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THE STAR QUILT

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for

the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS IN ENGLISH

WITH A CREATIVE WRITING EMPHASIS

By

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A Thesis

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

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ABSTRACT:

The adopted daughter of a Cherokee woman and a likable country man, Ginny Hefner grew up an only child in the small northeastern Oklahoma town of Wagoner in the decade of the 1930s. In that small town, against the backdrop of Prohibition, the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl, Ginny taught herself how to survive on her own after her parents' marriage unraveled. She found her first true friend in Skeet Maddox. It was through Skeet that Ginny learned there was more to life. While she got by with very little, Ginny dreamed of more. She weathered those bleak days, remembering every detail. She wrote down and recorded her life lessons and memories on scraps of paper for her granddaughter to cherish and remember. These are her stories, the happy and the sad, the tragic and the comforting, all reconstructing a life.

### **“Scraps of Yellowed Paper on a Bright, Sunny Day: An Introduction”**

As I raced the short distance from my kindergarten classroom to my grandma’s house after school, my blonde, dog-eared hair swayed back and forth across my bare shoulders. My grandma had sewn my bright, floral sundress, and I couldn’t wait to wear it to Mrs. Provost’s class that first day in the fall of 1975. I was excited about school, but saddened to know I wouldn’t be spending my days with her anymore. But she promised after school she would have a story for me – just as she had had a story for me every day that summer.

To me, she was always Mamaw, my mom’s mother, my closest friend. It wasn’t until I was an adult that I would learn “Mamaw” was a very old-fashioned, Southern name for Grandma. I was in awe that others would call their beloved grandmas by the same name I had given mine. I guess I had always thought it was a special creation of my own. No one ever corrected me. But to the rest of the world, she was Virginia Hawkins, or Ginny, or, as she signed her name in elaborate and flowing cursive on her checks, “Mrs. E.R. Hawkins, Jr.”

Her home was my home – not because I didn’t have parents and a house of our own just two streets away. No, it was just that Mamaw’s house was where I spent most of my time growing up. On summer days, Mamaw entertained me. On fall and spring afternoons, after school, she fed me scrambled-egg sandwiches on white bread with ketchup or her fresh-baked chocolate chip cookies.

I knew when I reached the front porch of her small yellow frame house on the southeast side of town, she would be waiting for me. We would walk through to the

backyard where our white wood bench swing sat ready for us. Cherry and mimosa trees offered shade and sweet scent, and the morning glory vine hanging on the clothes line seemed to always be in bloom. My hands held the cookies; hers, a Virginia Slims' cigarette and a real Coke with a straw.

She would make up wonderful stories about her Siamese cats, each named Susie; Cinderella's beautiful, sparkling ball-gown, always the palest blue, never any other color, and the gypsies and the Indians. Actually, the gypsies and the Indians were closer to true stories about her mother's Cherokee family, who came to Oklahoma from Tennessee. But my favorites were about when she was a little girl growing up in Wagoner, Oklahoma – especially the ones about the Shirley Temple doll her daddy got her for Christmas one year and the way she always stood up for herself against the bullies at school.

Grandma Lucy Lola Spriggs Hefner McKamey, Mamaw's mother, was a hard-driving woman, never satisfied. Mamaw's daddy, Dave Hefner, was just the opposite – a happy-go-lucky sort. The two did not live together long and were divorced when Mamaw was still a child. It was not until the judge presiding over her parents' divorce that Mamaw discovered she was adopted. News traveled fast in the small town, and before long, her cruel classmates called her names – words I wouldn't learn the meaning of until many years later.

Mamaw even witnessed Grandma Lola's attempted suicide when she put a gun to her chest. Her aim went too high, though, and missed her heart.

Mamaw grew up dirt poor. I remember she said she had only two dresses: one for school and one for church. She met my Papaw, Eric Roy Hawkins, Jr., when they both

were in high school in Wagoner. They fell in love, marrying on September 6, 1943. Papaw went off into the service, to fight in the war in France; Mamaw headed to California, to the shipyards, to offer her help for the cause. She never graduated from high school and regretted that; to me, that never mattered.

Mamaw excelled as an artist, painting landscapes in oil, designing clothes patterns with colored pencils, and handwriting her childhood stories. I even thought her grocery lists were works of art, such exquisite penmanship with sketches out to the side. She was carefree and content. She spent her creative time drawing or playing the piano instead of vacuuming and cleaning. She lived by her own clock, staying up most of the night, watching movies and drinking chocolate malts.

On August 16, 1977, Grandma Lola died – the same day as Elvis Presley. I had some memories of sitting with her, choosing bright yellow, purple, red, and orange fabric pieces for the Texas star quilt she made for my twin-size bed and nibbling on oyster crackers, careful not to get crumbs on the material. Never mind how she treated Mamaw; she still revered the woman. But, truth be told, I think the family mourned and grieved more for the passing of The King.

As I entered third grade, my parents decided to move us out of the city, where busing would take me to middle school on the other side of town rather than to Webster Middle School just down the street. The school district was integrating the schools; they didn't want to be accused of segregation. If you ask me, it just made for a big mess, with kids riding buses back and forth for half an hour or more. My parents had none of it and chose the small, rural town of Tuttle for us. It was only half an hour from Mamaw's house,

but it could have been the other side of the world. Now, I wouldn't see her every day. The separation seemed unbearable.

I kept up with my studies and did well in school. Of course, along the way, I lost my interest in storytelling – for a while. Our times together became less and less frequent. But when I graduated from high school, Mamaw was there beaming. When I decided to go to college, she became my most ardent supporter. And, when I told her I was choosing journalism, so I could tell stories, she glowed in support. After my first article was published in the community college newspaper, she promptly cut it out, placed it in a black, glossy frame and hung it on the wall alongside the childhood photographs of my mom, aunt, and uncle. I felt so honored.

Shortly after that, I went to work for the *Tulsa World* and then the Associated Press. When my first article appeared on the front page of *The Oklahoman*, Mamaw called to congratulate me. As she had done before, she framed this one in another black, glossy frame and placed it next to the other in the hallway. It didn't matter that it was a story about interstate construction and traffic. "Just so you see how far you've been able to go," she said. To her, I had reached a pinnacle – one she had found unattainable.

Later that spring, in 1996, I moved to Indianapolis to work in the Associated Press Bureau there. For my entire six-month stay, Mamaw wrote me a letter every week. Her letters may have only been filled with thoughts about groceries and quilt-making, doctor appointments and stories about my cousin, Chris, but they all gave me such a strong connection to home. "So you don't forget about me," she wrote. I never did. I wrote her letters, too – about my apartment on the sixth floor of the downtown building that

overlooked Monument Park; about the enormous, white stone library just a few steps from me; about the Indy 500 parade I could see with all the floats and pageantry from my living room window.

I came home at Thanksgiving and the following year began my career as a feature writer for *The Oklahoman*. Mamaw delighted in being able to read my stories every day. She would often call to ask me about the people I was meeting and pose questions that even I would inevitably forget to ask my subjects. She loved all the stories they had to tell.

With my reporting skills, we worked to find Mamaw's birth mother. But even after years of searching, we were never able to. It's amazing to me to know she always knew who she was, regardless of not knowing her forebears. I can trace my own bloodlines, yet have a blurrier sense of who I am. I feel lazy if I'm not working or moving or doing, but wish I had more time for lounging, for creating. I want the finer things in life, but feel guilty when I purchase them. Most of all, I want to be the free spirit Mamaw was, without my Puritanical practicality getting in the way.

Just before we moved my grandparents from the yellow-painted house with the white shutters to the Tuscan-styled assisted-living center, Mamaw asked me to stop by the house I spent so many days and nights in. Sitting at the round kitchen table under the Coca-Cola stained glass lamp in the den, she opened a black vinyl briefcase. Inside, there were scraps of cigarette-smoke coated, yellow legal pad paper filled with her looping cursive letters.

"These are my childhood stories," she told me. "I want to write a book about them, but I'm not sure I'm good enough to do it."



I had heard this before. She never thought she was good enough because she didn't finish school.

"I think that's a great idea," I told her – and meant it.

I couldn't believe she had so painstakingly retrieved these stories from her memory. It invigorated her to have a purpose. And, I really believed she could do it – just as she had faith in me.

But, then, in March 2002, Papaw died. Mamaw was never the same. Only a few weeks after his passing, I went to her room in the assisted-living center we had moved them to the previous year. She had always had beautiful, strong fingernails, but, with her eyesight fading, she could no longer see well enough to file them. If she was going to go to Easter Sunday church service with us, she wanted her nails to be pretty, not ragged. So I agreed to give her a manicure. As I was filing her nails to a fine point tip, I asked her for a story. She looked at me and said, "I thought you had outgrown your old Mamaw and my old stories."

"Oh, never," I replied. "How could I?"

It was then I began to wonder if she truly understood how much she mattered in my life. Had I not told her often enough how much I loved her? How much I admired her? How much she gave me?

Just before Christmas that year, she went into the hospital for the last time. She had been diagnosed with cancer, but we never realized how advanced it had become. That night, I looked down into her face. I brushed her wiry, curly hair from her face with my

hand. I begged her not to leave. It wasn't time. How could it be? She couldn't leave me here. She had been the center of my world, my one constant. And, now, she would be gone.

After Mamaw died, we found the briefcase in her room filled with the scraps of yellowed, worn paper; her distinct, elegant penmanship faded but still readable. Along with them were cassette tapes stuffed in a clear, plastic bag. She recorded her stories after she could no longer see to write them down. She's still here and a part of me. I feel her with us whenever my daughter, Molly, asks me for a story.

## **Chapter One**

“Are you kidding me?”

I sent my rhetorical question to the infinite metal ceiling covered in bright fluorescent lights at the Wal-Mart Super Center, hoping it travels to a higher power. I stop the shopping cart on the baking goods aisle and search frantically in my overstuffed black purse for a Kleenex.

“Jack, I cannot believe you just did that! Why, honey?”

My five-year-old son stuck a blue M&M from his trail mix he made in Sunday School – up his nose. Now, a slow stream of blue snot leaks down his face. Passersby flinch at the sight. Thank God no one I know is walking past. I'd surely be branded worst mother of the year.

My daughter, Molly, just laughs at her little brother. At twelve, she isn't at the age yet where he embarrasses her in public. Instead, she is highly entertained by his

ever-increasing antics. She revels in her brother's apparent stupidity. I see so much of my grandma in her.

