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I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Rebecca K. Brooks entitled "Milk Glass Moon." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

Michael Knight, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Allen Wier, Charles Maland

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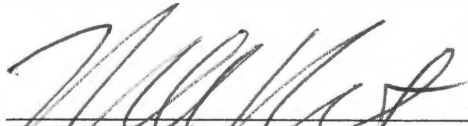
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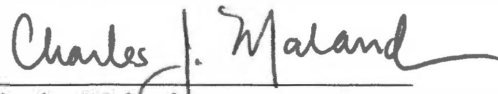


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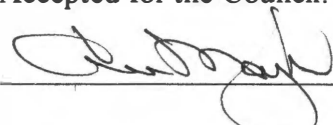


Allen Wier



Charles Maland

Accepted for the Council:



Vice Chancellor and Dean of
Graduate Studies

Milk Glass Moon

A Thesis Presented for the
Master of Arts Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Rebecca K. Brooks
May 2004

Thesis
2004
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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my grandparents, Sam and Mary Kesterson, their children, and all the other families who left the Oak Ridge valley in 1942-43 for the Manhattan Project.

Acknowledgments

I wish to thank those who were helpful to me in completing my Master of Arts degree in English. I thank Michael Knight and Allen Wier for their patient instruction in the art of writing. I thank those in the English Department who believed in my ability and provided the funding that enabled me to pursue the degree.

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Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to tell the mostly untold story of the 900 or so families that left the Oak Ridge valley in 1942-43 in order for the federal government to build the Manhattan Project, the secret project that built the atomic bomb.

The story is fiction but is based loosely on the experiences of the Sam and Mary Kesterson family. While the story covers the experiences of most of the family, it is told primarily through Lydia Mae Johnson's point of view, a young teen who must confront adult issues early: a strange man comes into the community, the boy she has a crush on joins the military, a man is murdered in their community, and the family is forced to move from their home.

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Introduction

By January of 1943, the 900 or so families who had farmed peacefully and quietly in a Brigadoon valley northwest of Knoxville, Tennessee, where horse-drawn plows were still common, were gone. They packed their meager belongings, their children, their livestock, took their memories and the government money, and abandoned their modest farmhouses and scattered into the surrounding counties. World War II had come to East Tennessee.

The war, of course, had already touched those living there. After Pearl Harbor, the families sent their sons off to Europe and the Pacific, hoping for news and counting the days until the boys returned. But little could they realize that when General Leslie Groves visited the area early in 1942 and made the decision to build the atomic bomb in the valley, their farms would become part of history and their graceful resignation a little noted part of the record (“Important Dates”).

Once Groves picked the Elza Area, as it was originally named, for The Manhattan Project, the daily concerns of the valley residents changed to an urgent need to find homes. By July, the U.S. Army had orders to acquire the site at once. Rumors swirled at the local grocery when strangers descended on the valley in August with surveyor stakes tied with orange cloths. By November, most families had their official notice to leave, knowing only that some great project related to the war was coming. Preliminary site preparation began for the mysterious plants which would be coded X-10, Y-12, and K-25. A massive administration building dubbed The Castle was begun before the residents

could even pack, and by early February of 1943 when the residents were all gone, the world came to the valley in the form of scientists, engineers, doctors, and laborers, bringing with them earth-moving equipment, building materials, and a secret technology to build The Manhattan Project (“Important Dates”).

For two and a half years, the valley bustled as never before. The world would discover the secret after August 6, 1945, when the atomic bombs were dropped over Hiroshima and three days later, Nagasaki, killing over 100,000 and injuring many more. The Clinton Engineering Works—as Groves had named the sprawling complex—had developed the bomb that would ultimately end the war and become a momentous part of twentieth century history. The impressive undertaking in the valley, the speed at which the project moved, the brilliance of the scientists, and the end result are what rightfully made the history books. The impact on the lives of those who were forced to leave their homes is the unrecorded chapter in that chronicle (Kesterson).

My dad’s family was one of those which had to leave the valley. They settled in the mountain community of Coalfield, about fifteen miles northwest of his boyhood home. I grew up there, listening to the stories my dad told about leaving what would come to be called Oak Ridge, a small city that still grapples with its place in history and the unwieldy aftermath of nuclear waste. Although my dad’s family members became outsiders to the area during the war, locked out by one of the five gates, they remained closely connected to Oak Ridge. After the war, Dad made a career working at the plants, and Oak Ridge was the nearest place to shop and to visit the doctor. I have long had a fascination with the

town: the fact that it was planned and built within the space of a year; the “acre of blue water” swimming pool; the unique Downtown Shopping Center which was no real downtown at all; the streets named after various states, alphabetically from east to west; the two-lane, curvy roads that led out of the old gates to the city; those massive plants—one with a building as large as a million square feet; and the secrets still held there. As an adult, I once worked at Y-12, and the appeal of the massive, restricted plants soon gave way to the doldrums of a job. I also realized that much of the charm of Oak Ridge was nothing more than a childhood infatuation. But one narrative always nagged in the back of my head. “This is a story to tell,” my mind whispered every time my dad would reminisce about his boyhood in the valley and the events surrounding their leaving. It would take me many years to realize that I could write the story.

Writing has always been a part of my life. My mother was a great letter writer, and she encouraged her children to do the same. I had pen pals in California and Texas and wrote them long letters about rural life in East Tennessee. By seventh grade, I was filling notebooks with poems, short stories, letters to boyfriends, and notes reflecting pop culture. After reading one of my stories written during a brief science fiction obsession, a high school teacher encouraged me to keep writing. I never stopped to consider a writing life. I wrote mostly for personal pleasure and therapy: an ode to a mimosa tree, journals of my children’s lives, sketches of what it was like to launder fifty pairs of tiny socks, echoes of a failing marriage, outlines of stories. I wrote first by hand, my constricted handwriting now difficult to read. By the mid 1980s, a remarkable miracle came into my home—a chisel

and stone computer where I taught myself a word processing program. I soon was spinning out copies that would fill boxes, waiting for the time in my life when I could sift through the old experiments in writing and rework them into what I hope can be a bit of art.

“Indeed, learning to write may be a part of learning to read. For all I know, writing comes out of a superior devotion to reading” (Welty, On Writing 60).

Books line shelves in my house, standing proudly with stiff spines waiting for me to pluck them and read them and stick pieces of paper in them to come back to later. My home smells faintly like a mixture of old paper and dust, just the smell you notice when you walk into a used book store. Along with the books pervading every room, stacks of folders hold marked-up stories, rejected stories, stories-in-progress—*my* stories. I don’t file them away because they are always progressing, changing. After my printer rolls them out, they wait for me to pick them up and use my own red-ink corrections or someone else’s scribbled comments to polish, to rework, to find the right combination. If I were Glenn Miller, I would say I’m looking for “that sound.” I would turn my head like James Stewart does in the movie, to hear if the magic is there. I’m searching for the sound, but the silent one you hear in your mind when you read a good story, the measure that E.M. Forster says will be the final test for a novel, “our affection for it” (23).

With no shame and without hint of guilt, I admit that *Gone With the Wind* influenced me more than any other book. I discovered it when I was ten or so; before, I had left it on the shelf because of its length. I had studied about the Civil War in school,

but it was a distant event in history with no personal meaning, and I had been questioning my parents about whether they would have been for the North or the South. Dad suggested I read Margaret Mitchell's epic. It was grand. When I closed the book, I cried just because there was no more. For a short space of time, I had been living in the Old South where I felt the enormity of the war. I was privy to a life not mine but one I felt just the same. Yes, Scarlett O'Hara's strength and presence grabbed me and held me tight. But as I read and reread the book, it was the exposed record of a person's struggle with life-changing historical events that transported me. It was the movement of Scarlett through these events—to heck with the political significance—that made the story real for me. Scarlett digging in the dirt for a sweet potato to eat, Scarlett stealing her sister's boyfriend, Scarlett defying tradition to make money, Scarlett permeating every page, every chapter of the book. To make the reader feel that Scarlett lives just down the street and that you could knock on her door and tell her she should have listened to Melanie about Rhett—this is the magic of words. And Mitchell did it with such a simplicity of style—a plainness that would garner her harsh criticism. Critics also judge *GWTW* as sentimental. I argue that other than the title, there's nothing sentimental about *GWTW*. There's no lovely conclusion where the lovers end up together. Melanie's dead, Scarlett's love of Ashley is lost, Rhett leaves, and the book ends with ““After all tomorrow is another day”” (Mitchell 689). Perhaps that could have been left unsaid, but then that would not be Scarlett, the eternal optimist. Call it sentimental, but most times past are looked on with nostalgia, especially the Old South before the Civil War. Mitchell has passed Forster's test: the story is readable and likeable.

Reading *GWTW* led me to other epics. I searched my parents' shelves for long historical novels. One was *House Divided*, by Ben Ames Williams, another Civil War saga based loosely on Lincoln and his family. Memorable—I relished its length, but there's no Scarlett holding it together. My reading during these years was limited to my parents' modest library and the small school library, books not necessarily on an academic reading list, but still respectable books. Eventually, my thirst for long chronicles of history led me to James Michener and his vast tales which begin with the dawn of time. To temper the seriousness of the epics, I also read passionate romances, favoring the ones set in the Old South. Other, classic books kept me spellbound. I spent days with Alice and Tom and Huck and Dorothy. I dreamed there were five little women and I was the fifth. I blundered with Anne as she lives in the house with the green gables. I read Edgar Allan Poe long into the night, afraid to turn off the light. I felt the pain flowing from the pages of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. I wished to live in the time of Jane Austen's manners—to court so proper and wear a graceful gown to a ball. I cried at the end of *Romeo and Juliet*, then cried at the beginning when I read it again. I wanted to live in Dickens' England and visit the old curiosity shop, to know everything as David Copperfield did and meet his Mrs. Micawber and Mr. Creakle and Uriah Heep. I wanted to be Jane Eyre.

There are other books which have more than a passing effect. *The Haunting of Hill House*, by Shirley Jackson, captivates me with its emotional composition. Jackson intrigues me with her ability to weave a dark tale which haunts the reader with both its psychological implications and its ghostly narrative. I read *Wuthering Heights* every four years or so for the pure pleasure of finding something new to like of its strangeness. I first

read Emily Bronte's classic in high school and focused on the unrequited love of Heathcliff and Cathy. Later, as I read it again, I realized that it was a disturbing tale in which Bronte captures the darkness of humanity in the moors of northern England. I find myself telling people who are troubled by the book to read it again. Its tale will seep into your psyche while you question its purpose. Flannery O'Connor's *The Violent Will Bear It Away*, set in a different century and in a different country, has the same effect. The reader questions the credibility of a backwoods religious fanatic so far out of touch with modern civilities. O'Connor has grasped life without romanticism but with a dark, believable passion. Thomas Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel* is also a book that I dwell on—I love it for its sadness. Perhaps because it is a thinly veiled autobiography and I know some of Wolfe's short life, I pick it up again and again, revering Wolfe's wordiness and his bragging once that he had written 10,000 words in a day. And, as I think about the books mentioned above, I find they are all connected by the misery of life's situations, whether it be a deranged family living on the moors or a demented Pentecostal preacher roaming the backwoods of Georgia: the grotesque. It's not so much the grotesque of the physical kind, but the type defined by Sherwood Anderson: "[T]he moment one of the people took one of the truths to himself, called it his truth, and tried to live his life by it, he became a grotesque and the truth he embraced became a falsehood" (26). O'Connor writes about the grotesque (in defense of her own writing depicted as Southern grotesque) as both fiction "pushing its own limits outward toward the limits of mystery" (41) and as the writer connecting two points: "one is a point in the concrete, and the other is a point not visible to the naked eye. . ." (42). The books mentioned here and the stories I like to write are

joined by the mystery of the extraordinary connecting to the ordinary.

“Human life is fiction’s only theme” (Welty, On Writing 54).

As a writer, I look beyond the obvious that surrounds a commonplace event for the illusion—the invisible that O’Connor speaks of—for the anguish that permeates the human condition. While none of the events that I write about have the impact of the Civil War, I try to find how a person’s life has been altered by some small or ordinary event. For example, I wrote a story about a woman’s chance meeting with escaped convict James Earl Ray. Although her daily life remained unchanged after the meeting, the emotional impact of the encounter changed her. With *Milk Glass Moon*, it’s the sadness of a life interrupted, altered, and a life transferred from one place to another that I hope to capture. I want the reader to feel the characters’ emotions when the family wakes up one morning and find that life is no longer the same. There’s no Yankee knocking at the door, but there is a government just as forceful. I want to remember that lesser events are also life changing: a father bringing home a peculiar boy (*Wuthering Heights*) or a foreboding house that might or might not be haunted (*The Haunting of Hill House*).

Because I write mostly about rural folks in the mountains of East Tennessee—interpreted by most to be regional, southern writing—teachers and friends have tried to point me in directions that can help my writing. I write about these people because I know them; they’re my friends, my neighbors, my family. And while I agree that Faulkner with his characters who live from story to story and his whole fictional, believable Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi, is the near perfect example of a southern writer, it’s not the southern setting that makes him good. His stories and his characters are

universal, even if the place is distinctly local. O'Connor says: "It is a great blessing. . . to find at home what others have to go elsewhere seeking" (54). O'Connor would also connect the southern story to truth: an identity "is not made from what passes, but from those qualities that endure, regardless of what passes, because they are related to truth" (58). I learn from O'Connor and Faulkner that my stories have to be believable both in New York and at home because they contain some truth about human nature.

Perhaps the strongest influence on my writing is Eudora Welty, not just her remarkable stories, but her advice to writers, as a writer. I learn much from this lady. I study her worthy book, *On Writing*, and I hope, I try, and I imagine I can write about place as she describes it: "The moment the place in which the novel happens is accepted as true, through it will begin to glow, in a kind of recognizable glory, the feeling and thought that inhabited the novel in the author's head and animated the whole of his work" (*On Writing* 45). In *Milk Glass Moon*, I want the place of Lupton's Crossroad—the lives of the characters, the house they live in, the life they experience—to shine, to be memorable, not because it *was* real but because the reader sees that "glow" that Welty speaks of.

For Welty, place is connected with the believability of the characters. "Place, then, has the most delicate control over character too: by confining character, it defines it" (*On Writing* 46). Place contributes to the illusion that fiction makes of a character. Welty instructs further in the invention of characters. First, she distinguishes between characters in a short story and a novel: "[C]haracters in a short story have not the size and importance and capacity for development they have in a novel, but are subservient altogether to the story as a whole" (*On Writing* 35). While I realize that there's much

more space inside a novel for some digression, the transition from short story to novel is a difficult one for me. In order to give my novel some depth and richness, I'm tempted to invent characters that, in the end, may have little to do with the plot on the page, but in my head, they are vital to the story. For the good of my story, and for them to matter to the reader, I have to learn to get inside each and every character and make them my own.

Welty says "when you can write most entirely out of yourself, inside the skin, heart, mind, and soul of a person who is not yourself, that a character becomes in his own right another human on the page" (*One Writer's Beginning* 100). So, while I am creating a character who is part of me, I have to make her separate and believable. In *Milk Glass Moon*, I have to shape a Lydia, the main character, who is like Scarlett O'Hara in that the reader can suspend his disbelief and believe that Scarlett lives just down the street and has thoughts and feelings and a soul. The classic city slicker has to be more than the interloper. He has to defy stereotyping and have a life that comes off the page. Here I turn to E.M. Forster for help: "[Characters] are real not because they are like ourselves (though they may be like us) but because they are convincing" (62). We can never know everything about our friends and neighbors—even our family. But a novel allows us to see into a character's inner self. The reader really knows what Lydia and Robert are thinking, and is that not one of the great appeals of fiction? The writer must make the characters "ready for an extended life," as Forster tells us (75). When my reader closes the book, Lydia, Esther, Mama, Robert, and the others have to live on, even though we know they are entirely a fiction.

Welty grew up learning to listen for stories. In that listening, she attended to the

“voice” of the story, seeking out the “seeds” that would later become stories. She discovered that one story can lead to another: “[O]ne secret is liable to be revealed in the place of another that is harder to tell and the substitute secret is often more appalling” (*One Writer’s Beginning* 17). Thus, I have listened to the words as my dad spoke them about his boyhood, listening for that other story that is uncovered but not spoken. Can I put into words the true feelings of being uprooted—can I give this story a place? Yes, if I listen. I’ve listened my whole life—at family gatherings, to my friends, to the children playing outside my window. There’s a story swirling in my head about all the ex’s we discuss at Christmas gatherings. Can I give place to a story about a garden party where all those ex’s gather and have to talk to each other, have to admit their failings and their connections? There’s the coal truck which spilled its load once, just two feet away from a tiny girl. I took chances, wrote it quickly, and gave it a voice, a place, and was rewarded by two prizes in contests. I work these stories in my mind, hunting out the place until I feel they are ready for paper. Another story in which I am waiting for the glow to emerge is one about an old, hard-bodied Samsonite briefcase at the end of a woman’s arm, a potential murder weapon. She wanted to kill the short woman standing before her, but the showing of that secret will surely betray another. I’ve listened. Now, I have to give place to these stories.

The story ahead presented its own problems. Most of the events are true, but some are just not believable. The old adage “truth is stranger than fiction” comes to mind. How do I make the reader suspend disbelief for the space of my story? And, how do I blend fiction with truth so that the fiction illuminates the story I want to tell? First, I tried to use

authentic details. If the reader can't believe that the *Chattanooga Choo-Choo* was a popular tune in 1942, then the reader will not believe in the place of the story. Next, I worked hard on both the dialect in the dialogue and on the dialogue itself. I want the dialogue to show the truth rather than just tell it. Thus, the dialogue has to be authentic in both the idioms and in the way people converse with family members, friends, and strangers. The other problem is how do I make the story meaningful to the reader. It's already important to me as the writer, but there has to be more. I try to make the "it" important by establishing the place in every aspect of the book: the setting, the characters, the plot, the dialogue, and the details. Each has to contribute to the overall theme of the book, or as Poe would say, to the "single effect" of the book (Poe 95). As I tinker with a word here or a chapter there, I am sure there's room for improvement.

