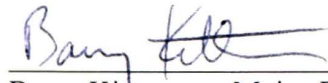


RURAL REFLECTIONS

STEPHANIE PERKINS

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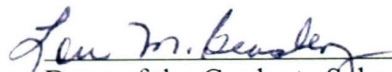


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Date April 28, 2004

Rural Reflections

A Thesis

Presented for the

Masters of Arts

Degree

Austin Peay State University

Stephanie Perkins

April, 2004

INTRODUCTION

“Rural Reflections” is a multi genre work, concerned with women’s conflicts and happenings in their everyday lives. Within the fiction, poetry, and memoir, I have endeavored to communicate the misunderstandings, struggles, secrets, hardships, happiness, and humor involved in relationships within circles of family, friends, and community.

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Passage

My grandmother slept on piles of pillows
supporting her curved, scant column
contorting her frame of fallen twigs

Her hands, the core of kin
canning, quilting, cooking, caring
but never too loving
too terrified of shattering

Her eyes were sunken gray orbs
darkened by twilight
her hair, a fine cotton boll,
sent soaring with a stroke of her comb
like dandelions swirling in the currents before a storm
no more proud spit curls for her

Tubes tumbled from her
“Is it Okay to die?”
the words faintly fell from her lips
through her burdensome breaths

I prayed for her passage
for peace
for sleep
her time ticked
until her clock ceased
her measure met

Memories Boxed and Bought

The moisture on the tall blades of grass soaked my white canvas shoes and my bare legs. My mother, holding my six-year-old hand, dragged me on until we stood at the back of the lonely house. There were boxes, and there were people. The sight of Mr. Marvin's bed on the front lawn was strange, but the rows of boxes filled with books, paperweights, pans, and plates overwhelmed me. I didn't know where to start. The people swarmed. My mother placed me in front of a box.

"Remember," my mother said as she knelt down, "you can only have one thing."

She swung her purse onto her shoulder. As she walked away, I wondered why she had left her scarf around her head and the small rollers in, just in front of her ears. Each night she spun the curls and wrapped her once-a-week hairdo into place before bed. I'd never seen her leave home with her hair still wrapped except when we helped Uncle Kelly with tobacco.

My mother left me there. At first I watched the others. A woman with dirty feet and worn-out flip flops picked up a cast-iron skillet, discussed the price with another woman who was still wearing her housedress, and placed it back in the box. When they walked away, I looked into the box in front of me. Should I touch anything? My mother had fussed at me repeatedly in stores for touching, but somehow this was different. It was okay to handle Mr. Marvin's possessions. I knew Mr. Marvin wouldn't have liked it. The vision of him stepping out onto his porch in his freshly steamed suit crept into my mind. He would have politely excused everyone from his yard, and no one would have

been offended. After all, it was Mr. Marvin. But he wasn't there to stop me, or anyone else. He was gone. My mother regretted Mr. Marvin's passing, and that was why we were there. Wanting a keepsake to remind her of the past, my mother introduced me to what happens to our possessions after we are gone.

I picked through the first box. A razor, partially filled cologne bottles, a silver plated brush and comb set with a cracked mirror held no interest for me as a child. As I moved to the next box, my mother returned with a set of embroidered pillowcases with dainty daisies trimming the edges.

"What did you find?" she said.

"Nothing."

Looking at the boxes that were near us, she stooped down and held up a dachshund figurine, a stained baseball, and a bag of marbles. I didn't want any of them. My mother was in a hurry, as always, and I don't remember if she picked out the heavy bookends or if I did. But she paid the man hovering over the boxes, and we went home.

Afterward, I felt confused, and when my mother finished cleaning the weighty wood and horseshoe bookends, she placed them on my shelf and seemed proud. When she left my room, I stared, and I felt strangely uncomfortable. Although I didn't realize it then, I felt guilty for taking what wasn't mine. I hid them in the closet, out of sight.

A few days later, I found my mother cleaning my room. When I saw her, all that came to mind was the set of bookends. Had she missed them yet? I tried to slip out, but she heard the floor squeak beneath the light touch of my sneaker.

“I thought we should go through your closet and get rid of some of your old clothes,” she said as she continued to pick through the clothes on the floor. “Yes, that’s what we should do. Is that okay with you?”

I knew that she had found the bookends, but she wanted to make me suffer. I cringed at the thought of a lecture. “Did you find them?” I said, wanting to get it over with.

“Find what?”

“You found the bookends in the closet.”

“Oh, you mean these.” My mother pointed to the bookends. They were back on my shelf. “I don’t know how they got into your closet. Do you?”

I looked down at my feet. “I’m sorry.”

“Why didn’t you tell me you didn’t want them? I could have put them somewhere else. I thought you’d like to have them,” she said, now holding them in her hands. As she walked to the door, I saw the sorrow I had caused.

“Why did you want them?” I said.

She turned away from the door and faced me. She looked at the bookends. “I’ve known him all my life. When I was little, he was our postman.” She smiled. “The post office had a rule. While driving his route, he was not to let anyone ride with him. But he found a way around it. He let me ride on the running board to my grandmother’s. Mammy’s was six miles away, and his ride gave me that much longer to visit.” She

stood with watery eyes. "He was kind." She looked past me, out the window, and past what was visible.

I promised to take care of Mr. Marvin's bookends.

As a child, I stayed with my grandmother while my parents worked. When my grandmother's memory and health began to slip, she moved in with us. I always think of her as a Breck girl, and she did use that shampoo. In the yellowed photo of her and her family that set on her nightstand, she could have been a Breck girl. Perfectly bobbed, waved hair with one spit curl in the middle, that was my grandmother's hairstyle. One day I realized my grandmother was the only one in the photo without a hat. When I asked her why she didn't have one on, she didn't hesitate.

"I didn't want to mess up my hair," she said, as if I should have known the answer.

By the time she moved in with us, the spit curl was long gone and so were most of her possessions, but what she did have, she brought with her. Making herself feel at home, she placed her rocker in the living room as well as other odds and ends about the house. Early on, I found myself mystified by a slightly opaque vase with a golden hue. When I held it in the light and turned it, other colors reflected. Shades of pinks and oranges swirled in the gold. Irises in relief reached for the top of the wide-mouthed vase. I grew curious about the vase. I was sure it was a priceless heirloom.

"Where did Grandma's vase come from?" I said, holding it firmly in my hands.

“That old thing. It was a promotional. She got it from the furniture store.”

It was worth no more than the jelly jars we used as drinking glasses. But the lack of monetary value did not diminish its value to me. Seeing my interest in the vase, my mother promised it would someday be passed down to me.

A couple of years after I had married, I was at my mother's house when she was moving a few things from the attic. I was in a different part of the house when I heard a crash. I ran to make sure my mother was all right. She was, but the vase wasn't. Before me, scattered to every corner of the room was golden glass. The tiny pieces no longer reflected the mysterious swirls of colors. It was lost.

“I'm sorry. I'm so sorry,” my mother said as her tears mixed with the slivers she swept from the floor.

“It's okay,” I said. “It's just a vase.”

“If I'd given it to you, this wouldn't have happened.”

“You don't know that,” I said. “Maybe I would have broken it.”

I held back my tears and helped my mother. When we finished cleaning the pieces of glass from the floor, I noticed blood following my mother's footsteps.

“Are you okay?” I said.

“I am if you are,” she said.

“That's not what I mean. You're bleeding,” I said. I pointed to the trail of blood that led to where my mother stood.

“Sit down,” I said. As my mother sat in the chair, she continued to cry. I picked the minute shards from her wounded feet and whispered to her, “it’s only a vase.”