After retrieving the candy from Jack's nose and cleaning the blue stain from his face, I look up again. I should be relieved we aren't headed for the emergency room. I should laugh it off, too. But all I can utter is, "Why aren't you here with me? I need you here. Help me."

It's been nearly a decade since Mamaw died. I miss her voice. I miss her wisdom. I miss her laugh – and, oh would she laugh at this. For me, it's sometimes difficult to find the humor. I'm wound too tight – always juggling, ready to snap in two. But that wasn't her. Her children were the center of her universe, until her grandkids came along. She could laugh anything off. No big deal. In fact, she would probably lament the fact that I didn't take a picture of Jack with his blue snot. "Get a grip, kiddo. Remember it," she would say. "It goes by too fast."

And I know she's right. So I take a breath and step back. Yes, that's exactly what I need. I need to hear her voice, her laugh, again. I need it to help me gain perspective – not sweat the small stuff.

When we return home, I pull the clear, plastic bag with the cassette tapes out of the closet. I blow the thin layer of white dust off the top before sliding the red zipper open. Each one has her writing in black marker, labeling them with their respective stories. I take the one with "Wagoner" scrawled across it, take it out to the car, push it into the cassette player, and wait.

Suddenly, there she is – here with me again. “Well, I guess I ought to start here with who I am. That’s as good a place as any I reckon,” she says, and I hear her giggle a bit and then sigh. “I’m Virginia Hefner Hawkins, but some folks call me Ginny . . . .”

## **Chapter Two**

Ginny’s home was not a happy one – though it had promising beginnings.

Lola Spriggs and Dave Hefner, Ginny’s Mama and Daddy, married on March 2, 1919. Times then were good for Dave; he owned a radio repair shop in town, and everyone liked him. Lola was happy, too; Dave was making money, and Lola couldn’t get enough. She had had enough of farm living growing up out by Flat Rock Creek on the Spriggs’ family homestead, so she sold her portion of the Cherokee Land Grant, and Dave bought two lots in the small town of Wagoner, in eastern Oklahoma. Ginny joined them on February 24, 1926.

Their house, a two-room shotgun house, not particularly pretty, is located on a lovely street lined with large sycamore and elm trees. The town lots became a desirable location. The other lot was cleared so Dave has a cow lot. (In the 1920s, this practice was allowed in town). Dave added onto the house and, more or less, designed it himself. He completed a large bedroom on the east front and put in a hall, with a bathroom on one side and a closet on the other. Across the back of the house, he added on another bedroom. Dave also made a modern kitchen with a sink and built-in storage cabinets. Along the west side of the kitchen he improvised a nice screened-in back porch. This is actually the main entrance of the house.

The back bedroom is the room they actually lived in. It boasts four windows on the south, so Lola can see her rose garden, and two windows on the east. The morning sunshine comes in bright through the windows. Two wooden rockers and the tall Victrola in addition to an iron bedstead and a large double dresser furnish the room well. In winter, Dave assembles the gas stove.

The kitchen also became a social room. When they had company over, they sat at the white-enameled table to drink coffee or play dominoes. The parlor, the front room of the original house, was reserved for special occasions only. Four pieces of furniture well-equipped the parlor. A large davenport upholstered in a dark-colored cut velvet fabric and an overstuffed chair to match, a basic oak library table, and a huge upright player piano completed the layout. Dave made an archway to the old second room. This became the formal dining room between the parlor and the new kitchen – rather small, but adequate.

Across the new front and east side of the house, Dave created a large front porch and built up a three-foot wall with rock topped off with cement slabs. This L-shaped front porch served as a gathering place, too, because it's so open and shady. The swing there catches the best breezes. Lilacs and crepe myrtles gave shade and privacy.

They are basically country people, moved to town. But Lola is determined to be socially acceptable because Dave, after all, is a businessman: He needs to be well-known and well-liked. But Ginny doesn't think Dave needs any help being liked. He's thought of fondly by all who know him, black or white, young or old. He never speaks ill of any human being; nor does he harbor grudges. He believes in honesty and justice.

There is usually a cat and a terrier puppy at the house. Lola enjoys her yellow canary, too. In February, Lola and Dave purchase yellow baby chicks. Ginny buries her face in the soft fluff. These animals become her constant companions. Several girls her age reside in the neighborhood. But she never feels like she fits in. She's just not like them. She doesn't want to be different – she just is.

First, there is Ginny's hair. Straight, with bangs. Not curly, or long with braids. Then, her dresses all look alike – straight, with a yoke. Short sleeves in summer; long sleeves in winter. And certainly the bloomers sewn to match do not help her image.

“Oh, how I hate those bloomers!” Ginny said. They always showed below her dresses because they come down to the top of her knees. If she pulls them up high under her dress so they won't show, the elastic tightens around her legs and hurts.

In winter, it's worse. Every October through March, Ginny wears long underwear and long stockings, tan and ribbed. A trip to the bathroom is an ordeal and one not to tally with because an accident is cause for punishment for being slow and lazy. She only has two pairs of long johns and two pairs of long socks.

Her long white socks are just for Sunday School and funerals. Her shoes are black, high-top, lace-ups. Yuck! The other girls in town wear low-top, buckled leather shoes for school and shiny patent-leather Mary Janes with white lace ankle socks for Sunday School. Betty Jo Kennan even has petticoats with ruffles.

### Chapter Three

Lola doesn't allow Ginny to have birthday parties. "I will not have kids tromping and running in my house," she says. Ginny swears she doesn't have a pretty party dress anyway, so she avoids invitations to other girls' parties. Standing in a corner in a calico dress watching other girls laughing and singing – she just couldn't stand the imminent embarrassment.

Whenever Ginny thinks about not fitting in, she reminds herself of her cat, Kitty, and how she purrs and always puts her at ease. She also has a large Horseman baby doll that says "Mama" when she turns her over, and she closes her eyes when she otherwise, lies her down. She has lovely blonde, curly hair and a bonnet.

Ginny got her for Christmas. Lola and Dave didn't have a Christmas tree – never do. Lola says they're too messy to be in the house, and they're a waste of money and time to decorate. Besides, she says, there's always one at church. The family goes to the Baptist church for the Christmas program and to see Santa Claus. He was handing out gifts, New Testaments, and sacks of candy and fruit. Just as he said he had to go to work delivering gifts, he looked straight at Ginny.

"I swear he did!" she exclaimed.

Sure enough, when they got home from church, the lights were on, and Ginny's baby doll and buggy were there. While she had started to doubt the Santa story, this definitely restored her faith in him.

Lola forbids Ginny from undressing or dressing her doll, so she stays perfect as new, except Kitty sometimes shares the baby buggy with the doll and sheds her fur on her clothes. Ginny pushes the baby and Kitty down the sidewalk in her ugly black wicker baby buggy. At least its wheels work fine. Still, when Ginny sees Betty Jo Kennan pushing her lovely big, blue leather carriage with her doll family, some with hair, she hurries up her walk and hides the black buggy behind the porch banister. Then she goes out and greets Betty Jo, admiring her fine family.

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A black woman named Cornelia washed and cleaned for the family. She was very special to Ginny, who calls her Ka-Nee-Ya since she can't pronounce her name. Kaneeya never gets excited or in a hurry, and she doesn't get mad and yell. She comes every Monday to wash clothes and every Friday to clean the house. It takes all day to wash the clothes and bedding. She puts out three wash tubs of water on the back porch. The first one has hot water, a rub board, and a new bar of P&G soap. The other two tubs hold cool water; they are the first and second rinse tubs. Then, there is a big, black iron pot outside by the garden.

Ginny and Kaneeya balance it on bricks and make a fire beneath it to boil the water and lye soap. White sheets and towels go first to bleach. Ginny spends wash day on the back porch with Kaneeya, who answers her questions and gives her extra biscuits and milk. Wash day supper means cornbread-and-buttermilk night – one of Dave's favorites.

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Lola owns a good cow. She sells most of the top cream to the creamery and gives Uncle Alex's family a gallon lard bucket of milk every day. When Lola makes butter, Ginny turns the crank on top of the gallon glass jar with wooden paddles inside. It isn't a hard job until the end. Then Lola takes the yellow globs of butter out and puts them in a square wooden box. She mashes down a paddle on top to push the air out and creates a nice, smooth square shape. When it looks packed down, she flips a little rod on one wall of the box and it falls away. She puts the final product in the ice box to cool. Sometimes, Ginny pretends it is a magic box with happy surprises and love and laughter, even imagined-fairy friends would come out to play. But, every time it opens, only the butter came out.

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Lola stayed sick a lot. Sometimes she was home in bed; sometimes she went downtown to the hospital. If she's bad sick, Dave takes her to the Muskogee hospital. Ginny is so lonely when she's gone, even if she's not always nice to be around. It's sad when she's gone, unless Lola and Dave hire a girl to stay with her or send her to visit Aunt Mamie and Uncle Leo.

Aunt Mamie has the most beautiful laugh you ever heard – so warm and friendly, and she is plump and soft and gives the best hugs in the world. Ginny always finds her in her kitchen cooking good-smelling food. She let Ginny have her first taste of brown sugar. A hard lump Mamie couldn't flatten out. Aunt Mamie makes sugar cookies, pies, cakes, and dumplings. She feeds a large family – Florence and Willie Lee, the older girls; Andrew and William, the middle boys, and Roy and Charlie, the little boys. They all lived in a big two-storey house out on the east side of town, known as the old Greer place.

Florence and Willie Lee spread out a paper doll house on the floor in one of the upstairs bedrooms. The cousins show Ginny how to make paper chairs, beds, and tables. For the walls, there are strips of paper outlining rooms with spaces left for doors. The dolls are cut out of an old Sears catalog. Ginny loves to play there. In her paper family, nobody's ever sick.

One day the older boys were playing and scuffling in their room. Ginny heard them and went to see if she could join in, but as she opened the door they came flying out. She fell against the door frame. They didn't know she was there, but when she fell she hit her shoulder and broke her collar bone. Ginny cried all that night. The next day Dave drove her to old Doc Bates, who took an X-ray on a cold, black table. He said he needed to put her to sleep to set the collar bone: the most horrible, frightening experience Ginny ever had – being put to sleep with ether. Big hammers clanged in her head; lights spiraled around. Sirens wailed loudly. When she woke up with a cast around her body and on her right arm, she felt awful. The plaster cast hurt her.

Ginny moved awkwardly -- lopsided. At only four years old, and with that cast, she felt like a circus freak. Thank heavens the weather was warm – she didn't have to wear that long underwear.

