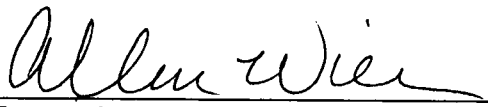
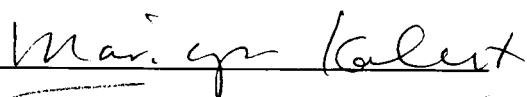
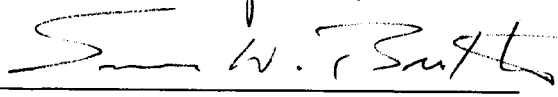


To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Alicia Mischa Renfro entitled "Life Estates." I have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.


Allen Wier, Major Professor

We have read this thesis
and recommend its acceptance:

Accepted for the Council:


Associate Vice Chancellor and
Dean of the Graduate School

LIFE ESTATES

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

Alicia Mischa Renfroe
May 1997

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my grandparents, Audie and Alice Evans, and my great-uncle and aunt, John and Etta Robertson. They are among the former residents of Goin, Tennessee, and without their love and support, I would not be the person I am today.

ABSTRACT

Life Estates presents four of the author's original short-stories along with an introductory essay which explains the author's evolving aesthetic theories. The collection represents the author's search for her voice as a fiction writer.

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INTRODUCTION: TRANSFORMING VOICES

I remember muggy summers when the Cumberland mountains trapped hot air in the valley for weeks on end, and afternoon rains sent steam from the ground in sheets as thick as fog. I remember Granny's voice, sharp and staccato like the snap and thud of the beans she broke over a tin pan, "Dog days set in wet. It'll weather through August." I remember leaning against Memie's cool, stone porch wall, my tee-shirt wet with sweat and sticking to my back, while I listened to the lyrical rhythms of the spoken word. Granny and Memie told stories of growing up in Goin, Tennessee, a town now buried beneath Norris Lake, and their voices seemed a part of that lost land, rising like steam and evaporating.

It is from their voices and their stories told and retold that my own stories are born; somehow, my own voice as a fiction writer must ultimately remain true to their legacy as storytellers. William Goyen discusses a similar interaction in his introduction to Collected Stories of William Goyen. Though the people of his fictional world are of East Texas, their language and land suggests a kinship with East Tennessee, with buried towns and "Dog Days," with little girls listening. Goyen says:

I've cared most about the world in one person's head. Mostly, then, I've cared about the buried song in somebody, and sought it passionately; or the music in what happened. And so I have thought

of my stories as folk song, as ballad, or rhapsody. This led me to be concerned with speech, lyric speech---my heritage. Since the people of the region where most of my stories start---or end (they do, I believe, move in and through the great world) are natural talkers and use their speech with gusto and often with the air and bravura of singers. . . I had at my ears a glorious sound. A marvelous instrument of language was given to me.

Like Goyen, I received the gift of a "glorious sound," "a marvelous instrument of language." From my earliest stories, I have been concerned with my own heritage of lyric speech, and, many times, I have tried and failed to capture the sound of language and successfully integrate it into the landscape of my stories. Though the dialect itself often fails, the rhythm of the voices remains in the landscape, the descriptions, the characters themselves, transforming itself into the cadence of my own authorial voice.

Writers also hear the voices of other writers. The experience of reading fiction and loving it is part of the reason that I write. "Experiencing" fiction began for me when I was about eight years old and a student at Powell Valley Elementary. I had already read my way through the entire collection of Nancy Drew mystery books when I discovered a thick, pink book on the top shelf, far above my

reach. A homemade sign deemed the section for "Sixth Grade and Up Only" in red block letters that seemed to glow like an exit sign even though I knew they were written on plain cardboard with a felt-tip magic marker.

Perhaps it was the notion of the forbidden, the lure of the salmon cover that matched the hardback Nancy Drews, or the simple fact that getting the book gave me an excuse to climb the shelves like a ladder. The librarian made me read the first two pages aloud before she would let me check it out, and from the first sentence, "There was no possibility of taking a walk that day," I was hooked. After successfully proving myself, I tucked Jane Eyre into my Winnie-the-Pooh book satchel and headed home.

I settled in my bedroom, on a white vinyl bean-bag beneath a window that overlooked my mother's clothes line, a spot where, with the help of my dog, Chi-ko, I had solved many a mystery while Nancy was still waiting to be rescued. With Chi-ko in my lap and a pound bag of M&M's beside me, I read Jane Eyre, and my backyard turned to a heather-covered moor, my bedroom to Thornfield Hall, and for that weekend, I was Jane, and Chi-ko was Pilot. We ate candy together (the entire bag) and traveled to a world far away from Speedwell or even England, Bronte's world.

For me, the moors and dells of England will always be Bronte's, and it is her landscape that I remember even though I have been to England and have seen the "real"

thing. Last summer, I traveled to so-called Bronte country, my guidebook touting the "haunting Yorkshire Moors." On the drive north from London, I envisioned what Jane Eyre described:

a north-midland shire, dusk with moorland, ridged with mountain...There are great moors behind and on each hand of me; there are waves of mountains far beyond that deep valley at my feet. The population here must be thin, and I see no passengers on these roads: they stretch out east, west, north, and south---white, broad, lonely; they are all cut in the moor, and the heather grows deep and wild to their very verge.

Even in 1996, the country was still "thinly populated," and I drove for miles through fields and farmland without passing another car. I couldn't see a scrap of heather in sight. I checked my map. I checked my location. I checked the guidebook. According to all logical calculations, I was right in the middle of Bronte country.

But something was not right. I stopped at a small gas station with a sign that promised everything I needed, "Genuine Coca-Cola/Directions/Petrol." Inside, a red-haired man sat on a wooden stool behind an ancient black cash register.

I asked, "This may be a strange question, but what do moors and dells look like? I've been driving for awhile, and I'm afraid I missed them."

"Can't miss them," he replied, "A moor is a flat field, and a dell is one that rolls a bit."

"Oh."

"You see that land over there? Past that fence?" He pointed at a field across the highway that looked remarkably like the fields that surround my home in East Tennessee.

"Yes."

"That's a moor. Put a ridge in it, and you've got a dell."

Though I have not confirmed these distinctions, I suspect that they are correct. I was too afraid to ask where and what heather was.

Yet, when anyone asks me what the English moors look like, I describe Bronte's moors, covered in purple heather waving in a wind so wild that you can almost hear Rochester call "Jane, Jane" over time and space. Bronte's fiction has become my reality and that is the transformation I strive for in my own fiction.

* * *

How do writers shape their voices so that they can forge a connection between themselves and their world and the real world of the reader? How does a plain old field become a haunted landscape?

I can speak only from my own experience, and I can say with conviction that my own voice as a fiction writer is not yet fully realized. I see glimpses of it occasionally, drifting through my fiction: a sentence here, a phrase there, but impossible to pin down with any sense of what it really is.

I have been a writer of one kind or another for as long as I can remember. As an only child, I wrote ghost stories and mysteries to entertain myself. In college, I became an English major, concentrating on creative writing. Somewhere along the way, I decided I wanted to be an attorney so I went to law school.

After I graduated from the University of Florida College of Law and earned my license to practice law, I realized I was unhappy. I was still writing; I was writing appellate briefs for an insurance defense firm. However, mulling over the specifics of who pays what to whom and then explaining why in a forty page brief was not my idea of fun. I missed the freedom of fiction writing.

After some consideration, I packed away my law books and returned to graduate school in English. People often asked me if I was crazy. At first, I tried to explain my decision, but I soon realized that making anyone understand why I changed careers was next to impossible. For a while, I even asked friends and family not to tell anyone that I

was an attorney. Now, when people ask if I am crazy, I just say "yes" and leave it at that.

Turning myself back into a fiction writer was not as easy as I had thought it would be. After spending four years away from fiction writing, I realized my voice as a fiction writer had changed. My stories did not come to me easily as they did when I was a child or even an undergraduate. I had a censor on my shoulder applying analytical strategies to every sentence I wrote. Whether I liked it or not, I had turned into a lawyer.

It took me a year or two to realize that a part of me will always be a lawyer, even if I never set foot into a courtroom again. I think differently now, and I evaluate information by weighing the evidence instead of listening to emotional arguments. Through trial and error, I have learned how to turn off the lawyer-censor while I write a first draft.

On the most basic level, my stories begin and end with a voice. Long before I ever touch pen to paper, I hear an initial voice that is an unrealized vision waiting to be transformed into a story. These voices of inspiration assert their presence at inopportune times and speak to me most often while I am driving, my conscious mind concentrating on weaving my car in and out of traffic, my unconscious mind consorting with the muses. Maybe the competent attorney is too busy avoiding the potential

liability of a traffic accident so the other side of me can play. Unfortunately, my car often wanders from lane to lane amid the sounds of honking horns and squealing brakes while I scribble inspirations on fast-food napkins with lipstick, scrawling in fat, illegible letters reminiscent of first grade penmanship, and I remember the feel of soft, wide lined, gray paper beneath a dull-pointed, thick, round pencil meant to fit the chubby hand of a six-year old. Logical arguments seem very far away.

A single sentence or phrase resonates in my mind and compels me to write a place for it. The sentence or phrase can be dialogue spoken by a yet-to-be-created character, an unknown narrator's description of an event, a thought, or anything else that captures a moment that somehow seems important. "Dogwood Winter" was born through a simple description that occurred to me while I was driving: "It was Dogwood Winter, bloom ridden boughs falling toward the ground like snow and the bite of the breeze more like fall than spring. The second to last cold snap before true summer fell in June." At the time, I had no idea who said this or what kind of world could hold the biting breezes of Dogwood Winter. While the line itself changed with revision, the story still developed around it. Another story, "Goin," began as a single line spoken by an unknown narrator: "There are thirty-two palings gone, and my picket fence looks like a gap-toothed jack-o-lantern." When I

wrote the first draft of "Goin," I knew that the narrator had a fence, and somebody was stealing it in pieces. That was all that I knew. Dead husbands, roses, and TVA came later, after the initial vision, idea, voice, or whatever else writers choose to call it. The rest of story comes through the transforming process of discovery.

As I write the first draft, I try to keep the lawyer out of it. I write quickly, typing as fast as I can which still is not fast enough to keep up with everything going through my mind. When I write these wild and rambling drafts, I often have no sense of time passing. I think I have been typing for a few minutes, and yet when I look at the clock, I realize hours have passed. These moments of uninhibited creation and discovery draw me to writing.

But, as much as I love writing the first draft, I hate what must inevitably follow. The fiction writer and the lawyer wage a continual war over who gets to control the story after the first draft is written. I hate revising and editing. I hate the long, tortuous task of making sense out of what I have written. The lawyer forces me to ask the question: "Now that I've got it, what do I do with it?" Rewriting is a slow process of stops and starts until those voices are transformed into fiction uniquely mine, bearing the subtle stamp of my own authorial voice.

The issue of authorial intention is relevant here. At least some writers claim that they write or revise a story

with a specific intention in mind. Perhaps the intention is simply to set up a particular conflict or to express a certain theme. For me, specific intentions are limiting. I try not to intend anything specific when I revise a story. If a character lacks sufficient motive for a certain action, I try not to provide a hard and fast motive. Instead, I try to develop a deeper character through an effort to discover who the character is and what the character wants to say. Perhaps specific motives will still not be apparent, but the ambiguity in the character will be.

What good are intentions to the reader? When the reader does not understand some aspect of a story, the writer cannot state a specific intention to clear up the reader's confusion. Intentions, however good, are useless because the reader does not and should not see them on the page. The writer has no place in the world of the story. Here, writers can learn a lesson from the law. The First Amendment consists of a single paragraph and that paragraph spawned millions of pages of case law interpreting the fifty or so original words. Constitutional Law attorneys often make arguments based on "Framer's Intent," a notion that if we can figure out what the original writers of the amendment intended, we can somehow understand how the amendment should operate today. Judges are usually reluctant to accept "Framer's Intent" alone as a valid argument because the Law suddenly becomes not the words on the page but the

intentions behind them. And intentions are useless in a world of interpretation and judgement.