Lastly, I have to discuss more about the academic way of looking at what a writer is doing, especially at what I am professing to be doing. I believe wholeheartedly in the study of fiction, of writing. To do that means one must read and read what is good. Again, I turn to Welty: "Reader and writer, we wish each other well. Don't we want and don't we understand the same things? A story of beauty and passion, some fresh approximation of human truth?" (*On Writing* 28). Oh, yes, we want the same. We are passionate about our reading and our writing. But it is difficult to stand apart from one's own words and say, "I did this because" We hope our work stands on its own and has a life beyond ourselves as the writer. Welty also wrote: "I never saw, as reader or writer, that a finished story stood in need of any more from the author: for better or worse, there the story is" (*On Writing* 29). If the story needs more explanation, have I done my job as a writer?

Have I shown the reader the place, and are my characters ones who are believable? Welty goes on to talk about someone who is gifted as a writer may not be gifted as a critical analyst: “I would rather submit a story to the test of its outside world, to show what it was doing and how it went about it, than to the method of critical analysis which would pick the story up by its heels . . . to examine the writing process as analysis in reverse . . .” (*On Writing* 31). I, too, want the story to stand on its own, but I practice my skills (or try to learn) as a critic in order to sharpen my skills as a writer. As a reader, many times, I lean on the side of sentimentality—that demon of the academic world—as I take the easy way out: “I loved that book.” Forster tells us, in talking about the way a novel moves us, “great chords begin to sound” (169). Those chords begin their vibrations for me when I take out *Gone With the Wind* or *Wuthering Heights* and open the cover. As a writer, I have to figure out why and apply that knowledge to my own writing, to make the chords/words express sentiment without the overt sentimentality. The best way to do that is to write, to not be afraid of what words will show up on my page. O’Connor says: “The only way . . . to learn to write short stories is to write them, and then to try to discover what you have done” (102). So I write. I try to apply what Welty says about place, what Forster says about character, and what all writers say about writing: write. I sit on my stories for a while, then I come back, trying to detach myself as their creator and try to figure out what I’ve done. I get help from other writers, choosing which suggestions to keep and which to discard. Sometimes, as I change a word for the tenth time, I wonder if the final version—if there’s such a thing—will ever resemble the first draft, and I think not. The story is never done.

“[S]erious writing does come, must come, out of devotion to the thing itself, to fiction as an art” (On Writing 60).

Lydia Mae Johnson

Lydia looked at the sun dropping over the Flatwoods and thought she had better hurry along. Mama would be mad at her for staying at Willamena's all day. Lydia and Willamena had spent the day at the swimming hole discussing the Reed boys who lived up on Black Oak Ridge. Johnny was in eleventh grade, and Bobby was a senior. They both had blond hair and pale blue eyes; most people thought they were twins.

"When school starts, that Bobby Reed's gonna notice me," Lydia said.

"You can have him. I hate his freckles. Johnny's the one for me," Willamena said.

"My dress is almost dry. I better head home. Mama'll be madder than a hornet."

"Let's walk up to Black Oak Ridge tomorrow. We might see the Reed boys."

"Can't," Lydia said, as she headed up the road. "We're going berry pickin'.

Besides, Mama would never let me go up there," she said, as she walked backward up the road.

"She won't know."

Something to think about. Lydia would have done almost anything to get out of Mama's clutches and out of chores. Mama always had some chore for her to do.

"Braid Mary's hair."

"Go get some butter out of the dairy."

"Gather some kindling for the stove."

"Fetch Sally to the barn."

Sally was the milk cow. Lydia hated to bring Sally to the barn. Sally was stubborn and wanted to stay in the field. Sometimes Sally might be a half mile away in the lower field. By the time Lydia got Sally into the barn and the gate shut, she knew she would smell like a cow barn for the evening. Why couldn't David bring Sally in? He didn't mind smelling like a barn.

Even wash day was no fun. They used to do wash on the back porch, where the branches of the maple hung over the roof. On the back steps, under the silvery leaves of the maple, Lydia could pretend she was anywhere in the world but Lupton's Crossroad. Last fall, Mama got Daddy to move the washer inside and rig a pipe going out the dining room window for a drain. Lydia went to bed every night, not wondering what the next day would bring. It would bring the same. Help Mama with breakfast. Wash the dishes. Help Mama peel apples for canning. Break beans. Watch little Mary. The list was endless. I bet them girls that live in Knoxville don't do chores, she thought. At least she looked forward to berry picking. Mama always let the children keep the money from two gallons for themselves. She might buy herself some new material for a dress. Maybe some purple, if Mama let her. Mama didn't like purple cloth. "It's the cloth of sinners," Mama declared once when Lydia said she wanted a purple dress. Where Mama got her ideas, Lydia didn't know. Maybe out of those awful books Mama read late at night. She could buy the fabric while Mama wasn't looking. It would be cut from the bolt and Mama couldn't make her take it back.

The July sun was making sweat run down between her breasts and under her arms. She used her hand and mopped the sweat with her underclothes. She wished her dress

hadn't dried so fast, but she did hope that the toilet water she and Willamena splashed on themselves would disappear by the time she got home. Mama would fuss if she smelled it. "You're always trying to gild the lily," Mama would say if she caught Lydia trying to pretty up her face. Sometimes, Lydia wanted to squinch her nose so she wouldn't smell Mama and the aroma of Octagon soap that always floated around her. Lydia's feet were hot and she was close to the Wilders' spring. Mrs. Wilder would probably be on the back porch this time of day, and she couldn't see Lydia from there. She could cool her feet in the pool and get a drink. It was about a quarter of a mile off the road, not far, she thought. She cut across Wilders' hay field and had made it to the spring when she heard something roaring by on the road. She turned in time to see a black car speed by, leaving a trail of dust behind it. She stood watching until the car was out of sight. The dust was settling on the Queen Anne's Lace at the roadside.

She hurried back to the road, thinking maybe the car was going to her house. Maybe it's John Daniel, coming back from the War. No, it could be a salesman. We haven't had one in a couple of months. He's probably selling Bibles. Mama had plenty of them—he won't have any luck with her. It could be one of them revenuers. They're probably back to see if the Millers are making moonshine again. But Lydia knew they'd find no moonshine still anywhere near where Mama lived. Since the revenuers found Haney Miller's still on the Johnson property two years ago, Mama regularly sent the kids out scouting for stills. Lydia enjoyed the adventure at first. She was sure they would find one. She had never seen a still, although when she heard there was one, she and Willamena had slipped off trying to find it. But the revenuer fellows found it first. Haney Miller was

gone off to prison in Atlanta, and the other moonshiners were afraid to set up anywhere in the valley. That's what Daddy said. But Mama still sent the kids out real often to check the woods. "Don't touch it," she said. "Run straight back here and tell me where it's at." Daddy bought Miller's land when he had to leave. "The Lord watches out for his own," Mama said. Lydia thought it seemed more like a good deal than the Lord's doing.

When Lydia got to the Gap, she noticed the pole laying across two posts at the beginning of their road was still in place. It was moved only when a car came through, and folks were usually too lazy to put it back, knowing they were going to drive back through. The Gap marked the meeting of the family property with the county road and was the family's point of reference. The school bus picked them up there. Daddy caught his ride to work there, and when Lydia, Esther, and David were younger, they were only allowed to go as far as the Gap. "You can go past the Gap when you're twelve," Mama would tell Lizzie, the younger sister, when she begged to venture farther. Lydia often wondered what was magical about age twelve, but never questioned Mama—she was too glad for her own freedom.

There were her own footprints, still in the dust from that morning, and the weeds along side the road were as clean as if rain had washed them. Lydia walked slowly up the road, worrying about being in trouble and a little disappointed at the absence of tire tracks. Sure enough, there sat Mama on the porch, nimble fingers breaking beans, keeping an eye out for Lydia. Mary was sitting on the edge of the porch, feet dangling. She had a small pan of beans in her lap to break, and Lizzie sat in another chair at her mother's side.

"If it ain't the stray child coming home," Mama said. "Where you been all day?"

“You said I could go to Willamena’s. We’ve been cuttin’ out a dress for her.”

“I didn’t tell you to stay all day. Git in there and help Esther with supper.”

“We been breakin’ beans all day. You could’ve come home earlier and helped us,”

Lizzie said, her voice superior even though she was four years younger than Lydia.

“You could’ve come home earlier and helped us,” Lydia said, mocking Lizzie’s tone as she let the screen door slam behind her. At least, helping Esther was nicer than helping Lizzie. Esther was sweet and kind and never said anything bad about anybody. Lizzie was a smarty-pants girl who thought she knew everything and was always trying to get on Mama’s good side.

Esther was peeling potatoes at the kitchen table. She had on a tan-checked dress with a faded blue apron over it. She had her brown hair pulled back at the nape into a bun and had a small, pinched face that rarely brightened with a smile. She was a shy young lady, and her light brown eyes always fluttered to avoid looking at someone, and when she did bring them wide open, there was never a sparkle of inner liveliness. She already looks like an old woman, Lydia thought as she entered the kitchen. I hope I never look old like her. Just a little rouge would brighten her face.

“Mama said to help you.”

“Mama was so worried about you. Did you and Willamena get the dress done?”

Lydia was watching Esther. She peeled potatoes like she had done it as much as Mama. Lydia knew they played together when they were younger, but sometimes she thought Esther was born a woman. She always seemed to know how to do the things women were supposed to do.

“Almost. What can I do? I hate peelin’ potatoes.”

“Can you chop up some cabbage for slaw? And chop it fine so Mama won’t fuss.”

Esther anticipated Lydia’s next question and got the chopper out of the drawer, throwing it on the table for Lydia.

“Did y’all see a car go up the road a while ago?”

“I’ve been in the house mostly.”

“Maybe David saw it. Have you seen him?”

“He’s hoeing corn.”

“Where’s the cabbage head?”

“It’s on the porch, you dope, where it always sits.” Lydia was at least glad that the last exchange brought a smile to Esther’s face. She might be pretty if she smiled more.

Lydia got the cabbage from the porch and went back into the kitchen. She preferred Esther’s company, but the kitchen was stifling from cooking beans all day. Lydia reluctantly took her bowl and utensils and the cabbage to the porch to chop. Esther never scolded or fussed at Lydia like Lizzie and Mama. Besides, Lizzie thought herself so pretty with her black hair and flashing teeth. She had Mama conned into believing she was the best child in the world. “Mama just don’t know how mean Lizzie can be,” Lydia said, hoping the screen door slamming would muffle her words.

“What are you saying?” Lydia forgot that Mama was blessed with “blind-man’s ears,” as she had told Willamena just that morning.

“Talking to myself.”

“Next time you go to Willamena’s, you be back here by noon. We got too much to

do with the garden coming in.”

“Okay, Mama, but day after tomorrow, I promised Willamena we would finish her dress.”

“We’ll see how the berry pickin’ goes.”

“I’ll do my chores early.”

Lydia chopped, liking the way the metal blade of the chopper sounded hitting the bottom of the bowl. But the snap, snap of beans breaking was irritating. She thought about the black car, but didn’t want to ask Mama or Lizzie. Mama was concerned that Lydia thought about the world too much, and asking about the car would cause Mama to spout out one of her famous sayings. Sometimes, Lydia wanted to throw out the books just so Mama wouldn’t learn any more of them. Besides, Lydia hated the sight of books. Too slow and too much trouble. She’d rather wade the creek or gossip with Willamena than try to fill her head with useless learning that she’d get in school anyway.

“‘Bout time for your daddy. You all go on and meet him down at the Gap.”

Lydia jumped off the porch and took Mary’s hand as they started down the road. Mary loved to meet Daddy when Luke Jones let him out at the Gap. Daddy worked in the coal mines above Lake City, and he was always gone when the kids got up. Mary delighted in seeing if Daddy had anything left in his lunch bucket.

They sat on a log near the main road. Mary was soon up and picking daisies. After about fifteen minutes, they heard Luke’s old truck rattling down the road. It stopped and Daddy slowly got out, his face black from the day’s coal dust.

“Hello girls. Where’s the others?”

“They’re at the house, getting supper,” Lydia answered.

They walked slowly up the road, the girls taking him by each hand. Mary nibbled on a hard biscuit and Lydia carried the empty dinner bucket. Lydia thought about the car but knew Daddy didn’t like to hear a lot of chatter. It was still hot, but the air was cooling somewhat with the sun hanging low over Black Oak Ridge. Daddy was home, and Lydia felt more settled, at peace with this small corner of Lupton’s Crossroad.

Chapter 2

Mama

Violet Mae Johnson sat up in bed. It was still dark inside the house, but she could see a faint light in the sky out the bedroom window. Without looking in the mirror, she quickly brushed and braided her gray hair and wound it neatly into a bun at the base of her head. She hadn't slept well. The house was hot from the cook stove burning all afternoon. They had canned beans and peaches, and then there was supper to get. It hadn't helped that this was the time Violet would develop hot flashes. Myrtle Jones tried to tell her about a concoction that would help, but Violet believed the Lord meant for her to go through "the woman's time" without any help. "The Lord don't need me trying to change it." Violet couldn't remember the last time she had taken any sort of medicine. Sometimes, she woke up in the middle of the night, and her long cotton nightgown would be soaked through. She'd quickly replace the shift with another, wishing she could sleep in something lighter, but there were too many children in the house. Lizzie and Mary were asleep in a half bed just across the room. David was asleep in the small bedroom where John Daniel used to sleep, and Lydia and Esther were in the bed in the living room. "Cut the nightgown to above the knees," Joe said one night, a little irritable from being awakened when she was up shuffling through the dresser drawer for her other nightgown. She didn't answer, preferring modesty and complacency to an argument.

She dressed quietly, putting on her regular day dress. They were going blackberry picking today, and she always wore a pair of Joe's old pants, but she would change later.

“I hope the good Lord forgives me for wearing britches.”

She went into the kitchen. She lit the kitchen lamp and saw that it was 4:30, a half-hour earlier than she normally arose. She opened her Bible and it fell to Psalm 69, a prayer for deliverance from persecution. Violet read her Bible daily but never followed a plan for reading. She simply opened the Bible and accepted what she read as the Lord’s will. She wondered what her persecution was to be and prayed for strength, saying an extra prayer for Lydia and John Daniel. She dreaded lighting the stove and the resulting heat that would stay in the house most of the day. But the family had to eat. Tomorrow, they would cook jelly, and the stove would again be hot for hours. If Joe’s work stayed steady, maybe they could save enough extra money to buy a small stove to cook on outside in the summer. She could sleep better at nights, anyway. Violet immediately felt guilty for that thought. The Home Comfort cook stove was just purchased last year and was the best around. It had a copper, five-gallon reservoir for heating water, and Violet kept the white porcelain enamel gleaming. She stirred up the biscuits, making extra to take berry picking, while the stove heated, and then walked down to the smoke house to get the ham.

By the time she returned to the house, Joe was up and getting ready for his day in the coal mines.

“We’ll take the berries and sell them this evening,” he said.

“I think there’s going to be plenty this year. We might get two or three days in before they’re gone.”

Violet wished he would say more. Sometimes she chattered for five minutes before she realized that Joe had said nothing. He was a quiet, brooding man whose narrow

shoulders seemed to sag under some unknown weight. He was tall and gaunt, and he always walked slowly. He loved his children, but rarely was affectionate and seldom laughed. The sight of them coming to meet him at the Gap at the end of the day brought a smile to his face, but it faded as he walked on home on the road, and it was always the girls who took his hand in theirs. Mama wondered if it ever occurred to him to initiate displays of affection. He would sit on the porch late in the evening watching the kids romping in the yard. If her chores were done, Violet joined in a game of kick-the-can, and she loved seeing him smile. As she sent the kids scurrying for a hiding place, Violet felt more like the girl Joe had married, before the babies, before the Depression and the War, and before the uprooting and moving had left her with a permanent tired look. Often, the kids would beg, "Daddy, come and play with us." His answer was always the same, "Not right now." He remained on the porch, his thoughts as distant as the darkness of the coal mines.

Violet set the biscuits and gravy and the ham on the table. The light was coming up fast, so she put out the lamp. Joe ate in silence while Violet busied herself cleaning up and packing his lunch. Violet ate very little herself, always urging the children to eat more. She ate one biscuit, and that would last her until she ate another one at lunch. Her high cheekbones, an indication of her Cherokee heritage, were emphasized by her thinness. She set out what the kids would eat for breakfast, then packed up a lunch of ham and biscuits, tomato and cucumber slices and cold ears of corn. She took down the half-gallon fruit jar with the wire handle and filled it with water.

It wasn't time to get the kids up yet. Violet went on the porch where the light

was better to write a letter to John Daniel. He had joined the army last winter. "You're just a boy," she had said to him when he told her he had joined. "They need me, Mama," he said. He had told Violet he might have to go to the South Pacific, drawing a map for her on a scrap of paper. She cried the day he turned nineteen, thinking ahead to his twentieth birthday that wouldn't be the same across the world. "They say it's a different day over there," she told the other kids. "His birthday won't really be his birthday there." John Daniel had been the one she turned to the most. Joe worked long hours and was so tired when he got home. Sometimes, he was away two to three weeks, working at a mine way up in Claiborne County where he stayed with his sister. Violet had depended on John Daniel to help her with decisions. Now he was off to war, and Violet prayed every day that the Lord would protect him. Maybe she should ask John Daniel what to do about Lydia. Lydia worried her more than any of the other children. She was a dauntless girl. Always complaining and wishing for something she didn't have. *Lydia wants to stay at Willamena's all the time*, Violet wrote John Daniel. *She does her chores, but nothing extra, and she usually does them in a hurry. I've tried to give her some freedom, but Esther says I give her too much. I pray extra for her every day.* Violet knew it would be weeks before John Daniel read and answered her letter, but it gave her comfort to put the problem of Lydia in his hands.

She counted enough pennies out of the jar to pay for an air mail stamp. She laid the envelope with the lunch so she wouldn't forget to put it in the mailbox. The light was good enough now for her to sit at the kitchen table and continue her Bible reading. She wanted the children up now, so she read aloud, as she often did when alone. "Why do you

read the Bible out loud?" the children used to ask her. "The Lord may send somebody to hear me," she said, "and it sounds pretty."

Violet closed her Bible, put it on the table in the living room, and went in to put on her britches. Lydia was getting up.

"Mama, can I wear britches today?" Lydia asked.

"Girls shouldn't wear britches."

"But you do, Mama. I don't want my legs scratched up."

"Wear your old, long dress. There's not enough britches for all you girls to wear, anyways."