Lola was angry that Ginny got hurt while staying at Uncle Leo's. Even though it was just a kid thing, she didn't see it that way. She blamed everybody for not being more careful, and they, in turn, blamed Ginny for being a nosy kid. Aunt Mamie never blamed Ginny, though. After that, Lola wouldn't let them visit even for a day. Dave missed playing

dominoes with Uncle Leo. He seemed to enjoy playing games so much. Dave remained the good guy in Ginny's life – the one person she would miss the most.

## Chapter Four

Tears well in my eyes at the sound of her voice, her stories. I can't believe she left me with such a gift. I can't believe it's taken me ten years to listen. I'm not even through one cassette tape; yet there are so many more. Some of the stories I have heard before or read in her yellowed papers; it was Mamaw's great pleasure in life to tell stories of her growing-up years in Wagoner.

As her voice cracks slightly, I am put at ease. She dealt with so much so young. I didn't know Lola was sick so often or that she was a maniacal, borderline psychotic about tidiness and order. She found a safe haven in Dave – at least for a while.

I knew Mamaw taught herself to sew. I picture myself, sitting in her sewing room – the middle bedroom in the small house at 6913 Sears Terrace. The blond-wood covered sewing machine top vibrates softly when she runs a stitch. I fidget with her red, tomato-looking pincushion, gently dropping from one hand into the other. The eclectic button collection in the glass jar catches my eye.

“Where did this one come from?” I ask, holding up a peculiar-shaped plastic button, with a floral design, not certain if it once belonged either to one of Mom's blouses or Aunt Sandy's skirts.

“Heck if I know,” she replies. “I just add them to the collection. You never know when it might come in handy.”

She hands me a needle and a piece of red thread. “Now, take the thread, lick it and twist it at the top, then punch it through,” she says. “Even if you don’t sew your own clothes, you should possess the knowledge to thread a needle and replace a button on a shirt.”

Before I know it, out comes her measuring ribbon, and swoosh – she whips it around my top, middle and bottom. Whispering under her breath, she recites the numbers and pencils them onto her sketch pad. I wonder what it will be this time – a holiday dress, a new skirt that twirls?

The brown tissue-paper patterns crumple so easily; I am careful not to touch those. Some patterns she purchased from the Helen Enox Fabrics store or from TG&Y, but mostly she draws them herself, transferring them to regular sheets of the thin paper to cut out.

In the closet of her sewing room are boxes and boxes of dress shoes. Black sandals with little heels and straps. White pumps with open-toes. I imagined her so pretty and young, kicking up her legs, just like in the black-and-white photos from her high school days in the late 1930s and early 1940s. I knew she hadn’t worn the shoes in years. She wore only flats to keep her balance. But she told me once that “things” can hold memories for us just like our minds. To her, those shoes were memories of good days. “Just don’t ever forget that the most precious things in life aren’t things,” she said. I still have the magnet with that phrase on my refrigerator in the kitchen.

Every time she made a new dress for me, she reminded me of how good I had it. I shrugged off her opinion. As I got older I wanted the newest fashions from John A.

Brown's Department Store and The Gap to keep up with the other girls. I didn't want any more "hand-made" clothes. I wanted Ocean Pacific T-shirts and Lee jeans – like the other girls in school. It took me years to realize I had it backward. Then, my senior year in high school she helped bring to life my first fashion creation: a long, ivory polyester skirt, a bold-patterned orange, purple, and blue paisley blouse and a blue velvet vest to top it off. Beautiful!

As much as she enjoyed sewing clothes for me, she reveled in designing Barbie doll gowns. Oh, our dolls were always dressed in exquisite, strapless satin ball gowns of every color in the rainbow. In one of her letters to me when I lived in Indianapolis, she writes about how she is itching to sew some, saddened that I have grown up, wanting desperately to have someone other than herself to make things for.

Listening to her voice now has uncovered another mystery: I finally know why she always kept a half-gallon of buttermilk in her refrigerator. It must have reminded her of Dave. I tasted a sip once. Awful, awful! But like the shoes, this "thing" held meaning for her. It was special.

What is special to me now is the wrought-iron picture frame with the taffeta ribbon-like cardboard inset that holds the black-and-white photograph. Ginny is three years old. She sits smiling tentatively, staring straight to the right. No doubt Lola stood behind the scenes, commanding Ginny's attention. Every dark strand of hair on Ginny's head is combed perfectly into a short bob with bangs. Her white dress is flawless, as are her white socks. Her Mary Janes are without scuffs. Ginny places her left hand on the white piano

bench to steady herself; the greenery in the background looking as though it could engulf her at any moment.

What was she thinking as she sat there, I wonder. She probably wanted to know how soon she could get down from that bench and into the dirt to play. I want to hear more of these stories about the little girl in the picture frame, so I sit quietly with my thoughts and again push “Play.”

## Chapter Five

Uncle George and Aunt Edith farmed the land west of Wagoner out by the Pipeline School. George Hefner is Dave’s brother; Aunt Edith is Uncle George’s second wife. His first wife, Vernon, died during surgery. Lola said they sewed up a towel inside her. Before she died, though, she and Uncle George had four kids: Opal, Ollie, Norman (Buck), and Billy – Ginny’s favorite cousins.

Their beautiful white frame house, surrounded on three sides by a wire fence with one side wooden, has four rooms downstairs and two bedrooms in the attic. A big red barn stands out back with cows, pigs, and some horses scattered around it. Every time Ginny comes out here, she wonders just how rich Uncle George must be. Grandpa Hefner lives with them.

Ollie and Opal each married and moved away, but their wood playhouse is still held together out in the cow lot. Curtains drape the little windows, a table and chairs are set for tea, and a cozy doll bed beckons the two dolls the cousins left behind. It made the perfect home for Ginny. Billy doesn’t much like to play house, but he does sometimes just to get out of doing chores. Mostly he acts silly and pesters her by not playing right. Out here, in

Ginny's make-believe house, she gets to make the rules. Though, sometimes she lets the rules slide. It's more fun to have someone to play with – even if Billy lives to aggravate her.

Most Sunday afternoons in the summer the family drives out to Uncle George's for dinner. Late in the afternoon they make ice cream in an old turn-crank freezer out on the big back porch that stretches all the way across the back of the house. It's shady and cool there on the south side of the house. The milk house sits on the west side and a huge tree by the well, a few feet from the porch, provides even more coolness.

Billy, Buck, and Ginny play a game called Annie Over. They take turns throwing a rubber ball over the roof of the house and holler "Annie Over!" Of course, it tends to be the boys throwing it and Ginny chasing it. But she doesn't mind. Summer on the farm not only means games with her cousins, it also means she gets to be away from sidewalks, alleys, and railroad tracks.

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During threshing season, Uncle George pays Ginny to carry water in and keep the reservoir filled in Aunt Edith's large, wood cook stove. That way she has hot water to cook with and to wash dishes in. She cooks very well and is very proud of her skills in the kitchen. She attends to every detail, even washing the dishes herself, so she is sure they are scalded clean. Ginny's other job in the house is to dry those dishes and put them away. All the dishes don't belong to Aunt Edith; they borrow extras through threshing because the average farm family doesn't have enough for a large group of men such as that. The men eat in shifts; usually the older, more experienced, or the bosses and owners of the

equipment come first. Next up are the young married or new farmers and then the working kids.

Ginny works to clear the table and set clean dishes real quick because the workers shovel in their food fast so they can get back to work. Aunt Edith bakes ten pies, peels a bushel of potatoes, fries six or seven chickens, bakes a pork shank, cooks huge pots of beans, boils dozens of eggs for potato salad, and bakes biscuits and a large pan of corn bread every day!

“I never thought I’d ever see so much food in one place at one time! I always eat as much as my stomach will allow at her table because I know there won’t be anything much left when I get back home,” Ginny says.

Uncle George’s farm is doing well, still bringing in good crops, but what they’re calling The Depression has finally hit Lola and Dave. Folks in town have sold their radios for money to buy food or provide transportation to California. No one needs a radio repairman anymore. None of them are sure what Dave’s going to do for work. He might be selling his shop soon.

But out here on the farm it’s like none of that matters. Aunt Edith keeps Ginny busy running to get water, eggs, milk from the well house and real butter. She chips ice for tea, hangs up wet tea towels, and brings in dry ones in. One afternoon Uncle George let Ginny be the water boy and told Billy to saddle a horse for her to ride up to the wheat field. So about 3 o’clock she fetched a couple of five-gallon lard buckets, chipped ice, and filled them up.



Ginny took off for the fields, so proud of herself for preparing the water. It's going to quench their thirst good, she thought. After reaching the field, Uncle George took one of the buckets. He slid the lid off, took a drink, and spit it out real quick.

He yelled, "What'd you do! Don't you have enough sense not to bring ice water to hot working hands in a field! It'll make us all sick."

"I'm so sorry, Uncle George," Ginny said. "I didn't know. No one told me."

She rode the horse back to the house, crying all the way.

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But back in town, Ginny does her secret job well. There's a bootlegger above the mercantile building who pays her a nickel each time she takes a delivery downstairs for him. Until Prohibition ends, it's a lucrative deal as long as it doesn't interfere with piano lessons from Ms. Moss. Ginny's getting her music ready for the recital at the Methodist church – the one with the bright red carpeting down the aisles. She'll be performing, "What a Friend We Have in Jesus."

## **Chapter Six**

Lola yelled at Dave again today. Not about his tobacco spittoon being in the house or how he has too many guns and guitars. Nor how he doesn't milk the cow with tenderness or feed the chickens right. No, this time it's about his daddy, Grandpa Hefner. Lola's had enough of his getting drunk and picking up prostitutes in town. Every time it happens, Clay Flowers, the sheriff, hauls Grandpa to Ginny's house instead of the jail's holding cell. In

Lola's book, that's unacceptable and a smear on her good, Christian reputation. So Lola's laid-in to Dave, telling him, "No more."

"He's my Daddy, Lola," he begged.

Ginny saw her mama's face turn red with anger. "No more!" she raised her voice to him.

At that Dave turned, taking Grandpa to the car for the drive out to Uncle George's farm.

"To hell with your good reputation," Kaneeya told Lola. "Miss Lola, you is drivin' that man away. You better be good to him. He makes you a good livin'."

But Lola's never been one to take anyone's advice but her own. True to Kaneeya's word, Lola has finally pushed Dave over the hill. No doubt he'll soon be falling into the comfort of other women's arms –not any nice, respectable women either. It once meant so much to Lola to be somebody, to be "Mrs. Dave Hefner." But now that's over.