The "Law" of a story should be self-contained within the story. In a traditional story, the writer cannot include an interpretation of the story as an addendum to make sure the readers got the point. Writers can only create their fictional worlds and leave the rest up to the readers.

I don't "intend" anything when I pick up my pen, keyboard, or lipstick except to tell a story. As a result, I do not think of stories as elements created separately in terms of plot, character, setting, time, or theme. Instead, a story is a rhythm, a cadence, the thud of green beans into a tin pan. Here, I turn again to William Goyen who says:

For me, story telling is a rhythm, a charged movement, a chain of pulses or beats. To write out of life is to catch, in pace, this pulse that beats in the material of life. If one misses this rhythm, his story does not seem to "work;" is mysteriously dead; seems to imitate life but has not joined life. The story is therefore uninteresting to the reader (and truly to the writer himself), or not clear.

I start with a voice much like Goyen's "charged movement" that is not even a character yet. I do not believe a writer can add elements to a witch's brew like ingredients in a

recipe for a successful story. The traditional elements and the undefinable should evolve and grow together.

It is extremely difficult for me to lay out a story like a road map where I begin at point A and end at point B according to Aristotlean notions of plot as a sequence of events connected by cause in a unified form of beginning, middle, and end. Such a tight structure seems too simplistic because my characters carry the baggage of their own pasts that causes them to act in certain ways within the present story. Past and present merge with an eye on the future which is always changing. In other words, how do you know where a story begins and ends until you write it?

The Aristotlean form also suggests a tight closure where the reader is not left holding a bag of loose ends. While I do think a story should provide a sense of closure for the main conflict or situation, the resolution of that conflict should open new issues for the characters, the readers, and the writer. As Flannery O'Connor says, "You ought to be able to discover something from your stories. If you don't, probably nobody else will." I have accepted, under duress, that I will never know the ending of a story I'm writing until I get there. Sometimes my ending is on page two, leaving me with the task of retracing my steps to recreate the story until the ending is justified. Ultimately, the potential for change should continue to exist in the character even after the action ends.

In my fiction, plot and closure are often more a readjustment of boundaries in response to change or to the threat of change than they are a series of directly linked events. The way the characters move through their settings, their physical and psychological worlds, suggests their attempts at control. Many of the characters want control of an uncertain world so they look to the past, to what is familiar. They are or they become extremists and loners by choice who seek their own way in the world but often fail.

Physical space seems most obviously represented in settings that are often dark and claustrophobic. Space literally diminishes boundaries between the characters and their worlds until the characters become shadows that are often incapable of functioning. In other words, the water is usually rising, and the tree line in the distance is dark and impenetrable. Physical space also becomes confining, a confinement that characters alternately embrace or reject. In "Dogwood Winter," Angeline rejects literal confinement after death and requests cremation rather than traditional burial. Emma is then defined by this request, and, as a result of her attempts to fulfil it, she becomes psychologically confined. Emma's character must readjust. At the end of the story, Emma hangs up the quilts to find her own space by defining boundaries. However, the readjustment of physical space comes at the expense of

psychological space where Angeline still defines Emma's boundaries between internal and external reality.

The importance of space and of boundaries in my fiction was not apparent to me until after I completed the collection, Life Estates. I never sat down at my computer and decided to write four or five stories about boundaries. As I revised the stories, the common themes became apparent even though I did not consciously intend to develop those themes.

Everything that generates a story stems from that initial voice that interrupts me on my drive from home to Knoxville or makes me get out of bed in the middle of a cold night to grab a pen. I discover my stories as much as I create them. I draw on voices from imagination or memory or experience: Paw and Granny for their oral storytelling, and Charlotte Bronte and countless others for the written word. I attempt to transform all these voices into something uniquely my own. And as they are transformed, so am I.

GOIN

I pushed aside weeds and wild roses with my cane so I wouldn't step in an empty grave. I was afraid of falling. Rounded dips lined the rear of my property in neat rows that bordered Norris Lake. When my husband, Henry, and I bought the land from TVA, we left the graves open as testaments to my ancestors, to the people who had to leave their land behind. Over time, the graves gradually filled when dirt crumbled inward, and their depth lessened to three or four feet as grass eased inside. I had sixty days of grace left before I found out if I had to leave again.

For the second time in my life, the water was rising, and I had no idea where to go if I lost the appeal. My husband, Henry, was gone, and the state was taking back the reevaluated flood plain.

When I received the first letter back in May, I hired a lawyer. He said I could fight, but the state had the United States Constitution on its side. The same Amendment that said a criminal didn't have to talk to the police unless he wanted to said that the government could not take my land without "just compensation." The lawyer said they could take what they wanted. They just had to pay for it. Just like TVA took my father's land over sixty years before to make a lake.

I walked to the grove that marked the end of my land and sat down under a Hawthorn tree so thick my hands would

not touch if I wrapped my arms around the trunk. The lake stretched out so still and smooth it looked frozen until it merged with sheer granite cliffs called "The Bluffs" that lined the opposite shore. Every few years, some teenager leaped (a dare or a suicide) and ended up paralyzed or dead when deep currents reclaimed the fallen body.

Rain had been pouring almost constantly since March, and the spring flood season was the worst since TVA sliced Powell River in half in 1933 and covered the town of Goin, Tennessee with about a hundred feet of water. My house sat near the foundation of the old Goin Baptist Church because I couldn't buy my father's land back from the bottom feeders. Empty graves filling fast and stone steps leading to rotten wood were all that was left of Goin, and in the fall, when the water levels usually dropped, the lowest graves were full of fish.

Once, I found a catfish the size of my arm climbing out of three inches of water like he knew where the lake was. He wriggled his pelvic fins like stub legs, but dirt and mud buried him.

* * *

It was almost dark when I walked back to the house. Just as I reached the front porch, lights moved down the road and a car slowed in front of my gate. Four or five teenagers crammed inside a gun-metal Camero with the T-tops out. On the passenger side, a girl's head emerged like a

mud turtle's. She touched a bottle to her lips and then tossed it over my picket fence, directly into Henry's rosebush.

"Hey." I stepped off the porch.

The driver looked at me and laughed before he peeled out. They were going to the peninsula past the house.

Henry and I had heard them many nights. We would sit for hours in the dark, listening to their music transforming itself, winding through the trees and drifting over water. One morning, while Henry was still sleeping, I walked down there. I found the remains of a camp fire, some beer cans, and used condoms in a rainbow of colors. When I told Henry, he wouldn't let me call the police.

"They're just kids," he said, "let them have their fun."

"Fun," I answered. "No wonder some fish eat their young."

Henry just laughed at me.

The tail lights glowed fainter and fainter like eyes closing slowly as the camero disappeared around a curve. The music started, and it was the kind you could feel without really hearing, a drum beating in your head like a heart. I went inside and called the police. I clicked on the porch light and waited on the front steps. The cruiser passed a few minutes later, and the music stopped. The

camero drove back by slowly, followed by the police car. I went to bed.

* * *

The next morning a hand touched my shoulder before the alarm went off. The clock sat on the coffee table, and the hands read two-thirty. I had not wound it since the night Henry died. I got up slowly, stiff from sleeping on the couch, and even with a shower, I still finished breakfast by seven-thirty. An old habit. I had been a biology teacher at the high school for thirty-five years, and I still felt like I should be somewhere by eight.

I went out on the sun porch that looked over the lake. Henry had conceded this room to my half of our hobby. For years, I saved rose cuttings, crossing and recrossing the plants until I finally got a perpetual hybrid that would stand the Southern heat, resist worms, and still produce a double flower. I used a fine-haired paintbrush for pollination because bees were too undependable. I maintained control of specific strains bred for color, size, or hardness.

I rearranged each potting tray to a precise angle so each plant would get the same amount of light. I turned the trays twice a day, and in cloudy weather, I used sunlamps that I bought from a beauty shop that closed down. I sprinkled four cups of water mixed with four tablespoons of old manure on each tray. Almost the year 2000 and growing

anything still comes down to manure. But if it is too fresh, the plants burn.

I had numbered the trays so I could match individual plants with a graph. Every day, I measured each plant, counted the leaves, checked for premature budding, and recorded the data in a spiral notebook. If a plant grew too slowly or the stem became thin, I culled it. I made the choices for the most desirable qualities.

The new strain looked good. Henry and I had planned to transplant them soon. I always mulched the yard, put them in the ground where he told me, and then they were his, circling the porch, lining the walk, and wrapping around the fence.

Henry and I met at a Botany conference almost forty years ago. He was an Ornamental Horticulturalist, and I was a teacher with a passion for growing mammoth pumpkins. Somehow, we both ended up at a non-academic seminar called "The Occasional Home Gardener." We talked plants ever since. Until he had an annurism.

Henry tried to talk to me about a living will once, not long after I retired. He was outside at dusk, mulching the tea roses, and working the dirt as he checked for worms.

"Ellen, have you thought about what you want if you got sick and couldn't do things anymore?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, what if you outlived yourself?"

"I don't know. I never thought on it."

"I've been thinking."

"How would you know when it happened?"

"You'd know. It'd be like you were alone even though you really aren't. When nothing happens."

When I didn't say anything, he continued, "I want you to let me go."

"Then go, but leave me out of it." I walked away, and he never mentioned it again.

After I double-checked the trays' positions, I went outside to sweep the front porch. Rain drizzled through the sunlight, and only a few damp leaves stuck to the white boards. I swept quickly, and when I accidentally sent a rag rug into the white rose bushes circling the porch, I found my mailbox.

The rounded top had been beaten into the base, and the door hung crookedly from one hinge. I tapped it over with the broom. There was no mail inside.

I left it on my front steps while I went back inside for Henry's tool box. In the hall closet, I found our Christmas cards, already sealed, stamped, and addressed in Henry's precise handwriting; our suitcases that we hadn't used since our trip to England for cuttings. The tools were in the back beneath a plastic bag I had labeled "Winter Comforter."

After I gathered the tools, I tapped the box back into shape. The door wouldn't close, and the red flag raised only to half-mast.

I knew they would be back so I found some wood and cement to fix the box. I nailed pieces of old shingles together until I made an open-ended square that fit inside the mailbox with three or four inches clearance. I mixed cement and poured it between the wood frame and the metal box. After I smoothed the wet cement with a trowel, I set the mailbox aside to harden overnight.

* * *

A few days after I put the new mailbox up, I found a broken baseball bat on my porch when I went out to sweep. The mailbox lay in Henry's rosebushes.

I left for town at noon, and though the sun beat down with the promise of dryer days, storm clouds rolled in low over the bluffs. I drove along the lake for about ten miles before I crossed several ridges and came out in the valley next to the old Goin Baptist Church, covered with kudzu and full of moldering hay. In a few years, you won't be able to tell the church was ever here.

When I was ten, I stood with my father and watched them hook the church to a truck and move it to the valley. The congregation tried to make a go of it, but too many people were gone. The building was a school for a while and then it stayed empty until somebody started using it for storage.

* * *

My mother wouldn't let me watch when they dug up the graves. We were at the Goin General Store for our last shopping trip when trucks drove through town with coffins stacked in the back like cut lumber. She sent me in the store with the other children while she stood by the street with a crowd of people. The owner gave all the children free horehound sticks, but I sneaked out the back and walked to the graveyard anyway. I wanted to see a dead body.

I knelt in vines that wrapped around me like snakes while shovels hit wood in dull thumps, and they pulled from the earth coffins untouched by time or the elements. A baby floated inside a glass coffin. Groundwater had seeped in, and its head bobbed back and forth like a shriveled apple.

At some graves, they kept shoveling, and I heard nothing but blades cutting the earth and soil hissing through the air until they stopped digging and shoveled dirt into new coffins.