I’ve seen a few vases like it since in antique stores. They were all reasonably priced, but I never bought a replacement. How could I replace my grandmother’s vase? It wasn’t possible, and I knew then that it wasn’t the vase that I wanted.

When my husband and I married, we decided on the one-year rule. *If you don’t wear it or use it in a year, it goes.* Our house is small and doesn’t allow anything unnecessary. This rule works for most things, but some items are untouchable. My grandmother’s ruby bowl, my great aunt’s cups and saucers from her collection, and my great grandmother’s preserve stand can never be discarded. Somehow, these inanimate objects symbolize their once animated owners. Logically, it is silly to hold on to memories this way. I know that when I cease to exist, these material things I cling to will be left. When that happens, I imagine that my belongings will be boxed up and sold. I see my great grandmother’s preserve-stand in a box with a tag on it. A woman in an oversized sweat suit will pick it up and talk about what a pretty candy dish it is. She’ll have no idea that Mammy served her best blackberry jam in that dish. The woman’s eyes will search for the tag. She’ll discover the price, and place it back into the box.

Pajamas and Pie

I stood over the sink, washing dishes. As I waved to my husband, dishwater flew from my fingers onto the window. Grabbing a dishtowel, I wiped away my mess, and my eyes followed my husband's car until it disappeared. It was another school year for him. The school year pilgrimage was one I had made for eleven years, but was not going to make this year. The school was where I should be, or was it? I stood with bare feet on cool linoleum, wondering where my place was.

My mind drifted to Coach Pickeren, my eighth-grade teacher and for several years, my peer. Santa Claus in clogs was what he conjured up in my mind. His stories and jokes were part of what I'd be missing this year. As he sits down to eat his lunch, he'll look around the table. If he has enough of a new audience, he'll tell what we call a classic. Perhaps he'll tell the Keith story.

Coach Pickeren taught first aid to one of the special classes. He went to their classroom instead of having them come to him. Mondays through Thursdays, he had the students working on basic first aid. On Fridays, he rewarded the students by taking them to the playground. When he got to class one day, he didn't see Keith.

"Did Keith check out and go home?" Pickeren asked Keith's teacher, Mrs. Baker. "I thought I saw him this morning."

“No,” she said, placing her hands on her hips. “He’s in time out.” She pointed to a cardboard box across the room. “Keith, stand up.” Keith stood. He had his back to both teachers. “Turn around and show him Keith,” the teacher said.

A tall, pale boy of twelve turned around and stood above the cardboard box of punishment. Both cheeks puffed out, and eyes filled with bewilderment.

“Keith, what’s the deal?” Pickeren asked.

“He didn’t like the nachos at lunch,” said Mrs. Baker. “And he won’t swallow them.” As she staring at the bulging cheeks, her face turned an angry red.

Pickeren stood looking at the boy who held chewed up nachos in his cheeks for three hours. Pickeren, puzzled over the situation, said nothing at first. Holding his laughter back from the sight before him, he walked over to Keith, deciding how he might settle the problem.

“Keith, we’re going to the playground to look for big trucks,” Pickeren said.

“You’ve got to swallow the nachos before we go.”

Keith looked at Pickeren hard and forced some down and then forced some more down.

“I need a drink before we go,” Keith said in a rough voice.

Mrs. Baker brought him a cup of water, and he got the nachos down. At the playground, Keith looked for big trucks.

It's a disgusting story for lunch, but it's a great way to have fun with the new teachers. And if it wasn't the Keith story, Pickeren would find something else as disgusting to tell to get everyone's year off to a great start. I hated that I wouldn't be there to laugh at the unsuspecting new teachers.

I wrung the dishcloth out and wiped the counter tops. Satisfied with the kitchen, I reached into the cabinet under the sink and brought out the furniture polish and dusting cloth. I was sure I could conquer the bedroom dust bunnies in no time. Dusting each picture and whatnot as I moved it from the dresser to the floor, I finally had a clear surface. I sprayed and wiped. I was stopped by my reflection in the mirror. I noticed the pajamas and wondered how many days I'd spend in them. It'd cut down on laundry. But then my eyes captured themselves in the mirror and were mesmerized. The lonesome grays stared back at me, and they scrutinized my face. The fine lines around my eyes glared at me. Youth was not mine anymore, and I wondered at my decision to leave a good job and good people.

Every day at school was an adventure, and each year brought new surprises. But I would not have the adventures or surprises this year. I finished up the dusting and decided to tackle my closet. The closet contained a kaleidoscope of colors. Within the diversity of colors, I found the black and white, my school colors. Or maybe they weren't my school colors any more. Shirts that read *Wildcat* needed to go. I held one in my hand and paused. What if I went back next year? I'd need it then. With that thought,

I put the shirt back on the hanger and back into the closet. I moved all my school shirts to the far end of the closet. When I picked up the one with *Coach Perkins* written on it, I wondered what Coach Tabor was doing today. His experience as a cross-country and track and field coach had been a benefit to me. He often helped me with my Special Olympics team. But his school career was coming to an end. This could be his last year. Retirement was his next stop. But today, the first day of school as assistant principal, I knew there would be some punishment he would have to render. I've always wondered why he became assistant principal. Tabor was not cut out to be the heavy, and I knew he missed teaching. Even more than teaching, he missed coaching.

Coaching meant traveling with the athletes, and that meant learning more about them. The first year he coached cross-country, Tabor and another coach arranged to take a group to Frankfort, Kentucky, to compete in a meet. When they got there, they drove to the motel to change before the meet. The coaches gave the motel keys out on the bus. The boys were staying four in a room, but the coaches only gave one of the four a key. Tabor handed Josh, a 6'1" fourteen-year-old, his key.

"Get your bag from under the bus and go on to your room," Tabor said.

"No problem, coach," Josh said. "Let me check it out first," he said, turning to his roommates.

After all the keys were given out and all the boys were off the bus, Tabor gathered his things and started off for his room. When he stepped off the bus, he saw Josh's long

arm, the color of creamy coffee, jutting from his team shirt and stretched across the door to his room. He stood in the doorway, blocking his roommates.

Seeing Josh and hearing sounds of irritation from his roommates, Tabor walked over.

“What seems to be the problem, fellows?” Tabor asked. “I thought you all were happy with the room arrangements, and now this.”

Josh stood not moving. His loose curls framed his face and his hazel eyes looked puzzled.

“This room’s no good,” Josh said, “Coach, we can’t stay here. They’ve got paper over the commode. Something’s wrong with it.”

Tabor eased past Josh’s guarding arm, walked into the room, and headed for the bathroom. Seeing a strip of paper across the commode that read, *sanitized for your protections*, Tabor tried not to laugh. He tore off the paper. Going back to the door, Tabor looked at the boys.

“Josh, I want you in,” Tabor said, “and I want the rest of you to stay where you are.” Realizing that Josh had never stayed in a motel, he took him into the room and closed the door.

“Josh, they put that strip of paper on the commode to show that they have cleaned it,” Tabor said, trying to be delicate with the matter. “Next time, tear it off and put it in the trash. That’s all you have to do.”

Josh’s curls fell forward as his head hung in embarrassment.

“Sorry Coach.”

“You get settled. I’ll tell the guys we got the toilet fixed.”

Josh gave Tabor a half smile. Tabor left the boys and walked to his room.

I gave up on the closet. I had forever. I realized the morning was over. Lunch. I went to the kitchen to find something to eat. I wondered if my husband, David, a special education teacher turned administrator, was eating now. I packed his lunch for him. We ate lunch together when I was teaching. I missed him. There was some pie. I grabbed the pie pan, a fork, and a coke from the refrigerator. Sitting down on the couch, I flipped through the channels. Nothing was on, but I left it on for the noise. I forked the pie and savored the sweetness. I knew I couldn’t eat pie every day, but for today, it was okay. I thought about my husband again. He’d tease me if he saw me eating pie for lunch. I was the one who always insisted on a balanced diet, not him. If he could see me, he’d say I looked like Roy. And that was no compliment.