"Esther won't wear britches, and Lizzie don't care," Lydia said, knowing she was pushing Mama's patience.

It was true. Esther wouldn't dare wear pants. She thought girls should always wear dresses. David wore overalls and had one other pair of pants. And Violet wouldn't let anyone touch John Daniel's things. She wanted them to be just the same as he left them when he went to war.

Mary started whining. "I wanna wear britches. I wanna wear britches."

"Hush," Violet said. "I'll take a switch to you both. Help Mary with her clothes and get on in the kitchen for your breakfast." Lizzie escaped scolding by keeping her mouth shut.

Violet went in the kitchen, hoping Lydia wouldn't act contrary all day. She went through the house, purposely being loud now. "Get up. It's berry pickin' day. Get busy with your chores." The kids usually got up quickly, each trying to be the first to the out

house. Lydia and Mary had been the first up, and Lydia helped Mary in the outhouse. Then, they gathered sticks for the kindling. Lizzie carried water into the house from the well. Esther usually worked around the kitchen, straightening up after the others. If Violet hadn't made her bed, then Esther shook out the quilts and fluffed the mattress and pillows. David went to let the cow out to the pasture and brought back an armload of wood for the stove. Violet put the breakfast on the table. It was Lydia's turn to return thanks. "Well," Violet said, "go ahead with it."

"WethankyeLordforthe food," Lydia said so fast Violet wasn't sure her mouth had opened.

"Let's hope the Lord heard that," Violet said.

The kids all reached at once, and soon the talk was all about who could pick the most berries and what they would buy with their money. Violet smiled at the children and offered a silent prayer that the Lord would keep snakes out of the berry patches.

David Samuel Johnson

Before Daddy left for the mines, David was in the barn beginning his daily chores. He knew that the day of berry picking meant most of his chores would go undone. He would have to work harder tomorrow to make up for the lost time. But he didn't mind. He would enjoy the outing with the family as long as the girls kept up their talk and didn't expect him to join in too much.

David went to the barn to hitch Bob and George to the wagon. At least Mama's letting us take the wagon, he thought, as he rubbed the nose of each horse. It was difficult to carry buckets of berries back to the house. Mary usually spilled hers, anyway. Mama was just getting to realize that David was capable of handling the horses and the wagon. I've done it enough, he thought, when she wasn't around. Now that John Daniel was off to war and Daddy working all the time, David took on more and more responsibility around the house and the farm. He was good at fixing things, but Mama always seemed to think of him as a little boy. Three years ago, when he was just nine and when he wasn't hammering nails of his own, he watched carefully as Daddy and Uncle James built the house. I could build a house by myself, he thought, as he pulled the tongue of the wagon up between the team. Last April he had built a new chicken house out of left over lumber Mr. Wilder gave him. When Mama came to look at the finished structure, she hugged him and cried, "My baby boy, my baby boy." He was embarrassed. When he turned eighteen, he was planning to build his own house past Forked Creek on the acreage Daddy had

promised him. He could think of nothing better in his future than to work that piece of ground for the rest of his life. Daddy didn't like farming—he was no good at it. He helped with the planting when he could, but it was David out there every day plowing and hoeing, tending the pigs and the chickens and keeping the stock healthy.

He wished John Daniel hadn't gone off to war. He and John Daniel were close, even with the seven-year age difference. He guessed it was because they were the only boys, and they stuck together against all the girls in the house. But David worried about his brother. David liked to listen to the news on the radio at night, and there was talk about Germany bringing its men all across Europe. It was scary. What if they made it across the Atlantic Ocean? He felt proud that his brother was going to fight, but he was also secretly glad that John Daniel was still at Fort Leonard Wood in Missouri and not in Europe. Mama thought John Daniel would be home soon, even though Daddy kept telling her that he would be sent to Europe or the South Pacific. David hoped Mama was right.

David liked blackberry picking. He knew the girls didn't like it much because Mama made them wear dresses, but he picked fast, and now, with John Daniel gone, he would be the one to walk ahead and stomp down the bushes. David was already almost six feet tall, a tanned, blondish replica of his father. He had long legs and long arms and skinny fingers perfect for reaching inside the briars for berries. They would pick the Flatwoods first, about a mile away. Then Mrs. Wilder's fields. She had told Mama they could pick there if the kids would stay out of her creek. Mrs. Wilder didn't like children. David reckoned it was because she had two babies that died before they were a year old, and she never had any more. She kept a genuine, store-bought baseball bat by her porch

rocker and sometimes shook it at the Johnson children and yelled at them if they cut across her field or waded in her creek. David once thought about slipping over to the Wilders' after dark and replacing Mrs. Wilder's bat with the one John Daniel carved from maple. What did she need with a baseball bat anyway with no children? She had the clearest spring around, but she didn't like them getting a drink there at all. Mr. Wilder was old and stayed in bed mostly, but every Friday, he took her to Copeland's to get supplies. Sometimes Mama sent Esther over with a jar of peaches or beans or something. Mrs. Wilder liked Esther, but David stayed as far away from Mrs. Wilder as he could. Mama used to send John Daniel over there to fix stuff for her, and David figured it was only a matter of time before Mama sent him over there. He reckoned he'd be nice to her, though. She couldn't help it if her babies died.

David pulled the horses and wagon up beside the porch. Lydia hurriedly jumped up on the seat beside him. He knew she thought she was too good to sit in the back. Mama didn't mind. Mama would rather be in the back with all of the kids than up front with David. Besides, David knew Mama was too nervous to sit up front. She feared they would get run over by a car or she would fall off.

"You sure you can handle the horses?" Mama asked.

"I've done it a hundred times."

They ambled down their road, and Lizzie jumped out to raise the pole at the Gap. David looked back at the family as he waited for Lizzie to climb back on. Even with all their prattle, they were nice to be around. He sat up tall and patient, waiting for them to settle in the wagon, feeling much older than his twelve years. Mama, Lydia, and Esther all

had bonnets, and Lizzie and Mary were wearing hats Mama had made out of newspapers. David wore his old straw hat that John Daniel had given him. The morning air was already hot, and the sun caught on the buckets every now and then. Mama sat on the quilt they brought to spread their lunch on, and Esther held tightly to the water jar. The box with their lunch sat at the front of the wagon. The blackberries waited in a glistening, deep purple dew in the mid-morning light.

Robert Allen Doleman

Robert Doleman cut himself twice, shaving. He was staying at the Anderson Hotel in Clinton, Tennessee. There was nothing to do, nothing to see in this little town, and he spent all day driving the hot dusty roads of Anderson County, making notes in his notebook and snapping pictures. Since he had arrived, he had read *David Copperfield* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. He still had *The Grapes of Wrath* and the Bible that his mother insisted he bring along. He wasn't going to read the Bible. He wanted to go to Knoxville, but his uncle told him to stay put at night and not to go "messaging around for girls." Robert tended to listen to his Uncle Ted. It was Ted who got him the job, and Robert was grateful and bored at the same time. He'd rather be back in Atlanta where at least there were more than one picture show to go to. He missed Atlanta and its clutter—the storefronts, the plumbing, the electricity. He was tired of the Anderson Hotel and the dirt roads that seemed endless and the myriad questioning faces when he showed up with his notebook and camera. He even missed Uncle Ted snapping orders to him at the office. "This job's important, Robert. It has something to do with the war, but I can't tell you what—I don't know myself," Uncle Ted had told him. Robert decided it was a better job than most, but he didn't figure on the long days of driving. There were four other men doing the same thing, but he rarely saw them. Two of them were staying down in Harriman, and the other two were also staying at the Anderson Hotel. He ate breakfast with them a couple of mornings, and they all complained of the same thing. It was hot,

mortally rural, and dusty. They just wanted to get the job done and get back to Atlanta. They had orders to work every daylight hour, and each had a map with his section marked off. Robert was to record and take a picture of every house, barn, cemetery, church, store, or any other building in Segment D. "And don't talk to the people. Just be friendly and tell them it's a government project. If they ask." Robert hadn't yet figured out how to be both friendly and not talk to the locals. Strangers were easily noticed in the country, and everyone wanted to know what he was doing. He usually said he was a photographer, and people let it go at that, flashing big smiles, hoping he would take their picture. Sometimes, if it was a pretty girl, he snapped one, but he knew Ted would scold him when the pictures were printed, and there was a Sheila or a Betty smiling back at him.

He finished shaving, put on a fresh shirt, and knotted a black and red striped tie around his neck. He knew by the end of the day his shirt would show dirt around the collar and the cuffs and smell like sweat, his sleeves would be rolled up, and the knot of his tie would be loosened. At least, he began the day looking respectable. "Don't forget to wear a tie every day. Folks will think you're important," Ted said. Robert laughed. He didn't feel important, and he knew about as much of what the government was doing as the next family up the road, where he took pictures of their house and their corn crib. He wondered why people needed so many outside buildings. There were assortments of chicken houses, smoke houses, outhouses, tool sheds, and barns. The small house in Atlanta that he shared with his sick mother had only an outhouse, and he planned on tearing it down as soon as he got back now that he and his mother had indoor plumbing and a bathroom. He was weary of taking so many pictures of outhouses. He took one last

approving glance in the mirror at his black, slicked back hair. He rubbed the scar down his left cheek as if he could rub it off. Aunt Ettie had told him the more he rubbed it, the more it would fade. He hated looking at it and usually kept his head turned a little to the left when he talked to people. It wasn't his fault anyway. He wished he was a little taller—he was five feet and nine inches—but the girls didn't seem to mind. He had dark brown eyes that looked black and showy teeth when he smiled. His skin was whiter than most, and he fancied himself one of those Hollywood types. He had been here two days and already was wishing to look up a few local girls.

He sipped a cup of coffee and ate a piece of toast at the diner by the courthouse, and then set out down State Route 61 to the valley where his segment lay. It was 6:30 a.m., and Ted would expect him to be in the valley by now. The air was hot, not cooling much during the night, and haze hung over the ridge. He stopped at a cross road to look at his map. He had marked the places he had been yesterday with a red pen, and he couldn't decide if he wanted to drive farther and work his way back or start where he left off. He decided to stop in the little store on down the road for a soda.

“What you doing in these parts?” the proprietor asked him when he paid for the soda.

“Just passing through,” Robert said, wondering how the man knew he was a stranger.

“We don't get many strangers around here.”

“It's a nice place you have here. I'll be on my way.”

Robert started out the door, hoping the man's curiosity wasn't aroused. He didn't

feel like talking.

“You looking for land to buy?”

“Just driving.”

“Where you from?”

“Atlanta. Georgia.”

“A city man.” He was looking at Robert with new interest. “I’ll be.”

“Got to get on the road. Bye now.” Robert pushed on out the door, glad to get back to the refuge of his black, dusty car.

He had turned onto a dirt road, going towards the end of his segment. A wagon pulled by two horses moved slowly towards him. He was going fast enough to leave a trail of dust, and he slowed down some. The wagon was filled with people, mostly children, and they were singing and having a good time. A gawky boy wearing a ragged straw hat managed the horses. Robert waved cautiously as he went by—he was still going pretty fast—and most of them just looked at him. The boy driver threw up a hand, and as Robert watched in the mirror, they put their hands over their faces as they were engulfed in a cloud. The girl beside him twisted in her seat to watch the car. When he looked again in his mirror, she was still turned, watching his car disappear in the haze.

Blackberry Picking

Mama worried all the way over that someone would already have picked the best patch in Hooks' field in the Flatwoods, but the black and red berries were plenty and waiting on them. By noon, their fingers were stained purple, and they sucked on them to relieve the pain of the briar pricks. David had picked two gallons, Mama, Lydia, and Esther had picked a gallon each. Lizzie and Mary, who had spent most of their time picking daisies or chasing June bugs had about a gallon between them, but Mama didn't fuss. They had seen two snakes, but they had scurried off at the threat of trampling feet. David went ahead to scare them off, and Mama made each of them carry a stick to thrash around in the brush.

When the sun was high and straight above, Mama spread the quilt under a forked maple tree and got the lunch out of the wagon. They sat in the shade, enjoying the respite from the heat and the picking.

"Who do you think was in that car?" Lydia asked David.

"Don't worry yourself about no car, Lydia," Mama said.

"I saw that same car yesterday. What's he doing here? I haven't heard anybody say anything about no salesman," Lydia said.

"Lydia thinks he cute," Lizzie said.

"Hush your mouth. I didn't say that."

"Is he your boyfriend?" Mary asked.

“Y’all hush up. I never said anything about that man.”

“Girls, that’s enough,” Mama said. Mama couldn’t bear to hear the girls say anything cross to each other. “T’ain’t none of our business who he is.”

Lydia hushed, but while Mama wasn’t looking, Lydia pulled on Lizzie’s braids. Lizzie stuck her tongue out, and Lydia returned with crossed eyes and a show of teeth. Lydia decided next time she saw a stranger, she would save it to discuss with Willamena. But who could he be? He had on a tie. Nobody wears a tie around here.

By two o’clock, they had all their pails full. Mama counted ten gallons. She said they’d take these home and empty them and pick awhile in Mrs. Wilders’ field. Mama told Lizzie and Mary they could stay at the house. Lydia begged to stay with them, but Mama said no, Esther would stay with them. Mama knew that Esther would start supper, and Lydia would just sit on the porch or dally around the yard. Mama, David, and Lydia set off across the road through Wilders’ field, each carrying two pails. David walked ahead.

“So, you and Willamena still working on her new dress?” Mama asked.

“Yeah, we’ll finish it real soon,” Lydia said, looking sideways at Mama and wondering what she was getting at.

“You need to start learning how to sew more of your own clothes. Me and Esther’s always finishing up your dresses ‘cause you lose interest in them.”

“Sewing is boring.”

“All girls gotta know how to sew. And cook. You could learn more in the kitchen, too,” Mama said.

“I don’t like cooking any better. It’s hot, and my biscuits always are flat.” Lydia

looked at Mama—she seemed in an agreeable spirit. “I want to learn to type and get me a job in Knoxville. They teach typing when you’re in eleventh grade.”

“Knoxville? Why, you don’t know nothing about living in a city,” Mama said, her face coming alive.

“Lots of people live in cities.”

“It’s not for us. We’re country people. We’re poor, but we have food and a place to live.”

“Them people in Knoxville have food and houses, too,” Lydia said.

“Young ladies don’t have no business going off to Knoxville,” Mama said. “You know, you’re sounding just like some girl in a dime store novel, daydreaming her life away.”

“I don’t know anything about them girls in books, but I don’t want to stay where there’s no electricity. Why do they have current in Knoxville and Clinton and not here?”

“It’ll get here soon enough. Besides, Mrs. Wilder told me it was dangerous to have current in the house.”

“There’s a world outside of Lupton’s Crossroad, you know.”

Mama set her mouth in a straight line and walked a little faster. The things Lydia didn’t realize would fill a book, she thought. I’ll pray harder for her, Lord, she said too low for Lydia to hear. By the time Daddy came walking up the road with his dinner pail, David had fourteen gallons of berries lined up in the wagon, parked under the big maple tree out by the barn. Mama kept enough berries to make one run of jam and a cobbler. After supper, David and Daddy set out for Hobart Brimer’s store in Scarboro. Mama had

decided that she and the girls wouldn't go. Lydia grumbled about not getting to go, but she decided not to rouse Mama's ire too much or Mama might not let her go to Willamena's in the morning.

A Walk to Black Oak Ridge

Lydia heard old Henry crowing early the next morning. Instead of waiting for Mama to rouse her out of bed, she got up and headed for the outhouse. On her way back, she gathered sticks for kindling, drew a pail of water, and swept the front porch. She wanted to go to Willamena's. Mama was just coming into the kitchen when Lydia hung the broom up on the nail on the porch.

“What you doing up so early?” Mama asked.

“Just helping you. Me and Willamena are going to finish her dress today. We might walk over to Copeland's to look at the piece goods. I got my blackberry money.” Lydia hoped that she and Willamena would have a little time to work on the dress after their walk up the ridge. At least, her words wouldn't all be a lie.

“Bring me a can of baking soda,” Mama said, and went to get some coins.

Copeland's was on the way up to Black Oak Ridge. Lydia knew that if Mama thought they were going to Copeland's, she wouldn't think it odd if anybody saw them headed that way over to Robertsville. She had twenty cents from the blackberries and another forty cents she had saved. That would be plenty to buy some dress yardage and trim. She had to have a new dress for school if Bobby Reed was going to notice her. They'd go up to Black Oak Ridge and get the fabric on the way back home.

“You can't go before breakfast. And you get on back here before the day's gone. We got corn to do, and tomorrow's wash day.”

After breakfast, Lydia braided her own hair, braided Mary's and asked Lizzie if she wanted her to do her hair.

"Why you want to braid my hair? You never do."

"Just trying to be nice. I don't have to braid it. Braid it yourself."

"You're so mean."

Mama heard the argument on the porch. "Lizzie, you let Lydia braid your hair."

Lydia got the comb, and started parting the hair. Lizzie had shiny, black hair that was straight and stayed where you put it. Lydia's own hair was dark blond and heavy, curling in places she didn't like.

"You're pulling," Lizzie said.

"Hush. Mama told me to braid it."

Lydia pulled tighter and tighter, and Lizzie complained louder and louder. Finally Mama came on the porch.

"Lydia, just get on over to Willamena's. But you get back here early."

It took Lydia about twenty seconds to get back in the house and retrieve her sixty cents from the little wood box under the bed. She put it in her dress pocket and headed out to the road.

At the Gap, Lydia bent back from her knees and walked under the pole with her back almost parallel to the ground. With a slight frown, she realized that she was almost too tall and would soon have to crawl over the pole like David. Down the road a bit, she saw Mrs. Wilder coming across her field. Lydia threw up a hand and waved at her, then stuck her tongue out at her, knowing Mrs. Wilder couldn't see well that far.

“Hello, Mrs. Witchy Wilder,” Lydia said.

Then she felt a pang of guilt, thinking about what Mama would say.

“Jesus knows what you are doing, all the time.” Lydia heard Mama’s voice, as sure as if it was right behind her.