When Dave came back from Uncle George's, he moved his clothes to the Wagoner Hotel. It was pretty easy for him to leave; Lola threw all his clothes outside for the whole town to see – just so everyone would know it was her choice he was leaving, not his.

The next morning Lola woke Ginny up and dressed her for school. She didn't even hit her with the hairbrush when she combed her hair. She made Ginny a bowl of oatmeal for breakfast instead of telling her to fix it herself. It was like she had a new Mama – the nice kind she always dreamed about. Without Lola's fussing, it took less time to get ready. She asked Ginny to run down to Linnie Muchmore's house and borrow a cup of sugar. Odd, she thought, Lola never borrowed anything from any neighbors. But Linnie only lived two houses and a cow lot west of them, so Ginny started the short walk. When she got

nearly to the end of the cow lot, Ginny heard the gunshot. She knew – just as if she had been standing there watching – what happened. Lola got Dave’s .45 revolver out of the top, left-hand dresser drawer and shot herself.

Ginny ran back to the house. Lola lay there on the floor by her bed. She wasn’t bleeding much, not like Ginny expected. She picked up the gun and put it back in the dresser drawer where it belonged. She looked back at Lola and stooped to her side; Lola was still conscious.

“Mama,” Ginny whispered into her ear. Lola turned her head to Ginny. “Mama, can you lean on me?”

Lola groaned and stretched an arm out. Ginny pulled with all her strength and grabbed her waist as her knees bent to help her stand. A few scoots across the floor, and she let Lola fall into the bed.

Then Ginny ran to the Parkinson’s house across the street – they had a phone.

“Call Mr. Hersman!” Ginny yelled. “Call him to bring his ambulance! Please hurry! It’s Mama!”

Then she ran back to Linnie’s house. Linnie stayed with Ginny and Lola until Mr. Hersman got there and took Lola eighteen miles away to the hospital in Muskogee. Mr. Hersman wouldn’t let Ginny ride with her. He said it would traumatize her. “Like I hadn’t been already,” Ginny thought out loud. “I wanted to tell him. It was me, after all, who found my own mother on the floor with a hole in her.”

Instead, Ginny waited for Dave to drive her to the hospital. Luckily, Lola didn’t know where her heart was. She shot herself in the left shoulder above her breast. The bullet tore through her lung. A .45 leaves a pretty good hole, but Lola survived the ordeal. Ginny

stayed at Muskogee General as long as Dave would let her, which happened to be just long enough for Clay Flowers to make his appearance.

“I need to ask you some questions, Virginia,” the sheriff said.

Looking him straight in the eye, Ginny said, “OK, if you have to.”

“Do you remember where you found the gun?” he asked.

“On the floor,” she replied.

“What did you do with it?”

“I put it up, back in the dresser drawer where it belongs. Mama doesn’t like things out of place,” she told him.

“Do you need to tell me anything else?”

“Like what?” she asked him.

“Virginia, did you shoot your Mama?”

“No!” she screamed.

“Did your Daddy shoot her?”

“Of course not,” she said in disbelief, tears streaming down her face. How could he ask that? For the first time since finding Lola on the floor, Ginny got scared. All she could think of was this man who was supposed to be so smart didn’t know her mama and her antics at all. Ginny just hoped Lola’s gamble this time wouldn’t land her in the county orphanage.

## **Chapter Seven**

I carry my Mamaw’s voice with me as I drive down State Street in Wagoner, looking at three small homes, all dating to the 1920s. I skim through her writings, reading the details of her childhood home like I’m doing it for the first time, trying to figure out

which one of the three belonged to her. “A clapboard, shotgun house, with a room added on,” I read.

In all her details, Mamaw left out one: the address. It could be that the homes didn't have numbers in the '20s and '30s. But even in the county assessor's land lot records I cannot find Dave's or Lola's name as a property owner. It's so strange, because the story goes that Lola sold her Cherokee land allotment to buy the house on State Street for the young couple, who married when Dave returned from serving overseas in World War I.

It's all beginning to make sense now, though. After years of living hand to mouth on a farm far from the center of town, Lola was living on one of the best streets in Wagoner, where the business owners and bankers resided. She longed to be accepted into high society, to rub elbows with the wealthy. It's got to be that one, I surmise, looking at the house on the corner, reconfigured to face the most prominent mansion in town: The Parkinson Home. The two-storey white house with green trim could be a Southern plantation home. Lush greenery and vines grow up its outside walls. Even today, it is spectacular in all its glory – even majestic. I can just imagine what Mamaw thought of that home, running to it as a source of refuge when Lola shot herself.

That incident never left her; she wrote it down twice and repeated it into the tape recorder, though she never spoke of it aloud to me. It must have been hard on her, acting like a mother when she was just a little girl.

I leave State Street and park in front of Owl Drug on Main Street. As I walk the now-broken and buckled pavement I realize Mamaw walked these same sidewalks. It is here folks knew my Mamaw as Ginny. This is where she grew up. I never showed any

interest in bringing her up here to show me around. Not that she ever asked. And, now, here I am, trying to figure it out on my own, putting the puzzle pieces of her life together – so scared I won't get it right.

I look down the street. Jim Miller's Department Store – no longer in existence – still has the intricately placed tiny, white-and-purple octagon tiles laid firmly intact in front of its once double doors that welcomed customers. Krakers Clothing Store is now the Wagoner Historical Museum. The façade of the Redmon Studio features two paintings: one of a gentleman taking photographs and another of two smiling children posing for the camera. The back of the building is destroyed, but the Redmon name still lingers in brick. At the corner of Main and Church streets, a vacant shop front stands where Dave's battery and tire shop was. Red brick buildings line the street: Now home to cafes and banks. Antique and consignment stores.

Mamaw's presence surrounds me. I can see her falling in love with her hometown. There is so much to see and soak in, especially from a child's perspective. I walk the street, taking pictures, imagining her there, walking, maybe even playfully skipping, from storefront to storefront, peering through the windows – wishing for toys and clothes, sometimes food, she couldn't have. After Lola and Dave divorced, life became tough for them all. Not to mention The Great Depression and the Oklahoma Dust Bowl were in full swing.

But they survived it all. Lola and Dave both lived until the 1970s, and both are buried in Wagoner's Elmwood Cemetery. I head there next. Nearly every Hefner and Spriggs that Mamaw ever knew is buried in this cemetery.

No markers or signs direct me to the lots I am here to see, so I get out of the car and slog through the rows of grave markers. Even though today's rain hasn't arrived yet, it's rained nearly every day for at least a month, making the ground here muddy and soggy. Printout in hand, with names and rows and plot numbers, I search through the cemetery. Row after row, nothing. I keep my head down, searching for the names engraved in the pale gray, marble stones. I know once I find one relative, the others will be in the same area. Minutes pass, still with no luck. Then, I see it – Lola's headstone.

Sadness washes over me, as the thunder cracks the sky. I'm not sad I didn't really know her; she died when I was only four years old. I'm sad at how unhappy she was in life. I have been told Lola lived to make other people miserable. Mamaw once said if she ever looked too content or daydreamed, Lola pushed a broom into her hand. She did not believe in idleness. While Lola relied on palm and tarot card readings and occasionally attended the Pentecostal Holiness church in town, she sent Mamaw to the First Baptist Church for Sunday School.

Lola's mother, Lucy Harvey Spriggs, was a true gypsy. Mamaw used to tell about how Grandpa Spriggs, Alexander A. Spriggs, left Tennessee and stole Grandma Spriggs from her gypsy family on the way to Oklahoma.

That was quite a story. I find the cassette tape marked "Flat Rock." I'm ready to listen again.

## **Chapter Eight**

Lola always said her father, Alexander Adam Spriggs, stole her mother, Lucy Harvey Spriggs, from a band of gypsies, and they ran away together and were married in

Polk County, Tennessee. It was quite scandalous since Alexander wasn't a gypsy. After Lucy married him, her family disowned her. She never saw her mother or any of her seven brothers or six sisters again.

To make matters worse, Alexander had Cherokee Indian blood: One-sixteenth Indian blood to be exact. He lived on Cherokee Nation land in Tennessee, which must have been privately owned because the Indian Removal Act took effect in 1830. After fighting the U.S. government for nearly eight years, the Cherokees began their Trail of Tears – marching toward Indian Territory in 1838.

But Alexander wasn't born until 1859; Lucy in 1866 – long after the deadly removal. The two began their life together in 1883. Lucy gave birth to a son, John Benjamin, Ben, in 1885. When mother and son were well enough to travel, Alexander loaded a covered wagon and set out for Indian Territory. The couple planned to live on Cherokee Nation land outside of Tahlequah, the tribe's capital city. Alexander wanted to homestead. With the government giving land to Cherokees there, he knew that would be home. Alexander's mother, Mary A. Spriggs, also traveled to Wagoner, Indian Territory, to run a hotel on Church Street behind what once was the old Wagoner Mercantile Building.

Alexander worked for his mother until he was allowed land lots near Flat Rock Creek, due north of the pioneer town, almost to the county line. There, the young couple first lived in a one-room sod house, about a half a mile south of Flat Rock Creek. Alexander then built a two-storey, L-shaped house on top of the hill, up some quarter of a



mile from the creek. He fenced in the main house, with a carriage house just outside the fence and the barn across the road.

Lucy gave birth to, in order, Annie B., Mamie Pearl, Henry Alex, Judge Leo, Seaburn P., and Lola. Two babies did not survive – an infant son born on May 3, 1892, who died seventeen days later, and a baby girl born on August 31, 1906 who died the same day.

Lola was five years old when the tragic incident happened. She was the only child at home when Lucy sent her to get Mrs. Hope, the midwife. When Lola and Mrs. Hope arrived at the house, they found Lucy unconscious and the baby girl dead. The poor baby was born with the cord wrapped around her neck. After that, Alexander put in a phone. Lola said she remembered how her daddy ripped it off the wall several times.

Alexander worked hard and demanded the same from his children. He was proud and not particularly generous, except when he believed one of his children earned it. His fields yielded abundant harvests – enough to hire on extra hands there was so much work to be done. Alexander's good fortune meant a nice life with plenty of meats and vegetables for the family at a time when so many others were doing without.