One year David had Roy in class. When Roy didn’t come to class one morning, David called the office and asked if they knew where he was. They hadn’t seen Roy but would look for him. Giving up on Roy, David started class, but in a few minutes, the principal walked in. Roy followed the principal. Roy’s pasty belly hung out over his pants, and he shuffled his pigeon-toed feet across the room. In one hand he carried a paper bag, and with the other hand he pushed up his glasses. There were crumbs on and

around Roy's mouth. Roy took his seat and placed the paper bag down on the floor beside him.

"Where'd you find him?" David asked the principal.

"Why don't we step out into the hall," the principal said. "I'll explain everything." Out in the hall, the principal began Roy's story. "I found him in the boys' restroom. He was in a stall eating pecan pies."

"He was what?" David said.

"Home Ec. is having a bake sale. Roy told his mother that he needed money to pay school fees, but he lied so he could buy pies. He bought three. He had eaten two by the time I found him."

"Thanks for finding him," David said, stunned at the thought of Roy on the toilet eating pies.

Without saying a word, David went back to teaching, while Roy concentrated on the remaining pie.

I smiled at the thought of Roy. Maybe I was like Roy. Did the pies fill his emptiness? I was hoping that my pie would fill mine. Why was I sitting on the couch eating pie in my pajamas instead of teaching? That was something that I hadn't completely figured out yet. I've learned to laugh instead of cry at the Roys of the world. But there are some students who couldn't be laughed away.

Before I left teaching, I'd watched many painful events and had been at God's mercy. Only there were times when God's mercy was nowhere to be found. When I found one of my students, Tamara, huddled in the back corner of the bathroom, I didn't know what to do.

"What's wrong?" I asked. "Do you want to talk about it?"

She sat up and acknowledged my presence. She held her knees close to her chest, afraid to let go of herself. If she let go, she might have burst into many tiny pieces. She rocked, back and forth. Her caramel skin was now crimson, and her face was contorted with the pain that lurked in her tiny body. The harder she cried, the harder she breathed. She began to hyperventilate.

"Take deep breaths," I said. I think I needed to hear myself talk to bring me back from her world of pain. I grabbed toilet paper. "Blow," I said. She followed all my instructions, and why shouldn't she. I was the teacher. I had all the answers. Didn't I? With her breathing under control, I got her off the floor. She clung to me. Her tears soaked my shoulder. When she was all cried out, she wanted to talk.

"My momma's in the hospital," she said.

"I know," I said. "She's got pneumonia doesn't she?"

"Yes," she said, still sniffing. "She's getting worse."

"She'll be okay," I said, trying to comfort her. "The doctors will take care of her. You've got to concentrate on graduation."

She cried at this. "What if she can't be there?"

“That’s a couple of months away,” I said. “Don’t worry about that now. What something to drink?”

She agreed to walk with me to the guidance office to get a coke out of the teachers’ lounge. I sat with her until the tears were gone and her face was returning to normal. Then I walked her to class.

Within two weeks her mother passed away. She died with pneumonia because of a weakened immune system. She had had AIDS, and I hadn’t known.

I went to the funeral home. I had to make sure that Tamara was okay. I knew that returning to school would be difficult, but graduation was only a few weeks away. She returned to school, and I watched her walk across the stage and receive her diploma. The weeks before graduation were difficult. But she made it.

When I thought of her future, it scared me. She was eighteen with no job, no real home, and two little brothers. What did her future hold? Only a few months before, I told her that everything would be okay. But I doubted it now. Guilt filled me. In trying to comfort her, I’d lied. Everything was not all right. Her life was a battle before, but now it was a war.

That’s when I questioned my teaching and myself. I had gone into teaching to change the world. I wanted to help the students who were slipping through the cracks of public education. I knew first hand what it was like to be ignored because I was an average student and wasn’t disruptive. The teachers had left me alone for ten years. It was not until my junior year of high school that one of my teachers looked at me and

mentioned college. That teacher challenged me in the classroom, and because she had pulled me from falling into the abyss of an empty future, I wanted to do the same for someone else. Teaching was more than summers off, holidays, and a paycheck. But at that moment when I saw Tamara walk across the stage, receive her diploma, and see my goal of her finishing high school accomplished, I wondered had I done what I'd set out to do. She reached my goal of getting through high school. The question now was, was that enough? It didn't seem to fill the greater good of my plan. My mind searched itself wondering how I could have done a better job because I realized my goal of graduation didn't necessarily mean a successful, brighter future for Tamara or any of my other students. That moment was the beginning of the end of my teaching. The job seemed much too big and overwhelming, and the soul searching that followed didn't leave me with any answers. I soon left my position.

A year had passed since I left teaching, and I still didn't have any answers. After an afternoon of shopping, gathering the last, needed items for my family's trip to South Dakota, I returned home to find an unexpected message on my voice mail. It took me by surprise, and I wasn't sure what to make of it.

"Call me first thing Monday," the assistant principal said. "We've got a full-time opening, and I need to know if you're interested."

Interested. The word ricocheted in my head. Was I interested? I knew I wouldn't be home on Monday; in fact, I wasn't even going to be in the state. Knowing I'd be over

half way to South Dakota from Kentucky on Monday didn't make a decision any easier. Floundering in indecision was how I'd spent my year away from teaching. Although most people, including my husband, considered me a bit eccentric when I mentioned fate and wondered if things meant something beyond the obvious, the call made me question if my future was staring me in the face. That night, I told my husband about the call and maybe teaching was what I was meant to do whether I wanted to or not, and he listened. When I concluded my blathering or his endurance waned, the conversation ended much like most of my philosophical conversations about the meaning of life and whether I'm on the right track.

"Do whatever makes you happy," he said.

His comment left me in my state of uncertainty, where I spend a good deal of time. When he saw frustration on my face, he tried to be understanding, but it was useless.

"What do you want me to do?" he said. "You want me to tell you what to do, so if you hate it, you can blame me?"

He was right, and I hated it. I wanted someone to tell me what to do, to make decisions for me. Although I realized all this, it didn't make the situation any easier. Since I over analyze, I decided to try and put the call out of my mind until Monday.

Monday morning came, and I found myself in Independence, Missouri. After breakfast and a short drive, we stopped at the Truman Library, a beautiful new building, a short video, and on to the displays. I thought I saw my grandmother's brilliant chrome

and Formica kitchen table and chairs as I wandered through the exhibits. We soon found ourselves at the oval office, a replica of Truman's office with many of his own belongings strewn throughout the room, as though he'd just stepped out. Seeing a sign for the restroom, I told my husband I'd be back in a minute. Outside the restrooms was a pay phone. I made a decision to call. If I knew more about the position, I could give it some thought while on vacation. Going for an interview would be impossible until the following Monday. That gave me more confidence to make the call; I had a week.

When I called, I asked the secretary for the assistant principal.

"She's out of her office," the secretary said. "May I take a message?"

I told her my name and continued. "I'm returning her call. She..."

The secretary interrupted me. "Can you hold? I'll page her."

I waited for what seemed like a long time. My heart pounded in my ears. Finally a voice came on the line.

"Oh, I'm so glad you called. I have a full time position in English. Are you interested?"

At first I said nothing. "I'm out of town on vacation," I managed. "I won't be back until next Monday."

"All I need to know is are you interested. The job's yours."

This was not what I expected. What happened to my week?

