."

Gretchen smiled, and then the smile quickly vanished. "I suppose you'll want to go home tomorrow."
“Why are we leaving tomorrow? I thought you wanted to stay until Sunday afternoon.”

“Originally, but after all that has happened to you I thought—Oh, Joe, if anything could go wrong it did. Half my family has the wrong impression about you because you’re a lawyer, Sal tried to kill you, Dad and Don drug you out into the cold morning and heaven knows what they put you through, and then Jess. I had a feeling this was going to happen, and I brought you anyway. I’m sorry you had to come and experience this.”

“If you think what’s happened to me in the last two days has been terrible then you should have seen me in college. What has happened here is nothing like what I had to endure with my frat brothers. Besides, I like it here.”

“What?”

“The hunting trip wasn’t that bad. I almost killed Annie—”

“Oh my.”

“But they gave me the tobacco plug of acceptance and I chewed, and I threw up, and I liked it.”

Gretchen laughed and shook her head.

“But seriously I think that your family was using defensive tactics to measure me up, and after getting to know me, they’ve warmed up to me. I was the same and now I’m comfortable with most of them. The best part is that they happily included me. You know I envy you for the family you have. Be glad you have them.”
Gretchen gave Joe a hug. She was relieved. She was at ease knowing that even though bad things happened Joe was still willing to stay. She was even more pleased to hear that he thought her family was great and that he liked it in Heath Hollow. It made her happy to know that he was not judgmental, condescending, or disliked her family, but he accepted them the way she accepted them.

"We better go back down before our food gets any colder."

VI

After dinner Bert brought down three of his guitars and Ralph followed carrying his own.

"John, I saw you brought your guitar. So let's do some pickin' and grinnin'." Bert gave George and Don each a guitar and they sat around the living room playing music. Joe stood by the front door watching with admiration.

John could play just about anything, and he introduced the family to some of the songs that his band had made. Ralph knew many classic rock songs, and Bert, George, and Don were country lovers. Joshua watched as the five played different songs. He then skipped over to his father and tugged on his arm.

"Dad, I want to play!" Joshua said. Don sighed and with reluctance gave over his guitar to Joshua. Joshua put the strap over his shoulder and started wiggling around like Elvis. He started strumming without making any sort of melody whatsoever. The noise was such an earache that the others in the room looked over at Don with unappreciative looks on their faces. Don quickly took the guitar back.
“Son, you played beautifully, but it’s my turn to play now,” Don said.

“No! I’m not finished!” Joshua replied. He started hitting on Don, but Don went on pretending like Joshua wasn’t even there.

“What are we going to play?” John asked. George started picking out the tune to “Amarillo by Morning.” Bert joined in and so did John. George stared singing and he actually sounded like George Strait when he sang. Bert motioned for Joe to sit down. Joe sheepishly sat and watched as they played.

“Do you play, Joe?” John asked.

“I had a friend in college who showed me how to play. All I know is how to play a few Led Zeppelin songs.”

“Awesome,” John said and he took off his guitar and passed it over to Joe.

“So you don’t know any country songs?” George asked.

“I’m not much of a country fan, sir,” Joe answered.

“Well, nobody’s perfect,” George said.

“Play us something,” Ralph said. Joe sat and gathered his composure. He looked at the other men who sat patiently. Joe then began to play “Stairway to Heaven.” The others listened and were impressed with Joe’s ability. Joe then began to sing the song. He deep down wished Gretchen was there to see him play.

Gretchen was sitting on the front porch with Jess and Aunt Midge. She was hiding from her mother and trying to avoid having to do dishes. Gretchen looked up at the mist that settled over the barren hilltops. Such an eerie sight caused a chill to run down her back. She wrapped her jacket tighter around her. Jess and Midge
silently rocked. From out of nowhere the silence was broken by Don’s singing inside. He could not carry a tune, and from outdoors his singing sounded worse. Gretchen and Jess started laughing, and Aunt Midge cracked a smile.

“Sounds like he needs singing lessons,” Aunt Midge said. The front door then came open and Granny Julie peeked out.

“Gretchen, your mom wants you to do dishes.”

Gretchen groaned at the thought but got up and went inside to do the job she was appointed to do. She didn’t want to get spanked with a wooden spoon again.

VII

That evening everyone gathered around in the living room to watch television and eat desserts. Then John pulled a video from one of his bags.