The morning that we left Goin for good had been foggy in the way of a waking dream that moves slow like the river in winter. My mother told me to tell the house good-bye and not to cry because there was nothing left but leavings. My father drove, and I sat in my mother's lap even though I was too big. Our house became a dot against the rising flood waters, and when we rounded a curve, a woman walked in water

up to her waist toward loaded apple trees that rose like islands.

My father pulled over and called to her. She was our neighbor, a widow that came to our house on Sundays. She walked to the shore, and my parents got out. My mother told me to stay in the car, but I followed anyway.

My father spoke to the woman, but she ignored him and took my hand. She led me the edge of a wide lake that almost covered an orchard that grew on the river bank. A tin roof glinted as the water the lapped against it.

"You see that tree? I put the set out myself and watched it grow."

I nodded.

"I first lived here, way fore you were even born, May tides come so fast the river rose over that tree. The water come up, and it was the Lord's will. Never covered the earth then, and he won't now. He promised fire this time."

She paused and looked at me.

"You hear me?"

I nodded.

"You remember I planted that tree. You remember I told you."

My mother came and took my hand. We left the woman standing there. When I asked my parents what happened to her, they would not speak of it because of what she did.

She waited for the fire, but the water kept coming. She never left Goin.

* * *

I reported the vandalism to the police and the post office. The police officer promised to pay a visit to the teenagers he'd cited for loitering on the peninsula. I asked a postal worker to hold my mail until the police caught the teenagers, but he refused. The post office would not hold mail while the addressee was in residence. The post office would not deliver mail without a proper box in place, and with the appeal pending, I had to get my mail. As long as the letters kept coming, the case was still alive.

On the way home, I took the back road in and avoided the water altogether. I sat on the porch with my mailbox on my lap until I heard a car coming down the highway at about two thirty. When I recognized a flashing clear light, I hurried across the highway. I held the box under my right arm and leaned on my cane with my left hand.

The mailman was a young man, about forty, and he looked startled when I leaned my cane against his car and opened the mailbox for him.

"Thank you. Sometimes they're hard to open. They get stuck in rainy weather. Rust." He shoved a handful of paper in and closed the door.

"You're welcome." I picked up my cane, but he still didn't drive away.

"Think it'll rain again today?"

"I don't know. It's rained about every day for six months."

He nodded. "You need somebody to put your box up?"

"No. I'll be meeting you with it. You usually come around two-thirty?"

"Most days. It's not always exact."

"I'll be ready. You go on now."

The mailman nodded and drove off. I didn't cross the road until he turned around and passed again. He waved, and I lifted my cane.

I carried the box back to the porch before I opened the door. A neatly folded circular addressed to "Boxholder" advertised a department store sale. A newsletter from The Darwin Society of Natural Scientists promised updated research. A catalog addressed to Henry Jenkins offered the newest hybrid roses. The law offices of Wampler, Miller, and Davis billed Mrs. Henry Jenkins \$2,750.00 for "services rendered" and enclosed a letter suggesting I "arrange for alternate accommodations in the likely event that my appeal was unsuccessful." The letter explained that the takings clause was a powerful thing.

* * *

When my parents and I left Goin, my mother was so upset she forgot to take the pictures off the walls in our house. She cried for three days because she left behind the only photograph of her grandmother. I had never met the old lady, but my mother said she was afraid to get her picture taken again because she thought the camera took a person's sight away. When I told Henry the story, he said he thought there might be some truth in that.

My father and I went back to Goin in a rowboat. The town was all but under and trying to float back up. Water lapped against ridgepoles, and when we passed the school, waves rang the bell. When we left town, the water got rougher. The boat passed so close to a tree-top that I lifted a kite from the branches.

My father did not speak until we reached a ridge about a mile from our house. He leaned out and tied the boat to a thick sapling.

"Come on, Ellen. I got something to show you."

He lifted me onto the bank and walked up the hill. He paused by another sapling. He braced his boot against the bank and twisted the tree at its base. When the green wood refused to give, he let go and pulled out his knife. With the knife open, he bent the tree again and cut it low.

"We need may need a stick. It's not far, but steep."

"Where?"

"The top of this ridge. Water's supposed to get that high before its through, and this is the last chance I got to show you."

He half-pulled me to the top and stopped, looking around.

"You help me look. Its a flat marker about a foot long. A stone. Says 'Annanias Honeycutt, Hung'."

He told me the story while we searched. Annanais Honeycutt was the last man hung in Goin and my father's father witnessed it. Honeycutt stole a horse from the Sheriff. Nobody knew why. Some said he wanted to die.

My father found the stone half-covered in moss that he scraped off with the knife. He picked up my hand and ran my fingers over the words before he started back down the bank.

I walked across Annanais Honeycutt's grave and crawled behind my father toward the water.

When we reached the house, it looked like a person going under, the windows wide and half-submerged like eyes. My father rowed on to the porch. He stood and the boat pitched hard when he kicked in the picture window. We ducked, and he pushed off the sill. We slid inside.

He circled slowly from room to room while I leaned out and touched the walls as we passed. My grandmother's picture hung on the bedroom wall a few inches above the water. When my father eased the boat closer, the water dipped below the black mark and back up again. We followed

the wall to a picture called "The Gleaners" that was already half under. When I lifted it, the paper curled up beneath the glass. My mother always said that pictures are all we have of the past.

* * *

On the first day of October, I counted thirty-two palings gone. My picket fence looked like a gap-toothed jack-o-lantern, and Henry's New Dawn climbers stretched out flat across the yard. I stretched the pale pink roses across chicken wire to get them out of the mud and layered sand to dry out their roots. They would make it if the rain held off.

I sat on a crate and worked on the fence while I waited for the mail. The palings were in a ditch across the road, and after I wiped the mud off, I nailed them back in place.

When the flashing light came around the curve, I stood and crossed the road to wait. I looked at my watch when the car stopped, and said, "You're late. It's past three."

"Some of the roads are flooded up the lake, and they're taking people out in boats."

"Are they coming down here?"

"Probably, if the rain doesn't stop. Every river, pond, and stream is past flood stage in this end of the state. On the water like you are, I'd say they'll get you out for sure. You want me to send somebody?"

"No, I've got work to do."

He nodded and handed me the mail. I had a circular from a retirement center, an offer for life insurance at one dollar per month, and a pamphlet from one of those save the children missions. They were all addressed to "Boxholder."

Just as I finished the fence, the drizzle started again. I checked the tea roses along the walk. The flowers blazed red and yellow even though the ground was saturated and black spots dotted the stems. They were drowning.

At midnight, I left the house like a snake shedding its skin and sat alone on the porch. Three carloads of them drove by with their car windows down. The music echoed and the notes came at me sideways like blowing rain, one at a time, and warped from bouncing over trees and floating over water.

A fall fog rolled off the water and surrounded the house. I stepped off the porch and moved through the roses. When I went around the house, all but two graves were covered, and the wild roses hung in the water like trot lines with thorns instead of hooks.

I slid down the bank and untied an old row boat Henry had kept tied to a tree. Heat lightning flickered over the bluffs, and thunder echoed over the water like gunshots. As I rowed toward the center of the lake, I didn't want to think of Goin and its dusty streets gone to mud. And the water creeping until it covered the bottomlands, the town,

and the dead. I didn't want to remember that water always rises and growing things always take too much.

When Henry had the annurism, I sat at the hospital in a plastic chair, signed the necessary consent forms and promised not to sue the hospital. Nurses took the paperwork to lawyers. I had Henry buried ten miles from the nearest river, lake, or stream. I didn't want him floating underground.

I must have sat in the boat for half an hour with lightening striking like fire before I could bring myself to look over the edge and stare through dead water, a hundred feet down at nothing, until I remembered I must not look too long and deep at leavings.

LIFE ESTATES

Jack Freeman waited for his wife. He sat in water puddled on a marble bench and watched the young attorneys come and go from the courthouse complex like blue-suited toy soldiers. He recognized several scrubbed and shining faces from Oak Glen, his neighbors' children who carried on family law practices.

He did not know how long he had been sitting there when he heard a loud horn. He looked up. He was alone on the street, the downtown lunch traffic over, and an old school bus stopped next to the curb. The engine idled loudly, and he wondered why he had not heard it coming.

A man stuck his head through the driver's window and yelled, "Hey Mister."

The bus was old, and the name of the school system had been covered with black paint. Rounded lumps appeared in the row of windows normally filled with children's faces.

"Can I help you?"

"Need some directions."

The man killed the engine.

"Where you headed?"

Jack approached the bus. The man had greasy blonde hair and sweat stained his shirt. Behind the man, watermelons filled most of the seats and the center aisle in neat rows and stacks. A young woman sat in the front seat clutching a military duffel bag. Sitting down, she was small, and her

face was pale and sallow against the vinyl seat back and the green of the melons stacked behind her.

"Lexington, or thereabouts," he answered and met Jack's gaze directly.

"Well, if you take the next right, you'll hit the interstate in about 45 minutes." Jack pointed down the block.

"Don't want to take the interstate. We want to see the country."

"Then you want highway 27. Its a straight shot but a winding road." Jack laughed and then continued. "Just keep going how you're going. You'll see a sign in about a mile or so for the turn. You can't miss it. It may be hard to maneuver in this bus though, lots of blind curves."

"Thanks."

The man turned the ignition key, but Jack put his hand in the window and pointed. "Where'd you get melons this time of year?"

"Florida. I'm selling them."

"Do you grow them?"

"No, I just sell them."

"You live in this bus?"

"You want a watermelon? Best melons to be had in November."

"I'll take one. Surprise my wife. Is that your wife?" Jack nodded to the girl who sat quietly, looking down, her

arms still wrapped around the duffel bag as though it contained things on which her life depended.

The man turned to the girl and said, "Ponga la equipaje. Esta bien."

"Que quiere el?" She placed the bag carefully on the seat beside her.

As she rose, her black hair fell across her face like a veil and hid her eyes. When she turned her back, it hung past her waist.

"Dale un melon. El grande que esta arriba."

She rolled a melon off the nearest pile and cradled it in her arms.

"I'll come around and get it if you'll open in the door," Jack wondered if her eyes were brown, or if they might be a vivid green or blue incongruous with her dark hair. He willed her to look at him.

"No need."

The man turned back to the girl. "Damelo y sientate. Ahora mismo. No te mires a el."

"Lo siento."

The man took the melon from the girl and passed it through the open window.

Jack shifted the melon under his arm and awkwardly pulled out his wallet. He removed a twenty. "How much?"

The man's eyes flicked briefly over the bill and then back at Jack as though measuring his worth.

"No charge. Thanks for the directions." The man tried to start the bus, but the engine sputtered.

As Jack stepped backwards, the girl rose quickly and her voice carried over the dying engine. "No habias tomado su dinero. Esto es todo que nosotros tenemos."

Jack lifted his head when she raised her voice, and he met her eyes for the first time. They were light brown, almost gold, like an animal's eyes.

"Are you . . . ?"

The engine caught, and they pulled away before Jack could find the Spanish words. His father's voice. Wrong words and wrong accent. Como es tu vida? How is your life? He held the watermelon.

If not for the melon growing heavy in his arms, the man and the girl could have been a day-dream, a part of a moment that passed of no consequence.

"Jack, are you ready?"

He turned around. A sharp contrast to the girl on the bus, his wife looked very clean with her bobbed blonde hair caught in a bun and her pressed linen blouse open in a vee that revealed a gold chain against tanned skin. She wore long shorts with pantyhose and loafers and carried her blazer folded neatly over her arm. For a moment, he thought she had not changed since they met in college.

"Where'd you get a watermelon this time of year?"

"I bought it. Well, not exactly. Something was wrong there Bron. I know it." Jack shifted the melon to one arm and stared down the street where the bus disappeared.

"What are you talking about?" She tugged at his arm and handed him red foil shopping bags from Dillard's and plain bags from The Uniform Shop filled with packages wrapped in red and green paper. He fell in step beside her as they walked past the row of office buildings toward Redi-Park.