Lola said he never cheated, lied or stole anything (except her mother). But he did have one weakness: Pearl Smith. Pearl was a widow who lived down in the bottomland close to Grand River. Alexander "helped" her from time to time. Lola never met her, but her brothers always knew where to look for him if he was needed. Ironically, Pearl, who was born on December 2, 1890 and died on June 6, 1945, is buried on Alexander's right side in Wagoner's Elmwood Cemetery. Lucy is on his left.

In 1896, Alexander began to place his children on the Cherokee Nation Roll so that each would receive 160 acres of land for their one-thirty-second worth of blood. He himself was admitted to the Cherokee Citizenship in April 1887 after providing what the tribe considered to be sufficient proof. In November 1900, Alexander also applied for Lucy's Cherokee citizen status through intermarriage. But, the Polk County Courthouse was destroyed by fire in September 1894. Alexander couldn't get a copy of his marriage license.

On October 9, 1902, a representative from the U.S. Department of the Interior interviewed Lucy before the Commission to the Five Civilized Tribes ruled on her application:

“Q. Your full name is Lucinda Spriggs?

A. Yes, sir.

Q. How old are you?

A. 36.

Q. What is your post office?

A. Wagoner.

Q. Are you a white woman?

A. Yes, sir.

Q. What is your husband's name?

A. His full name is Alexander Adam Spriggs.

Q. Is he Cherokee by blood?

A. Yes, sir.

Q. How long has he lived in the Cherokee Nation?

A. Sixteen years.

Q. Never made his home outside of the Cherokee Nation during that time?

A. No, sir; ever since he come here.

Q. When were you married to him?

A. '83.

Q. Is he your first husband?

A. Yes, sir.

Q. Are you his first wife?

A. Yes, sir.

Q. Have you lived together in the Cherokee Nation ever since 1883?

A. No, sir; not since '83. We stayed in Tennessee pretty near three years before we come out here.

Q. You were married in Tennessee?

A. Yes, sir.

Q. When did you come out here?

A. We been here 16 years.

Q. Your husband was admitted?

A. Yes, sir.

Q. Do you know how soon he came to this country after he was admitted?

A. I don't know much about it.

Q. Have you got a family of children?

A. Yes, sir.

Q. Have any children died within the last two years?

A. No, sir.

Q. All living at home with you?

A. We have one dead; been dead about eight or nine years. I don't recollect just when it did die.

Q. Your husband is living, is he?

A. Yes, sir.

With these words, which echoed Alexander's when he was asked the same questions separately, Lucy gained citizenship by marriage into the Cherokee Nation. The

couple lived in the Cooweescooee district of the Cherokee Nation. So, there they are on the Cherokee Roll – Nos. 15701 through 15708, with Lola being the “08.”

Lola believed her mother, Lucy, cherished her because Lola was born with a veil over her face. For gypsies, it’s a sign the child will have powers others don’t; the child will be able to see events from the past and future worlds. Mystical-sounding, yes, but scientifically it means that when Lola was born, the “caul” was wrapped over her face. Of course, the Spriggs family didn’t have much use for science. Lola sought out palm readers and tea leaf readers all her life. She believed in fortune tellers as much as she believed in God – like the religions where the revival-goers taunt the snakes. Yes, just like that.

Lucy went to church at Flat Rock; Alexander refused to go. One morning, when he was mad that Lucy and Lola went, he rode his horse to the church and cut the harness on the buggy. Lucy and Lola had to find someone to take them home.

In that home, in her bedroom, Lucy kept a Bible on the bottom shelf of an antique square table with glass ball-feet covered with wooden claws. She never allowed anyone near her table, to touch the Bible. Her feather bed was fluffed to perfection; no one could punch it down or make a dent in it. Likewise, her dining room was kept neat. There was a large table and side board. A white glass egg and a tiny, red glass mug from the St. Louis World’s Fair were her special knick-knacks. The wood stove kept the family warm in winter. Her kitchen had a water reservoir and three ovens. The pantry held the jellies and canned peaches Lucy made each year.

But as much as Lucy transformed her life into one of a good, respectable pioneer and Cherokee woman in Indian Territory, she would never leave behind who she was – the daughter of gypsies.

## Chapter Nine

Ginny liked going out to the Spriggs homestead at Flat Rock; it was the one time she had her daddy, Dave, all to herself. Together, the pair quietly walked through the woods, looking for frogs, rabbits, and squirrels. Dave brought along his .22, and he taught his young daughter to shoot. Whenever he got a rabbit, he warmed his daughter's feet with the furry carcasses and cut off the cottontails for her to play with.

Dave tinkered – with radios, cars, guns. He specialized in taking something apart just to figure out how to put it back together again. He didn't like Fords – thought they were junk. But he loved to get his hands on a Packard, Oldsmobile, or Buick.

At the homestead, it was easy to get lost. Lola's brothers and sisters and their husbands and wives and children numbered so many – except for the absence of Ben. He died in Lost City in a gunfight in 1912. Ben was the renegade of the family, stubborn to a fault – he was the only one who dared stand up to his father, Alexander. The others silently coalesced.

Annie Bell Spriggs married Horace Maynard Mann in 1903; they had seven children. Annie was a Pentecostal Holiness church member, and she endured much before finally leaving that no-good husband of hers. He was cruel. Henry Alex Spriggs and his wife, Rosie, had three sons and five daughters. Leo and Mamie Spriggs had four sons and

five daughters. Leo farmed his whole life in Wagoner County, and he even owned the first truck in town.

Not having brothers and sisters could be a blessing and a curse. With the cousins around, Lola had too much chaos on her mind to deal with her one and only child. Ginny delighted in the time spent alone wandering with her dad. It was an escape from Lola's nagging. Besides, in the house, there was always the chance of running into Lucy's false teeth. Ginny never knew where Lucy would set them down.

## Chapter Ten

After my journey through Elmwood Cemetery, I drive north on U.S. 69 to E 680 Road, near the town of Mazie. It is only a few miles from downtown Wagoner but felt like it was in the absolute middle of nowhere. I took the county road back east for almost two miles. The dirt and gravel road zigzagged through the trees. No other cars passed going in either direction.

With my finger I traced the map Mamaw drew of the area and compared it to the current Wagoner city map I picked up at the historical museum. Uncanny. It matched up exactly. How did she remember these details from her childhood? I knew she hadn't been to Wagoner since the early 1990s – after that her eyesight began to fail her, and she couldn't see well enough to drive long distances. Nearly every year before that, though, she and Papaw made the trek from Oklahoma City to the cemetery to lay flowers and wreaths on her mother's and father's graves. But I didn't remember her telling us she ever drove out this far on those trips.

I can't imagine she would have. The Spriggs homestead didn't hold many fond memories for her – except those few memories with Dave she locked away. Mamaw preferred her mind to wander back to life on the downtown streets of Wagoner. She loved movement; merchants busying themselves with decorating their shop windows, and cooks preparing food for their diners – the farmers and bankers and railroad workers who stopped in all through the day. Besides, Lola couldn't get out of the country fast enough when she agreed to marry Dave Hefner. Their visits to the Spriggs homestead were few and far between. Of course, Mamaw was only a small child when Alexander and Lucy Spriggs died, though there are a couple of pictures in the family scrapbook of Mamaw chasing chickens at the homestead. Lucy kept a careful watch over her youngest grandchild.

The clouds rolled in again, signaling another downpour. I look out the window and realize I am crossing Flat Rock Creek. Now, only overgrown trees can be seen. Actually, it feels as though the trees are protecting the land from unwelcome visitors. Three miles more to the road leading to the Spriggs homestead. I never understood how country roads make three miles feel like thirty.

Soon a small road appears, jutting off to the left. Again, enormous trees guard the road, making it impossible to go any farther. If I turned there, the water well sits to the left. Then a fork in the road would make me veer off left or right. To the left would be Aunt Pearl's home. To the right I would cross back over the creek and the Great Flat Rocks. A gate over the road secured Alexander and Lucy's land, house, and barn.

If only those trees were not blocking the road. I wanted to see more, but something inside me said, "Go home. Leave us be." Thunder broke the sky again. Suddenly, my



surroundings became ominous, and I felt so small, swallowed by the trees, the land, the dirt road. But I still wanted to know – just what are you hiding here, Grandma Spriggs? Would I ever find the answer?

## Chapter Eleven

Once home, I remember the yellow Texas Star quilt; it holds the thread that stitches together our generations. The bright yellow background is faded, but the red, purple, blue, and pink pieces are as vibrant as ever. It is the quilt Grandma Lola and Mamaw made for me together, the only memory I have of Grandma Lola. I sat at her house, eating oyster crackers, handing her the pieces of fabric, one by one from their distinct piles. It had to be 1973 or 1974.

Now, more than thirty-six years after handing Grandma Lola the pieces, I caress the tiny, intricate white needlework – how did she make every hand-stitch the exact same length? I hold the blanket in my hands, marveling at the white dotted lines that curve into swirling circles. It's not the only quilt Grandma Lola and Mamaw left behind, though. There are others: the flower garden quilt made from Mamaw's baby clothes; the log cabin quilt of dark green and burgundy made for me; the red-and-white bear claw lap quilt; my daughter, Molly's, red-and-yellow calico quilt made for her crib, and, finally, the tattered one that rests folded on the wooden rack in my bedroom. It was Mamaw's favorite before she died. Ironically, it's the last one she designed, but the glaucoma deteriorated her eyesight and someone else cut it out and stitched it for her. For years, it has been my comfort and refuge. When I curl up with it around me, I feel Mamaw's arms. She always said it was her "happy" quilt. "Aren't the colors so pretty?" she asked once.

Reds, pinks, whites, florals, and calicos in their triangle-shapes fit together perfectly. The years of washing haven't been kind to the soft, cotton fabric. Some pieces are ripped, exposing the white polyester filling. Each tear makes the quilt that much more beautiful. Its warmth leads me to happy memories, and I think about the story Mamaw often told, about her most precious holiday memory – the priceless gift that cost Dave so much. I find the cassette tape with “Shirley Temple Doll” scrawled on its cover and sit, waiting to hear her tell me again her favorite story of all.

## Chapter Twelve

She was the most beautiful doll Ginny ever saw. Golden curls fall all over her head. A lovely dimpled smile graces her face. She wears a pale blue chiffon dress with tiny accordion pleats all the way around off the yoke, tiny white shoes and socks and a blue ribbon around one wrist. Ginny has seen other Shirley Temple dolls, but this is the one she loves. The doll sits there among other dolls in the store, but she has a special look on her face. Her smile says to Ginny, “I’m yours. I love you in a special way and soon we’ll be together to play. You can tell me all your secrets.”