“Did you know I went to Canada recently and shot a moose?” John asked.

“Bull!” George replied with skepticism.

“Exactly, a bull moose. I’ve got it here on video,” John said. He popped the videotape into the VCR and pushed play. The screen went from black to an image of John standing in the woods. John was dressed in his everyday clothes and waving to everybody watching.

“Hey, we’re here in...in...”

“British Colombia,” John’s friend behind the camera said.

“I know that, but where in BC?”

“Dude, I don’t know.”
“How far from Washington are we?”

“I don’t know.”

“Anyway, hi, everyone, this is John M and John P from somewhere in British Columbia, Canada not far from Washington state, and we’re gonna shoot a moose.”

John then held up a digital camera.

Don and Bert looked over at John and shook their heads.

“I knew you weren’t really gonna shoot a moose dead,” Don said.

“Just keep watching,” John told them.

On the screen John crept through the woods whispering to John P behind the camera. The two came to an opening in the woods and found a large bull moose grazing on clover.

“Oh wow, I’m going to get my camera into focus. This is going to be an excellent shot,” John whispered. He took the picture and the flash was on, which startled the moose.

“There he goes,” John P said.

“I want one more shot! Come on!” John said to his friend and they went running. John P didn’t have enough sense to turn off the camera and the next two minutes of footage were shaky. All the viewer could see were blurred swirling images of green and brown as the two Johns pursued the moose. To avoid any sickness while eating their desserts John fast-forwarded the tape until the chase ceased. He then pushed play again.
“There he is. He stopped.” The camera went back into focus again. John stood at the edge of the woods pointing at the moose that stood on the road. John turned on his digital camera and was about to take a picture when truck horns blared and a speeding eighteen-wheeler ran over the moose.

“Wow!” John P exclaimed. “Dude, you killed a moose!”

John gave the cameraman a sour look. “I didn’t kill it the truck did,” John answered in a defensive tone of voice.

“Yeah, but you provoked it to run on the road. So you killed it.”

“Turn that thing off before I do it for you. If the Mounties see this I could get into trouble.”

The video went black. When the video resumed, John was standing by the mangled remains of the dead moose. The only thing intact was the head. The viewers groaned with disgust to see the moose’s internal organs exposed and smashed on the highway. The whole area around the two was soaked in blood.

Gretchen put down her peanut butter pie. She lost her appetite and didn’t think she would ever get it back.

“Poor moose,” Claire said.

“What a mess,” John said on the video.

“Look, the only thing that made it is the head,” John P said and pointed at the moose’s head whose dead eyes stared into the camera.

“You know, rich guys in Texas put bull horns on the hoods of their Cadillacs. I think I’ll put these on the hood of my hearse.”
“You can’t be serious. Those antlers are too big. You won’t be able to see the road.”

“Yes, I will so let’s do it.”

The video went black, and then John was seen standing outside a remote country store called Stinky’s Bait and Hardware Shop.

“Oh my goodness, there’s even a Stinky in Canada!” Gretchen said.

“I bet there are Stinkys all over the world,” Rachael replied.

“Okay,” John said on the video. “I’m here in front of Stinky’s Bait and Hardware where I bought a saw, a hammer, and a box of nails. I’m going to mount the moose antlers on my Cadillac hearse.”

The screen then went black again. When it resumed, John was standing by his hearse with moose antlers mounted on the hood.

“Now that’s fancy!” Don said.

“Why don’t you have those things on your car now?” Bert asked.

John stopped the tape. “I got in trouble on the border. The authorities told me the antlers would obstruct my view, and that it was illegal to hunt game without a license. I explained what happened, and then he told me it was illegal to tamper with road kill. Long story short, I had to leave my antlers in Canada.”

After the video, Midge went home for the evening. Jeanne, George, and Claire went with her to stay the night there. Don, Joshua, Sal, and Jess also went home for the evening, and so everyone at Bert and Rachael’s house started preparing for bed too.
It felt like her body was just going into deep sleep mode when Gretchen felt someone shaking her awake. Gretchen opened her eyes, rolled over, and saw her mother in curlers and a bathrobe standing over her.

"Time to get up we’re going to the mall. We want to be there at five for the excellent sales," Rachael said.

"When did this tradition start? If you think I’m leaving this bed you’re crazy."