"What did your lawyer say?" She asked. "Did something go wrong? I thought she couldn't contest the will?"

"Not the lawyer. The watermelon guy. I mean nothing's wrong with the lawyer, no more than usual anyway. But that watermelon guy . . ."

"Forget the watermelon. It won't be good this late anyway. Now what did the lawyer say?"

Jack ignored her. His eyes adjusted to the dim light of the garage, and he shifted the watermelon to his other arm while he struggled with the bags. At the car, he put down the shopping bags by the trunk and then opened the passenger door. In the gloomy light, Bronwyn did not look so young anymore.

She stopped before she stepped into the car and cocked her head to one side as she looked up at him with pale blue eyes. "Jack?"

"The will is valid."

"That's good."

She settled herself in the car while he continued to hold the door awkwardly as he balanced the melon against his thighs.

"You can give the farm to Neil," she continued. "He always loved it there when he was a boy. I'll write him when I send the new uniforms I bought today. He starts his rotations next week. The uniforms look just like a doctor's."

"He'll never be one though."

"I thought you had accepted his decision."

Jack slammed the door.

He made a show of opening and closing the trunk. He put the melon inside, and, after a moment's thought, he placed Bronwyn's shopping bags against the bumper of an adjacent car. The foil bags glinted dully in the rear view mirror like worn out Christmas lights as he backed the car out of its space.

He drove out of the garage and down the street before he spoke again.

"I get the farm, but Miss Dupree has a life estate in the cottage."

"What does that mean?"

"She can live there until I die."

"But," she began.

Jack cut her off. "Basically, the lawyer said that I am something called the 'measuring life.' Miss Dupree's estate exists for the duration of my life. Usually, they set this stuff up for the life of the person getting the estate. But my father wanted it this way. The lawyer said he could define his estate. As long as a valid will exists, I don't have a statutory right to inherit outside of it. My father wasn't crazy enough for me to have grounds for a contest. Basically, as long as I'm alive, she's sitting pretty." Jack laughed.

"But why would he . . ."

"You didn't know my father. He got all of us pretty good. I'm going up there tomorrow to meet the tile guy. If I can get it fixed up, I can sell the whole damn thing and let someone else deal with Miss Dupree."

Jack laughed again.

"He didn't get you. He could have left all of it to her. We'll never live there anyway, but Neil can."

"No. Not as long as she's there. I don't want him mixed up with her. Not that he'd even notice anyway."

"Jack. . ."

"Drop it. You don't know what you're talking about."

* * *

The next morning, Jack smelled the melon when he opened the car door. Bronwyn's questions and memories of Alexandria Dupree had made him forget it. When he opened

the trunk, pink pulp oozed around the dark green rind like the insides of a dead animal spread along the highway. Bronwyn must have smashed the melon when she discovered the bags were missing. He scooped up the remains and threw them in the grass near the spot Bronwyn always stepped out after she parked her car.

The smell hung on when he drove north to his father's farm to meet the tile layer. Foothills covered by a light dusting of snow rose like half-moons, and a morning frost covered the fields rolling beside the road. The farm was just off highway 27. Jack looked for the beat-up schoolbus around every curve, but he didn't find it.

He pulled off on the rutted dirt road that wound around a hill out of sight. The road was muddy, and he hoped he wouldn't get stuck. Miss Dupree's house was on the left: dead weeds covered her yard like cut hay. A one-story cottage with a small, front porch, her house lacked the clutter decorating most of the tenant shacks along the highway. A clothesline covered with bed sheets and white panties, stretched out beside the house, tucked discreetly away from the road.

A pack of dogs ran at the car when he drove by. They backed off when he swerved toward them. Alexandria Dupree was nowhere to be seen. He followed the road for another half-mile before he reached the main house. He had not been

inside the house since the day his mother died over twenty years before. That day had been the worst of his life.

From the outside, the house still looked the same, a dingy two-story in need of a coat of white paint, resting on the last ridge before the mountain rose in the background. The surrounding trees were taller, but the large maple that guarded the east side house had blown down and lay half-rotten across the side yard. He wondered why Bronwyn had not said anything about contacting a tree service after her visit to the house. She knew he wanted to sell.

The Realtor had told Bronwyn that the kitchen floor was rotten and needed to be replaced. Jack had decided on ceramic tile because it seemed so permanent.

When he reached the house, a large truck sat in the driveway, and a young woman leaned against it smoking a cigarette. She looked Neil's age, early twenties. She had black hair, the kind his wife said was too black to be anything but bottled, and for a moment, he thought about the woman on the schoolbus.

Maybe the bus had broken. He pictured her sleeping on the green seat, wrapped in the man's arms. Or she was alone, abandoned by the man, and Jack could help. He could speak to her now that he had the words. But the man and the girl were probably past Lexington by now, the bus empty of the watermelons sold at a farmer's market or an out-of-the-way truck stop.

"What can I do for you?" He asked the girl by the truck when he got out of the car. He wrapped a muffler around his face to block the wind coming down the mountain. Winter had not yet taken over with a vengeance, but it was coming.

"I'm your tile layer."

She laughed then, in a confident way, and ground out the cigarette. She wore jeans and brown work boots.

"I guess I'd better show you what I've got then. You may want to get back in that truck and get out of here while you can." He fumbled in his pocket for the house key.

She laughed again and touched his arm. "I bet I've seen worse."

They followed a stone walkway to the back door. He opened the door and groped for the light switch. It had been years, but his hand found it easily like he never left.

The house was empty, and its bareness startled him beneath the naked bulb. The peg where he once hung his wind breakers were empty, and someone had painted over the pencil lines that had charted his growth. The white door facing looked naked without the level black marks that told him where he had been.

"I want you to do this entry way into the kitchen, " he began, suddenly feeling the need to be all-business, as they removed their coats and walked across the small room. The girl was not much older than Alexandria Dupree when his

father had brought her home. In the bare kitchen, it was as though he expected to see Alexandria walking toward him, pale green eyes appraising his every movement, while she selected furniture for the cottage as if she could own everything bit by bit.

"Also, the kitchen, the sun porch over there to the left, and the bathroom at the end of that hall. This floor had better last."

"Oh, a tile floor will last as long as its on good wood."

"It'd better, or I'll come after you."

"Not me, come after the guy that put the floor in. That's who you want."

She leaned against the kitchen counter, and he did not know if she was sizing up the room or him.

"This must have been a beautiful house once. It has a homey feeling, even without any furniture or decorations."

"It was, a long time ago."

"Did you sell everything?"

"Not exactly, but we had to let some things go."

"You look familiar. Have I met you before?"

"I don't think so. You starting on it today?"

"No, just measuring. I'll be back out tomorrow to lay the tile."

She pulled a metal tape measure and a small note pad from her pocket.

"You want help?"

She nodded, handed him one end of the tape measure and directed him around the room while she took the other end. He watched her bend over and rise while she took the measurements, calling out questions and jotting down his answers with a pencil that she kept tucking behind her ear.

"Wait a minute. Are you Neil's father?" She paused for a moment, looking at him, and then sat cross-legged while she made calculations on a small pad.

"Yes. How do you know Neil?"

"I went to school with him. You don't remember me? I lived three houses down in Manor Estates, before you all moved to Oak Glen. I'm Leslie. You remember when Neil wrecked his dirt bike?"

"It was brand new. He'd only had it two days."

"I remember. He didn't want to ride it."

"He never rode it again."

She did not reply.

After a long moment of silence broken only by her pencil scratching against the paper, Jack spoke.

"How'd you get into this business?"

"It's a family business. We all do one thing or another. Mine's tile. My brothers like to roof, but I'm afraid of heights."

"Why?"

"I fell out of a tree when I was little. I won't even climb a ladder now."

"No, I mean why tile?"

"It's precise. It takes patience, I guess, and that's one thing I've got a lot of. What does Neil do now? I haven't seen him in years."

After a moment, Jack replied, "Nothing. I'll let you get to work. I've got another errand."

"Tell Neil I said 'Hi' when you talk to him. I'd love to see him."

"I don't know when he'll be around." Jack nodded at the girl and walked outside to the car.

He drove back down the road and stopped at Alexandria Dupree's. When he got out, the dogs came out of nowhere, barking, and surrounded him. Coon dogs. Many years ago, his father had trained dogs to track raccoons. He had kept them locked in a row of cages behind the farmhouse. Jack had hated those dogs, and this pack did not seem any better. They had him treed, and he did not move.

"Anybody home?" He yelled.

A dark haired woman appeared from the back. She had on jeans and a flannel shirt with the sleeves rolled up.

"Get off now, dogs," she said. They backed off, and she whistled. They ran away.

"Can I help you?"

He walked toward her and then stopped, remembering her with his father. Her arms were covered in blood.

Then, as though she read his mind, she said, "I just butchered a deer, not a passer-by. Now, what can I do for you?"

She wiped her hands on a towel tucked in her belt and stared at him.

She was younger than he remembered and still tall and slender, almost boyish. Alexandria Dupree had moved into the cottage when he was ten years old, before his mother died. His father brought her home after one of his long-distance trucking runs. He trucked to make money when the rocky ground took over and the harvest failed.

Jack knew now she could not have been more than seventeen or eighteen. He wondered how long it had been before his father slept with her. Jack had seen them together only once, right before he left for college.

"I didn't know it was deer season."

She shrugged.

"Do you know who I am?"

"Should I?"

"I guess not. I haven't been here in over twenty years. I'm Jack Freeman."

He paused for a moment and extended his hand.

She did not take it.

"I'm not leaving. I don't have to," she said.

"I know. I talked to my lawyer. I want to buy you out."

"I earned this place and more."

"I don't doubt that. I'm willing to give you a good price."

"I never knew a Freeman to give anyone anything."

She walked toward the back.

"Wait." Jack called out as he crossed the yard. He grabbed her arm.

"What?" She jerked away.

"Can I see your deer?" Jack groped for something to say so he could stay for a while to see what this place contained, what drew his father to this woman.

"Your father never said you were a hunter." She looked at him directly, her eyes pale like light shining through green glass. "You look like him. What do you really want?"

"I'm not a hunter. Just interested, I guess."

"If you're not used to butchering, you'll get sick. I've got a ten-point buck mounted inside, if you want to see it. I'm still not selling though."

He smiled at her, unsure of the invitation, and answered, "I'd like to see it."

The house was small and clean. Not what he anticipated at all. The hardwood floors were polished to a shine and uncovered by any rugs. Large windows with no curtains looked over the front yard, and bonsai trees in white pots

lined a table beneath the windows and mirrored in miniature the large cedars that towered over the house.

He sat in a corner in a wing-backed chair that, like the rest of the furniture, was an antique. The buck's head was larger than he expected and hung between floor-to-ceiling bookcases that covered an entire wall and provided the only color in the room. Books were lined up according to size, tall volumes on the right moving like stair-steps to the small ones on the left. Jack stared at the buck while he drank a Coke, watching its eyes and counting the points on its antlers. He recognized the delicate, blown-glass lamp on the side table. It had belonged to his mother.

Miss Dupree stood near the front door, and he imagined she was watching him the same way her eyes followed his father so long ago.

"Did my father teach you to hunt?" He asked when he could no longer stand the silence.

"Your father taught me a lot." She laughed again, and it was not an altogether bitter laugh. She tossed her dark hair over her shoulder, and her face glowed from the sun and wind as it had the first time Jack saw her years ago.

She had stepped out of his father's truck and walked up to the house with the air of someone coming home to stay after a long absence, but even at twelve, Jack had been sure that nothing like her had ever been there before. She reminded him of pin-ups, of Marilyn Monroe with her skirt

blowing up, of Jane Russell leaning against a haystack. She came alone and brought nothing with her, not even a bag or purse. It was as though she just appeared, in the driveway, with her clear green eyes staring at the house as if she owned it outright.