Lydia set her head straight on her shoulders, with her nose pointed forward, her legs walking as fast as she could to Willamena’s, her heavy blond braids bouncing on her back. She wished summer was over; she was tired of picking beans and okra and tomatoes. She was going to go to high school. She didn’t like the studying part, but at least there were other girls to talk to besides Esther, who never talked about much of anything, and Lizzie, who just wanted to talk about how to please Mama. I might even get my hair cut short if Mama will let me. Willamena had a magazine she got from the Rolling Store, and it had pictures of girls with short hair. Every female under twenty around Lupton’s Crossroad had long hair braided in two braids, and, when you were just a little older, a braided bun at the nape of the neck. As she turned up the road to Willamena’s house, she spooked a fat looking rabbit.

Willamena had just finished breakfast. Lydia wished Mama would let her sleep late like Willamena and her brothers did. But the Whites didn’t have a big garden like the Johnsons. Sam White and the older boys worked at Brown’s saw mill, and they always seemed to have more money than the Johnsons.

“I thought you were coming yesterday,” Willamena said.

“I told you we had to go berry picking. I’ve got money for some dress goods.”

“Let’s go down by the creek.”

They held up their dress hems while they waded in the water. They had to get away from Elsie, Willamena's mama, to discuss their plan to cut through the Flatwoods to go through Robertsville, and then up to Black Oak Ridge where the Reed boys lived.

"We'll stop at Copeland's on the way back, and no one will ever know we went up the ridge," Lydia said.

"Somebody'll see us."

Lydia thought a minute. "We'll say we were running an errand for old Mrs. Booth. We'll say we stopped to visit her and she wanted us to take some beans up to her daughter on the ridge. Nobody'll know any better."

They went back to the house for Willamena's money and some more money from Elsie to buy her some soap flakes. They ducked into Elsie's bedroom and splashed themselves with her toilet water, hurrying out the door before Elsie could smell them.

Lydia had forgotten all about the car they had seen yesterday until they reached the road. "Did you see a strange car around here? I saw it day before yesterday when I left your house and yesterday when we were going blackberry picking."

"There's not been a car down our road in ages except Daddy's truck."

"Who could it be?"

"Just a salesman or somebody's cousin or something."

The girls walked through the Flatwoods, picking and eating a few blackberries, then crossed Edgemoor Road, cutting through Peak's field to avoid Clinton Pike. They stopped in at Copeland's to preview what they might buy, and Lydia spied a green print that she knew she had to have. Mr. Copeland wanted to know about all their folks, and

they told him they had an errand and would be back later. They left out, taking the state road up the ridge. About halfway up the hill, a car came along, traveling in the opposite direction. It slowed, and Lydia recognized it as the same car she had seen yesterday and the day before. When it was even with the girls, the car stopped. The driver had slicked back hair, so black it looked wet, and a white shirt loosened at the collar with a tie also loosened and his sleeves rolled up. He was looking around and behind the girls, and finally settled his eyes briefly on Lydia.

“What are you girls doing?” he asked. His eyes kept darting from Lydia to Willamena and over his left shoulder. He kept turning his head to the left as if he was trying to look over his shoulder. He patted his forehead and under his eyes with a dingy handkerchief.

“We’re–uh–walking home,” Lydia said, poking Willamena with her elbow.

“You want a ride?”

“Does it look like we’re going your way?” Lydia said, getting more nervous. They rarely talked to strangers.

“You girls live up there?” he asked, pointing over his shoulder.

“Yeah,” Lydia said, giving Willamena another poke with her elbow.

“What are you doing here?” Lydia asked.

“I work for the Census Bureau,” he said, trying to make it sound important.

“What’s that?”

“I count people.”

“You work for the government?” Lydia asked, thinking he couldn’t be too bad if

he worked for the government. Her eyes kept shifting to the back seat where she saw a camera and a book lying face down. A soiled towel lay crumpled on the floor.

“I guess you could say I do. If you girls don’t want a ride, I guess I’ll go on.”

He drove off, and Lydia and Willamena turned and watched his car go down the hill until it was out of sight.

“Can you believe that? A government man right here. He was good looking, don’t you think?” Lydia said. “And, did you see that scar?”

“What scar?”

“On his left cheek. It was ugly.”

He’s too old for you. Besides, you don’t know anything about him.”

The girls went on up the hill, arguing about who was better, a home boy like Bobby Reed or a stranger driving a black car. At the top of Black Oak Ridge, they took a small road that ran along the ridge. The Reed boys lived at the end of that road, and the girls meant to cut across old Mr. Greene’s property and come in at the back of the Reed property. They wanted to stay clear of Mr. Greene, though. There were tales going around at school that he hated kids and chased them with a logging chain off his property. Lydia doubted he could catch them, but still, she didn’t want any run-in with him.

Mr. Greene lived in a two-room log house that had belonged to his parents. He never married, and folks said he had never traveled past Copeland’s store on one side of the ridge and not past Oliver Springs in the valley on the other side of the ridge. He had a cook stove outside, and the kids at school said he cooked pinto beans out there every day of the year. He wore a beard half way down his chest, smoked a corn cob pipe, and

carried a walking stick made out of curly maple, taller than himself. Mama pointed him out once down at Copeland's. "There's a lonely man," she said, adding, "Don't stare," when she saw the girls all lined up looking at him like he was some kind of show. Lydia had wondered what made him lonely—the long beard or his hunched over back. He must be a hundred years old, she thought. She tried to imagine him as a young man, but couldn't.

The girls walked cautiously through the woods to a clearing behind Mr. Greene's house where there were several dilapidated sheds. They stood behind one of the sheds for a minute, listening for Mr. Greene and peeking through the cracks for him. They decided the way was clear, and had just rounded the corner of one shed, near the cook stove where he cooked his beans, when Lydia stopped suddenly, causing Willamena to run into her. Lydia stood petrified on the spot, her arms out from her side to hold Willamena back. In front of them, there by the door of the shed, lay Mr. Greene's dog, dead, with flies buzzing all around. There was a mass of blood around his neck, and Lydia wondered briefly if his throat had been cut.

"What should we do?" Willamena asked.

"I don't know. Maybe we should see if Mr. Greene's all right."

"We should go home," Willamena said, getting a nervous whine in her voice.

"Hush up. Be quiet. Let's go a little farther."

They walked along toward another shed and the back porch, holding on to each other's arm. Willamena was shaking, and Lydia trembled too, but she didn't want Willamena to know it. A corn cob pipe lay over by the mulberry tree, and laying on the bottom step was Mr. Greene's stick. There was blood on the porch and on the steps.

“Is it from the dog?” Willamena asked.

“I don’t know. We have to go in and see if he’s all right.”

“I’m scared. I want to go home.”

“Mr. Greene?” Lydia said, thinking by now he really might be hurt.

They crept up on the porch, half expecting him to storm out of the house with his chain, but it was quiet. They knocked on the door and when there was no answer, they pushed and it came open. They were in the living room, and there was blood on the floor and on a ladder back chair by the heating stove. The bedroom—the only other room in the house—was also empty, but no blood. Lydia followed a trail of blood out the front door, on the porch, and out through his front yard. As far as she could tell, the blood went on up towards the road.

“He’s gone, whatever has happened. We should go home,” Lydia said, holding on to Willamena to steady herself.

She didn’t have to coax Willamena. They ran back around the house and down the ridge through the woods, never looking over their shoulders. When they reached the creek at the bottom of the hill, they stopped to cool their feet and discuss what they had seen.

“We should tell somebody,” Willamena said, starting to cry.

“No,” Lydia said, with force. “We’re not supposed to be up there. We can’t tell anybody we’ve been up there.”

“What if he’s dead or something?”

“That’s probably just dog blood. He’s probably gone off to find whoever killed his dog. Besides, we didn’t do anything. Don’t tell anybody, you hear?”

Willamena agreed, reluctantly, and they continued down and crossed the state highway onto the Pike to Copeland's. Willamena didn't want to stop at Copeland's, but Lydia convinced her that they had to come back with some goods or their Mamas would be mad. Lydia bought three yards of the green print, some buttons and thread to match, and the baking soda for Mama. She had enough left to get some stick candy to take home to the others, and she bought herself a cheese sandwich. While Lydia ate her sandwich, Willamena, still trembling, tried to decide on a fabric. Lydia finally went over and pulled a bolt down and told Willamena that it matched her eyes, so Willamena settled on it, all the while keeping an eye on the door.

"Who you looking for?" Lydia whispered.

"I don't know. I just want to go."

Mr. Copeland wrapped up their purchases and told them to tell their folks hello, and they headed out the door. Outside, the humid afternoon had turned the skies dark, and a storm was rolling toward them from over Black Oak Ridge. The girls hurried through the fields and left off the Pike and were at the edge of the Flatwoods when the rain came. Willamena wanted to stop under a tree, but Lydia was more shaken than she wanted to admit, and she wanted to get home herself. A car was coming towards them. It was the same black car they had seen that morning. He stopped beside them.

"Wanna ride, girls?"

"It seems you're still going the wrong way," Lydia said.

"You're getting wet."

Lydia looked at her drooping package and felt her wet dress beginning to cling to

her, and she looked at Willamena. It was the fear in her eyes that made Lydia decide. I would hate to be so frightened, she thought. Mama would be mad, but in an instant, Lydia ran around the front of the car, opened the passenger front door, and yelled at Willamena to follow. She slid across the seat, her dress leaving wet streaks on the vinyl, and Willamena got in beside her.

“We live the other way,” Lydia said.

“I’ll just turn around up here.”

As she got in, Lydia thought about the camera in the back seat and wondered what a government worker needed with a camera.

“What did you say you do?” she asked.

“Oh, I travel around and count people and buildings and other stuff.”

“You take pictures?”

“Sometimes.” Robert had looked briefly at Lydia’s hair, and she ran her hands over it to smooth out the fuzz.

“What’s your name?” Lydia asked. Willamena sat far against the door, looking straight ahead.

“Name’s Robert. What are your names?”

“I’m Lydia. This here’s Willamena.” As an afterthought, she added, “We’re sixteen.”

“You don’t say,” he said, a smile coming up at the corners of his mouth.

They were approaching Lupton’s Crossroad. Lydia knew it wouldn’t do for them to get out of the car up by her road, and it was barely raining now.

“You can let us out here,” Lydia said.

Robert stopped the car and the girls got out. He told them he would see them, and they thanked him for the ride. Lydia knew she’d have to walk Willamena home, even though their house was nearer.

“What do you think?” Lydia said as soon as the car drove off.

“I’m scared. What if Mr. Greene’s dead?”

“He’s probably not dead. I told you that blood’s from his dog. Besides, I meant what did you think about that Robert fellow?”

“You don’t know anything about him.”

“But isn’t he cute?”

“I suppose so. I want to go home.”

“Don’t tell anybody about today,” Lydia said.

“Not even Mama?”

“Especially your mama. You want to get us both in trouble?”

“No.”

They walked on in silence, and when they could see Willamena’s house, Lydia told her to get on home, and again, to keep her mouth shut. The wrapping of Lydia’s package was wet and coming loose. She wanted to be home, to hear Mama scolding her, to hear Mary’s chatter. She waited until she could see that Willamena was near her own house, and then Lydia took off like a deer towards home.

Mama, David, and the girls were all on the porch. Mama sat in her straight-back chair, David stood behind her, Mary and Lizzie were on the floor at her feet, and Esther

was kneeling at Mama's side. The mailman had brought a package from John Daniel. They were buzzing with talk as Mama cut through the wrappings. Lydia felt like an outsider.

"Look at you girl, you're all wet," Mama said, looking up from the package.

"Lydi, Lydi, John's sent us something," Mary said, her green eyes shining with childish excitement.

No one noticed the limp parcel Lydia was carrying, so she laid it aside and joined the family. Several smaller packages, each wrapped in brown paper and tied separately were inside the larger box. Each had a name written in John Daniel's handwriting.

Mary couldn't wait, so Mama handed her one first. She and Lizzie each had a packet of colored hair ribbons. Mama's gift was a white and yellow satin pillow top, with *Mother* printed in blue letters in the center. It had yellow-gold fringe around the edge and birds and flowers printed in two corners, US Army printed in one corner, and Fort Leonard Wood in the other. Esther received a watch—she had been saving her money to buy one—and David a pocket knife. Lydia's gift was wrapped in several layers of paper and was a small bottle of *Evening in Paris* toilet water in a cobalt blue bottle with a gold cap. She opened the cap and took in the sweet smell and momentarily forgot the day's events. Mama looked at her for a brief moment with disapproval, but John Daniel had sent the gift. Mama was holding the pillow top to her chest; she couldn't be stern.

"Let's open Daddy's package," Mary said.

"It's got his name on it. He'll open it when he gets home."

"Please, Mama," Lizzie said, "We can tie it back up for him."

"You see that name there? It says 'Daddy.' That's who's going to open it."

Lydia put the toilet water in her box under her bed and carried the Copeland package into the kitchen. She unwrapped it and set Mama's baking soda on the shelf. She smoothed out the green fabric, and when she discovered it was damp, she started out the door to hang it on the clothes line.

"You're awfully quiet," Esther said.

"Just wet from that rain."

"The fabric is pretty. Where you going?"

"To put this on the line. I'll be back."

"Mama wants us to pick some corn."

"I'll be back."

Lydia hung the fabric up and went out to the apple orchard. She picked an apple off the ground that looked like the worms had left alone and sat under the tree to think. She heard a voice and realized Mama was calling her. She started to the house and then suddenly felt a chill wash over her as she realized the government man Robert had seen her and Willamena walking toward Black Oak Ridge.

News from Black Oak Ridge

Three days passed before the Johnsons heard anything from Black Oak Ridge.

Lydia had stayed close to the house, not even wanting to see Willamena, slipping around the house and yard so quiet that Mama was sure she was coming down with something. The days had been busy enough—they had canned corn and peaches and more beans, made pickles and jam, and Lydia cut out her dress and sewed half of it. Lydia's seams took paths of their own, and the dress was likely to be lop sided, so Esther took mercy on her and did the most of it, saving simple tasks like sewing on the buttons for Lydia. In return, Lydia promised to roll up Esther's hair for church on Sunday and let her use some of her *Evening in Paris*. "You've got your own toilet water," Lydia said, protesting that favor. "But I just want to try something different," Esther said. Lydia agreed, not in any sort of frame of mind to argue with her usual vigor. She wished everyone would quit thinking she was coming down with the measles or mumps. She was fine. She thought she might even forget about old Mr. Greene in a few days.

At the New Hope Baptist Church on Sunday, Lydia sat fidgeting through the service, wondering why no one had said anything about Mr. Greene. Willamena's family never showed up for church, and Lydia was dying to talk to her. By the time they returned home, Lydia decided that nothing was wrong, and old Mr. Greene was probably alive this moment on Black Oak Ridge, swinging his chain at some scared neighbor child.

Daddy brought the news home with him Monday evening. He had heard it from

Luke that morning when he picked him up for the drive to the coal mines. Joseph Johnson was a man who used few words to tell anything, and Mama and the kids had to beg him for every detail.

“James Crawley’s been killed. Murdered.”

Lydia thought her heart had stopped. She backed up a little, away from them all gathered around Daddy. Mr. Crawley lived up on Black Oak Ridge near Mr. Greene. He used to come down to their place occasionally and trade with Daddy. Once he took home a pig and left them four jars of molasses.

“How?” Mama asked.

“Somebody cut his throat. Lay there several days before anybody found him. Cut Mr. Greene’s throat, too.”

“Is he dead?”

“No. He made it over to the neighbor’s house. He lost a lot of blood. They took him to Oliver Springs to sew him up.”

“Who did it?”

That was all he knew, and Mama was still standing on the porch with her hands resting on her hips, looking toward Black Oak Ridge, when Lydia felt sick and went off the end of the porch to the outhouse. She wanted to run as fast as she could to see Willamena, but she knew Mama wouldn’t let her go with a murderer around. Maybe she’d let her go if Esther went with her. Esther could talk to Mrs. White, and she could get Willamena off by herself and see what she knew.

It was easier than she thought. After Mama told her again that she was coming

down with something, with her being so pale and all, she said Lydia and Esther should go over to the White's.

“Stay on the road—don't go through the woods. And stop at Mrs. Wilders. They ought to know there's a murderer running free. We all need to be on the look out.”

Mrs. Wilder had already heard the news. Mr. Wilder had been to Copeland's that morning where several in the neighborhood had gathered to shake their heads and contemplate the crime. “What's the world coming to?” Mrs. Wilder said, as the girls were leaving, stepping their way cautiously around the flowers in her yard.

As they rounded a curve in the road, they saw a car coming toward them. Lydia's heart skipped. It was the black sedan. She kept her head down, but he began slowing about two hundred feet away. Lydia began walking faster, but, soon, he stopped.

“Hello there. How are you girls today?”

Esther looked everywhere but at him, wiping her hands on her dress. Lydia looked at him briefly, then straight up the road.

“We've got an errand to run,” Lydia said.

“You want a ride?”

“Seems like you're always going the wrong way,” Lydia said, then wished she had just told him no. She glanced sideways at Esther, hoping Esther didn't notice what she said. Esther was looking ahead, a pink flush on her face.

“Suit yourself. Nice seeing you.”

Lydia took hold of Esther's wrist and started down the road at a quick pace. She looked back once and Robert was leaning out of his car, looking at them.

“Hurry,” Lydia said.

“Lydia,” Esther said, with a bit of alarm in her voice, “do you know him?”

“Me and Willamena saw him on the road the other day.”

Esther didn’t say any more, and Lydia knew enough to say as little as possible.

Esther wasn’t one who usually tattled, but Lydia knew Esther thought Mama let Lydia run around the neighborhood too much. “She runs around like a little ruffian,” Esther told Mama one day in the kitchen. Lydia had been sitting on the back porch—Mama and Esther didn’t know she was back from Willamena’s. “She’s high strung—you gotta give a child like that a little freedom,” Mama said. “She don’t go past Copeland’s or the White’s.” They didn’t say any more, and Lydia was disappointed. Having Esther around so grown up was like having two mamas. And Lydia had little hope that Esther would ever get a boyfriend or a husband with her pinched face and her quiet nature.

The Whites had also heard the news. As soon as Esther was settled telling Elsie White about what they had canned, Lydia grabbed Willamena by her sleeve and herded her out the door. They headed down to the creek. When they felt safe, Willamena started crying. Lydia let loose.

“Did you tell anybody about what we saw? Hush up. Someone will hear you.”

“No,” Willamena said, trying to quit crying. “Oh, Lydia, it’s so awful. What if the murderer had still been there and killed us?”

“He wasn’t. And he didn’t. He probably did it the night before,” Lydia said.