In the window of his department store, Jim Miller displays another Shirley Temple doll in a pink dress. She sits there with the other Christmas toys and tree. An electric train runs all around the toys, up hills and in tunnels and over bridges. Ginny knows the snow is really cotton and the water is really a mirror, but it looks like a magical snow-covered paradise with a frozen lake.

Mr. Miller always decorates his window early so children can see it. A lot of country kids only come to town on Saturday, so he tries to let as many as can enjoy it. Oh,

it is a lovely sight! All the lights in the little village light up, and the train sounds a real “TOOT-TOOT.” Lights shine through the tiny homes, and a bell crossing with little barriers comes down across the gravel roads he has formed in his window village – complete with trees and a church.

Lola, Dave, and Ginny are living in the back of Dave’s radio shop. Ginny walks up the street every day and looks in Mr. Miller’s shop window. She knows where every toy is. She also can tell if one is moved or taken out or a new one put in. As some go, Ginny speculates as to who might be getting it for Christmas. Ginny is nine years old. She knows all about Santa Claus. But Lola told her not to expect anything for Christmas.

It is 1935 and not a good year for Dave. On a gamble, he took a number of radios on consignment for the Philco company; they aren’t selling as well as he hoped.

The family lost its home in 1934. When that happened, Lola and Dave separated and divorced. Now, they are back together, and Ginny is happy. It doesn’t matter that they live in the back of the shop. She doesn’t even mind the wires and the bedspreads and quilts hung over them to divide the living room from the bedroom and kitchen. At first, it was great fun – an adventure. But she soon discovered it was cold on the concrete floor, and the railroad tracks are only a few feet from the back door. Coal smoke and soot seep into the store; trains shake the buildings. Dave’s big wood stove provides heat.

During the day men from around town sit near the place, spit tobacco juice, whittle, and talk to him. Lola won’t let Ginny hang around the stove, but she can hear the men from the back, because there aren’t any real walls. The gas cook stove is connected in their

pretend kitchen, so Lola lights the oven, and they hover around it. Ginny can't warm her feet well because the stove is so high off the floor.

Every morning after she eats breakfast Ginny checks Mr. Miller's store window on her way to school. As soon as the 12 o'clock whistle blows, she runs out of school, down the street, and looks quickly at the window. She eats her lunch fast and runs back to school before the one o'clock whistle. "I sure am glad it isn't far to school," Ginny thinks to herself. She's in Mrs. Miles' fourth grade class at South School. She usually rides her bicycle, but the snow is too deep to pedal it.

After school Ginny rushes back to Mr. Miller's window, always looking to see if her Shirley Temple doll with the blue dress is still there. She imagines how she will play with and talk to her. A sense of relief washes over Ginny when the doll is there, but then she tells herself if she ever isn't that maybe by some miracle she'll be hers – knowing she won't. Lola's words echo in her mind, "Santa can't afford a doll for you this year."

When the other kids in town crowd around Mr. Miller's window, Ginny tells every one of them the doll is her Christmas present. "Then why is she still here?" they ask.

"Mr. Miller is leaving her in the window for me, so she doesn't get lost," Ginny replies.

They didn't buy that logic, but Ginny tries her hardest to make them think the doll was taken. She didn't want anyone else to buy her. It is getting closer and closer to Christmas. Ginny counts down the days. Little by little, the toys in Mr. Miller's window disappear – the big red fire truck, a baby doll, a baby buggy, a teddy bear, a little red wagon, a big red wagon, a doll bed.

It's Christmas Eve. It seems like everyone in the whole world has come to town. All the farmers and their kids are here. Ginny knows someone will buy her Shirley Temple doll for sure. She goes to look in the window again just before six o'clock – when the Wagoner town-whistle blows, signaling closing time.

Ginny searches the window. She's gone! The train still runs around the big track, toot-tooting as merrily as ever. The lights in the village shine brighter now that most of the toys are gone. Holes peek through the cotton where the toys once sat. It's such a sad sight. The magic is gone, and in its place the bare, bleak, disheveled window proclaims, "Christmas is over." Ginny cries for a long time until the store turns off its lights.

It is too late. Ginny doesn't want Lola and Dave to see her tear-streaked face, her disappointment. She knows if they had the money, they would buy the Shirley Temple doll. Ginny just hopes whoever does get her will love her as much as she does.

Ginny walks back to the shop, glad there are people there celebrating the holiday. Without saying a word, she goes to the back of the store and into bed. It's hard to go to sleep with all the talking, but she does. She never hears all those people leave.

When she wakes up, it's so cold in the store she can see her breath; She doesn't get out from under the covers, just lies there thinking about what she'll do because it's Christmas after all. At least the family has a good holiday dinner to look forward to. Someone in town paid Dave with a hen for fixing a radio. Lola loves to wring their necks, literally.

Ginny hears Dave get up, light the oven, and put on coffee. Then he builds a fire in the big wood stove. After a while she can't stand it anymore and must go to the bathroom. Dave hears his daughter and calls out, "Baby, there's a box on the davenport for you."

Ginny looks over, and there is a big, blue box with writing on it. Her heart leaps. Could it be? Is it really? It is! The beautiful Shirley Temple doll with the blue dress!

She can't believe her eyes. She really belongs to Ginny now. "But how?" she asks.

"Someone came in last night and bought a radio," Dave said. "Can you believe it, Baby? Mr. Miller let me in after the store closed. He had one doll left."

"I thought there was only one," she said.

"No, no" he said. "Mr. Miller ordered a dozen with blue dresses that size. Did I surprise you?"

"Oh, yes, Daddy!"

Ginny doesn't care if eleven other kids in town have a doll like hers. She is special. Ginny loved her a long time before that day, and the smile on the doll's face tells her she knew all along she'd belong to Ginny and loved her, too. The pretend world she creates with her Shirley Temple doll helps Ginny get through the horrible real world of going to school and being traded off between Lola and Dave.

That is, until Ginny meets Skeet.

### Chapter Thirteen

Some days, Lola and Dave loved each other; others, they cannot even speak civilly. Lola divorced Dave on August 6, 1934. The court papers read: “For the past three years she and the above-named defendant have been growing farther apart; that their life together is incompatible; that there has grown up between them a condition over which neither seem to have control; that they often and seemingly without cause quarrel together and constantly argue over matters that may to the court seem trifling but to them for some unexplainable reason causes ill feeling between them, and that they engage in constant bickering.”

But Ginny knew the real reason. Plain and simple, Dave didn't make enough money to suit Lola. Then, just as Ginny became accustomed to life without Dave, his profits picked up. Dave asked Lola to remarry him and on March 15, 1935, she did. Ginny's life seemed to be back to normal. Only, this time the couple only lasted a month. The fighting started again. The tighter Lola pulled Dave's leash, the more he strayed.

Lola left him and filed for another divorce. It was final in June 1935. Of course, it didn't stop Lola from using Dave to provide a roof over her head from time to time – that's why Lola and Ginny were staying in Dave's shop at Christmas. After that, Lola decided Wagoner was too small a town for both her and Dave, so she took Ginny to live in Pryor. Lola got a job as a housekeeper, cook and part-time store counter clerk for Mr. and Mrs. West, who owned a corner gas station and store just south of Pryor on old Highway 69.

Mrs. West was very picky about her house. It was immaculate; of course, it had to be since Lola cleaned and dusted it from front to back every day. It was Ginny's job to

sweep the porches and sidewalks and pick up trash along highway leading to the house. She thinks it's a huge waste of time what with all the dust constantly coming back up. She does a good job, though, and Mr. West trusts her enough to let her sell pop and candy to his customers. "Boy, I am a business tycoon," Ginny thinks aloud. "I can make correct change all the way up to a dollar."

Ginny needed to straighten her back, Mrs. West decided, so she got a broomstick and put it through Ginny's upper arms and with a small cord ties it to her. Mrs. West made Ginny stay that way for hours, until she ached all over.

Lola hates the treatment, but she can't say anything. She's terrified of losing her job. It is torture.

The entire time Ginny thought about running away back to Wagoner, back to Dave. Ginny told Lola once, through her crying, that she wanted to live with Dave. Lola matter-of-factly told Ginny he didn't want her and didn't have any place for her. Ginny didn't believe her. She couldn't believe her. Just as Ginny planned her escape, Lola came and picked her up, and together they rode the late bus back to Wagoner. Lola said Mrs. West was in town that day, and Mr. West couldn't keep his hands to himself. Ginny didn't know exactly what that meant. Whatever the reason, she was glad to get out of there and back to the streets of Wagoner.

## **Chapter Fourteen**

Ginny started back to school in Mrs. Drury's class at North Elementary School. It was not too different from the other schools she went to: Mrs. Boyd's Expression School, South School, Whittier Elementary School and Pryor Elementary School. This school was



a typical two-storey, red brick school house, square-built. In the basement are the bathrooms, fountains, boiler and store room. On the first floor are four classrooms – two on either side of a big entrance hall where the stairs go up, turn, and go up again. A big slide is there to use as a fire escape out the upstairs window.

Students march into school double-file to the music of a John Phillips Sousa record. Their hands are at their sides. They aren't to touch walls, banisters, or other people. The building smells of chalk dust, musty books, and red floor sweep – a product made from sawdust and oil the janitor sprinkles on the wood floors to keep the dust from billowing up.

Right from the beginning, Ginny knew she and Mrs. Drury would not get along. She didn't like her at first sight. Mrs. Drury looks like an old battle axe. Ginny reckons she's in her 30s, short and stout with piercing eyes that see down to her students' souls. "Honest to God, I think the woman can read my thoughts," Ginny says.

Mrs. Drury insists on her pupils sitting up straight at their desks. This woman was crazy if she thought she was going to make Ginny straighten up – not after the brutal experience of Mrs. West and her broomstick.

First thing, every morning, after the flag salute and prayer, Mrs. Drury, also the principal, instructs her students to do breathing exercises. Ginny is very noisy doing these depending on how silly she feels. Once back in her seat, she slumps over her notebook and spends the day drawing paper-doll dresses. "I have to say," Ginny starts, "she is persistent, determined to instill some semblance of education in my brain. She swears I will learn my multiplication tables, stand up in class and recite them from memory, or I will not pass her class."

To help the memory process, Mrs. Drury assigned poems for them to recite verbatim to the class. Ginny's is "When the Frost is on the Punkin" by James Whitcomb Riley.