I hesitated, looked at my feet, out the window into the courtyard.

"Yes," I heard myself say.

“Great. You’ll need to stop by the board when you get back to get your paperwork in order,” she said. “I’ve heard a lot about you. Glad to have you on board.”

Hanging up the phone, regret and second-guessing lurked in my mind. I went back to the oval office and told my husband.

“I thought it was the right thing to do,” I heard myself saying, not for him but for me. “Maybe I’m supposed to teach. What do I have to lose? Besides, how many people do you think get hired on the pay phone at the Truman Library?”

I’ve been there two years now. Teaching is not an easy job. Anyone who professes otherwise is either lying or showing up to put in his or her time. I wanted to teach, to help others, and most of the time I think I’m succeeding. Daniel, a student I had in junior English last year, came by the other day. He wanted to know if I would proofread his paper before he turned it into his senior English teacher. We spent thirty minutes on his paper.

“Thank you Ms. Perkins,” Daniel said with a smile that stretched across his face.

“You’re welcome. I hope you make a good grade,” I said, handing him a clean print out.

“I will now. You got any chocolate in your desk?”

“No, but I’ll bring you a candy bar after lunch.

I won’t lie. There are days I wonder why I bother. The students are apathetic, the administration is out of touch, and there is more work than I can ever accomplish. As a

teacher I sometimes feel like my students. I don't always want to do what I'm told.

There are always new things I must learn, and there are days I just want to sit and eat candy and hope it comforts me enough to get through the day. I just hope there are more days of smiles and thanks and fewer days of eating pie.

Traces of Silence in Conversation

The farmers had cut their tobacco, leaving behind barren stubs in the burnt orange, dusty soil. Smoke crept from cracks and crevices of the firing barns and reminded Annabelle of the nearing of autumn. Families gathered the remaining fresh fruits and vegetables from crackling, yellowing vines. The Sizemore family was no different from their neighbors in this manner.

Annabelle and her oldest daughter Eliza moved crouched down in rows of peas, the last of the season. Annabelle wiped the sweat from her forehead with the back of her hand and pushed a loose curl back into place with her long fingers. The white, enameled dishpan rested on her left hip, secured with one hand, as she snapped the purple hulls from the bushes with the other. Moving at a slower pace, Eliza pulled at the peas with her less experienced thirteen-year-old fingers. The dew and dirt mingled and caked on her bare feet.

“Hurry,” said Annabelle. “I haven’t much time.”

“You think you’ll get it, Mama?”

Eliza looked at her mother, who was still picking.

“You think you’ll get it, Mama?” Eliza asked again.

Annabelle stopped, stood straight, and looked around the farm. She stared at the wind-torn tin roof of their barn. *The boys would have to get on that before winter*, she thought. She remembered the day the barn had been raised. The men in the community came at sun up. The women came at lunch, bringing with them a variety of side dishes

and sweets. Annabelle had baked a ham and more biscuits than she thought possible. She worked for days cleaning, cooking, and preparing for the event. The make-shift tables of saw horses and planks were set up by her husband, and square bales of hay lined the sides of the tables for seats. When the men had been fed and had gone back to work, the women ate. After their meal, they gathered up their dishes but didn't leave. They moved their conversation and laughter to the sitting room where each pulled out her squares for a nine-patch quilt. Sitting in a circle the women sewed, talked, and laughed. As the day eased into evening, the women gathered their things and walked back to their homes, where they would prepare supper for their own. When evening's sun waned and the light faded, the men gathered their tools. The men disappeared from sight, and Annabelle stood beside her exhausted husband smelling the newness of the wood and the sweat of the men mingling in the cool spring breeze. Her eyes lit with approval, and she hugged and kissed her husband, brushing the sawdust from his face. He put his arm around her, and she watched him as he eyed his new barn and smiled with approval.

"Well," Eliza said.

Annabelle turned from the barn and looked back at her girl's hopeful face.

"No choice." A quick smile replaced the blank stare. "Back to work," Annabelle said as her worn dress blew through her long, slender legs.

At the end of her row, Annabelle turned to Eliza's row and gathered peas until they met. They walked from the yellowing garden to the cistern at the back of the house.

There Annabelle, with both hands, grabbed the handle of the pump and pushed and pulled as Eliza poured the can of priming water down the pump. Annabelle continued to work the handle as water ran over Eliza's mud caked feet.

"Refill the priming can and bring the buckets around."

Obediently, Eliza filled the coffee can and gathered the empty buckets.

"Mama?"

"What, child?"

"But what if you don't?"

"God forbid you to think such," Annabelle said. She stacked the heaped dishpans on top of each other and handed them to Eliza. "You take these around to the front porch and get a start on them. Your aunt will be here soon. She'll help you finish them."

Annabelle took up one of the buckets and walked to her room. She poured the water into the small washtub she had placed there earlier. Sitting down on the stool before the dresser mirror, she noticed her hair and dampened a few sprigs, spun them into curls, and pinned them. She'd take the pins out after her bath. Her best suit hung on her closet door near her bed where her husband once lay with her. He was taken by consumption, and she now slept alone. Seven years had passed. Even his own brother insisted that she put him in the sanitarium, but she wouldn't. When he died, her brother, Noble, said that she should move to town, but she wouldn't. The farm and children rested solely on her shoulders, and she had managed. But she wondered if she could continue.

Undressed, she stood in the tub, reached down to a water-filled sponge, and squeezed the water down her legs. She looked up to see her reflection in the mirror. The proof of bearing and nourishing four live children was clear. Her eyes captured themselves in the mirror. The lonesome grays stared back at her, and the fine lines proved that youth had left her behind. *What was she to do if she didn't get the job?* She stepped out of the tub onto a dry cloth and wrapped a clean cloth around her. She dried, dressed, and sat back at the mirror. She unpinned the curls, powdered her face, applied the little-used lipstick, and picked up her hat and gloves. Before she opened the door, she heard the mumble of the children in the house. They sounded like a hive of bees buzzing about her.

She opened her bedroom door and looked across the hall. The sagging kitchen door faced her. The paint on the door was no longer a clean white. Streaks of yellow grease stained the door and a hint of brown blended in from the occasionally burned meal. Annabelle stepped out into the hall and faced the front door. She walked past the other bedroom and past the sitting room where she noticed the wallpaper hanging precariously in the corner. *Maybe it will hold until I can mix some paste,* she thought. She stood in the open doorway of the front door and looked out the screen. There on the porch was her sister Mildred Ann. She watched as Eliza and Mildred Ann hulled the peas and talked. They were so peaceful. She felt a whining Elmer pull on her skirt and looked down at him. She ran her fingers through his fine, soft hair. It was the shade of

the summer sunsets she watched from her kitchen windows. She brushed aside his bangs and kissed him on the forehead. He held up his arms.

“No, honey,” she said. “Mama can’t pick you up.” She turned from the child and called to the kitchen, “Lois, come get your brother.”

A girl, just a bit bigger than the boy, hopped through the kitchen door and grabbed the boy around the wrist and pulled him away. Elmer cried out, but Annabelle gave no notice as she saw the billowing clouds of dust coming down the road. She went out onto the porch.

“Don’t you look pretty,” Mildred Ann said as she rose from her seat. She saw the dust and knew too that it was their brother, Noble. “Why don’t you check your lipstick before you go?”

Annabelle stepped back into the house. When the car reached the house, Mildred Ann walked out to meet Noble. “Are you sure this is the right thing?”

“Makes no difference,” he said as he walked past Mildred Ann. “What else is there to do?”

“Did you tell her?”

Noble stopped, turned, removed his hat, and looked Mildred Ann square in the face. “Did you?”