His mother turned down the crisp, white sheets on the spare room bed, and Alexandria Dupree moved in. She stayed in his mother's house for a week or so, moving through the cupboards and closets, and then she went to the cottage. His mother never spoke of Miss Dupree again.

"He tried to teach me, but I wasn't very good at it. I hated the dogs so I never cared to hunt coon," Jack said.

"What about deer?"

"I couldn't stand to sit still for hours in a tree waiting for something that might or might not come. It just seemed pointless."

"I guess it might seem that way to some."

"Maybe he wasn't a good teacher."

"We got on all right. He was with me when I got that buck. It was my first kill with a bow." She walked across the room to the windows and ran her hand along the tree tops.

"He gave me a bow for my birthday. I couldn't have been more than twelve or so."

"What was your first kill?"

"A snake. I shot it from the deer stand. He got mad at me for wasting an arrow. Ruined the point when it hit the rock the snake was on."

"Why'd you shoot it?"

"I don't know. I guess I was tired of waiting. I wanted to see if I could hit something. So, did you go with him often?"

"Some. Until I learned. Then, I went alone. I like walking these mountains. You must be good to make a shot like that."

"Fair. It's been a while. I guess I'm out of practice."

She faced him then, and he shifted the sweating glass to his other hand.

"You done with that?"

Jack nodded and held out the glass.

"Just put it on the tray over there on your way out."

For a moment, he did not know what to do, and then he stood. Except for a few lines, she could have been the same girl that stepped out of his father's truck so long ago. He did not feel so far removed from that twelve-year-old boy who watched her when she did not know he was looking.

"Well, thank you for the drink. That's a beautiful buck." He crossed the room and placed the glass carefully on the tray. At the door, he turned and spoke, "Maybe I'll take up hunting again."

She nodded. "It's not the kill you know. It's walking until you find that spot. Looking until you find the grass where they graze, the water that they drink. Releasing the arrow so fast that it turns to air. It's making yourself so still and small in a tree that they come to you like lambs. Your father could do that. He could wait forever if he had too."

"He could at that." Jack closed the door behind him. On the porch, he paused by the window and watched, just out of her line of vision, as she touched the small trees each in turn.

* * *

When Jack got home, the melon pieces had been swept to his side of the driveway. He kicked the green rind against Bronwyn's car, but there was no pulp left to spatter colorfully on the white paint.

Inside, Bronwyn sat in the den in yellow pajamas, feet tucked neatly beneath her, on thick white carpet surrounded by red and green packages that she pulled one after another from worn, foil shopping bags. To Jack she looked like one of the round, golden ornaments that swung sparkling from the tree. Nothing like the wildness of Alexandria or the innocence of woman on the bus. Bronwyn placed the packages in a row and looked at him.

"Redi-Park called today. Someone turned in our bags." She paused for a moment and then continued, "I can't believe

that you forgot, Jack. Think of the money. I spent hundreds of dollars on those nursing uniforms."

"It doesn't matter." Jack sank into the sectional sofa and gathered a cushion to his chest. He closed his eyes. He knew they would not talk about the uniforms or the melon.

"It does. You won't do anything for him or let me."

"I just send him money and watch him ruin his life." He propped his feet on the glass-topped table.

"He just wants to be happy."

"Who laid out his life for him that he should be a fool?"

"He isn't staying here over Christmas. He's coming in, but just for a weekend with his old friends. They're exploring those old caves outside of town. I talked to him today."

"So? If he doesn't want to come here, then so be it. If he'd rather be in a cave than with us, that's his decision. I've never understood why he does what he does."

"You went to the farm today."

"Yes." Jack kept his eyes closed.

"So what happened."

"Nothing. I just looked around. See what I need to do to get the best price. I'm going back out tomorrow to tie up some loose ends."

"Avoiding it won't help, Jack. I'll go with you tomorrow. You need to put what happened there behind you. Staying away all these years hasn't helped."

Jack stood and said nothing until he crossed the room. He paused at the door leading to the garage. "Leave it, Bron. Don't retake the same ground."

* * *

Jack sat in his car until past midnight, listening to the radio scan from station to station. He wondered about the woman on the bus. Maybe she was a myth come to life, a woman like the ones on talk shows. He half-expected to hear the tail-end of a news brief: Illegal alien held at gunpoint by career criminal wanted in twelve states.

Instead he got bits and pieces of high school basketball games, a few notes from different songs, but never enough to tell what song played or who won.

Maybe his father had first seen Alexandria sitting somewhere, white-faced and clutching a bag. Maybe he offered her help, a place to stay, someone to turn to. But Jack could not picture Alexandria uncertain or afraid. Not the Alexandria he watched as a teenager or the older Alexandria, up to her elbows in blood.

* * *

Jack left early the next morning, and Bronwyn insisted that she join him. Neither spoke until they were outside

the city limits. Jack watched the road unfold in front of him, climbing into the mountains.

"You didn't have to come too. I can handle things alone."

"Jack, we've already been over this. I can help you go through your parents' things. If you accept you father and what he did, you can move on. It's the reason you can't be close to Neil. You owe your son more than indifference."

"Drop it, Bron. This is something you don't understand. I never should have told you about Alexandria and my father. I can't forget what they did to my mother."

"But they didn't kill her. They had an affair."

"You don't know what you're talking about. I was there."

He stopped at a two-pump gas station and country store a few miles from the farm and parked beside a single car. Snow clouds gathered over the mountain top, and he shivered in the sharp wind when he left the car. The store owner had been friends with Jack's father, and when Jack was a boy, they would leave the fields at dark and walk to the store for bottled Cokes that Jack pulled dripping wet from a cooler that held fresh bait on the weekends. All day while Jack dug rocks from the loose dirt, he dreamed of that Coke, sweet and tasting of fish.

The parking area was still dirt, but discarded bottle-tops formed a pavement of sorts. Inside, an old man sat

behind the counter reading a newspaper, and a group of young men clustered around the cooler.

"Excuse me." Jack slid back the glass door and pulled out two sodas.

"Lo siento."

Jack stopped dead and really looked at the men for the first time. All three of them looked Mexican, probably pickers who stayed around to load dried tobacco to take to market. He had heard that illegals worked on many of the larger farms, but he had never thought about them before.

"Por favor . . ." Jack began and stopped when he could not think of the right words. "Tu . . ." He pointed at the men. "Conozoco . . . No wait a minute."

"I speak English." A small man wearing black rimmed glasses answered him with only a slight accent.

"Have you seen a woman, Mexican or Spanish, maybe mixed, on a schoolbus with a white man? She's very beautiful: golden eyes, black hair."

"No. Why?"

"I bought a melon from them. The man said they were going to Lexington."

"What's your name?"

"Jack Freeman. But that's not necessary. They wouldn't know me anyway. It really isn't important."

"You from around here?"

"I live in town."

"You know anybody looking to hire workers?"

"Not long term, but I've got a tree that needs to be moved, some odd jobs. Take the dirt road to the right about a mile from here. It's the first turn. You can follow me."

"No. We'll be out in a few hours. Is that good?"

"Fine with me."

Jack walked away first and stopped at the counter by the door. The old man looked up and eyed the drinks.

"That'll be one dollar and sixty-seven cents."

Jack pulled a wad of crumpled dollars from his front pocket and glanced at the dust covered cash register with raised silver keys.

The old man laughed. "That thing hasn't worked in thirty years. Had to use my head ever since."

"That's something. You think it'll snow? Some mean clouds gathering."

"Maybe. You John Freeman's boy?"

Jack nodded.

"I've not seen you in years. Where you been keeping yourself? I remember when you weren't this high." He held his hand over the counter.

"We came in here a lot."

"Your daddy, he sure was something. Never saw a better hunter or a harder worker. I knew him all his life. You living on the farm now? I sure hate to see the place empty."

"I'm headed up there now. Haven't been able to get out here much. It's a long drive." Jack walked toward the door.

"Well, you don't be a stranger now that you're back."

Jack nodded again and left.

Bronwyn was tapping her fingernails along the dashboard when he got back the car. He handed her the drink without a word. He glanced at her several times while he drove the last mile. She faced the side window, and the back of her head moved only slightly as if she felt him watching her. It seemed as if they had been in the car for hours.

Sleet fell as he drove higher into the foothills, and the mountain itself was cloaked in white. When he reached the turnoff, a thin, white sheen already covered the red clay. A light shone in Alexandria's window, and he wondered if it came from his mother's lamp.

At the end of the road, sat the tile layer's truck. Bronwyn immediately stepped out of the car without waiting for him to open the door. Jack lingered, adjusting his shirt, removing the keys, while Bronwyn disappeared around the corner.

When he stepped outside, the sleet bit his face, and he hurried after Bronwyn.

"Hello?" He called from the entry. "Leslie? It's Jack Freeman."

"In here," Bronwyn answered.

He followed her voice until he found them in the kitchen. Leslie was stretching twine across the floor, and Bronwyn had seated herself on Leslie's workbench.

He smiled at Leslie. "Need some help? I thought I'd see how you're coming along up here." He tossed his coat on the workbench.

"No, I work best alone. You can watch if you want."

"What's that you're doing with the twine?" Bronwyn asked.

"I'm marking off the room so I know where to lay the first piece. Then, I go from there." She pulled the twine from one corner diagonally to another where she held out her hand. Bronwyn rose with the hammer as though they had been working together for years. Leslie tacked the twine in place and then stretched another piece from the opposite corner to the remaining corner.

"Oh, I see. X marks the spot." Bronwyn laughed as if she were in on a private joke.

"Yes. That tells me where to start."

Jack cut in. "I thought you'd start in a corner and just keep working out until you covered the floor."

"No, that's where most people make their mistake. Usually a room isn't perfectly square so if you start in a corner, the tile looks crooked. This way, if you get the first piece in right, it's perfect, even if the room isn't,"

Leslie said. Bronwyn flashed Jack a smile over her shoulder.

Bronwyn sat back down on the bench as if preparing for a long visit with an old friend. "Now Leslie. Weren't you in Neil's class?"

"Yes. I lived down the street. I bet you'll be so excited when Neil comes in for Christmas. I told your husband I'd love to see him."

"He's in right now, but we haven't seen him yet. He went with the McCleary boys to explore some caves outside town."

"We used to go to an old cave on Mr. Latham's farm. A bunch of us went out there on weekends in high school."

"Really." Bronwyn raised her eyebrows, but Leslie appeared not to notice.

"Of course, nothing could top Neil's birthday parties. We looked forward to them for weeks in grade school. All of us would line up around the cake and wonder what kind of great presents he'd get."

Jack remembered the pictures. A dozen indistinguishable round faces, lit by the glow of candles and later turned green from too much cake. Year after year they waited for their lives to be handed out in yearly increments of GI Joe's and Barbie's smeared in too sweet icing.

Leslie opened a small can and dumped a lumpy mass on the spot where the strings crossed. She pushed at it with a metal trowel, and Bronwyn rose for closer look. Bronwyn bent over Leslie's back while Leslie's arm moved slowly back and forth until the glue spread out in neat rows like a fresh-plowed garden.

"Hand me that package next to the bench." Leslie pointed at a large box.

Bronwyn moved toward the box, but Leslie spoke. "No. Let him get it. It's heavy."

Jack's back creaked as he moved the box. He knelt beside her and peeled back the brown paper.

"Jack, I can help Leslie. Why don't you get started upstairs, and I'll be up in a while to help."

"Where did you get this tile?" Jack asked as he held up a square covered with sunflowers. Bronwyn probably thought no one would buy a house with a floor covered in yellow flowers.

"I left it for her at the hardware store. Don't you remember when we picked it out?" Bronwyn looked over at him and smiled again.

"Is there a problem?" Leslie paused.

"No." He answered finally, rising. "No problem at all." For the first time, he wondered if he should sell.

Leslie centered the first piece and pressed it into the glue. She turned it slightly with a finger-tip, measuring

with her eyes as she twisted it into place. She put down an x-shaped spacer and backed away to eye the piece again. Finally satisfied, she reached for the next piece, and Bronwyn placed it in her hand. Neither of them looked up when Jack left.