"Now I tell you, to a city kid this poem makes no sense. What's 'the fodder's in the shock' mean anyway? How can she expect me to stand up in front of the whole class and recite something when I don't even know what it means?" Ginny asks.

The poem is 32 lines long! Thirty-two lines long! Suddenly, her mind closes off. "No way. I can't do it. I won't do it. I always have D's and F's on my report card anyway. What's one more?" Ginny says.

Mrs. Drury is a step smarter than Ginny, though, no matter her rough demeanor, she is determined to teach her this poem. When Ginny can't stand in front of the class and recite more than the first line, Mrs. Drury quiets the laughing classmates and turned to her.

"Alright, Virginia, you will memorize one line each day and recite a new line to what you have already learned until you have memorized the whole poem," she said.

Ginny is able to memorize a verse a day until she knows the whole thing. Mrs. Drury won, but so did Ginny.

Memory work has its rules. Stand up straight. Girls' arms bent at elbows, hands cupped in front at waist. Boys' hands are clasped firmly behind the back. Speak in a distinct manner, pronouncing words correctly. Recite in a rhyming cadence. Eyes on audience – that one is easy for Ginny. Her eyes are always on every audience.

There are times when she gets bored, and one of her favorite class-upsetters is to stare at the ceiling. One by one, the class looks up, too. Finally, Mrs. Drury looks up. That's when the class cracks up laughing. That trick always gets her sent to the office. But it doesn't stop her.

Another trick is to hide in the cloak closet after recess. Mrs. Drury is in the middle of a lesson before she misses Ginny. She opens the door, and Ginny comes out with a big smile, headed straight for the office! Her one other trouble-making technique is to pretend to get the hiccups. "They are as loud as I can possibly make them, and I follow them with a giggle and a snort!"

Ginny gets a paddling every time, but it doesn't stop her. Maybe it's because of Charles Upton. She has such a crush on him. He's quiet, with dark hair and brown eyes. He's very good looking. But he doesn't seem to care at all for girls. Ginny tries her best to change his mind. She pokes him in the back with her pencil. She works her hardest to get a rise out of him. No matter what she does he never even tells Mrs. Drury she's pestering him. Ginny doesn't get it. How can a boy be so polite? Ginny is in love.

She just has to make the time in class pass faster, though. It's not that she doesn't hold her teachers in high regard. She does. In fact, she thinks they are right there with preachers, the president and God. Ginny just refuses to get chummy with them. The way she sees it, only the kids who talk to the teachers are the pets. And that's something she definitely doesn't want to be.

Then, Ginny meets Juanita Maddox, her first true friend. God must have played a hand in this because he gave her a good one. Juanita is quiet but not square, smart but not a smart aleck. She keeps secrets and accepts Ginny. More than anything, she is loyal.

Juanita came into Ginny's life at a time that changed it. Here Ginny is, living in different apartments and the back of Dave's shop, playing in the alleys and on rooftops. She is a street kid. Juanita and her family showed her what a real family looked like. Mr. Maddox works for the Katy Railroad. They moved him around a lot before settling him in Wagoner. Juanita – who's nickname is Skeet – is new in the fifth grade, just like Ginny. The girls share a double desk. "I swear it is one of the best things that ever happened to me," Ginny said.

Skeet has beautiful handwriting; Ginny's is sloppy. She's still working on her style, and she copies some of Skeet's because she admires it so. Skeet is always so clean, too. Her teeth are brushed, hair groomed and combed and shoes polished. Ginny doesn't even have a toothbrush. Skeet told her about salt and soda –at least that's something.

Ginny starts to make a better effort. She hangs her clothes, so they won't get wrinkled, and when they get dirty she washes her two dresses. After they dry, she uses the flat irons heated over a gas burner to press them. She wants to look nice so Skeet won't be ashamed of her.

Some days Ginny's stomach growls something awful. She tries to laugh it off, but Skeet knows her friend is hungry. She takes Ginny to her home for lunch. The dining room table is draped in a cloth. On it sits a huge bowl of beans and fried potatoes, biscuits and gravy. All wash their hands and set the table. Skeet has three sisters: Betty Jo, Mary

Francis, and Leona. Her baby brother is Dick. Everyone has a job to do at mealtime. It's here Ginny realizes what it's like to have a real family. She always wondered what it would be like to have a brother or sister.

Skeet's mother is calm and patient, with a gentle voice. Her eyes twinkle, and her laugh is quick. She never yells, but she is matter-of-fact when work needs to be done. Soon Mr. Maddox comes in the door. He greets his wife with a kiss on the cheek and a, "Hello, Mother." Such pleasantries don't exist in Ginny's life. Mr. Maddox left a lasting impression on her, and Ginny decides then and there she will marry someone with manners like him. That's the life she wants.

### **Chapter Fifteen**

Since school was starting to go well and Ginny had her new friend, Skeet, naturally life at home presented some trouble. Lola was admitted to the hospital in Pryor; doctors there removed her right kidney. While she was there, Ginny stayed alone in the one big room the two are renting over the Chevrolet garage in Wagoner. They don't have money for gas and electric, and there isn't any water. The toilet is at the end of the hall. They bathe in a wash tub with water heated on a hot plate.

The first day, an old, female bulldog, brownish and ugly, comes upstairs and makes her home outside Ginny's door. When Dave comes by to check on her, he tries to shoo the dog away. She won't go. "I don't know why she stays. I don't have anything to feed her. I don't even have anything to feed me," Ginny said.

Dave comes again the next day to tell Ginny he sold a nickelodeon to the café and is taking the pay in meals. He told her to go by there and get a hot plate every day. Now Ginny

can use her nickels to get a bone from the butcher for the dog. The dog stays outside her door every day and every night. She protects Ginny and won't let anybody open the door.

Bob Lancaster, a school friend of Lola's, came to see about Ginny one day. The dog bit him clean through his cowboy boots and scared him away! "I don't know why she did it, except she must have sensed danger. Come to find out, Mama hadn't sent him to look in on me," Ginny says.

A deep snow covers the ground again, reaching up to her knees. She can't ride her bicycle in it, so her feet are ice cold after walking to and from school and from the café. She goes into the garage downstairs and warms up by their big stove, then runs upstairs real fast, climbs into bed, and covers herself up with lots of quilts to keep warm. It's never dark in that room at night; a street light shines right outside the two big windows.

Ginny took the bus to see Lola in the hospital; Dr. Herrington and the nurses told her Lola might die. All Lola wants is a Coke, so they let Ginny go to the little grocery store nearby and get her one. She sleeps in the bed in Lola's room. The next night, one of the nurses takes Ginny home with her and gives her a bath in a real bathtub with hot water. The nurse cleans Ginny's hair and washes her underwear out, too. Lola can't eat her meals, and the nurses know that. But it doesn't stop them from bringing the trays to her room for Ginny. Lola and Ginny split a Coke each night; something they'll manage to continue even after she comes home. Ginny vows that when she grows up she'll have all the Coke she wants.

Not long after Lola returned, the bulldog who protected Ginny, disappeared. Ginny believed God sent that dog to keep her company and protect her while she had to live alone.

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At North Elementary School, the Works Progress Administration handed out oranges and grapefruits to the students – many were getting scurvy from not eating much or often. After class ends, some of the kids throw theirs at each other or at a tree. Ginny waits around until they leave, then picks up the split and bruised fruit. Some nights, it's all she and Lola have to eat. Sometimes they split a plate lunch a day at the café, but not often. When Dave's tab runs out there, he gives Ginny a quarter or two to buy food. Lola sells her furniture, silver, and crystal a little at a time.

When the kids catch Ginny picking up the bad fruit, they make fun of her, calling her "Heifer." She hates it, fights back, pulls hair, and kicks. "No matter what I do, though, they never stop. I run home and cry. I wish I was strong and pretty. I wish Mama and Daddy were together and we all lived in a nice house like we once did. I wish Mama wasn't always sick and we weren't poor and hungry. I wish I had lots of pretty clothes instead of the two dresses I wear," Ginny says.

She dries her eyes. "No," she says to herself. "You can't change the way things are." Ginny decides then and there she can either be miserable and cry or laugh it all off. She chooses the latter – much to Mrs. Drury's dismay. Her previous antics are now amped-up a bit more. Ginny is officially the class clown. If kids want to laugh at her, she is giving them a good reason to. Every day Mrs. Drury paddles her for it; her teacher doesn't know about Lola being sick or Ginny living alone and being hungry. Ginny thinks she could hate her for showing no emotion, but she is actually a pretty good teacher. She taught Ginny the parts of speech, and she can still recite them.

## Chapter Sixteen

I sit in disbelief. How could her dad not have taken better care of her? How could he leave her there in that apartment alone? Mamaw always talked about Dave as if he could walk on water. Well, so much for that. As far as I was concerned, his good-guy reputation was forever tarnished. Besides that, none of Grandma Lola's brothers or sisters or Dave's brother, George, stepped in and offered to care for her. Mamaw never knew if Grandma Lola forbade them to, or if it was their choice. She was on her own at ten years old. It was a different time, I remind myself. Dave only had a third-grade education. He must have felt she was safe. Besides, I don't even know if he had a home at the time. He could have been living with one of his girlfriends, and she could have objected to him bringing Grandma Lola's daughter into her house. Whatever the reason, I think Mamaw knew from that point on she could take care of herself. She had God's protection.

My heart hurts to realize how alone she must have felt. As I was growing up, whenever she told me a story, to me it was just a story. I missed the poignancy behind it. Now, I understand her better. Even when she had money later in life, Mamaw made every sip of milk count. She always made her own chocolate chip cookies from scratch. She saved her grease in an old metal coffee can on the gas stove. Her pantry held the essential canned goods – vegetables mostly. I remember some of my favorite nights as a child were in the winter when she made a crock-pot of spaghetti and meatballs. Snow fell outside, but inside was as warm and cozy as a home could possibly be. Her cornbread, cooked in cast-iron corn rows, was crunchy on the outside and soft in the middle. No one else has ever made it like her. Then, there were her pies – fruit pies and meringue pies. It didn't really matter to me which she made. All I cared about was the extra dough she would mold



into strips and bake with cinnamon and sugar. People today talk about comfort food. Mamaw found comfort in simply having food. Nothing fancy. Just the basics.

Hearing her story about Grandma Lola's hospital stay gives me the source of her love for Coca-Cola. Mamaw drank Coke from morning until late in the night. Her blue plastic glass held ice cubes and the liquid, which she sipped with a striped straw. She was a devoted follower of Coke – right up until 1985 when the company changed the formula and New Coke was born. Mamaw hated the stuff. That's when she switched to Pepsi.