“You know I didn’t. But isn’t there something else we can do?”

“I’ve tried to get her to stop,” Noble said, as he flipped his hat around in his hands. “She keeps going to the school and begging for a job.” He stopped and looked

around the farm. Weeds surrounded the tractor left in the field. It was in the same place he'd seen it a month ago. He shook his head at the sight of it. "You'd think after last year she'd know she wasn't going to get one. If it hadn't been for those boys, maybe, but there's no chance after that."

"But I don't see it."

"It's not real obvious to me either. But in the kitchen the other day, I heard it. It was there a minute. She was at the stove while I was sitting and drinking coffee at the table. But then it was gone. I don't claim to have the answers. That's why I think it's best that someone else decide for us."

He turned back to the house and met Annabelle and the children. "Let's go," he said to Annabelle. "You don't want to be late."

"Thank you for coming for me," Annabelle said as she moved to the car. "I know how much you hate driving these dusty roads."

"Good luck," Eliza said. Her mother offered her a smile and a wave.

Noble opened the door for Annabelle and helped her in. Walking around the car, he looked over the round roof to Mildred Ann and gave her a quick glance.

"I'll see you later."

The door closed and the car moved down the road, out of sight.

When the morning newscast finished and music began to fill the car, Annabelle reached over and turned the volume louder. She sang along with *Sentimental Journey*

until Noble turned the blaring radio down and looked at his sister disapprovingly. She sat straight and didn't bother with conversation, until she felt something pressing into her leg. Reaching under her thigh, she pulled out a small bottle of Listerine. She held the bottle in front of her, examining it. Noble grabbed the bottle from his sister.

"Why do you have this in here?" Annabelle said.

"To keep people out of my business, including you." Noble changed the subject as quickly as possible. "I saw Harry Truman on the television last week, or at least it sounded like him. Couldn't see him too well, too much snow."

"What?"

"I said I heard President Truman on television last week," Noble said a little louder.

"I read about it in the paper," Annabelle said. "I'll be glad when they run the wires for electricity out to my house."

"What'd you think about his idea of meatless Tuesdays?"

"Believe me, we have a lot of meatless Tuesdays."

Noble didn't say more and neither did Annabelle until they drove by the school. She looked at Noble strangely.

"Where are you taking me?"

"Downtown."

"Where?"

"Downtown," he said.

“But I thought we were going to the school. What about my interview?”

“They will interview you downtown.”

Approaching the town square, Noble passed the A&P. The signs lined the large glass windows advertising the special on stew meat, carrots, and tomatoes. Annabelle thought maybe they could stop on the way home if she got the job. On the other side was the Five-and-Dime. They had a display of children’s shoes in the window with a sign that read “Back to School Sale.” Annabelle slumped down in the seat a little. She wondered where she’d get the money to buy all the children shoes this year. Even their Sunday shoes were worn badly. As they drove closer to the courthouse, Annabelle saw the Farmer’s Bank. She certainly knew that place well since her husband had passed. The cost of starting a crop and keeping a farm going was more than she had ever thought. When Noble got to the center of town, he pulled into a parking space in front of the courthouse. The two-story brick structure loomed over the benches where men gathered to share their tales. A few were playing checkers while others leaned against the engraved marble slab that was a monument to the fallen Confederate soldiers of the county. Noble got out, walked around to Annabelle’s door, opened it, and helped her out. Walking toward the white doors, Annabelle followed her brother.

“How you been?” Mr. Goodwin’s voice boomed. He held out his large, swollen, arthritic hand to Annabelle, and she shook it.

“Fine. Thank you for asking,” Annabelle said to Mr. Goodwin, a neighboring farmer. “How’re your wife and children?”

“They’re fine. You remember that son of mine you had in class a few years ago?” Mr. Goodwin said. “Thurman. He’s getting married in the spring to that Litchfield girl, Martha.”

“That’s nice to hear,” Annabelle said. “You tell him I said hello.”

“We better get going,” Noble said, leading the way to the door.

“Good to see you,” Annabelle said.

Noble held the door open and Annabelle stepped into a large hallway. She waited for him to step in front of her and lead the way.

“Sit here,” he said as he pointed to a wooden bench. “I’ll be right back.”

Annabelle surveyed the hall and studied the door through which her brother had just passed. On the door, she read the name, “Judge Carver.” She did as her brother had instructed. In a few minutes, Noble returned to his sister. He held his hand out, and she accepted it. He led her through the open door of the judge’s office.

The tall mahogany walls reached for the vaulted ceiling in the cavernous room. Annabelle’s eyes rested on the floor. It was clear that many feet had been in and out of the office, and they had stopped just short of the judge’s desk. A man in his shirtsleeves pulled on his suit coat as Annabelle entered.

“Please, Mrs. Sizemore,” the man said as he pointed to a chair in front of the desk.

“Have a seat.”

Annabelle sat down in the straight-back leather chair. She sat up straight, placed her purse and gloves on her lap, and placed her hands atop them.

“Thank you,” she said to the stranger. “Are you Judge Carver?”

“Yes, yes I am.”

“I hope you can help me,” she said fingering her gloves. “I’ve been trying to get a teaching job, but I’ve found nothing. I’ve four children to feed.”

“Yes,” Judge Carver interrupted, “your brother has told me.”

“I’ve taught for years, but this year the superintendent tells me that there are cuts. I hope you can help me.”

The judge looked from Annabelle to her brother and moved around behind his desk. Sitting across from Annabelle, the judge opened a folder.

“Now, Mrs. Sizemore, do you know why you are here today?”

“Judge Carver, I need a job to support my family.”

“Yes, Ma’am. I understand that.” The judge thumbed through the folder. “Now Mrs. Sizemore, I need to ask you some questions, and I need you to answer them to the best of your ability.” The judge looked across to Annabelle.

“Can you help me get a job?”

The judge picked up his pen. “What is today’s date?”

“What?”

“What is today’s date?” The judge’s question echoed from wall to wall.

“What?”

“How old are you?”

“A job sir. That’s all I’m asking.”

“When is your birthday?”

The tears ran down Annabelle’s cheeks and fell onto her suit. The judge continued questioning her. But she gave no answers and continued to ask about a job.

Noble reached for her and escorted her out of the room. He took her back to the bench.

“Wait here,” he said as he moved back toward the judge’s office. “I’ll just be a minute.”

The judge was on the telephone when Noble entered the office. He only heard one side of the conversation, but that was enough.

“That’s right. I’ll have her brother bring her round.”

Noble stood patiently while the judge ended his telephone conversation. When the judge put the receiver back into the cradle, he wrote quickly on a paper from the folder he had opened before the questioning.

“That didn’t take long,” the judge said without looking up from his writing.

“No, sir.”

“Now, you take your sister out to the state hospital.” The judge looked up from the paperwork. “And I wouldn’t tell her where she’s going until I got there, if I were you.”

“Yes, sir.” Noble lingered. “Are you sure this is best?”

“You didn’t know what else to do, or you wouldn’t be here. It’s all I know to do. Besides, it’s done now. Don’t worry so.”

The judge stood and held out his hand. Noble politely took it and shook it.

“Thank you, sir,” Noble said before turning and exiting the door.

There was silence in the corridor. Noble held his hand out to Annabelle, and she accepted. He walked her to the car. She did not look at him, and they did not speak.

When he turned off the main road, Annabelle looked at him.

“Where are you taking me?”

He kept his focus on the road.

“Where are you taking me?”

He quickly drove to the small white building that was centered between the entrance and the exit of the state asylum. Annabelle reached for the door, but he reached across her and held the door closed.

A man stepped out of the building holding a clipboard.

“May I help you, sir?” the man said.