"Please, it’s a girl thing your aunt started. All us girls are going except Midge. Plus I want to start my Christmas shopping." Rachael yanked the covers off Gretchen and the cold air of the fan hit her body. Gretchen was now awake. She rolled out of bed.

"Thank you, Sweetie," Rachael said and she gave Gretchen a kiss on the cheek. She left the room, and Gretchen, still in a sleep-like stupor, searched her duffle bags for something to wear. Her head felt so heavy that she wanted to go right back to sleep sitting in the floor of her bedroom. Gretchen pulled herself out of it, got upon her feet, and turned the overhead light on. The light filled the darkened room, but the brightness was too much for Gretchen’s eyes to take. She turned off the light and turned on a little table lamp, which let out just enough light for Gretchen to see to color coordinate her clothes.

At 3:30 Rachael, Gretchen, Julie, Jeanne, Claire, and Jess met up in front of Rachael and Bert’s van. They all got in. Rachael drove, Julie sat in the front, Claire
and Jeanne got in the back captain’s seats, and Gretchen and Jess were left to sit on the bench seat in the very back. Rachael started the ignition and they started off for the mall.

It was approaching six o’clock in the evening. Bert and Ralph sat in the living room in the two recliners watching the Outdoors Channel. Joe sat on the couch and watched time after time as some wealthy hunter shot and killed bucks, ducks, and various other woodland creatures. Watching was no longer entertaining to him. Joe went out on the front porch and sat in the cool air, which he thought felt wonderful compared to how hot it was inside the house. Joe sat in silence, and then he heard the van approach. He got up and waved to the women as the van came to a stop in the driveway. The ladies all piled out of the van and retrieved their various bags of purchases. Joe looked over at Gretchen who didn’t have any bag, but looked like she was in a bad mood.

“Did you all have a good trip?” Joe asked.

“Oh, we had a wonderful time,” Jeanne replied.

“We found some really good sales,” Rachael told him. Gretchen went by him without saying a word, went inside, and went up to her bedroom. Gretchen sat on her bed practicing an old therapy technique that her grade school guidance counselor taught her. She wrote down her frustrations as Joe knocked on the door and peeked inside.

“Is it all right to come in?”
“Yeah,” Gretchen answered in a flat tone. She put away her writing. Joe came in and sat down at the foot of her bed.

“Is everything okay? You seemed like you were in a bad mood when you came home.”

“You have no idea how bad it was. Mom woke me up too early and I couldn’t get back to sleep in the van because Mom sang along with the radio the entire way there and I was cramped in the very back seat. Jess used me as her pillow. When we finally got to the mall, it hadn’t opened yet, but there were people lined up outside the doors like it was a concert or a movie. I even saw tents where some crazy people camped out. We stood in line for fifteen minutes in the cold. When the doors opened, people rushed in like there was no tomorrow. I felt like I was in a herd of cattle.

“Mom and Granny Julie hurried to Sears and we lost Claire and Jeanne. I was left with Jess so the two of us went walking around the mall waiting for some more stores to open. There was such a crowd in there we could hardly walk though. As Jess and I walked towards Bath and Body Works, a woman going by tried to take my purse. I resisted and demanded she let go, but she kept tugging. That caused a scene, and what made it worse was when Jess slugged the woman and the two then started fighting. I was mortified. I wanted to pretend like I didn’t know either one of them and walk away. Security came along and took the three of us to an interrogation room somewhere in the mall. A few witnesses followed and testified against the woman. She was taken away and Jess and I went back to shopping.
"By the time that nightmare was over, some more stores opened so she and I went to a video store. Jess bought over a hundred dollars’ worth of DVDs of shows she likes to watch. We went to Victoria’s Secret to smell the perfumes and lotions, but an eager store clerk, who kept telling us about specials on panties, bras, and lingerie, followed us around. We were so annoyed we left without making a purchase. The last place we went to before going to lunch was the bookstore. Jess spent her time in the comic book section reading comic books while I sat at the coffee counter trying to get my fill of caffeine to keep me going for the rest of the day. As I sat there, some guy, who acted like a know-it-all, tried to impress everyone around him by spouting off how much he knew about everything. It’s people like that that make me sick. When Jess was finally ready to go it was noon. We went to the food court and found the others already there eating.

"While I was trying to eat my lunch, Aunt Jeanne was trying to milk information out of me about you. She’s under the impression that we’re engaged. What really got my goat was that she wanted to know how much money you made. She said it doesn’t matter how much I love you, if you don’t have money you weren’t worth marrying."