The sky was growing darker as storm clouds slid in over the mountain. The three Mexicans gathered rotten branches and loading them into a truck. Jack approached them; they didn't stop working until he spoke.

"How much do want for the job?"

The man wearing glasses stepped forward. "Minimum wage for manual labor is fine."

"Well, what is that?"

"Five-fifty an hour."

"How about I give you a hundred dollars for the job?"

"Fine." He held out his hand, and Jack took it.

"I've got an old barn on the other side of that hill." Jack pointed toward a low ridge to the right. "You can stay the night there if you want. I may have more work for you tomorrow."

"We don't need a place to stay. Leave word at the store if you have work." The man turned away as if he was finished with Jack and resumed pulling loose branches away from the tree trunk.

Jack was almost at his car when he felt the first icy raindrops hit the back of his neck. Alexandria Dupree

emerged from the tree line behind the house. She ran lightly across the yard, gun cradled under her arm.

"Hey, Alexandria." The wind caught his words, and he wasn't sure she could hear him until her head turned toward him. He waved one arm while he opened the car door. She was running for the car when he jumped in the driver's seat just as large raindrops pelted the windshield so hard they sounded like hail stones. He flicked open the passenger door, and she slid in, already dripping wet.

Her hair came loose from the coils wrapped around her head when she removed her cap, and he handed her his jacket from the back seat.

"Thanks, but I wouldn't have melted." She tossed the jacket aside, and wiped the water from her face with her hands.

"Just trying to help." Jack started the engine.

"What brings you back out here?"

"The house. I had to meet some workmen."

"I saw your 'workmen' yesterday when she got here."

"You sound like my wife." Jack turned sideways and half-faced her while he backed up the car.

"What are you doing? Practicing your story for your wife?"

He glanced back and forth from her profile to the red glow in the rear window.

"No. Usually I don't bother. My wife's inside anyway."

"Does she know you pick up strangers?"

"You're no stranger."

The road was somewhere beneath his car, and he let the jarring ruts guide him when he could no longer see through the sleet.

"We never really knew each other."

"I watched you sometimes." Jack kept his eyes on the glowing white beams from the headlights. "I followed you once when you went hunting. He met you in the woods. You got a buck that day, and I watched you field-dress it. He helped you. By time you finished, blood covered you both. I thought of it when I saw you yesterday. I thought about you and him, together."

He stopped the car at her house. They sat there, silent, and it seemed a long time before she spoke.

"What else?"

"I saw you touch his face and his chest. You unzipped his pants without even wiping the blood from your hands. I could have killed you both that day. I had my gun when I followed you. I had planned to go hunting because I wanted to surprise him with a kill. It was his birthday, and my mother was baking a cake. Then, I saw you leaving the cottage. I thought I might speak to you, but I just watched. And then he showed up. After you finished, I

almost shot you. I hid in some brush with the gun propped on a log, and I sighted on your chest while his hand went back inside your shirt. I could have shot you both."

"Why didn't you?"

"I don't know. I just couldn't. He always loved you best."

"He never loved me. He loved your mother."

"No. I mean better than me."

"That's not true." She took his chin in her fingers and turned his face toward her.

"Why'd he bring you here?" Jack heard the words and wondered who said them. The voice did not sound like his own. It had not for some time. He had talked so fast that it seemed as if someone else had said the words. She answered only after another long pause while she stared at him.

"Why didn't you kill me?"

Jack leaned closer, wondering if he was going to kiss her. He pushed her hand away from his chin and kept a hold of her fingers. "I told you I don't know. Why did you come here?"

"He made me ask." She pulled free and opened the door. Ice blew inside until she slammed it behind her.

Jack opened his own door and yelled at her, but the wind caught his words or she pretended not to hear. He slammed his fist on the hood and started toward the cottage,

Headlights hit him suddenly, and the tile layer's truck stopped behind him.

A hazy form moved in the storm, and he did not recognize Bronwyn until she was beside the car.

"You left me."

"Get in. I was coming back." Jack slid back into the driver's seat while Bronwyn stepped in the other door.

"Well, that's not important. Flip on the radio. We just heard the news." Jack clicked the switch and fiddled with the dial.

"About the storm?"

"No. About Neil. Hurry."

"What? An accident?" His hand stopped, and he looked at her.

"Here. Let me." She pushed his hand away.

"Well, what is it?" He heard only static buzzing over the wind.

"He found a cave, or a whole series. They made national news."

"A cave? But everybody knows about Latham's cave."

"No. That cave connects up with another one with a lake that runs all under the town. They think it may be the biggest cave in the Southeast."

"So?"

"They called in geologists and earthquake people. The whole town could fall into the lake. We're living on a fault or something."

"I'll make sure to wear my life jacket to bed."

"Jack." Bronwyn flipped the radio off without finding the newscast. They did not speak again.

Jack kept his eyes on the road that appeared foot by foot. Occasionally, he glanced in the rear view mirror at darkness uninterrupted by lights from cars or houses along the highway. He was back inside the city limits before he knew it, and he realized that the drive was not so long after all.

CONVICTED

When I saw myself on TV the first time, they told it wrong. That wasn't the way it happened. For one thing, there was a storm that night, and that's probably why I'm here in prison. Between that storm and Old Doppler, it may have been the will of God.

But that's the end of the story and wouldn't make much sense without you knowing how I got there, in that storm. Maybe if you know it all, you'll know why I did what I did.

The first thing they told wrong was about the snakes. They said they were mine and mine alone. That's not how it was. They were ours. Mine and my wife's. Fact is, they came with my wife when I married her, and I didn't even want them.

I met my wife, Tammy LeeAnn, when I was a backslidden man, except I didn't know I was backslidden then. I thought I was right as rain, working at the Shamrock Coal Mine, from the time I was twenty. I fixed heavy machinery (you go to vocational school for that), and not once did I have to go into the dark hole in the mountain. I went to work regular as clockwork and didn't even take a sick day for five years.

After I'd get paid on Fridays, I'd go with some of the miners to the Wild Turkey Bar over the state line in Scott County, Tennessee. It was just a shack, but it drew good business from the dry counties. On weekends, twenty or thirty cars lined the highway, and the place was packed so

tight you couldn't move. We'd drink cold Budwieser and shoot pool until the bar closed at two.

I had been going there for years before I met Tammy LeeAnn. It was a Friday night like any other until she walked in. She was with two other women I'd seen there before, but she didn't belong. I knew what women in bars were even though I didn't care back then. I picked up most of the regulars up a time or two. But Tammy LeeAnn was different. Her face was smooth and clean, and her hair wasn't dyed blonde. It was real shiny-dark and fell uncoiled past her knees. I'd never seen longer, darker hair on a woman. It looked alive.

I watched her first. She sat, still as a bird, with her bar stool pushed against the wall. Her hair fell across her face, and her head bent down like she was staring at something on the floor. When a man went up to her, she barely glanced up, and her hair rippled when she shook her head. One by one, her friends disappeared, and she was alone.

A miner cornered her before I walked up. I knew him, and I stared him down. Before I offered to buy her a drink, I asked her if she was okay. When the miner left, I made sure I stood back, away from her, but she still looked afraid. I bought her a Coke.

We talked for a while, and she told me she was just nineteen. I felt like an old man at thirty-four. I messed

up my hair so my bald spot wouldn't show, and I sucked in my beer gut, but I'd had too many to flatten out. She took to me anyway, and even stranger, I took to her like I never took to a woman before.

We got married three months later. Of course, I didn't know she was backslidden. I didn't know I was backslidden. I'd never got far enough with God to have anywhere to slide back to. I was stuck in a state of perpetual disgrace and didn't even know it.

She was looking for something in that bar that night, and she thought she found it in me. Later, I knew she never wanted me. She wanted God; she just didn't know it.

I bought us a house. It was a put-together house from Jim Walter Homes with only one owner who hadn't made the payments. The living room and kitchen made one big, open room separated by a bar and as soon as I saw it, I could imagine me sitting on a stool while Tammy LeeAnn served from the kitchen. We had two bedrooms connected by a short hallway, a bathroom, and a utility room. We could add on when we had kids. Our closest neighbors, the McLendons, had a trailer just off the main highway about half a mile from the end of our driveway. I thought it'd be good for us to be alone. We could learn one another.

At first, I couldn't believe she was there, in my house. She wore her hair down because I asked her to, and it felt cool and slick in my hands. Her hair drew me.

We walked in the woods together. Tammy LeeAnn found a wild blackberry patch, and we spent hours there, eating more than we put in the bucket. Tammy LeeAnn smiled and lifted berries to her mouth by the handful. Black juice ran down her neck and chin until I licked it off. The sun turned her pink, and her skin felt hot and tight when I touched her.

Over the next few months, she spent a lot of money that I didn't have to re-decorate four rooms that already had barely-used, factory furnishings. She said she wanted to create our home. She opened a charge account at Sears, up to two thousand dollars instant credit and a low payment of only fifteen dollars per month, or so she told me. That sounded real good until I figured out it'd take me over ten years to pay up. By then, Tammy LeeAnn had already bought a water bed set that was so big I had to slide sideways to get in on my side and my knees would still hit the paneled wall. It did have a mirrored headboard I liked though.

She bought a washer and dryer and a microwave, too, before I took the card away from her. When I figured out how much money she'd spent, I was angry. Not that I'm selfish, I just wish she'd asked me first.

We had been married about six months when she went back to church with her family. She came home saying she got redeemed, and the holy spirit filled her. She stopped buying beer for me and threw away her blue jeans. Pretty

soon, she got on me to go with her, and after a while, I did. It was easier that way.

That was the second thing they told wrong. I didn't take Tammy LeeAnn to that church. She took me.

We followed the highway into the mountains and turned off on a gravel side road that washed out into a gully after about a half mile. Then, we walked.

It was getting dusky dark, and I could barely see the lights from the building. We picked our way around the top of a rock quarry and when I looked over the side, white bones glowed among rusted mining equipment. I guess they were from cattle that had walked over the edge.

The church itself, like Tammy LeeAnn, was like nothing I'd ever seen. The church building was an abandoned block plant that was long and flat, like a warehouse. At one end, garage doors opened into a large room. Piles of sand and lime had been swept against the walls, but a thin layer of white still coated everything. Several men folded out metal chairs and placed planks across saw horses for pews. Another man cranked up a portable generator, and bare light bulbs dangling from wires across the high ceiling lit up and waved back and forth in a breeze.

At first, I wanted her to leave that church because I was afraid, not of God or man, but of the snakes. I heard the stories, but I never saw the snakes. I'd already seen

people drink poisons, shout, and speak in tongues, but I'd never seen them handle.

On my fifth trip to that block plant, they took out the snakes. It was in the dead heat of summer, and not a breeze blew through the wide open doors. Tammy LeeAnn's father, Mac Wheatley, walked in with a long, flat box that had "In Jesus' Name" carved on the side. The top was half-screen and half-wood that you could lift like a lid. The box buzzed when Mac walked past me down the aisle. White lime stuck on his sweat; he looked like a ghost when the light from that one bulb drifted across him.

When he pulled out the first snake, the crowd moved forward. Tammy LeeAnn walked down the aisle, and her Daddy met her. She knelt, and he lifted a handful of snakes over her head. I wanted to go to her, but I watched. She lifted her hands, and he placed a snake in her palm. She rose, stretching it overhead, and she swayed in a circle. That was the only time I ever saw her dance.

She threw her head back, and the snake slid across her palms, and she dropped it around her shoulders. It wound through her hair and curled toward her face. She reached for another snake.

That was the night I got redeemed. The snakes spoke to me in a way no preacher ever had, and I understood about backsliding and the world and such. When I took up my first

snake, I just knew. No way to explain unless you've taken one yourself.