“Yes, they are expecting us,” Noble said.

“Name please,” he said.

“Mrs. Sizemore,” Noble said.

“Yes sir. We just got the call. If you’ll just drive around to the back door the attendants will be waiting.

Noble drove up the drive. A brick building with immense white columns was now visible. It looked like a state capital building except for the bars on the windows. Annabelle struggled more and more with Noble as they neared the building.

“What are you doing?” Annabelle screamed.

Noble didn’t answer. He kept one hand on the steering wheel and the other on Annabelle. She wriggled beneath the strength of his arm. When she became frustrated with her failed attempt, she bit him. He pulled back his arm and slapped Annabelle. Confusion filled her, and her struggling stopped.

As soon as the car stopped at the plain rear entrance, the attendants pulled her from the car and started toward the building. As she regained her senses, she wrestled with the attendants, but it was no use. When they reached the entrance with her, she started to scream.

“My children. My children...” Annabelle yelled. As she disappeared behind the door, her cries were muffled and disappeared just as she had.

Noble drove back toward the house. He turned the radio up loud to block out any thought and reached for the comfort that rested in his glove box. It warmed him as he drove slowly.

When he reached his sister’s home, Eliza ran to the car.

“Did you get it? Did you...” Eliza’s voice trailed off when her mother wasn’t in the car. She studied on it a minute. “Did they have her stay and teach today?”

“No, child,” Noble said. “Your mama got sick while we were in town. I had to take her to the hospital.”

“She was fine this morning.”

“Sometimes, these things just come on a person. She’ll be fine with some care and rest.”

“Mama doesn’t like hospitals.”

“Well, it’s best. No more questions. Go pack your and your sister’s things. You and your sister will be coming to stay with me and your Aunt Dora till your mama gets out.”

Mildred Ann came out of the house as Eliza was going in.

“Well?” she said.

“Incompetent is what the judge decided. She’s in the state hospital.”

Rolling her hands up in her apron, Mildred Ann turned back to the house.

“You take Elmer home with you tonight. I’ll take Eliza and Lois with me. The oldest boy can stay here.”

Mildred Ann quickly turned back to her brother. “You can’t have him stay here all alone. He’s just a boy.”

“Somebody’s got to feed the animals. You can bring him food and check on him. You’re just down the road if he needs you.”

Mildred Ann turned back to the house and carried out the business as her brother instructed.

Eliza brought Lois’s and her things out in a flour sack and put it in her uncle’s car. She helped Lois into the back seat and then climbed into the front seat beside her uncle. As they drove, there was silence. When the car hit a pothole, the glove box fell open and

a bottle with amber liquid landed in Eliza's lap. Noble grabbed the bottle and shoved it back into the glove box.

"You'd better not say a word," Noble said, as he slammed the door to the glove box. Eliza looked away from him and out the window until they reached Noble's house.

When Noble drove up, his wife, Dora, came out to meet him.

"I've got a surprise for you," he said as he opened the back door and Lois spilled out.

"Oh, gracious me. We have a visitor," Dora said. Her smile widened and then she looked at her husband. The smile remained, but her eyes questioned. Eliza opened her door, got out, and walked toward her aunt without taking her eyes off the ground.

"Oh, and Eliza Jane too. You girls go on in and get settled in the guest room," Dora said as she turned and pointed to the door. "I'll get you both some supper in a bit."

The girls vanished behind the door of the house. Dora and Noble were left in the fading light of the evening.

"I hope you don't mind," Noble said. "I thought you'd like having the girls with you."

"What happened?"

"It all happened as I had expected. I took her to the judge. He asked her some questions and decided to send her to the state hospital."

"Did you take her or..."

"Yes."

“I guess those boys weren’t lying then.”

“No, I guess they’re right. I’ve heard her do it myself. When I asked her how the corn was the other day, she said, ‘Oh course you can have some more.’ She came over with the coffee pot and filled my almost full cup to the top.”

“It’s just so sad. She’s managed all these years and now this,” Dora said. “I guess the stress of running a family and a farm is just too much for a woman to handle.”

Eliza stepped out onto the stoop. The conversation halted and the couples’ eyes rested on the girl.

“I came out to ask which towels you wanted us to use,” Eliza said looking at Aunt Dora. “You’re wondering if I heard. Aren’t you, Uncle Noble?”

“Heard what?” he said. “Your aunt and I were talking about supper.”

“No, you weren’t. You were talking about my mama and what you did with her. I heard it all.”

“Let’s go in,” Aunt Dora said.

“No need,” Eliza said. “You can talk about how crazy you think my mama is right here in front of God and everyone because I know it’s not true.”

“These are things that a child has no business in,” Noble said, moving toward Eliza.

“She’s my mama and that makes it my business. You want to know the truth? I know the truth.”

“Let’s get that supper,” Dora said, moving between Eliza and Noble.

“Ya’ll weren’t there. I was. Those mean boys just wanted to get my mama fired. They’d sneak around, and she’d catch them even though she couldn’t hear them. She may have said a few strange things, but...”

“What did you say?” Noble said. “Repeat what you just said.”

“Which part? About the boys or about Mama?”

“Just the part about your mama.”

“That Mama caught them or that she may have said some strange things?”

“You said she’d catch them even though she couldn’t hear them.”

“That’s right,” Eliza said. “Mama made me promise not to talk about it because she was afraid she would lose her job, but she’s already lost it anyway.”

“What do you mean she couldn’t hear them?”

“Mama’s been losing her hearing. Unless she’s looking at you or you’re shouting at her, she can’t hear. Sometimes, she still can’t hear. Sometimes she can. When we were at church cleaning after the revival, we were the only ones left. I hollered at her to bring me some more water, but she never understood.” Eliza stopped. “It was peculiar. When we left the church and were walking home, she could hear me fine. I just don’t know.”

Noble looked at Eliza, puzzled. “The boys said your mama whipped them for no reason. Their parents came to school. They talked with your mama and told her to leave their boys alone. But she didn’t. She kept whipping them. Why didn’t she just stop? Then none of this would’ve happened.”

“She didn’t stop because they didn’t stop. They threw paper wads and pencils at Mama when she turned to write on the board. She couldn’t catch them, but she knew who it was. When she caught them in her desk taking the milk money, she wore them out and made them stand in the corner the rest of the day.”

“So why were the parents upset with your mama?” Noble said.

“Who would you believe?” Aunt Dora said. “Would you believe your child who had all the things money could buy and more, or would you believe a poor school teacher with no husband and four children to feed.”

“The boys said they saw her taking the money, and she whipped them to cover it up,” Eliza said. The parents believed their angel boys, and so did the superintendent. That’s why they didn’t hire her back.”

Dora grabbed Noble by the arm. He looked at her. Confusion filled her face.

“Go on in Eliza,” Noble said. “We’ll talk more in a minute.”

Eliza did as she was told. As the door closed, Noble turned to his wife.

“They won’t do anything to her tonight.” Noble said. “I’ll check on it in the morning. Eliza may not know all the story. I’ll talk to Annabelle tomorrow and the superintendent. Let’s put this away for now. I’ve had a long day.”

Noble brushed his wife’s hair away from her eyes and placed his hand on her waist and guided her into the house. He closed and locked the door for the night.

The people in white surrounded her and were moving her down the hall. Light flashed in Annabelle's eyes as she peered up at the ceiling. It seemed as if they were moving her faster and faster. All the questions she'd been asked swirled in her mind. They were absurd, and she hadn't answered.

"Bow your heads," Noble said. "Dear Lord, thank you for the food we are about to receive. Thank you for your goodness, and watch over our family."

The light from the hall dimmed as the doors swished and closed behind Annabelle.