Joe chuckled.

"Jess started making comments again about how much Claire wasn’t eating. To avoid a fight I covered Jess’ mouth. I have no idea why she likes to get Claire riled up like that. And after lunch Mom and Granny Julie shanghaied me and took me to a bridal shop. Mom said I needed to start planning now as to when I want to get
married so that everything could be worked out. It seems that no matter how many
times I tell everyone that we’re not engaged the less they believe me. I give up
contradicting them. I’ll just let them believe what they want. But I did try on some
wedding dresses just for the fun of it, and they are expensive. When we left the bridal
shop, they took me with them to go Christmas shopping for Dad and Ralph. I have no
idea what to get them. I don’t have a man’s mentality. But while we were in J C
Penny’s, three shoppers were fighting over some article of clothing. While they were
having it out, we happened to walk by, and one woman hit Granny Julie over the head
with her purse. Granny Julie fell over into a rack of men’s shirts. Other than a
headache she was all right.

“By the time we left the mall it was four thirty. Traffic alone added another
half and hour onto our trip. All the way the interstate was jammed. I was the one
driving too because everyone else was too tired. I was tired too, but I guess I drew the
wrong straw. It seemed like I had a big sign on the van that said ‘Cut me off’ because
it seemed everyone who wanted to change lanes changed in front of me. One car cut
me off so close I could have rear-ended him if I hadn’t put on my brakes. I am glad to
be home.”

“And now you can take it easy,” Joe said. He got up from the bed and left the
room. Gretchen felt better after venting out her frustration. She took the paper she
was writing on, tore it up, threw it away, and lay down to take a nap.
When Gretchen woke up the next morning she felt completely rested. Outside the sun poured in her window in rays. She got out of bed, put on her slippers, and went downstairs. As she reached the foot of the stairs she saw Granny Julie and John both with their belongings and heading out the front door.

“Were you going to leave without saying good-bye to me?” Gretchen asked.

“I didn’t know how long you were gonna sleep. I have to get home so I can get back to radiology on Monday,” John said. He put his suitcase down and gave Gretchen a hug. “It’s been something else, but the food was good. Hey, let me know when your wedding is and I’ll get my band to play for you, all right?”

“All right,” Gretchen replied. She had grown tired of trying to correct everyone. She did plan on getting married one day maybe not to Joe.

“See you at Christmas.” John picked up his suitcase and left.

Granny Julie then stepped up and gave Gretchen a hug. “Well, baby, I best be heading out too. I love you. You take care of yourself and your fella. I’ll see you later.” Julie then gave Gretchen a kiss on the cheek. “I’m leaving now!” she called. Rachael ran out from the kitchen and gave her mother one last hug before she left. Rachael and Gretchen saw Julie out to her car as George and Jeanne, in their silver Mercedes, and Claire, in pink Mustang, passed. Gretchen and Rachael waved goodbye to them and watched as the cars disappeared over the hill. Granny Julie pulled out of the driveway and started off.

“Lord, don’t let her get lost,” Rachael quietly prayed. Once Julie was out of sight, Rachael and Gretchen went inside.
“What’s for breakfast?” Gretchen asked.

“You mean lunch. It’s almost 11:30,” Rachael answered.

“Really? I didn’t pay attention to my clock this morning. So why are you still in pajamas this late in the day?”

“Because I just haven’t changed yet.”

Both went into the kitchen where Ralph was still eating lunch. Instead of leftovers he was having a DiGiorno’s pizza. Gretchen noticed two people were absent from the scene.

“Where’s Dad and Joe?”

“They’re out in one of Dad’s outbuildings. Don’t ask me what they’re doing,” Rachael answered.

“Mom, we’re out of milk, and Cocoa Puff cereal. We also need napkins,” Ralph told her.

“Gretchen, would you please go to the store for me?”

“After I eat and get ready.”

After eating and getting dressed, Gretchen was ready to go to the store. She was coming down the stairs as Joe and Bert came in the front door.

“Hi,” she said. “Where have you two been?”

“I was in the outbuilding showing Joe how to skin a deer head. I think he was grossed out.”

“It was gross.”
"I bet Mom will be glad to get some of her freezer space back. I'm going to the store for her."

"Good, buy me some candy," Bert said.

"Do you want to come with me, Joe?"