As for the oranges, I can't recall a single time when I saw her peel an orange or even have one on her kitchen counter. Her favorite snack was a banana and vanilla wafers. But never oranges. The government must have soured her on them. I hunger to hear her voice – to erase the stress of the day, to again put life in perspective. Once again, with gratitude, I push "Play."

## Chapter Seventeen

When the kids aren't calling Ginny "Heifer," they shout, "Your daddy's a woman chaser. Your mama's a whore." They also shout, "Heifer is a bastard." Frankly, she doesn't understand their insults. What hurts the most is Lucille Mahare.

Lucille's mother was Dave's lady friend. She lived in a two-storey house next to Skeet's family. Lucille walked up to Ginny one day and said, "How do you like my new coat your daddy bought me?" Tears welled up in Ginny's eyes. It can't be true. He wouldn't buy her a new coat. Would he? Her tears turn to anger. Ginny yanks Lucille's hair and hits her in the face. Lucille is tougher than Ginny, though, and Lucille leaves her beat up and crying.

Skeet, Imogene Asher, and Wanda Higginbottoms want Audrey Brewer to go after Lucille. Audrey is big boned and a little mean, and she offers to whip Lucille. Ginny's tempted – but afraid. If Lucille tells her mother, then Dave won't give Ginny and Lola any money at all. No, it won't be worth it. Dave's business is doing a little better – it has to be for Mrs. Mahare to be seen with him. He fixed Mr. Looney's projectors at the Cozy Theater, so Ginny goes to every movie that is shown. There, she falls in love with Gene Autry. His voice is like an angel's.

### **Chapter Eighteen**

It just so happened that passing Mrs. Drury's fifth grade class gave the added pleasure of having Mrs. Drury again for sixth grade. The one favor that saved Ginny is that she and Skeet still shared a double-desk. Life was tolerable.

During blackboard arithmetic, Bettie Webster stood by Ginny's desk writing her problem as Mrs. Drury called out the numbers. Suddenly, Ginny felt something strange on the floor around her feet and looked down. Water. Bettie, the teacher's pet, wet her pants! Ginny nudged Skeet. She looked down, too, and both girls started snickering, holding their noses so they won't laugh.

Mrs. Drury tramped down the aisle. "What's going on here?" she demands.

Ginny pointed to the floor.

"Where did that water come from?" she asked.

Bettie turned around with an ashamed, pitiful look on her face. "Maybe it's raining outside," she offered.

Right then, Ginny cracked up, and so did everybody else. The sun was shining bright as a new dollar. Mrs. Drury told Bettie to go to the office. Then, she lectured the class on being kind to one another when accidents happen. She said, "It's not nice to tease people." Ginny sat there dumbfounded, wishing someone would defend her like that.

### **Chapter Nineteen**

School was finally out and summer began. Lola and Ginny live in the Blake Apartments, up over Jim Beard's Wholesale Warehouse. They still don't have any gas or water. Ginny carries water from a public well by the railroad tracks in a large glass jug. Lola washes the clothes in a wash tub then bathes Ginny and herself. She uses the dirty water to mop the kitchen, hall, and bathroom; she flushes the commode with what's left. There is a bathtub, but since Mr. Blake shot and killed himself in it, the two refuse to use it. Ginny is not going in that bathroom, especially with no light or even a window.

With no coursework or school functions to keep Ginny occupied, Dave teaches her to drive his Buick Coupe with the rumble seat. It was once a nice car but is not in good shape now. At only twelve years old, Ginny doesn't need a driver's license. There aren't many cars on the road. She drives all the way to Muskogee for Lola to go window shopping.

Ginny parked the car on the street, and mother and daughter went off in different directions, agreeing to meet back later in the day. The big clock at McIntee's Jewelry Store helps Ginny keep the time. She grabs a hot dog at the chili café before meeting back up with Lola.

Once home in Wagoner, Ginny hears the good news. Dave tells her she can go into Mr. Platt's bakery to eat and put it on his tab. He fixed something for Mr. Platt, and, as usual, Dave is taking his pay in trade. "It's my lucky day," Ginny thought. Mr. Platt put in an ice cream fountain and is selling banana splits for 12 cents each. All summer, she and Lola ate banana splits for lunch and dinner.

It's the summer when Ginny's feet have outgrown her shoes, so she goes barefoot everywhere. Lola will not buy her new ones until the new school year begins. "It's not so bad," Ginny says, "except it's too hot to walk on the sidewalks. I have to be in the dirt."

Ginny's careful when she goes in Mr. Platt's bakery. Some of the other kids steal cookies. Lola would beat her to a pulp if she ever found out Ginny stole anything. Lola never did discover the bottle of Blue Waltz perfume Ginny took from the Kress store in Muskogee on one of their trips. It was only 10 cents, but still that was more money than Ginny had. She picked it up and walked out the door. She walked and walked, rounding the corner. At the entrance to Calhoun's Department Store, Ginny felt every eye in the whole town on her. "What if they tell Lola?" she thought. Ginny considered taking it back, but if she got caught she'd still be branded a thief. She thought of going to a sales clerk and paying her, telling her she forgot to pay earlier. "No, that won't work. I don't have any money," she said, whispering to herself. There was only one thing to do: throw it in the trash. And, that's exactly what Ginny did.

Lola taught Ginny never to beg, mooch, or steal. Lola is a proud woman and refuses to think of herself as "poor" or "trash." Ginny never lets on to anyone that they don't have anything – except, of course, Skeet. She can tell her just about anything. The deciding

factor about a living in a small town is either you are somebody or you're a nobody. There are social classes, and falling out of class is worse than never being there in the first place.

When Ginny was a very little girl, she was invited to all the best birthday parties in town. Betty Jo Kennan's dad owned the lumberyard. LaRue Detherage's dad was a dentist. Virginia Hersman's dad was the undertaker. Betty Brummett's family owned the grocery store. Maxine Gilbert's family had the grain storage. Virginia Rutherford's family had Star Meat Market. Shirly Lamb's family owned a store, too. Tommy Jo and Ida Mae Adams' grandmother operated Mrs. Lyle's dress shop. Bill Wideman's family worked with the railroad. Dave owned a tire shop and a radio shop, before losing both, and they fell on hard times. It was like the family never existed. The children don't even talk to Ginny at school anymore.

Lola became bitter. Ginny believed it was because Lola was displaced in this world. Lola knew how to be a lady, how to have hired help and give orders. She believed good manners opened all doors; now, she only seems defeated. Ginny would not ignore what Lola taught her, though. And, she doesn't give up – especially not on her dreams. That's something Dave taught her.

Dave, on the other hand, is such a happy person despite any circumstance. The gentle man from Potts Camp, Mississippi, picks a tune out of any instrument – guitar, fiddle, zither, piano. He walks down the sidewalks in Wagoner whistling. He never repeats town gossip or carries tales around about anyone. Ginny wishes she could tell a story like Dave. He can take a small fact and elaborate on it. Color it up, exaggerate it, put a little

humor in and, soon, he has everybody in stitches. He is famous for his windy tales – one to fit any occasion. He'll do just about anything to make people laugh.

## Chapter Twenty

Ginny knows no matter how crazy her family life – or lack of one – is, her one constant is her best friend, Skeet. The two girls are inseparable, ever since that first day in Mrs. Drury's fifth grade class. They support one another all the way through junior high and high school. They shop the stores on Main Street with money earned from babysitting. They curl and pin their hair. They go swimming and bicycling. They pose fashionably for the camera.

One day, as they watched the boys' basketball team practice in the Wagoner High School gym, Ginny notices an attractive boy, Roy Hawkins, Jr. So tall and thin and handsome, she thought. She doesn't know much about the boy who just recently moved to town. Meanwhile, Skeet giggles, completely taken with Eddie Nash, the teammate who became Roy's best friend.

As Skeet and Ginny talked, conspiring to get the boys' attention by twirling their hair and looking coy, Roy's younger sister, Arlene, walked up the side stairs to their row of bleachers.

"You know you'll never be good enough for my brother," Arlene said, and just as quickly as she had come she haughtily walked back down the stairs and out the door.

Arlene's harsh words stung Ginny like a slap in the face, but she was determined not to let them get the best of her – not this time. After all, she was all grown up now. Skeet

offers words of comfort to her best friend, and the two girls wait until the boys finish practice to leave. Ginny made her way to the court. She flirted with the farm boy from Arkansas, telling him how impressed she was by his playing, how she hadn't had a chance to meet him yet.

“Hi, there. Thanks,” he says, “I'm Roy, by the way. Want to catch the showing of ‘Bambi’ with me tonight?”

“You can call me Ginny,” she replies, “And, yes, I'd like to go with you.”

Another chapter begins.

### **Epilogue**

This is where Ginny's stories end. She doesn't tell anymore about her courtship or marriage to the handsome young boy from Arkansas. She doesn't tell about the children they raised or the homes she kept. I have often wondered why, but then I remember.

After she met Roy, she had everything she ever wanted – someone committed to loving her and looking after her. In a sense, it was when she really started living. I once asked her to tell me about the time she lived in San Francisco during World War II, working in the shipyards for the cause. “Oh, you don't want to hear about that. Let me tell you more stories about Wagoner,” she said. It was as if those were her badge of courage. She survived those bleak times and lived to tell about them. From then on, she cherished the moment, enjoying every minute.

When I began the process of compiling her childhood stories, I intended to tell her story only. As I reconstructed her past, the more I began to journey through mine as well.

We are inextricably linked, Mamaw and I, through words and memories. I once told her how glad I was that we were so much alike. She wrote back in a letter:

“You know, I got to thinking about what you said about you’re like me.

Well, the thing that came to me is that you are so much more dedicated and determined than I was. You don’t cave in and go along with anyone’s way of life but are independent enough to go it alone, your way. I would never have that much drive, because it’s just easier to give up and let others tell me what to do. So I am proud of your spunk and vigor.”

Her words still reach straight into my heart and inspire me to go on. She saw the best in me. But how could *she* not see how brave she was for living out her own dream? She has definitely made it possible for me to live mine. During the past year, each time I began to wander off the main narrative, desperately believing I needed subplots along the way to create tension or mystery or length, I heard her voice gently guiding me back, saying, “Simplify, simplify.” And this is what is left – her stories and mine, interwoven, pure and detailed, just as she wanted them to be.