Old Doppler was the first snake I ever handled. Biggest diamond-back rattler I've ever seen. He must have been five and a half feet long, at least ten segments on his rattle. After that service, Mac Wheatley gave me Old Doppler. I didn't know until then that all the snake handlers traded snakes after a good service.

Old Doppler was special. Mac had had him for many years and gave him to me as a legacy, like a dowry for marrying Tammy LeeAnn. Mac had named the snake for the weather radar because Old Doppler always knew when a storm was coming. That snake could sense the state of a soul. Mac taught me how to catch my own snakes in the wild with a snake stick just like his father had taught him. He told me that the rattlers were the most deadly and should only be taken up by a true believer under the conviction. Copperheads were different. Mac said they wouldn't even kill a sinner, just make him wish he were dead.

Mac told me about the ways of the church. He told me never to handle unless I felt convicted, to act only when the spirit moved me and to always be careful who I took a snake from, that if the snake sensed an unclean spirit, it would bite. Even handlers that seemed holy got bitten sometimes because they were hiding a sin. A man in sin couldn't be convicted. Mac told me I should be anointed

with oil and be blessed by the preacher before I took up a snake and to let it go when I lost the conviction and the spirit left me.

I handled a snake when I got redeemed, and I had a blessing before I touched it. The preacher put his hand on my forehead and spoke to God. I don't remember much else but the snake being cool and dry like a drink of whiskey first in your mouth. But, no matter what Mac says, I didn't know the true nature of the power until I caught one wild, with my bare hands.

I was walking in the woods behind our house, thinking about Tammy LeeAnn and God, when the sun fell on a coiled up rattlesnake. I didn't have my snake stick. I don't know why I just picked up that snake. The snake was warm like I'd lifted fire. I knew God then, and I felt the power.

Those handlers had kept the power for themselves and held me to toting and carrying and caring for the snakes without knowing. And not knowing was the worst of it.

* * *

We kept all the snakes, except Old Doppler, in the shed behind the house. I made wire cages the size of a deep freeze and covered them with screen so the snakes couldn't crawl out. Thirteen copperheads in one cage, and nine rattlers in another. I caught them all myself, except three copperheads that Tammy LeeAnn found right in our front yard. Whenever we'd go to meeting, we'd put five or six of the

biggest ones in the serpent box, but for some reason, I never wanted to take Old Doppler.

Old Doppler stayed in the house with us like a pet. Tammy LeeAnn bought a cracked fish tank at a yard sale, and I filled it with pink and blue rocks for fish tanks and moss from the woods. We put it on the kitchen counter, and whenever Tammy LeeAnn cooked, Old Doppler lay in a ball next to the crock pot.

* * *

We'd been married for a about a year when I fell out with the church. They told me I had to be anointed before I handled a snake and that I couldn't bring out all my snakes at once. I told them I wouldn't follow man's rules but I'd go as God wanted. And I knew what he wanted. They told me I was out of the Bible, that God said we had to be anointed. I said man wrote the Bible and not God. I left for good. Not because of Tammy LeeAnn. I knew the power, and I didn't need that church. I left because I didn't want to be told of God.

I handled at home then, in the shed or in the woods. One time, I took out Old Doppler right there in the kitchen. He bit me, but I didn't get sick. That's how I knew. If I had been unclean, I would have died. He hung on my hand, and I was alive. Old Doppler warned me. I looked right into that snake's eyes, and I knew Tammy LeeAnn had backslid again, and I had some hard thinking to do.

I should've seen it coming. I got laid off at Shamrock about the same time that I quit the church. Tammy LeeAnn took a job at the Pic Pac in town because we kept getting bills from all the stores where she got charge cards. That's when she started to backslide. She wouldn't listen when I told her she was out of her place, that I could provide for both of us. Then, she took up with a bunch of Baptists, out to save the world. She wanted to get rid of Old Doppler. Told me I was crazy and that she had found grace.

I thought on it and prayed on it and then, I decided what to do. It was storming that night; I saw a tornado warning flash across the TV screen right before the power went out. I went to the kitchen and got our only flashlight. Tammy LeeAnn was in the bedroom getting ready for work. I heard her call me when the lights went out, but I stayed quiet. The house was dark; I could barely see my hand in front of my face.

I listened to the thunder and Old Doppler. The storm had him torn up and when the lightening flashed, his black eyes stared out at me, and his rattle waved in the air. His forked tongue struck the glass, and lit up so, he looked like he was moving through water above fish rocks and dry ground.

I sensed her coming down the hall and into the living room. I felt the devil in her. I waited behind the kitchen

door. When she opened the door, the lightening lit up her face, and I saw her red lips. That's when I grabbed her.

I shoved her through the back door. I guess she screamed. I couldn't hear a thing except the thunder. Her skin was clammy in the rain, like a dead fish, and I lost the flashlight trying to keep hold of her.

It was pitch black, not even a moon out, and the wind blew so hard that the rain came at us sideways. I couldn't see her, but I knew the paint was there, making her like those women where she worked, smearing across her face like blood and coal dust. I meant to make her clean.

I got her down right there and rubbed her eyes and her mouth with my fist. I didn't hit her. She struggled some, clawed me so hard that she brought the blood. I still didn't hit her.

She slipped away, but I caught her by the shed. I heard the snakes before I opened the door. I knew what I had to do.

* * *

It is raining now, but not like it was that night. When the police came, I told them she handled Old Doppler right there in the kitchen. I told them I tried to take her to the hospital, but she ran off and I couldn't find her.

But, in the end, it was Old Doppler that done me in. It was so dark when I put Tammy LeeAnn in the snake cage that I couldn't tell that I shoved her in with the

copperheads. Everybody knows copperheads won't even kill a sinner.

Now, the rain splashes on the ledge through the bars on my window. It is a slow and straight rain, not coming sideways or anything. When I look up at that sky, sliced up by the bars, I think I know what Old Doppler felt like looking out of that serpent box.

DOGWOOD WINTER

Emma knew the exact moment the clock stopped that morning just as surely as if she had heard it falter, chime five times, and die. It did not matter that the clock sat on a mantle in a house half a mile away from Emma's and that not even the keenest wind shearing off the granite bluffs could warp and carry a sound so far down the mountain.

She knew it when she felt the bite of the breeze blowing in the open window. It was Dogwood Winter, the second to last cold snap before true summer fell in June.

Emma lay quietly, listening to her husband snoring softly beside her and the baby rustling in her cradle like a squirrel cracking nuts in dry leaves. She slid out of bed and dressed quickly in semi-darkness. The wind blew again, hard enough to lift the white curtains that covered the window, and Emma crossed the room and closed it.

She sat on the trunk beneath the window with her arm resting on the sill. A single patch of sky visible over the trees that circled the house was barely gray, and the sun had not rose to burn the sprinkling of frost that covered the grass like white sugar. The dancing lights were there, in the rare, spring fog that shrouded the mountain, but she could not see them.

"What are you doing?" Joe spoke from the bed behind her.

"You'll scare the baby." Emma turned away from the window and walked to the cradle at the foot of the bed. She bent over the baby and tucked the blankets tight.

"It's not even daylight yet." Joe sat up, a dark lump in the barely gray light.

"I'm going to Angeline's. It's time."

"Are you sure?" He stood up and reached for his clothes that were draped across a cane chair next to the bed.

"Yes."

"When?" Joe leaned against the bedpost while he straightened his shirt like a great duck preening its wings.

"Just now."

"I'll get the preacher. He can take care of it."

"No. I'll take care of her. I have to go to her. You know that." She did not look at him and instead lifted the baby.

"No, you don't. Let her alone. That's all she ever wanted anyway."

"She's all I have." Emma nestled the baby in one arm while she gathered extra blankets, baby clothes, and a basket.

"What about the baby? You're the one that's been so set on keeping her these past months even though we don't know nothing of her."

"I'm taking her with me. Now, I've got to get ready. You do what you want." Emma took the baby to the kitchen and placed her in the basket that she put on the table. She filled up the wash bowl with fresh water and carefully undressed the baby and lowered her into her bath. She flailed her arms, protesting the cold, and Emma remembered.

* * *

She found the baby in November, the morning after the hardest, early snow that she could ever recall. Angeline had said the snow was a sign. The kitchen pump refused to draw a drop of water so Emma took a bucket outside to the old stone well at the edge of the woods. Creek rock daubed together with mud made a circular base about waist high that supported a wooden crank. Brown vines killed by the frost still twisted around the rock, and Emma ripped a handful from the crank before she could turn it. The bucket was out of sight, already dangling in the well.

Emma knew as soon as the bucket emerged, mud-coated and damp, rocking gently and compelling her. A naked baby curled in the bottom of the bucket, and her skin was the blue-gray color of the mountain top just before dawn. She lay on a disc of ice that glinted in the sunlight, and for a moment, Emma thought that she was already dead.

She rubbed the baby hard with a towel until wash water heated on the stove, and Emma submerged the baby directly in the pot without bothering to pour the water into a pan. She

dunked the baby again and again until her face knotted and her eyes opened like rosebuds in a moment of transformation. Her eyes were blue like Angeline's.

Later, when Emma dried the baby after a bath in clean water, she found that she liked the feel of the downy blonde wisps that felt like a baby duck beneath her fingertips and the look of the deep gray eyes that had seen another world until Emma saved her from the water where she would have disappeared.

At the bottom of a well you would see jagged rock and red clay and water shining like an offering plate or a new moon. Maybe the man in the moon waited there in the well to reach through the bucket and pull the baby under by her bare, pink feet until the water covered the downy fuzz and she disappeared. For this reason, when Joe asked Emma what the baby's name was, Emma said that the baby found her own name at the bottom of the well and would tell them the story when the time came.

* * *

Emma walked around the house, gathering items into a bundle. A new needle and white thread from her sewing basket. Soft white linen. A bag of salt. A square of lye soap.

Joe spoke from the doorway. "You forgot the baby's rattle."

Emma took the rattlesnake rattle from him and placed it in the basket hooked over her arm. She gathered up the bundle and opened the front door.

"No one will come."

"No one ever did," she answered and closed the door behind her.

Emma did not look back as she walked through the yard to the nearly impassable road that wound up the mountain like a snake. She stared up, toward the mountain top, but it was shrouded in fog, and the lights stayed hidden. She had been looking for the dancing lights since she was ten years old. She came to the mountains with Angeline who was sixteen and newly married to a traveling preacher. He brought them from the lowlands of Virginia to a dark place where the trees grew so tall that you could see the sky only in chunks like patches on a crazy quilt.

The older people who lived in the valley below told stories of glowing lights weaving back and forth across the mountain top that were the lost souls of the dead, wandering in darkness and lost forever.

Grass and weeds crackled beneath her feet until she stepped into the single rut path that she had worn to Angeline's and walked so often that she did not need to see to find her way. She climbed the steady grade in semi-darkness, surrounded on either side by groves of maple and

apple trees that grew so thick that it seemed time stayed stopped at dusk.

The path rose sharply and turned suddenly into a clearing overlooking the valley and another mountain range rolling to the east. They had cut the trees themselves and left them to rot where they fell while they made a clearing so Angeline could see the other mountain. A breeze blew up as she stepped into Angeline's yard, and near the house, a single sugar maple was covered with new leaves that turned their pale green backs up to the gray sky beginning to glow from the sun rising, somewhere.

Cedar trees surrounded the white house on three sides while the front porch faced the clearing that revealed the view of the valley and the mountains. The windows were still strangely bare to Emma. Angeline had burned her curtains the day her husband died. That was when people stopped coming around and the weeds took over the narrow, winding road. They thought that Angeline killed him.

Emma stopped in the yard by a black circle where no grass grew and remembered. When the sugar maples caught in their leaves the fire spreading down the mountain and the fresh plowed fields in the valley turned to blood beneath the sun, Angeline said it was time to make soap. They rolled the cast iron kettle from the barn behind the house and sweated even in the cool morning air that blew over the mountain top and down, sweeping through the valley like a

frozen finger tip. They gathered dry cedar from trees split by lightening while the frost crept at their heels, telling of a snow coming in winter, and spiders wove thick webs that hung from their hair like veils.