Sealed Summer

Pick them ripe
but not too ripe
when my fingers pierce flesh
and the smell of rot rushes out
I throw them over the fence

Two gray-spotted galvanized dishpans
are too cumbersome to carry
I make several swaggering trips
back and forth from garden to kitchen

The torrid water wells up in canners
sterilizing Mason jars
tomatoes plunge into the blistering boil
their skins crack
tomatoes plunge into the cold-water pan
their skins peel like red ribbons from Christmas presents

I sprinkle a teaspoon of salt into each jar
and squash the slices in until each jar is stuffed
my sticky fingers stained a faded sunset
place lids and rings on each
and balance the jars in the boiling bath of the canner
jars rattle

All is timed to perfection
I seize the sizzling jars from the stove
and position them on piles of newspaper
cooling
popping
sealing summer

Faded Photos

The warmth of the room surrounds us. The men's laughter rises and falls in the family room just past the kitchen where we work. They talk and joke and loosen their belts. To them, Christmas means putting trees up and putting bikes together and eating for days, nothing more. To us women, it means cleaning and cooking and entertaining. Standing over greasy, near bubbleless dishwater and using damp towels that barely dry the multitude of dishes is where we talk. We fret over the gifts, entertaining, and our families.

"Where does this go?" my sister Lois says. She holds great-grandmother's ruby red relish dish.

"Just put it on the table," I say. "I'll put it away later." I can imagine the dish slipping out of Lois's hands and the red shards covering the floor and her walking through the glass just to see what I'll do.

She swipes it one more time and places it on the table. I grab it up and place it in the back of the china cabinet.

"I think that's it," my brother's wife says as she pulls the stopper from the sink and lets the thick watery solution slowly swirl away. She wipes the counter top and rinses the sink and then the cloth.

"Let's go have a well-deserved seat," I say. Sweat beads around my hairline dampening my bangs. My Santa sweater is in a corner somewhere, and my bare arms show beneath my short sleeves, but it's still not enough to keep me cool.

We leave the men to talk about whatever men talk of and go into the living room of twinkling lights, presents, and children. My twelve-year-old daughter's voice travels down the hall from her room, where she plays with cousins. "No, put it there," I hear her say. Bossy, I think, but what else could she be? Dreading the teen years with her, I put her out of my mind.

On the couch I sit by my sister-in-law, Bertha. *Why didn't her children convince her that big hair was out years ago?* Her hairdo was a constant in the family. It could be counted on. My children made me discover hairdryers and curling irons only three years ago. My short cut was easy to care for, and I couldn't imagine going back to once a week beauty shop visits, wrapping my hair and using the small rollers to keep the curls tight around my face every night. Freedom came with my change, but I'd never reveal that to my sister-in-law. Close is not a word to describe us.

As we sit, I notice the open, old, photo album on the floor. The long black pages, captions written long ago, and black and white photos blur until my eyes swim in a frothy sea of black and white waves. *Where did they get that album?* I wonder but dare not ask.

"Are you ready for Santa?" my sister-in-law says.

"As ready as I'm going to get," I say. Before I can say more, my son's voice rises over the others.

"Mama, is that..." My son, Jacob, stops in mid-sentence as he turns to see my eyes meet his. After being my son for twenty-two years, he knows the meaning of that

look and turns back to his cousin. He reads the caption under the photo. "It says Mrs. Stewart. It can't be your mama," he says as he flips the page.

I rejoin Bertha in conversation. The tightness leaves me until my niece, Maddie, flops the page back to the photo.

"Who is this woman?" Maddie says. "Is she related? She must be. Mom looks just like her."

My sister, Lois, never acknowledges the question. She continues to talk. Maddie brings the taped and tattered photo album over to my seat. "Who is she?" Maddie says.

Fumbling with the album, I pretend to study the black and white photo. There she poses across the hood of her last-minute-husband's 1957 Chevy. She looks like a pinup instead of a wife.

"Honey, that was so long ago," I say. "I don't really remember." The album returns to Maddie's hands, and she puts it back on the floor. "Why don't you put that record on with Elvis's 'Blue Christmas'? I just can't believe he's really dead," I say, hoping to change the subject.

Maddie moves to the lengthy, massive oak stereo console and turns the record player on. Instead of placing the record on top of the silver stacker, she puts the record on the rotating disc, moves the arm over, and places the needle on "Blue Christmas."

"Next year will be easier," Maddie says. The King's only been gone a few months.

I stood in the door to Lois's room and watched her unpin the rollers from her head and her peroxided ringlets fall in perfect form.

"Marry him," I said. "He thinks you set the moon in the sky."

"I'm not ready," Lois said as she combed the curls and wrapped her hair around her fingers to position each in its place.

"Not ready? How can a single woman with a baby not be ready?" Turning my back to her, I walked away. I stopped at the stove and lifted the lid to the canner, the last of the green beans. With the rolling boil covering the jar rings and lids, I set the timer. I'd left the farm long ago, but Mama made sure I put up enough for winter, enough for two families. "You never know when you'll need them," Mama always said. I didn't argue because I knew she knew better than I did about need. Through the door of what was once my sewing room, I saw the tiny fingers of my niece gripping the crib railing. Pulling herself up, she held, and then she fell on her bottom.

"She'll be walking in no time," I said to Lois. "You'll have your hands full then. You'd better get him while you can."

"I married Maddie's father for the sake of the family," Lois said, sliding her slip over her head. "Look how that turned out."

I placed the wooden board between two of the steel-legged kitchen chairs and placed a shirt on the board. With the iron positioned on the hot pad on the kitchen table to protect the Formica top, I reached for the starch and sprayed the collar. The iron hissed as I pressed the collar.

“What do you have to say about that? Lois said, walking to the door with both hands on her hips.

“That was different. You were pregnant and young. Cleve forced him,” I said, spraying the sleeves. “This one loves you and doesn’t need any coaxing by our brother.”

“It was annulled,” she said as she checked her purse and added a handkerchief. “We never even lived together.”

“It doesn’t matter. You still have a baby thanks to him. You can’t afford to make that mistake again.” I walked to her and knelt down. I pulled her too-short skirt down to cover the lace of her slip. “Like Mama told us, ‘once they have the milk, why buy the cow?’”

She stopped and stared straight at me. “When you say I can’t afford to make that mistake again, you mean you can’t afford it. You and that husband of yours are the ones who care what everybody thinks, not me.”

I turned back to my ironing and didn’t answer. I kept my eyes hidden from her. My eyes focused on the small flower embedded in the kitchen wallpaper. She was right. I didn’t want the shame or the whispers again. I’d heard the word bastard too often. It shamed me.

“How do I look?” Lois said, twirling around in front of the mirror.

“You don’t want me to tell the truth, do you?”

“You don’t have to say,” she said. “Your face tells me all I need to know. Maybe I am a whore.”

“I never said...”

“You don’t have to,” she said. “You know, someone could have told me where babies come from.”

“You were fourteen,” I said looking up from the ironing board. “Mama did well to take care of herself after everything, but I never thought...”

“That’s right. You never thought.” Lois looked right through me. “Eliza, why didn’t you tell me when you found my bloody panties behind the stove?”

“I told Mama. I thought she’d tell.”

Hanging the stiff shirt on the doorknob behind Jacobs’s playpen, I pulled a pair of jeans from the basket. After placing them on the ironing board, I sprayed them with starch. The jeans sizzled at the touch of the hot iron, and I sizzled with her words. She always blamed me. She was never the guilty one, not even when it was her own mistake.

“If I marry him, would it make you happy?” she said.

I pressed the iron harder on the jeans. “I guess it would. Wouldn’t it you?”