“Who could have done that?”

“I don’t know, but that government fellow named Robert, he was coming down

from Black Oak Ridge that day.”

“We rode in the car with him,” Willamena said, beginning the crying again.

“Hush. It’s over. Nothing happened to us. The important thing now is that we don’t tell anybody. About what we saw or riding in the car. You hear me?”

“Yes. I hear you. I won’t tell. Mama’s been worried about me, thinking something’s wrong with me.”

“Me, too. I probably won’t get over for a while. Mama’s going to keep a tight string on me now.”

They played around in the creek a while, getting their dress tails wet. Lydia was ready to go, knowing Mama would be anxious if she and Esther didn’t get back soon.

“I’ll see you sometime, maybe at church. Esther’s helping me with my dress. Don’t think about what we saw.”

Back home, they reported to Mama what the neighbors knew. Elsie White heard that they were looking for two boys. Lydia hoped it was true, and that the government fellow wasn’t involved in any way.

The screen doors at the front and back had latches on them, but there were no other locks on the doors. Mama took to propping a straight-back chair under the door knobs at night.

End of Summer

The August heat was even more oppressive than July's humid days, and Robert knew that by the time cooler September nights came, he would be finished with his work around Lupton's Crossroad and be back in Atlanta. His maps were a mass of red marks where he crossed off the places he had covered. He had a couple of days of worry after the sheriff and a deputy approached him at Copeland's.

"What are you doing around here, Mister?"

"I'm working for the government." Robert said, fishing in his pocket for a letter telling anyone who asked who he was. The sheriff looked at the paper and handed it back.

"Mind if I look around in your car?"

"No, sir." Robert took out his handkerchief, wiping sweat off his forehead.

The sheriff poked around in the car, finding only the camera, the maps, and his notebook.

"Where'd you get that scar?"

"In a fight."

"What did the other fellow get?"

"He's dead."

"Did you kill him?"

"Somebody else did."

Robert hated relating the whole unpleasant story to the sheriff, but he knew the

sheriff would be making a phone call to Atlanta to check him out. He told him as few details as possible, but he knew they would be confirmed in Atlanta.

“Somebody said they saw you up on Black Oak Ridge the day of the murder.” The sheriff was pointing at the ridge over his shoulder.

“I don’t even know where Black Oak Ridge is. It’s not one of my segments. If I was there, I was lost.”

Robert wasn’t sure if the sheriff was satisfied with his answers, but he finally let him go after he found out where Robert was staying. He had given him Ted’s phone number, and he dreaded hearing from Ted after the sheriff called down to Atlanta. He headed on out the state route, turning off on Lupton Road.

He wondered which farm the girls he had given a ride to lived on. He smiled as he thought about the younger girl—Lydia—she said was her name. She was a mess the day he picked them up during the rain. Her dress was wet and her hair was fuzzy and dripping. He had remembered that she and another girl were coming from what the sheriff had called Black Oak Ridge the day he had first offered them a ride.

It was late afternoon when he got to the road with the pole over the end. He hesitated briefly about moving the pole, but he knew he had to document every piece of property. He drove slowly up the dirt road, hoping there were few buildings to photograph. The house sat just where the drive ended. It was small and rather plain with wood siding and a porch that went across the front. Robert thought it looked fairly new. He snapped a picture of the front of the house before he went on the porch. A young woman with a blue checked apron tied around her waist came to the door before he got to

the steps. She didn't open the screen door.

"Hello?" she said.

"Hello, ma'am. I need to take some pictures of your property."

"They're out at the barn."

Robert looked to his right towards what he thought was a barn that he had seen coming up the drive.

"I'll take the pictures and be gone," he said, not sure who she meant by her comment.

"You should talk to Mama."

"Pardon me, Ma'am. My name's Robert Doleman."

The young woman didn't say anything. Robert wondered if she was affected in her mind. She was plain with her hair in a bun, but she might be pretty if she smiled or looked at him instead of glancing off to the side. She's just shy, he decided and without knowing what else to say, he started off the porch.

"We're the Johnsons."

"Thank you, Ma'am."

An older woman and some children were sitting on benches in a lean-to by the barn shucking corn. He recognized the girl, Lydia. She had pretty blond braids and a liveliness that he hadn't seen in most girls around the valley.

"Hello folks," he said.

The older woman looked at him guardedly, but Robert was plenty used to folks scrutinizing him when he intruded on their property. Most thought he was selling

something until they saw his camera.

“Hello yourself,” she said.

He held his hand out. “Name’s Robert Doleman. Glad to meet you.”

The kids had all been talking when he walked up. Now, they were silent. Mrs. Johnson looked a little uncertain, but she took his hand and pointed to each kid in turn and gave his or her name. “I’m Mrs. Johnson. Can we help you?”

Robert looked around, resting his eyes on Lydia longer than the others. She looked away, and he noticed that her braids were fuzzy. She always looked a little untidy, he thought. She wouldn’t look at him at first, and he saw that she was nervously fingering her braids. He started looking around at the buildings, opening his notebook, when he noticed she was sending him eye signals. She was shaking her head just so slightly, and he finally realized she didn’t want it known that they had met. He nodded to her, and then turned his attention to Mrs. Johnson.

“I work for the federal government. I need to take some pictures and write down some things,” he said.

“Why?” Mrs. Johnson said, with more than a trace of apprehension in her voice.

“Something to do with the census, Ma’am,” he said.

That seemed to satisfy Mrs. Johnson, and she pointed out all their buildings. He was surprised when she invited him for supper.

“We’re having a watermelon feast here, soon. You’re welcome to eat some and stay for supper.”

Robert wasn’t sure whether he should stay. He had only been invited to supper at

one other house and had not stayed. Ted had told them to not get too friendly with the people.

“I might do that, ma’am. I’ve got to finish my pictures first.” That gave him a way out. But he wouldn’t mind some home cooking. He was tired of the sandwiches at the stores and the food at the diner. Mrs. Johnson sent the boy to fetch the watermelon out of the creek, and the other children followed their mother to the house. He took a picture of two sides of the barn, single shots of a chicken house, a corn crib, and was headed to another out building when the girl Lydia came up behind him.

“I never heard of census people taking pictures,” Lydia said.

Robert wrote 355-6 in the notebook as Lydia peered at his writing.

“There’s probably lots you never heard of,” he said.

Lydia looked back at him and toward the house.

“Don’t tell my Mama I rode in the car with you,” she said, blurring it out fast.

So that’s what she’s so nervous about. He laughed. She looked more distressed.

He winked. “It’s our little secret.”

She turned and took two steps towards the house, and then was right back in front of him.

“Did you hear about that murder?” she said.

“Yep.”

“Well,” she said, hesitating, “You were coming from Black Oak Ridge that day.”

He thought for a few seconds, then realized she had might have believed he had something to do with the murder. “And you were going up Black Oak Ridge.” He smiled

as he said it, and a flush came over her face. Maybe she's embarrassed she imagined I was involved. She had spun quickly around and was off again when she turned back to him.

"Where'd you get that scar?"

He was usually annoyed when people asked him that, but he was amused by this girl. "You ask a lot of questions," he said.

He smiled at her as her face became red again.

"Just curious, that's all," she said and turned to go.

"In a fight," he said to her back. She stopped for a moment, keeping her back to him, and then took off in a sprint and was almost to the house before he returned to his work.

At the house, they had spread newspapers on the porch and were waiting on the boy to return with the melon. Mrs. Johnson told the black-haired girl to get him a dipper of fresh water from the well. The younger woman with the blue apron disappeared into the house as soon as he walked onto the porch. The boy put the melon on the papers and split it open with the biggest knife Robert had ever seen.

"You from around here?" Mrs. Johnson asked.

"No, Ma'am."

She kept looking at him.

"From Georgia," he said, wondering if he should sit in a chair or on the edge of the porch and dangle his feet like the younger children. He thought perhaps he should have declined the invitation; they asked a lot of questions. He felt sure of his territory when he was outside the folks' buildings, taking pictures and making notes. But, now he was on

their porch. He had been around enough to know that the people were protective of their property.

“Census people taking pictures must be new, I reckon,” Mrs. Johnson said.

“I just do what I’m told, Ma’am.”

The watermelon was cool enough to take some of the heat from the afternoon. This was the most hospitality Robert had seen since he arrived, and he found himself relaxing against the porch post, enjoying the younger girls’ seed-spitting contest, taking off his tie and joining in a couple of times, getting pink watermelon juice on his white shirt. One of the girls got him a wet cloth, and he dabbed at his shirt. He wondered about the young woman who stayed in the house, and Lydia kept looking at him and turning away as soon as his eyes met hers. The only boy in the family had gone to the shed to get a bucket to put the rinds in for the pigs. He put his tie back on, tying it loosely, and thanked Mrs. Johnson for her hospitality.

“You’ve got to stay for supper,” Mrs. Johnson said. Robert looked at Lydia sitting on the edge of the porch. She wouldn’t look at him, at first. Finally, she met his eyes and smiled a bit, but he was thinking about the tired food he was eating in Clinton, and he made his decision.

“What time do you eat?”

“It’ll be a couple of hours yet,” Mrs. Johnson said.

“I’ll go down the road a bit, then I’ll be back. I appreciate the offer.”

He looked in the mirror as he was driving down the road. They were all standing on the porch, the younger ones waving. The shy woman in the blue apron had come out.

Robert didn't say much at first. He was busy savoring the pinto beans cooked with a ham bone, fried potatoes, corn on the cob, and corn bread.

"Lizzie, eat your corn."

"Mary got the one I wanted."

"It's just a roastin' ear. Eat."

"Lydia said I was a big baby."

"No I didn't. I said you *acted* like a big baby."

"That's enough girls."

He enjoyed it all—they all talked at once—and learned there was a Mr. Johnson who wasn't coming home from his job in the coal mines until Friday. They were polite and didn't ask him too much, and the young woman whose name he hadn't heard didn't talk at all. When Robert slowed down eating, he asked them how long they had lived there, and he saw Lydia's spoon stop in mid-air when he asked them if school started soon and what grade they were in. He had already guessed she wasn't quite as old as she had told him that day in the car. But her brother, David, saved her from embarrassment.

"You heard about the murder up on Black Oak Ridge?" David asked, the question about school lost in the clatter.

Robert cast a glance at Lydia. Her head was down and she was stirring the beans in her plate.

"I heard about it at the store."

"It's a sight what this world is coming to," Mrs. Johnson said.

“Mama’s got a gun loaded—she’ll shoot murderers if they come here,” the youngest girl said.

“Hush up.” Mrs. Johnson lightly smacked the girl’s hand.

“We keep our doors locked at night. We don’t take no chances,” Mrs. Johnson said to Robert.

The noise was suddenly gone. No talk, no clamor of flatware on plates, no shifting of feet on the floor. Robert wondered briefly if he had offended them, somehow.

Mrs. Johnson broke the silence. “When are you leaving here?”

“In a couple of weeks. I’ve got to go back to Atlanta and make my report.”

They took their peach cobbler out to the porch—it was cooler out there. When they had eaten the last bit of cobbler, and it grew quiet again, Robert thanked them for the good supper, and Mrs. Johnson asked him to come back and eat sometime. He thought he just might, the food was so good, he told them. The older sister hung back at the door, not coming out. Lydia sat in the rocker, saying nothing, and he let her be. Her hair had been freshly braided for supper, and he smiled thinking about her dripping dress in the car and her blushing when they were behind the house and he was taking pictures. Before he went down the steps, Robert turned and looked directly at the woman behind the screen door.

“What did you say your name was?”

He could barely see her face through the darkened screen, but she said Esther in a breath barely audible and turned to go into the kitchen before the last syllable left her mouth.

Chapter 9

Sunday

Lydia hadn't quite known what to make of Robert's supper visit, but he had, by trying to be nice and talk to Esther, seemed so mature. Lydia was mortified every time Robert looked her way. She knew Mama would think he was too old for her, but Mrs. Tallent, her eighth-grade teacher, had married a man twenty years older than her. Lydia sat on the porch long after Robert drove off, hoping she hadn't seen the last of him. The thought of him coming down from Black Oak Ridge bothered her, and she tried to remember how he had seemed that day, but he was surely handsome, even with that scar. He didn't look like the type to fight, but that's what he said. He did look at her a lot, and Lydia fancied him taking a liking to her. Lydia could think of nothing better than living in Atlanta. Everybody living there had electricity and maybe even an indoor bathroom. And, he did think she was sixteen, plenty old enough for him to court. Before she slipped off to sleep that night, she thought about how to get Mama to let her out of the house more. She'd have to go out to the Gap more—maybe he would come by. Bobby Reed? He would look like a little boy after the likes of Robert.

A week went by, and Lydia had just about given up on ever seeing Robert again. She walked to the Gap every day, sitting there for an hour or so, bored. Robert never came by. Lydia turned her thoughts back to Bobby Reed. At least she'd see him when school started at the end of August. True to her nature, Mama kept close watch on Lydia and the other children, not letting them roam the roads and the woods by themselves. If

she went to Willamena's, Lydia had to take Esther or Lizzie with her. Mama wouldn't even let David go to the store by himself. If a store trip was needed, they all climbed onto the wagon and went together. Talk at Copeland's and at Brimer's about the murder revolved around the unknown killer, with rumors that the sheriff was close to making an arrest. Once Lydia heard someone talking about all the government men in the area and that one of them had something to do with the murder. Lydia kept in the back of her mind that Robert might be involved, but she was sure she hadn't seen any blood on his white shirt that day he stopped them as they went up the ridge.

Lydia didn't want to go to church on Sunday; Preacher Patterson was preaching, and his sermons went on for an hour. Lydia knew that Mama would never let her stay home with a murderer loose, so she got up and got ready. She had worked late Saturday night to finish her new, green school dress, and Mama said she could wear it to church. Ed Wright usually picked up the Johnsons at the crossroads in his log truck. Mama hurried everyone along, afraid they would miss their ride, and they just got up to the crossroads when Mr. Wright pulled into view. There were two or three other families in the truck, and the first news they heard when they climbed on was that the sheriff was questioning the Snyder boy—Tom—and his cousin Paul Garner for the murder of Mr. Crawley. As they headed down to Bear Creek Valley Road towards church, Lydia was surprisingly not relieved. She had told herself that Robert couldn't have had anything to do with the murder, but something in the back of her mind had nagged at her. Lydia hoped Willamena came to church—she hadn't seen her in three weeks, and they had lots to discuss—Robert, the murder, school starting soon.

In the valley south of Pine Ridge, the white clapboard church sat on a small knoll adjacent to the church cemetery. It was a pleasant building, and Daddy had helped hand-plane the poplar covering the walls, the floors, and the ceiling. He took Lydia with him once to the saw mill, and she loved the smell of the fresh-cut wood. Most of the folks around Lupton's Crossroad and in the valley went to church there—if they went at all. Once, the family all rode the log truck to a church way up the valley in Wheat for a revival meeting, but Mama said it was too far to drag younguns' to church, and they never went back. The New Hope Church was heated in the winter by a pot-bellied stove, and on the coldest days everyone tried to get there early to sit near the front by the stove. In the summer, the church was stifling hot, and the quiet between Preacher Patterson's words was punctuated by the sound of ladies vigorously fanning themselves with pieces of cardboard decorated with wall paper samples. Lizzie and Mary took turns fanning Mama, but Lydia usually was too busy fidgeting with the song book or turning her head around to see who was there. Lydia used to like looking out the windows, but two years ago, the men all came to the church on a Saturday and painted the windows—"to keep the Lord in and the devil out," Mama told the children when they asked. Sometimes, if they got there early enough, Lydia picked out a tune on the piano. Once, she forgot she was in church and played part of *Chattanooga Choo Choo* that she had heard on their Silvertone radio. When she realized her mistake, she stopped quickly. Lucky for her, Mama was still in the church yard talking to folks. But in the second row, old nose-y Mrs. Barnes held her handkerchief to her mouth as she squinted her eyes at Lydia.

Mama wouldn't let any of the kids sit in another pew. Willamena's mama wasn't

so strict, so as soon as Lydia saw her, she motioned for her to sit with them. The Johnsons sat near the rear, on the right side, because Daddy liked to sit in the back. Even when he wasn't with them, they sat there. When Willamena slid in between Lydia and Lizzie, Mama gave Lydia a look that meant no talking. When Mama wasn't looking, Lydia whispered.

"Did you hear about them boys they think did the murder?"

"I'm so glad. I was so scared."

"They haven't arrested them, Mama said. Did you get your dress---"

"Shhh!" Mama's shhh was louder than their whispers.

With that the girls hushed. The congregation was on the last chorus of *Blessed Assurance* when Robert Doleman walked in, looking around for a seat, and sat across from them on the left side. He had on his usual white shirt, but his tie was black, and his hair was freshly combed. Lydia drew in her breath as she jabbed Willamena with her elbow. When she finally got courage to look at him—the ushers were taking the offering now—he was looking at her and winked. Lydia sat back in her seat, hoping Mama wasn't looking. Lydia wanted to look at Robert again, but she didn't dare; Mama kept a close watch on each child. Preacher Patterson went on and on, preaching how God knows your sins when other don't, and Lydia thought he would preach all day. Finally, when he had repeated every warning three times, he ended the service.

"Are you going to talk to him?" Willamena whispered as they filed out of their row.

"Maybe. He ate supper with us the other day."

Willamena's eyes were wide. "He did? Why didn't you tell me?"

“I haven’t had a chance.”

Robert had gone out ahead of them, and Lydia followed Mama when she went over to speak to him.

“You working on Sunday?” Mama said.

“No, Ma’am,” Robert said. Lydia noticed he kept his head turned to the left a little as he talked to Mama, but his eyes stayed focused on Mama’s face. Maybe that’s the way city folks act, she thought.

“You should come eat Sunday dinner with us,” Mama said.

“Thank you. I might just do that.” He was looking now at Esther, who was standing behind Mama. Lydia and Willamena stood several feet away and Lydia was poking Willamena in the side again.

“He’s too old for you. Your Mama will skin you alive if she finds out you’ve took a liking to him. He’s not going to like you anyway.”

“She won’t know. Besides, he thinks we’re sixteen, remember?”

“What about Bobby Reed?”

“What about him? Robert’s older, but he’s not too old.”