"Sure."

Gretchen went into the kitchen to get the shopping list and some money from Rachael before going.

Before actually going to the store, Gretchen decided to go for a ride around Shelton Valley. She drove around Fairland Estates, which is the neighborhood where the well-to-do people of Shelton Valley lived. She and Joe looked at the expensive homes. Gretchen looked at the homes and then thought about her one-person apartment. She hoped that someday she could live in a house like those in Fairland Estates. She drove on and took Joe through the downtown area. Very few businesses remained downtown. The businesses either went out altogether or picked up and followed Wal-Mart to the skirts of town. City Hall, the high school, various lawyer, doctor, and government office buildings, churches, and funeral homes, banks, and the courthouse were all that remained downtown. Gretchen stopped the car in front of the courthouse. It was one of the grandest structures standing in Shelton Valley. It towered over the buildings around it. The courthouse had large marble steps and tall columns that went all the way up to the roof. It had large wooden doors and stained glass windows.
“I remember my political science teacher took us here on a field trip. The tour guide said that the courthouse was the product of FDR’s Works Project Act, and that it employed many young men from this area. They sure knew how to build things that would last back then,” Gretchen said. Joe nodded in agreement. Gretchen then drove along a back road that circled around downtown and came out on the fast food strip. Along the back road was the cemetery upon the hill. Somewhere up there Grandpa and Grandma Mills and other members of the Mills family were laid to rest. They soon came upon a dilapidated house. It was overgrown with vines, the windows were broken the roof had fallen in at some places. The front door was boarded shut.

“That house has been there since the town was formed. Legend has it a homeless man, a squirrel, and a cat built that house. The homeless man was tired of being homeless and he trained the two animals to steal people’s tools. He built that house from the trees he cut down in the woods around the house, and he made the bricks for the foundation from the mud he got from the creek.”

“Is that true?”

“Ask anyone in town about that house.”

“I still find it hard to believe.”

They passed the house and soon came out on the fast food strip where every fast food chain imaginable had set up shop. Gretchen pressed down the buttons that worked the automatic windows. As the windows came down the mouth-watering smells of French fries and grilled burgers filled the car. The smell alone was tempting enough to make one want to turn in and order a burger. Gretchen resisted. Such
smells reminded her of her college days when all she ate was fast food and although the smells were heavenly, she knew if she ate a burger she would gag. The further they went along the strip they came to a plaza of businesses one being the Save-A-Lot grocery store.

"We’re here," Gretchen announced as she parked the car. She pulled out Rachael’s list that grew from just three items to half a page’s worth of stuff. "We might be here for a while."

When Gretchen and Joe returned from the grocery store, Bert and Rachael were in the living room napping. Not wanting to wake her parents, Gretchen and Joe brought in the groceries and put them away. Gretchen took some of the canned goods that wouldn’t fit in the kitchen cabinets and put them in the spaces she could find on the pantry shelves.

"Mom needs to use these or give to a canned food drive," Gretchen said.

"Gretchen, where does this go?" Joe asked holding a package of sausages.

"Put them in that freezer," Gretchen answered and pointed at the chest freezer. Joe opened the freezer and saw the five skinned rabbits in freezer bags.

"What the heck are these?" Joe asked. Gretchen went over to look.

"I guess those are the rabbits you all hunted," Gretchen replied.

"They look awful skinned like that."

"True, but you can’t eat them with fur on them."
That evening with the hope that Rachael’s invitation to dinner would promise a good meal, Don, Joshua, Jess, and Midge showed up to eat. The family gathered around the dining room table as Rachael brought out covered plates of food. She removed the lids from the covered plates only to reveal more Thanksgiving leftovers. The majority sat and looked at the food with tired looks of disgust on their faces. It was day three of the same thing. Bert got some turkey, corn, and stuffing. Instead of eating the food he poked at it with his fork.

"Rachael, you know I love you, but I’m getting tired of leftovers,” he said.

“You either eat them or your beagles will,” Rachael replied and she loaded her plate. “I’m tired of leftovers too, but I never like for food to go to waste so I need for everyone to finish the leftovers.”

“Be glad you have it. When I was young we were in the Depression and we were lucky if we got good food to eat. Rachael, I won’t complain. A dying old woman like me is thankful for everything she gets,” Midge said. She then loaded her plate with as many leftover vegetables as possible.