A car horn sounded out front. He was there. She turned and added a little more lipstick. “Don’t you think fifteen is too young for marriage?” she said.

“Don’t you think fourteen is too young for a baby?” I said, picking up Jacob from his playpen.

She grabbed her sweater. “Don’t wait up. You never know how late a girl like me will be.” She opened the door and looked back at me. Trouble danced on her face. Her gaze blazed with hatred. She laughed and disappeared out the front door.

Hurrying toward the door, a sea of rage seethed in me. The timer dinged, the green beans. I placed Jacob in the crib with Maddie and walked toward the stove.

“Mom, do you know this woman?” Maddie asks, looking into my sister Lois’s face.

“I used to know her,” Lois says without hesitation. “She was a lot of fun.”

Bertha, my brother’s wife, leaves the room. It’s the discomfort that makes her move. Cleve soon returns with her. “Thanks for having us. The food was wonderful.” Each gave me a holiday hug. “We’d better get the grandchildren to bed. Santa will be here soon.”

I push the abandoned photo album under the couch with my foot. I hope it will be forgotten after the goodbyes. With the last good night, I turn to my sister.

“Shouldn’t we be getting to bed, too?” I say, trying to avoid any more agitation.

We all part and vanish behind different doors.

I listen to my husband's heavy breathing turn into snores. I know I'm not going to sleep, so I ease out of the bed and through our bedroom door. A drink of whiskey, I think. But I don't drink. I walk to the kitchen. Opening the refrigerator door, I pull the coconut cake and fruit salad from it, cut a large piece of cake, and pour the sweet syrupy fruit on top. I look through the fog on the window and absent-mindedly eat.

We were eating our Sunday dinner of cold fried chicken when we heard the door open. I got up and went to the entry.

I saw my sister putting her purse down on the hall table. "Where've you been? You worry me so when you don't come home."

She held out her hand. On her ring finger, she wore a band of gold. "We finally did it."

Her new husband walked in the front door. I extended my hand to him. "Congratulations. Welcome to the family."

He thanked me and turned to his Lois.

"I've got to get my things together. We're leaving for Arizona today," my sister said as she and her husband left the front hall for her room.

I heard my husband, Otis, hollering from the kitchen to come eat. Moving through my hazy thoughts, I sat back down at my place at the table. Picking at the chicken and moving the vegetables around, for the first time I wondered what I'd do without her. Marriage yes, but Arizona no.

It only took a few minutes for my sister to pack. The couple, giggling, stood beside me, and I turned to see them, her with a small pink suitcase and him smiling as if he had won the blue ribbon for a prize heifer. Looking up at them, I knew he had a lot to learn.

“I don’t need much. I’ll buy whatever I need when I get there,” Lois said as if she were answering my question before I asked it.

“Should we mail some of Maddie’s toys?”

My sister handed her husband the suitcase and told him to wait in the car.

“There’s no need sending her things.” She waited for the door to close. “I’m not taking her.”

Otis’s fork froze and so did his eyes. He glared at me. Afraid of what he might say or do, I got up and grabbed my sister by the arm and took her back to the front hall.

“What do you mean you’re not taking her?”

“You’re a better mom than I will ever be. She’s too young to know who her mama is.” Lois gazed at me and waited for me to speak, but words didn’t come. “You know you want her. You always have.”

She had to keep on. She knew how to push me over the top every time.

“How can you do this?” I screamed. I grabbed her shoulders and shook her.

“How can you leave your daughter?” My face reddened and tears filled my eyes.

No tears came to my sister. "She'll be better off with you," she said as she pushed me away. "By the way, you and Mama were wrong. He bought the cow." The door closed behind her.

I watched the wavy glass as the taillights disappeared over the distant hill.

I look down and realize I've eaten it all. The coffee is cool, but I pour a cup anyway. Before opening the back door, I grab a light coat. The mild Kentucky winters never promise a white Christmas. In fact, if it is cold enough for a Christmas sweater, I'm happy. This is one of the warmer winters. But the dark, night air is cool and refreshing. I place the coat on the steps and set the coffee beside it. I climb upon the railing and reach up above the column. My hand fumbles through spider webs until my hand reaches a small plastic bag. I seize the bag and jump back onto the porch. The concrete porch feels cold to my feet. I sit on the steps and cover my feet with the coat. After I open the bag, I pull out a cigarette. I put the cigarette to my lips and strike a match. The flame is bright blue against the night sky. I hold it to the end of the cigarette and puff until it lights. I begin to cough and place the cigarette on the concrete and quickly take a drink of the coffee. I hear the door behind me open. I don't turn to look.

"What took you so long?" I ask.

"I had to wait until he was asleep," my sister says, as she sits down beside me. She picks up the cigarette. "I thought you'd quit."

"I have. I just keep some out here in case I feel the need."

The phone rang. After pushing the bedspread off and getting out of bed, I ran down the dark hall to the kitchen and felt for the light switch. It was late, and the phone carried no good news late in the night.

"Hello," I said, fumbling with the receiver.

Otis now stood beside me and watched me for a sign.

"Okay. Yes. I'll be there." I covered the receiver with my hand and whispered, "Lois," to my husband.

Otis's look of worry turned to aggravation. He turned back to the bedroom and was soon out of sight.

"What time?"

After hanging up the phone, I went back into the bedroom. My husband rolled over and put his back to me, and I knew he hated me for always being there for her.

"She's my sister. What do you expect?"

"I expect no more than you to walk right into Hell some night and demand her if she calls," my husband said without rolling over or saying any more.

Gathering my clothes, I went to the bathroom to dress. I grabbed the car keys and my purse and left a note. "Gone to bus station. Be back soon."

As I drove, I thought about my husband's statement and knew he was right. But I'd promised Mama. And I loved my sister despite everything.

Putting the cigarette to her lips, my sister takes a deep draw and coughs. "My God, what kind of cigarette is this anyway?"

"They've been out here a while. I keep them up there," I say, as I point to the top of the column.

We both face the night, keeping ourselves hidden from one another. Silence surrounds us. We finish the cigarette.

"Why haven't you told Maddie?" I say.

"Never felt the need."

"I can't believe you."

"She knows about her father. She didn't need to know about the second husband."

I put the matches and cigarettes back into the plastic bag. "She should've known the truth. The whole truth."

"What was I going to say to her? I really screwed my life up. I got pregnant, married your father, that didn't work, married again, ran off leaving you with your aunt, moved to Michigan, and sent for you when you were almost three. I've been lying so long. I don't even know if I know the truth. I think back, and it's like looking at someone else's life, not mine."

"Don't you think you should have told her? Did you see how fast everyone left tonight? They all know. The only person who doesn't know is the one who should know. What a crazy family we live in. Always keeping secrets. But they're not secrets."

They're only secrets to the ones who should know. Don't you get tired of trying to remember who's supposed to know and who isn't?"

"I guess you would have me tell her about the pills I ordered from the magazine, too."

"What pills?" I turn and study her face. She looks away across the yard and back into the night.

"The abortion pills," she says, lowering her head. "You know the ones. They advertised them with the sea monkeys and the x-ray glasses in the back of magazines."

"You didn't take..." I stop. I see her head bend toward her lap.

"I did. They didn't work."

I get up and climb back upon the porch railing. I reach up and scoot the cigarettes back into the corner, just above the column.

"Say something," she says.

I jump off the railing onto the concrete.

"What do you want me to say? You were fourteen. You didn't need a child, but I never knew you...tried..." I stop. I turn toward the door where I think I see something move. There in the door stands Maddie.

"What's wrong?" my sister says, as she turns toward the door.

Maddie's tear-stained face glistens in the moonlight.