Mama was moving on out to catch their ride, and Lydia hoped Robert would go on and not see her climbing onto the truck. She thought about asking him for a ride, but Mama wouldn’t allow it. Lydia dallied until everyone else had climbed on the truck, and Robert’s car was kicking up dust. On the way home, the talk centered on Robert and what he was doing there. Some thought he was a revenuer, some believed he was a census taker, and others thought he was neither but some person the government sent to spy on

them.

“Why would they spy on us?”

“Something to do with a factory, maybe.”

The talk turned to the corn crop and the weather, and when the truck got to the Gap, Robert was standing outside his car, waiting. Lydia got off last, hoping her face would turn back to its natural color.

“You should’ve moved the pole,” Mama said.

“Didn’t want to intrude, Ma’am.”

David moved the pole aside and Robert drove his car up their road while they walked. At the house, Mama sent David to get a chicken while she stoked the stove and put on a skillet of grease. She went out to help David dress the chicken while Esther peeled potatoes and Lydia got water from the well for the corn. Mama had had green beans cooking since breakfast. Robert sat on the porch with Daddy, asking him about work in the mines, thinking he sure could get used to the home cooking. Soon, they were all gathered around the table, with Lydia trying to act older than her fourteen years and Esther trying to disappear into her chair. Lizzie and Mary argued over which chicken they were eating—was it Minnie, Elsie, or Betsy? David told them it was none of them, but the cranky old hen that they didn’t like and declined to name. With that, Mary refused to eat her chicken leg. Robert smiled a lot, and Lydia thought he seemed to really enjoy eating with them. He winked at her two or three times, but Lydia also saw him looking at Esther and she thought, in dismay, that maybe he was just being nice to her like he was nice to everyone.

When the meal was over, Robert sat on the porch a few minutes with Mama and Daddy while the girls cleaned the dishes. Lydia came out just as he was going down the steps, thanking his hosts for the meal. She saw him looking at the screen door and turned just in time to see a small smile working its way onto Esther's face. He gave Lydia a last little wink and was soon driving out the road.

A Short School Term

Scarboro School began classes in late August, and the Johnsons settled into a morning scurry of braids, pencils and paper, lunch pails, or money for the cafeteria if Mama had it. If they didn't catch the bus on time, they had to walk to school. Mary was going for the first time, and she cried on the first day. Mama worried for a few days until Mary came home excited, telling Mama about the rhythm band, sock skating in the gym, and her pretty teacher Miss Anne Marie. Mama and Esther had the same argument they'd had since Esther had started high school.

"My kids are going to finish school," Mama said. Even though Mama was an enthusiastic reader, she had only completed third grade.

"I don't want to go to school any more. I like staying home and cooking." Esther said.

"Knowledge's the food of the soul," Mama said.

"I've got all the food I need here at home," Esther said, but meekly. She didn't like to argue with Mama.

"One more year won't hurt you."

It was settled. Esther would finish. Lydia was starting the ninth grade, and Mama hoped Lydia didn't get any notions about quitting. Mama grew tired just thinking about arguing with Lydia. David liked school—he was in seventh grade, and he brought home every book he could from the school's library, sitting up late at night, reading by a dim

kerosene lamp until Mama made him go to bed. But he worried about leaving Mama home by herself with the extra chores. "I'll be fine," she said, when she realized he might quit because of her. Mama had more chores to do during the day, but she was lonely with Mary off at school now, so she didn't mind the chores.

The kids were doing well, Daddy was working steady, and Mama got her letters from John Daniel. If only John Daniel could come home, things would be just right. Mama hurried through the morning chores, and in the afternoons when she needed a rest, she would get a book from David's room and sit on the porch and read. By the end of September, she had read *Robinson Crusoe*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and a volume of short stories by Washington Irving. Sometimes she would read for a couple of hours, completely carried away with the story before she realized that she should be getting supper started. Irving was her favorite; she loved to sit around the fire at night and gently frighten her children with stories of Icabod Crane and Rip Van Winkle.

One afternoon, Mama was going to walk out to the woods to look for muscadines. She had just started down a little slope from the barn when she saw three men walking across their field. She went back to the corner of the barn where she could see them, but they couldn't see her. They stopped, pointing and looking and writing something on paper. She went back to the house, wondering why there were strangers in their field, but didn't mention it to anyone until two days later when she walked out to the Gap to meet the kids from school, and across the road, there were two men in Mrs. Wilders' field. Mama wondered if they were the same men. On Saturday, everyone in the family but Esther went to Copeland's for supplies, and in several places along the road, they saw

strange men in fields, walking, stopping, pointing, and occasionally driving a small stake in the ground with an orange cloth attached.

“Who’s all the strangers around?” Daddy asked Mr. Copeland.

“They say it’s something to do with the census,” he answered but was shaking his head. On the way back, they saw two small airplanes flying low, circling around the valley. The kids were thrilled, but Mama couldn’t help but worry. It had something to do with the stakes, she was sure.

Mama tried to talk to Daddy about it, but Daddy just shook his head and said he didn’t know anything. Mama wished he were a little more concerned so she wouldn’t have to worry. He had a tendency to stay out of other folks’ business, and when Mama pressed him to talk about serious matters, he said little, and would get his pipe and tobacco and go out on the porch. Mama would sit at the table in the kitchen, consoling herself that he provided for the family. It was enough.

In early October, Mama sat on the porch watching for the kids—she hadn’t gone to meet them today—and David came running up the road ahead of the others. David was a quiet boy, and when Mama saw him running, she jumped up, her hand to her chest. She just knew something had happened to one of the other kids.

“What’s wrong? Where’s the other kids?”

“They’re coming. There’s stakes and little flags up everywhere. Everybody’s fields has them. Look. They’re in ours, too.”

Mama looked where David was pointing. She had been in the house all day, only coming out early that morning to feed the chickens and milk the cow. But sure enough,

there were hundreds of wood stakes everywhere with strips of orange cloth tied on the ends of them.

“What are they for?” Mama asked, but David had no idea. Mama went out to the other kids.

“Why are those stakes there? Did anybody say anything at school?” Mama directed her questions to Esther, but she looked around at the other girls. They were uninterested, glad to be out of school for the day. Mary and Lizzie were already off to play before they did their evening chores. Lydia was grumpy and told Mama it was probably something to do with the census and Robert Doleman. Esther said she heard something about a factory from one of the teachers at school.

“They can’t build a factory here. We live here.”

“I don’t know, Mama.”

Mama fretted and worried. “It’s some kind of map survey, Violet,” Daddy said, trying to reassure her. He told her about the talk at work and was convinced that was the extent of the strangers and the wood stakes. He went on to work the next day, and Mama sat at home and fidgeted. Airplanes flew low all day. She walked around the property, looking at the stakes. They all had numbers on them, but they meant nothing to her. She walked over to the Wilders’ farm, and Mr. Wilder said it was just like when they built Norris Dam. His family had lived there and had to move. “I reckon they must be going to build another dam on the Clinch. It don’t seem like they need another dam so close. But it must be going to be a big one if the water’s going to come all the way over here.” Mama left, thinking that was surely what was going on. Maybe the water wouldn’t come this far.

She waited on the porch for the kids, and today, they all were running—even Esther. They were all yelling. Mama pushed on her chest, trying to contain its intensity.

“Everybody be quiet. David, tell me what’s wrong,” Mama said, trying to calm them all down.

“School’s out!” He had to stop and catch his breath. “No more school. It’s over.”

“They can’t do that. They just can’t turn out school.”

“They did. The teachers said it was something to do with the government. They said not to come back.”

Mama sat back in the rocker, silent, in disbelief. Where would they go to school? It had to be a mistake. They had laws about schools. And didn’t they pay property taxes where part of the money went to schools? She wished John Daniel was home. He would know what to do. Nothing to do but wait until Daddy was home. He might have heard something.

Mama, Lydia, Lizzie, and Mary all went out to the Gap to meet Daddy, but he just shook his head and said he knew nothing. By supper, the kids’ joy at being out of school had turned to a cheerless silence. Mama usually tried to keep her fears from the children, but the kids saw Mama wipe her tears, and she didn’t eat at all. She looked from child to child, trying to read their faces. They all hung their heads and stirred their food around on their plates.

“You can teach the kids at home,” Esther said, the only one happy about school being let out.

“It’s not right. I shouldn’t have to. They got a building and teachers over there,”

Mama said. Mama realized there would be a lot of wasted food if they didn't eat. She picked up her fork. "You all better eat. You'll be hungry by bed time."

After supper, Mama went out in the yard with the kids, playing kick the can until almost dark. Daddy went out to the barn to oil the harnesses, he told them, but Mama saw him walking up the slope from the south field. Maybe he was worried, but Mama knew he wouldn't talk about it. He got quieter if things weighed heavily on his mind. Esther sat on the porch with the mending basket, and Mama, who had never cast an ill thought toward Esther, wished she would quit smiling to herself.

When the kids were all finally in bed, Joe and Violet sat on the porch in silence, each feeling defeated, each wondering what to say to the other, each saying little. It was a cool but pleasant evening, but Mama felt a thickness in the air she wished would go away.

"How can they come in here so quick, on our land?" Violet asked Joe.

"I don't know," Joe said, and Violet had expected no more. Joe had no answers.

Mama said she was going to bed, but she went down the steps and walked out into the yard. The moon was bright over the barn; it was a milk glass moon with pale edges that faded into the endless sky. When she was a girl, Violet's mama use to point at a milk glass moon and say it was the Lord's way of reminding the folks on earth that life was fragile, as breakable as a milk glass candy dish.

Mama went slowly into the house but not before she took a lantern and went down the hill towards the creek and pulled up a surveyor's stake. Inside, she hoped the kids were all asleep as she took the stake out of her deep apron pocket and shoved it in the stove. She lay awake for hours thinking about the lost schooling for her children and wood

stakes with strips of orange cloth tied to them.

Life in Limbo

Lydia got up before even Daddy.

“What are you doing up so early with no school?” Mama was lighting the stove for breakfast.

“I just wanted to help you. I wanna go over to Willamena’s today.”

“Out of school one day, and you can’t stay home. I don’t know. There’s a lot of strangers around.”

“Please, Mama. Maybe Mrs. White knows something.”

Mama told her to hush for a while, but after Daddy was off down to the Gap, Mama said she could go after the kids were all up, but be back in two hours.

“I don’t want to be wondering what’s happened to you.”

“What are you writing?” Lydia asked when she saw Mama at the table.

“A list of chores for you all. We’re going to paint the house, and you and Lizzie are gonna learn how to milk the cow.”

“Painting the house will be fun, but I don’t wanna learn to milk the cow. She stinks.”

“You just hush, girl. Do you think I wanted school to end? You all can’t sit here with nothing to do. David might even have to get a job at the sawmill.”

Lydia was surprised at the crossness in her mother’s voice and decided to not say any more. She was upset that there was no school. Staying at home all summer with

Mama and the kids was enough. Now, she didn't know when she would go back to school. She didn't really like school. Her grades were B's and C's, and she knew she could do better if she studied. But she couldn't see any sense in wasting all that time on the books when there was so much other stuff to do at school. She and Willamena passed endless notes to each other. They had magazines hidden in their desks, and during breaks they sat under the trees and looked at what the girls in New York were wearing, practiced putting lipstick on their lips, and discussed the boys. Lydia took a notion right after school started to write a letter to Robert Doleman, but before she got it half written, Bobby Reed started talking to her, and she soon forgot the stranger with a white shirt and a black car. All her attention was focused on getting Bobby to notice her. And now school was out, and she was stuck with Mama and the kids for who knows how long. She and Willamena would just have to find a way to see the Reed boys.

"Let's walk up to Black Oak Ridge," she said to Willamena as soon as they were out of hearing range of Mrs. White.

"After what happened last time we went up there?"

"Don't be silly. Nothing's going to happen. We'll stay on the road." Lydia knew she was talking as much to convince herself as Willamena. The sheriff let the two boys go. With all the strangers and school being let out, Lydia hadn't thought much about the murder. She wondered if Robert was still around.

Lydia persuaded Willamena, and they set off, telling Mrs. White they were going to Brimer's store in Scarboro. As soon as they were out of sight of the house, they cut through a field and got back on the road towards Robertsville. Two planes flew over at

separate times, and they counted six cars that passed them before they got to Copeland's.

Lydia looked at each driver, hoping to see Robert.

"What are we going to do if we see them?" Willamena asked, about half-way up Black Oak Ridge.

"Say hello, you dope. We'll say we want to see the murder house."

"But I don't want to see it."

"Who said we're going to see it? We'll just say that."

Before they even got to the Reed place, about half way up the ridge, they caught up with a woman and a girl. It was Mrs. Reed and the boys' younger sister, Faye. Mrs. Reed held a handkerchief to her face, and her eyes were red and puffy.

"Hey Mrs. Reed. Are you feeling bad?" Lydia asked, being sweet when she had to.

"Yes. It's an awful day. An awful day."

"What's wrong?" Lydia said, as she and Willamena exchanged looks. Lydia was getting concerned.

"It's my boys. They've left to join the Army."

Lydia grabbed Willamena's arm as she drew her breath in. Mrs. Reed was sobbing and Faye was trying to hug her. Lydia felt she couldn't breathe. They're just boys, she thought.

She gathered her thoughts. "But they're not old enough, are they?" Lydia said.

"They said they would take them. Bobby turns eighteen next week, and Johnny will be eighteen next September."

"When did they leave?"

“We’re just back from walking them to Copeland’s. Mr. Jones is taking them to the train at Elza. They’re riding it to Knoxville.”

Lydia felt herself breathing again and thought how hard it was just to let air into her lungs. Willamena’s eyes were brimming with tears. As soon as they could politely get away, they were running down the hill. Lydia thought they might catch the boys at the store. But, Mr. Copeland said they had been gone at least fifteen minutes. They realized it was hopeless, and they left the store in silence, arm in arm. Lydia left Willamena at the Gap, not bothering to walk her on home like she usually did. She walked slowly up the road, seeing Lizzie and Mary playing in the yard. The world has to move on. Mama took one look at her face and asked her what was wrong. “Just that the Reed boys joined the army,” she said, not stopping on her way to the bed that she shared with Esther in the living room. She lay down and only got up when Mama told her to help Esther with supper. Some things don’t change, she thought, and cheered up at the prospect of painting the house.

The wood stakes stayed in the fields and no answers came as Mama thought up new ways to keep the kids busy. They took the quilts to the creek and washed them. They finished painting the house white and used the leftover paint to paint the outhouse. Mama thanked the Lord every night that David was too young to join the army, and she stopped what she was doing four or five times a day to pray for John Daniel and the folks in the valley, telling the kids “only the Lord knows what’s in store for us.”

Every neighbor had his own rumor he believed. There was the dam rumor, which had the most credibility. A few had moved there from Norris when that dam was built, and

they said it was the same thing. Some said “they” were going to build a huge factory. But no one seemed to know who “they” were. Others chose to believe “they” were making new maps of the county. Some said it had something to do with the war. A few thought “they” were extending a major rail line through the valley. Whatever one chose to believe, there was no mistaking the dread that everyone in the valley felt. The strangers, the unknown “they,” the stakes with orange fabric, the airplanes—they all imparted the same story: change was coming.

Lydia accepted the idea that she might never see Bobby Reed again. The more she thought about the strangers walking around in the fields and about the rumors, the more she wondered about Robert and what he was doing in the valley. He’s someone I have to reckon with, she thought, borrowing one of Mama’s sayings. The more she reasoned things out in her head, the more she begin thinking Robert was the cause of people leaving the valley and of the school closing. And there was that unsolved murder. It was hard to believe those boys could do something like that. How much did anyone know about Robert Doleman anyway? Yes, there’s going to be a reckoning. She didn’t know how or when, but she would have her say with Robert.

Cooler days meant she had to stay in more, and she finally took an interest in sewing, helping Esther sew up new dresses for Lizzie and Mary and nightgowns and underpants for themselves.

A Letter Arrives

By Thanksgiving, most of the neighbors had received a letter informing them the government had bought their land and they had to move soon. Mama used to look forward to the mail carrier coming because he brought her letters from John Daniel two or three times a week. Now, she dreaded the day the Johnsons would receive their letter. Every day that passed with no government letter, she thanked the Lord that they were spared. Maybe he would spare them forever. If it wasn't raining, she sent the kids out early to the mail box at the Gap.

The letter came on a Wednesday, December 2. Mama turned it over in her hands several times and held it up to the light. The kids begged her to open it, but she refused, saying it was addressed to their daddy, and he would be the one to open it. When it came time for Daddy to get home, all the kids went to meet him. They dragged him along, telling him about the letter, but he was tired and dreaded opening the letter. When he finally got into the kitchen, he told Mama to open it. They all crowded around Mama at the kitchen table as she took the knife she was using to peel potatoes and slit the envelope. She unfolded the paper, scanning it, catching her breath a little.

“Read it out loud. Read it.” The children were all talking at once, it seemed. Little Mary was excited, not understanding the import of the letter. Mama read slowly, in a clear voice, only faltering at the January date:

WAR DEPARTMENT
CORPS OF ENGINEERS
KINGSTON DEMOLITION RANGE
LAND ACQUISITION SECTION
HARRIMAN, TENNESSEE

Joseph Johnson
Rt. 1
Oliver Springs, Tenn

November 25, 1942

The War Department intends to take possession of your farm January 5, 1943. It will be necessary for you to move, not later than that date.

In order to pay you quickly, the money for your property will be placed into the United States court at Knoxville, Tennessee.

The Court will permit you to withdraw a substantial part of this money without waiting. This may be done without impairing your right to contest the value fixed on your property by the War Department.

It is expected that your money will be put in court within ten days, and as soon as you are notified, it is suggested you get in touch with the United States Attorney to find how much can be drawn.

Your fullest co-operation will be a material aid to the War Effort.

Very truly yours,

Fred Morgan,
Project Manager

When Mama was done, Daddy took the letter and looked at it, folded it in half, and stuck it in his overall pocket. He started out towards the barn. Mama went with him, and when Mary and Lizzie took off after them, Esther called them back.

“What are we going to do?” Mama asked when she was sure none of the kids would hear, “and how are we supposed to find this United States Attorney?”

“I’ll find us some place to live,” Daddy said. The family was used to moving, but he knew Mama liked it here with the schools being close and the house new. “I’ll talk to

Luke. He'll know what to do."

"It's so quick. How can we move so soon? And our house is almost new. What will they do with it?"