“So what are you dying from today, Aunt Midge?” Don asked.

Midge had a frustrated look on her face. “You and Bert are both alike. I tell you I’m dying and you laugh at me. It doesn’t matter to you that I have a blood clot that could cause a stroke or an aneurysm.”

“Okay, how do you know you have one?” Bert asked.

“I...well...I just have one. I know it.”
“Do you have a will, Midge? As an attorney I can help you get your affairs in order. With a blood clot you could go at anytime. You need to be prepared.”

“Thank you, Joe, for your concern, but I’ve had a will made for years. I had one done the year my husband passed away. The Salvation Army gets all my stuff not my drug addicted, failure, jailbird sons. Although I will need to make some changes now that I got sis’ house,” Midge answered. She then leaned over and whispered in Gretchen’s ear, “He’s gonna make you very happy. He’s so considerate.”

Gretchen rolled her eyes around and shook her head. Her great aunt couldn’t pick up that Joe too was making a light thing of her hypochondria.

After dinner Midge went home. Bert and Don reclined in the two recliners and watched hunting shows while in the kitchen Rachael, Ralph, Jess, Joe, and Gretchen sat around the kitchen table playing Uno.

“Uno!” Gretchen happily called out.

“Yeah, yeah, you got one card left that can change,” Ralph said. Jess, Ralph, Rachael, and Joe went their turns putting down their skip cards or reverse order cards to make sure Gretchen couldn’t get her turn. Finally, when it was Gretchen’s turn, she threw down her last card.

“Ha! A wild card anything goes! I win!” Gretchen said and she got up to do a victory dance.

“Gee, your poor sportsmanship is starting to show,” Joe said.

“Gretchen’s always been a sore loser and a gloating winner either way you
can’t stand to play with her. Are you going to play some more or dance all night?” Jess asked as she shuffled cards. Gretchen calmed down and took her seat at the table. Once each person had seven cards the game began. Gretchen looked at her hand and giggled.

“She’d make a terrible poker player,” Joe said. Gretchen then got serious.

Toward the middle of the game the color was red and the number was four. It was Rachael’s turn and she had neither. She drew from the stack and still nothing. She drew over half the stack before she found a red card. Joe put down a red eight, and Gretchen changed the color to yellow. She now had two cards left.

“You pest!” Jess yelled out and she drew from the stack. Gretchen smiled and stuck her tongue out at Jess. Jess finally found a yellow card, but it was a reverse card, which meant back to Gretchen. Gretchen put down her yellow-five card.

“Uno!” Gretchen called out.

“Not again,” Ralph said. Joe put down a green five, Rachael a green nine, Ralph a green six, and Jess a blue six. It was now Gretchen’s turn. She gave everyone a large smile and put down a wild card again and the game was over.

“How do you do that?” Joe asked.

“Tut, tut, a master never reveals her secrets,” Gretchen replied.

Rachael looked up at the clock on the wall. “It’s 9:35 and we have church tomorrow so people need to start getting ready for bed. Since you’re the winner, Gretchen, you get to go first.” Gretchen left the table and went to take her shower.
“Now that she’s gone maybe some of the rest of us can win for a change,” Rachael said as she shuffled the cards.

X

“I- want- to- sing, sing, sing, sing—”

Gretchen opened her eyes. Bert was singing to someone. She suspected he was singing to Joe. Gretchen quickly got out of bed and retrieved her church clothes out of the closet. As she was leaving her room, Ralph was coming out of his room.

She rushed to the bathroom to beat Ralph. She made it in and slammed the door in Ralph’s face.

“Gretchen, don’t take all morning!” Ralph said as he pounded on the bathroom door.

“I won’t be long!” she called through the door. Ralph stood outside the bathroom waiting as Bert left Joe’s room. Ralph peeked in and saw Joe get out of bed. He could hear the beagles outside howling.

“Did you enjoy Dad’s wake-up call?” Ralph asked.

“Does he always do that?” Joe asked.

“Only if you’re still asleep past nine.”

When the family arrived at church, everyone saw the stranger that came in with the Mills family. Rachael and Bert went about introducing Joe everyone as
Gretchen’s fiancé. The preacher and his wife approached Gretchen with smiles on their faces.

“Congratulations, Gretchen, when you do decide to get married let me know and you can get married here,” the preacher said. “I can also conduct the ceremony for you.”