"It's just a house, Violet. We'll find another house. Maybe a better house."

"But where?"

"I don't know. I don't know. Don't worry." He had turned away as he had a habit of doing, and Mama knew he would say no more.

Telling Mama not to worry was useless, and in the next few days, her high cheekbones became more prominent because she ate very little, saving it for the kids, saving it for hard times she was sure were ahead. She had taken to staying up late at night, scrubbing the walls and the floors. She had this thought, way back in her mind where she wouldn't let it surface so that she would have to give it credibility, that if their house was really clean, they might let them keep it.

A Search for a Home

When Joe Johnson opened the letter from the government, he thought of the letter he received from Violet, way back in 1916—many years ago—telling him she would be his wife. He had not known what her answer would be then; she had been hesitant, he was hopeful. But he knew with certainty what kind of news this letter held. He suddenly felt older than his forty-nine years. The weight of finding a home and the questions in the children’s faces eagerly turning to him for reassurance was too much to face. And Violet. He feared what this would do to her. She didn’t want to ever move again. She loved the house with its polished hardwood floors and the maple tree just out the back door. They had argued about which way to face the house; she wanted it to face the west, but Joe thought the house would have more light if it faced the south. She had given in, and now she loved the way the sun lit the house until mid day. He knew Violet depended on him—not just for a home and food—but for emotional support. He couldn’t give it.

Joe Johnson and Luke Jones never went back to the mines in Claiborne and Campbell counties. Luke had received his letter the same day as the Johnsons, and his had the same deadline as theirs. The day after the letters arrived, they went to the courthouse in Clinton to find out how to locate the US Attorney. Joe stood in one of the two lines, shuffling his feet and occasionally checking his overall pocket for the letter. The courthouse had polished tile floors and nice paneled walls. Young ladies dressed in neat business suits stood behind the counter and patiently answered the men, giving them the

same answers. The men all had the same look: overalls or plain-looking clothes, their hats in one hand and a government letter the other, and sagging shoulders. The young lady smiled as she looked at Joe's letter and then explained how he could join a class-action law suit against the government to get more money for his land. Joe and Luke signed their name on the list to join the suit. They also found out that they would receive another letter soon telling them how much money they were to receive, and they would have to go all the way to the Federal Court House in Knoxville to see the attorney and get the money.

Before they went home, Joe and Luke drove the back roads around Clinton, looking for property for sale. When they stopped at Brock's store in Marlowe, they heard that farmland was being bought up quickly in the valley on the other side of Black Oak Ridge. Joe had been glad at first when he heard of other folks getting their letters before him. Now, he realized his folly—the best farms would be gone.

When Joe got home that evening, even Mama was waiting at the Gap for him. When the truck came around the curve, he saw see her pacing, her hands smoothing her hair and going in and out of her apron pocket. He dreaded dealing with her anxiety but was determined to be cheerful. He had misread her distress on this day. She and the kids had walked to Brimer's store and heard that they could get John Daniel an emergency furlough to help look for property. In an unusually animated voice, Joe explained everything he had found out, then he headed for the barn. When Mary and Lizzie went after him, Mama called them back. "Let him be," she said. "He's thinking." At supper, the kids badgered: "Where we gonna live?" "What will our new house be like?" "Where will we go to school?" "How will John Daniel find us?" Joe had no answers but assured them

that they would indeed find a new home. That night, he lay down, more tired than the coal mines ever left him. He felt defeated. Every day, more and more truckloads of equipment and materials came into the valley. There was a huge building going up on Clinton Pike, not even a mile from their home.

Luke picked Joe up early the next morning at the Gap, and they decided to go to Clinton first to request an emergency furlough for John Daniel. There, they filled out endless forms and were told that he could be home by Sunday evening. It was already Friday, and Daddy thought that the government could sure move fast when it wanted to. Then, they drove northwest of the valley, all the way to Deer Lodge, stopping at every country store along the way to pick up information. “The old Goddard place is for sale,” or “There’s a hundred acres for sale in Lansing, but no house.” They both knew they had to find land with houses, and they also knew one family might end up in Deer Lodge and the other in Clinton. Luke and Joe had always been like brothers, and they meant to help each other. They kept looking. Finally, in Deer Lodge, just at the edge of the Cumberland Plateau, they found two old farms for sale about two miles apart. One had a decent house, but the other had an old, one-story shack with broken windows and a porch falling down. Daddy knew he would have to take the one with the shack, because he only had fifty-six acres, and Luke had ninety-eight and would get more for his property than the Johnson’s, but he dreaded telling Mama about the house. He decided not to tell her just yet. Perhaps they would find something else.

“She won’t like it. It’s too far,” Joe told Luke on the long drive home.

Luke said little, knowing his own family would dread a move to a place none of

them had ever heard of.

By the time Joe walked up the road, it was snowing. Mama met him on the porch; she had gone to the door at least twenty times to look down the road for him. David had to keep piling wood in the fireplace; every time Mama opened the door, cold air blasted through the house.

“Did you find something?” Mama asked, before he even got on the porch.

“Well, maybe.” Joe was hesitant. He pushed on into the house, Mama at his back.

“Where is it?”

“Deer Lodge.”

“Deer Lodge!” Mama sat down at the table with her hands holding each side of her face. “That’s too far. We can’t move these kids out there in the middle of nowhere,” she said.

“We’re going to look some more. John Daniel may be home by Sunday night.”

With that, Mama seemed to forget about Deer Lodge and moving and jumped up quickly from the table.

“Oh my! How will we ever get ready in time? Girls, get in here and get busy. We’ve got lots of baking to do before Sunday.”

Early Saturday morning, Daddy and Mama were up again. The snow had tapered off.

“You shouldn’t look today. You all might wreck,” Mama said.

“We’ve got three weeks to find a place and move,” Joe said, his voice cross.

“The Lord will provide us with a place,” Mama answered quietly. “He’s bringing

John Daniel home—he provides.”

Luke and Joe had decided to go up to Peabody and Habersham in Powell Valley and look around at some places in Campbell and Claiborne Counties. Joe and Violet had lived in Peabody right after their marriage. John Daniel and Esther had been born there and David had been born in Clairfield. Joe thought Violet would like it up there; he would also be close to the mines. Luke had two sisters who lived in Habersham. The day was long, and the properties were either too much—more than they thought they would get for their own property—or had no house. Joe came home cold and hungry—they had eaten their ham and biscuit lunch early in the day. Joe had never felt so tired—he felt even his bones knew what faced them. He knew Violet had pushed all thoughts of a home aside as she was in a state of flurry thinking that John Daniel would be home soon.

By Sunday evening, Mama had an apple stack cake and an apple pie sitting on the dining room cupboard. On the stove, she had a pan of dressing and a sweet potato pie, and inside the stove, she was roasting a wild turkey David had killed that morning. Mama made so many trips to the door to look for John Daniel, that Joe finally told her she might as well sit on the porch and wait for him. She bundled up with scarves and Joe’s coat and a quilt over her lap, sitting for about an hour before she spotted the tall young man in a military overcoat walking up the road. Mama let out a yell and was off the porch in two seconds. The others came running close behind her.

After Mama kissed and hugged him a million times, she finally asked, “How’d you get here?”

He had ridden a train to Knoxville, then to the Elza flag station where he caught a

ride with Mr. White to the Gap. He had gifts for all: a pin spelling *Mother* for Mama; a new pipe and tobacco for Daddy; bracelets for Esther and Lydia; a leather belt for David; and paper dolls for Lizzie and Mary. He had the gifts wrapped in paper printed with holly and bright red berries and had meant to save them for Christmas, but he had heard enough of what was happening in the valley to know that the family needed some cheer. They ate their supper cheerfully, yet, Mama's eyes were constantly filled with tears. Joe looked at her sadly. He knew she was thinking already of Friday, when John Daniel had to get back on the train to Missouri, and of an unknown doom that stretched out before them like a gaping hole. Joe sat at the table smiling that all of his children were under one roof.

Joe and Luke were up and out early again on Monday morning, and this time, John Daniel went with them, driving his own car which had sat by the barn for nine months because no one else in the family knew how to drive. Joe had once tried to start it by piling hot coals under it to warm it up, and Mama came running out of the house with a bucket to douse the coals before they did any damage. This morning, John Daniel and David fiddled under the hood a while and finally got it started. The men drove west down East Fork Valley Road, out of the valley to Roane County. Just past the Wheat Church, a huge tract of land had been stripped of trees, and there were men scurrying everywhere, and stacks of materials were sitting all along the road. They looked around Kingston, and near Harriman, they found a place with river bottom land on the Emory River that Joe thought would make good farm land. It had a decent house. Luke found a place towards Kingston near the Clinch River. The men knew they would have to act quickly since both places had other potential buyers, but they had to wait on payment for their own land.

Meanwhile, Joe thought Mama would be pleased, but she was adamant.

“I’m not living on the river where my kids would drown,” she said.

“The house is not that close to the water,” Joe said.

“But them kids will be down at the water every chance they get. I have to drag them out of the creek here.”

Joe knew if Mama was unhappy that they all would be unhappy. At least the letter telling them they could get most of their money had come that day. They would have to go to the United State Courthouse in Knoxville to get it. The government was compensating them \$2250 for their fifty-six acres. They could get eighty percent of it now and the rest in thirty days. Joe, John Daniel, and David drove over to Luke’s after supper to see if he had received his letter. He had, so they made plans to go to Knoxville the next day before they resumed their search for a new home and for land again. Luke told Joe that he would probably buy the farm near the Clinch, but Joe convinced him to continue looking. When they returned, Lydia begged to go to Knoxville with them, but Mama said no. “It’s men’s work. T’ain’t no business for a girl.”

Tuesday saw the men all day in Knoxville, standing in line at the courthouse and filling out confusing papers until they both had checks in hand. When they got home, the kids all crowded around Joe, looking at the check. Lizzie and Mary jumped up and down, “We’re rich. We’re rich.” Joe and Mama were silent. Joe was hoping he would find a place soon; he was depending on John Daniel to ease the way with Mama, but it was just two more days before John Daniel had to leave.

On Wednesday, Joe and John Daniel went to the bank in Oliver Springs to cash the

check. Luke decided to take his wife and go looking on his own. Joe kept a thousand dollars in cash and put the rest in a savings account. They drove to the north of the valley and found two places with “For Sale” signs posted, but they, too, were promised. Then, they decided to head back to Morgan County. They looked around Oliver Springs, and Joe found a Sears and Roebuck mail-order house for rent, but no farm land. He asked the man to hold it for him until that evening when they would be back through on their way home. Joe had a tip from Brock’s store that the Hugh Jackson place in Coalfield was for sale. He had the directions written on a scrap of paper in his overall pocket.

The two-story, clapboard house sat at the base of a hollow about a half-mile off the main road. It was weathered gray and had a porch across the front and a side porch off the kitchen. It had two bedrooms upstairs and a bedroom, living room, and kitchen on the first floor. The house sagged in places, but it had a fairly new tin roof. Mr. Jackson owned a hardware store in Wartburg and lived most of the year there. He was eager to sell. He had heard of the big government project in Anderson and Roane Counties and thought it would fall through in a year or so, and he would be able to buy his land back cheap. He had about a hundred acres with about half of it cleared and the other half going up ridges and down hollows. The timber hadn’t been cut in Mr. Jackson’s memory, and there was plenty of it. There was a small barn half full of hay and an outhouse. Up on the hill to the west sat a small cemetery, and a creek trickled through the property. Joe knew Mama would hate a house in a hollow, but the hollow opened out wide to the north, and was only about two miles from Prudential Hollow where she was born. Although her Mama and Daddy were dead, she was familiar with the area. John Daniel thought it was a good

place, and Joe made a quick decision. He gave Mr. Jackson \$150 cash and signed a piece of paper saying he intended to buy the property for \$2,000. He would pay him \$850 in ten days and the remaining \$1,000 by the end of March, 1944. Before they left, Mr. Jackson asked them if they knew anybody else looking for a place.

“Mr. Potter over there would sell his place,” he said, pointing east of his place.

“I do know someone,” Joe said, thinking about Luke.

Joe felt a great burden was lifting. At least they had a place to live. There were also some coal mines in the area; perhaps he could get work in one of them. They stopped at the rental house in Oliver Springs and told the owner they wouldn't take the house. When they got home, Mama was sitting in the rocker with her Bible. She took the news, her face unemotional. Mary and Lizzie jumped up and down with delight. Lydia asked about the school, and Esther stood at the stove in the kitchen not saying anything.

Finally, Mama got up slowly out of her chair.

“Is there a school?” she asked.

“A nice, two-story brick building. It's about a half-mile away.”

“I guess it's settled then,” she said, as she went into the kitchen to help Esther with supper. Joe looked at Mama's face and thought that must have been how Lot's wife's looked after she turned to a pillar of salt.

Lydia Disrupted

Since the day Lydia and Willamena met Mrs. Reed on the road and learned the news about the Reed boys and Robert had disappeared, Lydia felt herself turning into Mama. She had taken to fretting like Mama, sitting down in a chair and suddenly standing up, pacing back and forth, sticking her hands in and out of her dress pockets. The moving didn't concern her. School and roaming around the valley with Willamena were her small life, and that was all disappearing. Bobby Reed had just started to notice her when school let out. After she found out the Reed boys had left, she wrote a harsh letter to Robert, asking him why he came up there to disrupt her life and now he had disappeared, and she remembered seeing a bloody towel in the back floorboard of his car the day he came from Black Oak Ridge. That should get his attention, she thought as she sealed the letter and counted out the pennies for a stamp. She had simply addressed it to Robert Doleman, Atlanta, Georgia, having no idea if it would even get to him. She had walked to the mailbox when it was time for the mailman so that Mama wouldn't know what she was doing. Not that Mama would notice. After the government letter came, Mama paid little attention to the kids, brooding around the house in a constant state of tears and nervousness. Lydia thought if she disappeared off the earth, Mama wouldn't notice. When the weather was nice, Lydia simply left, unannounced, to go to Willamena's and returned by supper. Sometimes Willamena came over to the Johnson place, but lately, she was busy helping her mama pack—her family had found a place in Clinton and was moving next

week.

“You always wanted out of Lupton’s Crossroad,” Willamena said when Lydia complained that everyone was moving.

“It’s not the same,” Lydia said.

She had begged Daddy one evening, when he seemed in a better mood and before he found the place in Coalfield, to look for a place in Knoxville. But he just shook his head. “There’s too many people in Knoxville. We got to have a farm.” She was pacified somewhat by thinking that she would go to a new school and make some new friends. Maybe Daddy will find a place near town, and there would be stores and a picture show. They might even have electricity. But every night, when he came home and talked about the places he had considered, Lydia’s spirits sank. He looked only in the country. She was so weary of having nothing to do that she had taken to helping Lizzie and Mary cut out paper chains and stars from wall paper samples for their Christmas tree. She even agreed to let Esther help her with her embroidery. Esther was embroidering pillowcases with images of pretty southern belles and kitchen towels with colorful fruits and vegetables.

One day, in early December, the Thursday before John Daniel left, Lydia set out to Willamena’s. The weather had warmed after last week’s scant snow, and she took her time walking on the road. By now, the residents in the valley were accustomed to the constant cars and trucks driving around the valley making mush out of their roads, the men traipsing through the fields, and the planes flying low. Mama had decided all the strangers around were harmless. “They’re getting our house and land. What else could they want?” All Mama had on her mind was that John Daniel was leaving on Friday.

Lydia was almost to Willamena's when she saw a car coming. Three cars had already passed her—one going towards Bear Creek Valley Road and the others coming from there. At first, she didn't pay much attention to the car—there were lots of cars on the road now—but as it came closer, she was sure the driver was Robert Doleman. As the car approached, it suddenly sped up. The driver ignored her waving, and the car soon disappeared around the curve. Lydia stood in the road looking after him. "Well, I'll be. Isn't he a high hat?"

Willamena said he probably didn't see her.

"I was the only person on the road. How could he not see me?"

"Maybe he was in a hurry. You know how all these new people are around here—always hurrying about."

Lydia wasn't convinced. He had to have seen her. Something was up. She and Willamena made plans to write each other and visit each other at least once a year. To seal their lasting friendship, they each cut a lock of hair with Mrs. White's sewing scissors, wrapped it in tissue paper and wrote the date on the outside, then exchanged the small packets of folded paper.

"I'll still see you at church on Sunday," Willamena said as the girls hugged goodbye, but Lydia's family hadn't been to church lately; Mama was too distraught to face the neighbors. Lydia walked backwards up the road, waving until she went around the curve. She didn't know when she would see Willamena again.

John Daniel Leaves

John Daniel had to flag the eleven a.m. train at Elza in order to catch his Knoxville train at three. Daddy decided they would all go to the station in John Daniel's car if Luke could drive them. Even Mama said she was going, although she said she couldn't bear to see him get on the train. When Friday morning arrived, Esther said quietly that she didn't feel well and was staying home.

"I'll stay home with you. They can go without me," Mama said.

"No, no. You go. John Daniel wants you to," Esther said, unusually animated. John Daniel was outside putting his bag in the trunk, looking anxiously at the house as he waited for Mama.

"Okay," Mama said, "but you lie down and get some rest."

Mama knew that in her own troubled state of mind lately that she had put a big burden on Esther, leaving most of the cooking and tending of the kids to her. She let her be and put on her coat and went out to the car.

Luke, Mama, and John Daniel sat in the front, and Daddy, Lydia, Lizzie, and David sat in the back with Mary on David's lap. It was rare they rode in a car together, and they all sang *What a Friend We Have in Jesus* together, trying to cheer up Mama, who sat with her handkerchief to her face. When they got to Elza, even John Daniel was close to tears. Mama hugged John Daniel in the car and refused to get out of the car. They were early, so they all got back in the car to wait. When they heard the train, John Daniel

hugged Mama again before he got out. When he stepped on the train and waved back at the family, Mama was thinking of time zones she was sure she wouldn't understand. He had put off until the last minute just before he got out of the car telling Mama that he was to be sent to the South Pacific soon. "I'll send you our address as soon as we move," Mama said, struggling with the thought that she might never see him again. They watched until the train pulled away and crossed the river towards Knoxville before they solemnly got back in the car. It was a quiet group on the ride home, and Mama looked straight ahead, never speaking. Daddy suggested they go by Copeland's, but Mama said no. She wanted to go home.

At home, Mama sat in the rocker in the living room with her Bible open, not reading, but staring straight ahead. Esther was feeling better, and they had supper early. Before Luke left, he and Daddy made plans to go to Coalfield the next day and take David to see the place. Luke decided he would look at the Potter place in Coalfield before buying the farm on the Clinch.

The little house was quiet and gloomy that night. Lydia took Esther aside while they were cleaning up the kitchen.

"Did you see Robert Doleman yesterday? I saw his car, but he wouldn't wave."

Before Esther could answer, Mama came in the kitchen, with an old light in her eye that they recognized.

"We're going to make dolls tonight." With that, Mama put Lizzie and Mary to bed, got out the sewing basket, and Mama, Esther, and Lydia sat up with the kerosene lamps making two dolls. Lydia didn't mention Robert again, and Mama even hummed

Silent Night as she cut yarn for the dolls' hair.

Christmas and a Sad Day

On Saturday Luke, Daddy, and David took Luke's truck to Coalfield. Daddy planned on paying Mr. Jackson more money, and Luke wanted to look at the Potter place. It didn't take Luke long to decide. He was tired of looking, and every day more land was being grabbed up as the folks in the valley scrambled for a place to live. The Potter place had a two-story white house and a barn. He couldn't think of better neighbors than the Johnsons. He paid Mr. Potter on the spot.

The family set about busying themselves for the move. Daddy said he wanted to move as soon as possible, but Mama said not until after Christmas. David went to the woods and cut a cedar tree, and the girls put on their paper decorations. It wouldn't take long to pack the family's meager possessions. The biggest task would be trying to move the cook stove, the cow, the pigs, and the chickens. Daddy and David built crates for the chickens, and Daddy arranged with Luke to use his truck to move. Luke would drive the truck and Daddy would drive John Daniel's car to the new place. David was good with the horses and would bring the wagon. Daddy and Luke would come back in a few days to get what wouldn't fit on the first trip.

"But you don't know how to drive," Mama said in protest of Daddy driving the car.

"Me and David's been practicing on our road."

"He's just a boy—he can't drive," Mama said, but Daddy and David just stood there

looking at her, and she knew the argument was over.

Esther and Lydia were quieter than usual. Esther was reserved anyway, and it was much easier to notice that Lydia's pushy nature was muffled somewhat, demanding less, arguing less. But Mama knew something was deeply troubling Esther. She thought about it some, but attributed it to the move. Esther had told her after they bought the Coalfield place that she didn't want to finish at a different school. "We'll talk about that after we move," Mama said, dismissing anything that might distress Esther.

Mama had been too upset to go to church after they got the letter, but she announced on Saturday evening, the nineteenth, that they would be going to church the next day. "It's the Sunday before Christmas. The kids will want to be in the pageant." The church always had a children's pageant at Christmas. Unrehearsed, the kids reenacted the Christmas story and sang Christmas carols. They usually used live animals for the manger scene, and Mama ordered David to catch a couple of chickens to take.

"I'm too old to be in the pageant," Lydia said, "And Willamena's gone."

In normal times, Mama wouldn't have let Lydia have her way, but she knew the kids were troubled by the move so she relented.

Sunday morning, they all got up and readied themselves for church. Esther appeared ready, but just before they began bundling up to catch the log truck, Esther again claimed she was ill. Mama was concerned. "You must be coming down with something. You go right back to bed."

"Really, I'm okay. My stomach's just a little upset. You go on to church. You don't want to miss the pageant."

Mama stood at the door, looking from Esther to Mary and Lizzie. Mama was wavering between going and staying.

“I’ll lie down a while, then I’ll start Sunday dinner for us.”

“Are you sure you’re gonna be all right?”

“Yes, I’ll be fine.”

Esther gave Mama a hug and pushed her out the door.

At the church, someone had brought in a cedar and decorated it with store-bought ornaments, pretty shiny glass balls with pointed tips on the bottom. Lydia slid in by Daddy. David, Lizzie, and Mary went to the side room to get their parts for the play. Mama—like many of the ladies that day—cried the whole service as she looked around and saw half the congregation was missing. When Lizzie and David came out as Mary and Joseph, Mama thought she had never seen such a solemn Mary or distinguished Joseph. Even little Mary looked her part as a bright angel. At the end, Preacher Patterson announced that it was the last service. There just wouldn’t be enough people left in the valley to continue. When it was over, the ladies promised to write each other as they hugged, and the men shook hands.

At the Gap, the family climbed down from the truck, and they strolled up the road. Lizzie and Mary were running ahead and then running back. “Did you see me as an angel? I’m an angel.” Mary would spread her arms out like she had wings and run in circles around Mama and Daddy. Mama thought of Esther and began walking faster, leaving the others lagging.

When Mama opened the door, she could smell fried chicken.

“We’re home. Esther?”

Mama looked in the kitchen, but Esther wasn’t there. She wasn’t in the bedrooms. Mama thought she must be in the outhouse, but as she walked back through the kitchen, her heart stopped briefly, and a small cry came from her mouth. On the table, there was a piece of paper folded in half with *Mama* written on the outside in Esther’s hand. She was reading the note when the others came in noisily, but Mama didn’t hear them.

*Dear Mama,
Please don't be mad at me. I've left with Robert Doleman. We're going to get married tomorrow in Clinton. I would have told you, but I didn't want you to talk me out of it. Please forgive me. Robert is a good man. He has a good job. I'll write you as soon as I know where we will live.
Love, your daughter, Esther*

Mama handed Daddy the paper to read. She wasn’t crying, but Mama’s eyes were dead and vacant.

“What is it?” Lydia asked, looking first at Daddy as he read and then at Mama.

“It’s your sister,” Daddy said. “She’s run off with that government fellow.”

“What? Who? Robert?” It was cool enough inside the house, but she felt flushed. She thought the world had stopped in that instant, that everything would now be still and never move again.

“That’s him.” Daddy said.

“But he’s a---” Lydia said.

Lydia took the note from Daddy and was reading it for herself. Mary and Lizzie were pulling at her. “Where’s Esther?”

Mama sat in the rocker. She hadn’t spoken. Suddenly, she jumped up.

“You’ve got to go get her. Get Luke to drive John Daniel’s car and you can look for her.”

“We should leave her be. She knows her own mind.” Mama’s eyes pleaded with Daddy for help, but he went outside to get wood. Mama sat back in the rocker with her Bible, the only constant comfort she had known.

“Is Esther coming home?” Mary asked.

“No,” Lydia said. “Hush.”

“Can I sleep with you now?”

Lydia looked at Mama. She was staring at the Bible and was mumbling something to herself.

“Y’all come help me,” Lydia said, herding Lizzie and Mary to the stove. “We’ve got to fix dinner.”

Lydia stirred up the cornbread and got it in the oven. She checked on the green beans Esther had cooking and the potatoes she had boiled and set the other two girls to mashing them.

They ate mostly in silence with Mary excited and chattering about the new house. Mama didn’t come to the table, sitting in the rocking chair, rocking back and forth with her Bible closed and hugged to her chest. David wanted to know why girls wanted to get married so young. Daddy didn’t answer, so finally Lydia said, “Girls like to have a house of their own.”

They finished the meal, and Daddy and David went out to the barn to get things ready to move. The girls cleaned the dishes and tried to cheer up Mama. They read parts

of *Little Women* to Mama, each playing the part of one of the sisters and Lydia doing the double duty. They sang Christmas carols and wrote little notes to John Daniel. But Mama just sat in the rocking chair, staring, and when they all went to bed, Mama was still there, in the dark.

Mama, tired and resigned, was up early cooking breakfast. Lydia woke early and dressed quickly to help Mama. Lydia got the plates off the shelf and set them on the table. When Mama saw Esther's empty place, she rearranged the plates to take up the space.

"Are you all right?" Lydia asked Mama quietly, tapping her lightly on the shoulder.

"We've got to have Christmas, don't we? We've got to keep living."

Mama gradually cheered up as the days wore on to Christmas Eve. They got a Christmas card from John Daniel—he was in California by now—and he sent them a picture of himself by the Pacific Ocean. No letter from Esther. Luke came over in the afternoon and brought apples and oranges for the kids' stockings. Mama had saved a bag of candy bars that John Daniel sent earlier, and she put them in the stockings. For Lizzie and Mary, she had the dolls they made, a package of lipstick samples for Lydia that Mr. Copeland had given her, and a small bag of marbles for David. She had a cookbook she was going to give Esther, but she left it in the box under the bed.

Looking in, from the outside, a stranger might conclude that it was the happiest of families that sat around the hearth on Christmas Eve. But inside, Mama felt as if part of her had left forever. Two children gone and, now, she had to leave the place they knew. She knew Daddy was busy getting ready for the move, but it didn't help that he said nothing about Esther's absence. Mary and Lizzie grew more excited as moving day

approached, and David sat reading by lamplight at night, Mama unable to read his mood. Lydia was irritable and had so many unkind words for Robert Doleman that Mama had to say something.

“He’s your brother-in-law now. You have to learn to like him.”

“The things you don’t know,” Lydia had said, and Mama was too dazed and too spent to ask her what she meant.

Lydia's Impasse

Lydia could barely wait to get the dishes cleaned and get off to figure out what to do about Robert the day Esther ran away with him. Lydia couldn't believe the words as she read them from the note. It must be a mistake. Robert Doleman. How could she marry him? She barely knew him. But then Lydia started thinking about the things Esther had been doing. Staying home, pretending sick. And she did see Robert that day coming up the road. All that sewing of underwear. No wonder she wanted new underwear. And Esther had already packed up her clothes. Lydia had asked her why she packed them up so early. "Just want to be ready," Esther had said. That sneak, she thought. She's so quiet. Who would've believed she had it in her to run off with a stranger and get married? And, I'm the one he was always winking at and flirting with. Lydia wondered if he had got her letter and what would he think. What if he showed it to Esther? Maybe he never got it. Esther and Robert. It sure sounded strange to even think of Esther having a boyfriend. She's never had a boyfriend. And now she's gonna have a husband? Lydia shook her head in disbelief.

She hurried through the dishes that day and went out for a walk. Surely her sister wouldn't marry a murderer. Lydia thought she would pop if she didn't talk to someone about it. Willamena's gone and she couldn't talk to Esther. Mama would never understand and Daddy had too much on his mind. David was in the barn, building a chicken crate.

"Where's Daddy?" Lydia asked.

“He went over to the Wilders’. They’re moving tomorrow.”

“I need to tell you something,” Lydia said.

“Go ahead.”

Lydia hesitated. She couldn’t just say that Robert was a murderer. What if he wasn’t?

“You know that Robert that Esther ran off with?”

“What about him?”

“I–me and Willamena was up on Black Oak Ridge the day after the murder.”

“What was you all doing up there?”

“We went to the see the Reed boys, but we never saw them.”

David had stopped his work and was looking at her. “You know Mama’ll be mad if she finds out you was all the way up there.”

“I know,” Lydia said, “but we didn’t know anything was going to happen. We just--”

“What happened?” David said, seeming really interested now.

“We saw a dead dog at old Mr. Greene’s. Then we ran down the hill. But before we went up there, we saw Robert coming down in his car.”

“So? What’s so strange about that? Robert’s been all over the place.”

Lydia could see David didn’t understand. “I think he’s the murderer. And it’s his fault we have to move.”

David didn’t say anything for a while. Maybe he was too young for her to tell him this. Finally he said, “They think them boys did it, but you’ve got to tell Daddy. Don’t tell

Mama. She'd just cry more."

"You think Daddy'll understand?"

"I don't know, but you should tell him."

Lydia left the barn and went out to the Gap to meet Daddy. She waited about thirty minutes and had just about decided to go back to the house when she saw him walking across Wilders' field. They walked up the road towards the house, and Lydia told him everything about she and Willamena slipping off, running into Robert, finding the dog, and even that she thought she saw a bloody towel in the car. Daddy didn't say much, and Lydia thought maybe she was really imagining things about Robert. This was about the longest conversation Lydia ever had with Daddy, and she wanted him to say more. Finally, he spoke again.

"I don't know the man, but surely your sister does. He doesn't seem like a murderer, and are you sure about the towel?"

"I don't know. I didn't remember it till later. But, what about that scar on his face? He said he got that in a fight."

"You've got to be sure about things to do with a murder, girl. They think those two boys did it, so you should just forget about Robert having anything to do with it. The sheriff'll take care of it."

Before they went in the house, Daddy hugged Lydia, and Lydia was surprised. She couldn't remember him ever embracing her unless she initiated it.

"Don't tell your Mama none of this," he said as he went up the steps.

Lydia felt relieved. At least, she had told someone. And Daddy didn't seem to

think Robert was involved. But Lydia still couldn't understand how he could come here and disrupt their family and then take Esther off with him. That night, as she lay in bed, missing Esther, she suddenly realized what bothered her the most. It should have been her to run off with Robert.

Moving Day

Luke and Myrtle Jones moved on December 29, and Luke came back on New Year's Day to help the Johnsons. Daddy said they had everything ready, and there was no use waiting until the January 5th deadline to move. It had rained for two days before, and the first day of the new year was sunny and clear. When Mama got up and saw the sun so bright, she said it was a good sign. Mama and the girls had everything in the house packed and waiting. Mama made extra ham and biscuits to take with them and had baked a cake on New Year's Eve. They'd put the stove out before they went to bed so it would cool. "It's no telling when we'll get the stove working at the new house," she said. Mama sang all morning as they busied themselves with the preparations. She had finally heard from Esther the day before.

*Dear Mama,
We got married on December 21, and we're staying at the hotel in Clinton. Robert's going to get to stay on working for the big government project here. We hope to get a little house soon. I love you and I'm sorry if I've caused you trouble. Robert says we will come see you all when you get settled in the house.
Love Esther*

Mama let Lydia read the note, and Lydia wanted to tear it up, but she handed it back to Mama. Lydia didn't think she would ever feel the same again about Esther. Esther had left them all there to deal with moving, marrying the first man that ever looked at her.

The furniture all fit in the back of the truck with the kitchen table and the hutch on the wagon. They had to tie it all with rope to keep it from falling off. Luke had to go as far

as Copeland's to find some men to help load the cook stove. The pigs, the chickens, and the dog rode in the wagon, and they tied Sally up to the back of the wagon. Daddy drove John Daniel's car up and down their road a few times for more practice, and Mama was so scared by the thought of riding with Daddy that she decided to ride in the truck with Luke and the girls. Lydia said she wasn't scared to ride with Daddy. David had to drive the wagon, so Mama bundled him up with blankets and a hot brick for his feet. It was about three-thirty before they finally left the Gap.

David led the party with Sally reluctantly walking behind the wagon, then the truck piled high with furniture, then Daddy in the car. When they got out on the road from the Gap, Daddy stopped the car and placed the pole back in place. Lydia thought it was a useless effort, but Daddy said they were leaving their property in good standing. When she kept turning around to look back at the house, at the Gap, and then at the road, Daddy finally said, "Don't look back girl." The group traveled so slowly that Lydia couldn't help but turn back occasionally.

They traveled up to the crossroad, turning left on the road, away from the river. Lupton Road was paved but was still a muddy mess. There were many cars and trucks on the road now, and on both sides, there was heavy equipment digging in the dirt, knocking down trees, and making more mud. The valley seemed to be a brown bustling snarl of strange people sloshing around in what used to be corn fields. Daddy hoped they could get out of the valley without getting stuck in the mud. On up the road they went, soon coming to Clinton Pike and turning to the west there. The pike was also covered in mud, and if you veered off the road, you would be sure to get stuck in the mud. They passed

Copeland's store, and there were cars parked out in the road. Just past Copeland's, they turned north on the state route to go up Black Oak Ridge. Lydia thought of the Reed boys and old Mr. Greene and the murdered Mr. Crawley. Mr. Greene had already left, and Mama had heard that the Reed family moved to Harriman. Nothing will ever be the same, she thought at the crest of the ridge as she looked back into the changed valley that was already a stranger to her. At the top of the ridge, the road then took a winding descent down the back side of Black Oak Ridge into Oliver Springs. Less mud filled the landscape now. The sun was beginning to drop over the mountain by the time they turned west out of Oliver Springs to continue on State Route 62 into Coalfield. The horses were getting tired, and it was slow going up the mountain into Coalfield. Daddy pointed out to Lydia the hollow where Mama was born and said they would be there soon, but it was almost dark. Luke and Daddy had already turned on the car lights. She sat forward in her seat, anxious to see the house. Daddy had described it to her several times, but she was concerned now that it would be an old worn out house that Mama would hate. Finally, the road flattened out for about a mile, and then David turned the horses onto a smaller road to the left. Luke had built fires in the fireplaces and left Myrtle at the house. She had swept it out and shined the windows and had a lantern lit in a front window. In the darkness, Lydia thought it looked at least a little bright and cheerful. As she got out of the truck a milk-glass moon was coming up over the ridge.

Lizzie and Mary ran all through the house, delighting in its novelty and its second floor bedrooms. Mama looked around and said she reckoned it would do. "It's home now. We'll manage." Daddy, Luke, and David took a lantern and worked on getting the

animals settled for the night. They put Sally and the horses in the barn and left the pigs and chickens in the wagon but pulled it into the barn. Lydia wandered through the house, wondering what Esther was doing at that moment and wondering how she would ever feel at home in this bare, strange house.

Mama put everyone to work, and they soon had the truck unloaded and the beds put together. The stove would have to wait until morning when they could round up enough help to move it. Lydia, Lizzie, and Mary were to share a room upstairs, and David had the other all to himself. Mama and Daddy had a room downstairs. Lydia thought it would be grand to sleep upstairs, but when she woke the next morning, a cold one with a heavy frost, and her bed was icy when she moved her feet, she realized how nice it had been to sleep next to a fireplace in the other house. She wrapped an extra blanket around herself and went downstairs. Mama was already in the kitchen, putting dishes away. A small fancy overtook Lydia, and she suddenly went to Mama, put her arms around her, and gave her a big hug. Mama was as surprised as Lydia was at her own self. Mama had awakened early, unable to sleep in the strange, new place, and had heated water in the fireplace for a bath. Lydia disengaged herself from Mama's strong arms, but she thought as long as she could smell the Octagon soap that drifted around Mama after a bath that she would be home. And when Lizzie and Mary got up and bundled up to go outside and explore their new home and surroundings, Lydia joined them.

THE END

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Vita

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