Gretchen thought about regular church services and Grandma Mildred’s funeral. She could only imagine people falling asleep at her wedding if he conducted the ceremony. “Thanks, I’ll keep that in mind,” she replied. She and Joe sat down in the back pew. “I just know I’m going to hell for this,” she said with a sigh. “I just let the preacher believe a lie.”

“Let them believe what they want. Eventually you will get married to someone,” Joe told her. The preacher then took his place behind the pulpit. The congregation took their seats and everything fell silent.

After returning to home from church, Gretchen and Joe packed their belongings, put their luggage in the car, and waited for lunch. While Rachael and Bert in a dual effort prepared lunch, Gretchen, Joe, Ralph, and Jess sat in the living room watching a Food Network special on the history of fast food restaurants. From the kitchen they could hear Rachael humming “Bringing in the Sheaves” as she cooked.

“Whatever they’re cooking in there it smells great,” Joe said.

“That’s rabbit. Only Mom, Dad, Don, and Midge like it. You might like it if you try it,” Gretchen told him.
"If not you can have cube steak like the rest of us," Ralph said.

The front door flung open and in ran Joshua. He jumped on the couch between Jess and Joe.

"What are you watching?" he asked.

"It's not SpongeBob that's for sure," Jess answered.

"I know that. SpongeBob isn't on anyway," Joshua replied. He kept jumping up and down. "This couch is like a trampoline."

"You better quit. You might break down the couch," Joe said.

"No I won't," Joshua replied. He then jumped off the couch and fell on the coffee table and broke the table.

"What's going on in there?" Bert asked. He and Rachael came in. Gretchen, Jess, Ralph, and Joe all pointed at Joshua who was on the floor on top of the broken table. Bert had an angry look on his face. Rachael helped Joshua upon his feet.

"Are you okay?" Rachael asked. Joshua nodded. "Good." And Rachael spanked him. Joshua looked at her with a shocked look on his face. "You will never jump around on my furniture ever again, and if I catch you doing it again I'll spank the living daylights out of you! Do you understand?"

Joshua nodded.

"Little heathen," Bert mumbled as he and Rachael went back into the kitchen.

Come lunch everyone gathered around the dining room table. Bert brought out the platters with rabbit on one platter, and fried cube steak on the other while
Rachael brought out the biscuits and gravy, mashed potatoes, and salad. Ralph again volunteered to say a blessing over the food. While Midge, Don, Bert, and Rachael had rabbit, biscuits and gravy, everyone else had cubed steak, mashed potatoes, and salad. Joe tried some rabbit, but ended up eating fried cubed steak like the rest.

"Excellent steak," Sal said.

"The rabbit is better," Don said.

"I'm glad I could make something everyone likes."

Joe sat back taking in the sight. Gathered around him were content people with smiling faces. This was how he pictured Thanksgiving, and even though it was not Thanksgiving it felt like it to him. He was thankful that he was temporarily a part of a family where everyone was smiling, laughing, and enjoying the food and company.

Gretchen looked over at Joe who sat across from her at the table. He appeared to be relaxed and happy to be there. She was relieved. She had assumed the worst, and even though the worst happened, he was willing to persevere. She was glad that the heartbreaking outcome she had predicted would happen never did happen. Lunch was now coming to an end, and Gretchen knew that she and Joe would have to leave soon. Their break was over and come Monday it would be back to work and back to the routine way of life.

After lunch, Gretchen determined it was time to say good-bye. She gave everyone a hug before leaving. Rachael and Midge gave Joe a farewell hug.
“Sorry for kissing you without warning,” Jess told him and she shook his hand.

“Well, it got Claire off your case,” Joe assured her.

Bert, Don, and Sal all gave Joe a handshake.

“Maybe next time you’ll get a rabbit,” Don said.

“Sorry I almost shot you,” Sal apologized.

“You didn’t and that’s the most important thing,” Joe answered.

Gretchen and Joe went to the car. They got in, put on their seat belts, and Gretchen started the ignition. As they backed out of the driveway, Joe and Gretchen waved good-bye to the family. As they drove away, Gretchen watched in the rearview mirror as the houses got smaller and disappeared over the hill.

“I’m glad this holiday wasn’t a complete disaster,” Gretchen said.

“Not at all. Your family is very accepting and friendly once they get to know a person. You have quite a unique family.”

“I know and I love them just the same.”

“Do you think it would be okay if I came back next year?”