Angeline controlled the fire, adding the kindling until she said, "Fire's hot enough when it'd boil a body, bones and all." Then, she told Emma to add the water to the boiling fat that made the lye foam into pure, white soap.

For a moment, Emma could not take another step, and then she was on the porch. After her husband died, Angeline told stories while they sat, breaking beans together and rocking the evening away in the cedar rockers that still stood in a row. They laughed together, and the words came faster and faster as their hands flew over the beans, stringing and snapping them so fast that one bean turned into another unbroken.

She opened the door. The hall stretched long before her, still dark, and the faint light drifting in the living room window too far away to cast more than shadows on the faded rose-patterned wall paper. She turned left into the living room where she knew Angeline would be.

Fumbling in half-darkness, she put the basket on the floor, and the baby whimpered when the basket swaying on Emma's arm stopped rocking. She groped for matches and the oil lamp on the mantle. The flickering lamp light slowly lit the room, and the walls were bare except for a few

pictures cut from a calender. Angeline was in the rocker, wearing her white cotton nightgown, and a quilt lay draped across her lap as if to ward off the chill of Dogwood Winter. Her sewing basket rested at her feet as though she had stopped when she dropped a stitch or could no longer see well enough to tie off a knot or rethread a needle. Her eyes stared at the mountain that was beginning to glow with the first sunrise. She would sit for hours, rocking, watching the lights play on the dark shapes. A light on the mountain will draw you if you look at it, and you will follow it blindly forever.

The baby whined again, and Emma pulled the quilt from Angeline's lap and spread it across the spotless floor. She removed the baby from the woven willow cage and placed the rattle in her small fist. The baby pulled herself across the floor, scooting on her belly and waving the rattle when she paused to pick at the raised patterns.

Emma left her crawling while she got a pan of water and piece of bread dipped in honey from the kitchen. She placed the pan on the floor and gave the bread and honey to the baby. She opened the bundle and spread out the needle and thread, the linen, and the lye soap before she lowered Angeline's body on to the quilt, her muscles flexing against her dress, arms strong from hoeing row after row of beans and corn.

She lathered the soap onto a linen cloth and scrubbed the tan skin above the lace-edged collar, and she recognized Angeline's stitches, neat and tight like the endless, perfectly spaced legs on a caterpillar. Emma could never sew so straight. She rubbed the clean linen rag across Angeline's high forehead, dampening the strands of dark hair sprinkled with gray that hung in waves around her face, rubbing her high cheekbones until they looked like the first bloom of a pink rose, like the Angeline who came to the mountain and never left.

When the neck was clean, she eased the gown over Angeline's shoulders and rolled her on her side to wash her back, touching the faint scars crisscrossing like a spider's web weaving the story of their lives.

When Emma was fourteen she hid in the hallway and watched Angeline's husband push her until she fell through the front window, the wood splintering and panes shattering, the blood flowing down her arms in bright red rivers that mixed with the ice crystals turning pink on the porch. Emma dragged Angeline into the hall and hung quilts over the broken window while the winter wind blew in, patches of snow piled in soft mounds, and Emma's breath hung in the air like fog. It was as bright as day that night with the moonlight glittering on the snow that covered the yard and the ice that encased the trees and transformed them to ghosts.

Emma cut the dress off and sat beneath the new rose-patterned wall paper, picking glass from her back with kerosene-coated needles that shone like tiny icicles hanging in the moonlight, listening to the clock chiming every hour. When Angeline's dead baby came into the world, she washed it in a pan of snow and chipped the frozen ground with a butcher knife until she dug a shallow grave. Angeline said that the hard freeze was a sign.

Emma waited, wrapped in a quilt, silent except for the hiss of the knife that she drew across a whetstone, turning the knife lightly back and forth with a delicate stroke like a hand brushing the hair from a baby's eyes. He did not return.

The crying baby startled her, and she realized that she was scrubbing Angeline's back so hard that the skin had turned pale pink like the baby's fist that pulled at the dress rolled to Angeline's waist. Emma lifted the baby, shaking her lightly and humming. When the baby quieted, Emma put her back on the quilt and handed her the rattle.

She finished the bath quickly and glanced at the clock on the mantle. It had stopped at 4:45 when Angeline died and her spirit left her. Emma rose for a moment, stretching like a sapling bending in a hard wind, and lifted the clock, shaking it slightly. She opened the glass door with the ornate gold lilies etched on it and touched the pendulum with her finger tip, but it made no sound except for the

forced ticking as the pendulum moved then stopped, silent as the church after the preacher calls the invitation when the singing stops but no one moves down the aisle.

She removed another set of rattlesnake rattles, black and shiny with fourteen circles stacked like wedding bands, the mate to the smaller set that made the baby's toy, and carefully closed the door and replaced the clock. Each ring told a story: lessons from their father on accountability, conviction, and punishment. She put them in her pocket, and she knew that Angeline never forgave her for remembering and for telling.

* * *

The whitewashed church sat between the low foothills rolling toward the mountain range rising on all sides. The slow sinking sun dropped like a pocket watch into a trouser pocket behind the highest peak to the west that was turning black in the twilight. White cattle dotting the low lying ridge to the east faded into the distant mountain and darkness closed tight around them.

Angeline laughed, her head tossed back and hair hanging to her waist, as she skipped in front of Emma and pulled her through the church door. An aisle led to the altar where a single lamp sat beneath a window, and its blackened glow dimly illuminated pictures hanging on either side of the altar while casting the rest of the church into shadows. Beneath the picture on the right, Emma could just make out

the words, Christ Blessing Little Children, in dark type. Underneath, she read, "Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me. Matthew 19:14."

But it was the painting on the left, titled The Serpent in the Wilderness, that Emma could not take her eyes from. Bodies twisted in agony framing a wooden cross held erect by two men. A serpent twisted around the cross, its tail flicking in the faces of the men below. A sign in a child's block letters hung beneath the picture and read "When he beheld the serpent of brass, he lived. Numbers 21:9."

A man stepped behind the pulpit and without a word, the congregation began as one, singing, "They were in an upper chamber, they were all in one accord, when the Holy Ghost descended as was promised by our Lord. O Lord, send the pow'r just now." Hands clapping cracked whip-like, and the music swelled in the humid air like a blister rising while every voice lifted in the song.

The man lifted a flat black box and placed it on the pulpit as he pushed the worn bible aside. The front rows pressed close, pressing the altar with shouting, swaying bodies. He raised his hands, and the singing stopped.

"And he said unto them, Go ye unto all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned. And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with

new tongues; they shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover. So then after the Lord had spoken unto them, he was received up into heaven, and sat on the right hand of God."

"Do ye wish to be taken into Heaven and sit on the right hand of God?" He faced the men on the left and slid his hand over the black box laid out in the shadows of the pulpit like a child's coffin.

"Then thou shalt tread upon the lion and adder; the young lion and dragon shalt thou trample under feet. There shall no evil befall thee if the Spirit hast moved. For, behold, I give unto you power to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing shall by any means hurt you."

He looked down and clicked open the latches around the edge of the box. He raised his hand holding a snake. Emma shrank back while Angeline tugged her forward.

"The word is truth. Sanctify him through thy truth. Lift up your hands to receive them, without wrath and doubting truth. See what you will receive in the kingdom of God. Amen."

Hand over hand, the snakes were passed down the first row. Emma clutched Angeline's hand, pulling her toward the aisle and the rear doors. But Angeline stared straight ahead, moving in time with the snakes, jerking her hand away

and extending her arms as she waited for the feel of the cool hard flesh in her hand like a slick smooth rock.

The snakes were all around them, twisted like briars curving through outstretched palms, and when the man held a rattlesnake behind its thick head, the rattle-ringed tail flicked below his belt line. Angeline pushed past Emma and faced the man.

"Who here is not ready to be a vessel? Who has tasted the forbidden fruit and is cast out of the garden in shame and damnation for eternal torment? Only the righteous will survive. Those that have faith take up the serpents. For he that endures to the end, the same shall be saved."

The snake twisted free, and its fangs clasped his hand. He raised his arm high, the snake still clinging to his fingers.

"And when Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks, and laid them on the fire, there came a viper out of the heat and fastened on his hand."

He swung the biting snake around the crowd and paused in front of Angeline. He slid his right arm down, slinging the snake off his fingertips to land limply at Angeline's feet.

"And he shook off the beast into the fire and felt no harm. Howbeit they looked when he should have swollen, or fallen down dead suddenly: but after they had looked a

great while, and no harm came to him, they changed their minds and said that he was a god."

Emma grabbed a handful of Angeline's hair, but Angeline pulled away, her hand reaching to the man, their fingertips just touching as blood ran over his hand and into hers.

* * *

Emma found the dress wrapped in pink cloth and placed in a trunk by the window. She could smell Angeline, lavender in her hair and flour on her hands, and feel her, moving gracefully, wrapping embroidered table cloths and dresser scarves into neatly folded bundles. Emma shifted through delicate lace webs crocheted for a dress never made, through the table cloths starched for a table never set.

Emma coiled Angeline's hair around her head and dressed her in the wedding dress. She waited.

She saw them coming through the glare of the sun on the window panes, split into squares, their faces glowing against the dark pines and thick maples, rising from the ground like a mist. The weeds rippled before them, parted and fell back as though no one had ever passed that way.

The preacher led them, waving a steel cane before him as if to ward off unseen snakes. Joe and three other men walked beside him with shovels slung over their shoulders like guns. Three women came also, the same ones who came when Angeline's husband died, and they carried tightly

wrapped bundles in their arms like babies, food for the dead.

They were in the yard, standing in a small cluster. No one stepped on the porch because they were afraid, faces pinched, moving uncertainly, huddling in waiting and indecision until the preacher made the first move.

He led them to the porch like a flock to the altar, and their feet trailed red clay mud across the smooth, white pine floor. The knob clicked, and she heard the uneven thumping of heavy footsteps and a cane. The others waited, unable to step across the threshold.

The preacher, a tall man with a face like red cabbage, entered the room.

"Sister," he began.

"Preacher," Emma nodded back and bent over to pick up the baby.

"Don't worry. Your husband explained everything. I've taken care of the arrangements."

"No, I doubt he explained anything. There's nothing for you to do here."

"The Wikens are bringing the coffin, and I sent the men to dig the grave next to her husband's."

"She doesn't need. . ."

"I know what is best."

"She wanted to be cremated."

"Lord have mercy," he said like a prayer and bowed his head.

"She won't need a grave. I don't know about a coffin. Seems like a waste to me, but I don't guess it matters."

"Doesn't matter? You don't know what you're saying." He grabbed her arms and pushed her into the rocker. "I'll send the women in. You're upset."

"No." She shook off his hands and rose, shifting the baby onto her other hip.

"But," he began.

She interrupted and took his arm with a grace she thought she had forgotten and led him to the door. "No. You may leave now. She won't be needing you."

She opened the door, and the women stepped back, dropping their eyes and placing the baskets on the porch. They did not speak.

"I'll come back when your husband sends for me. Perhaps after some time. . ."

Joe nodded and pointed him to the path. One by one they followed the preacher into the trees and disappeared. Only Joe remained.

"You can sit up with her alone. Nobody'd stay up here anyways. We can bury her in a day or two, after you've grieved."

"No, we won't. Just you wait a minute." Emma answered and closed the door behind her.

In a moment she reappeared with a covered plate and a glass of milk. "It doesn't matter how many days. I have to help her now. She never liked you, but you knew that. Here's your dinner. You come around to the back when you're hungry."

He took the plate, and she went back inside. She watched from the window while Joe stared at the house and then followed the others.

She waited until the Babe slept quietly in her basket and the moon outlined the mountains in dancing lights. It was past midnight when she left through the back door, comfortable in the darkness without a light. She followed a path winding through a small stand of Dogwood trees that had somehow found life beneath the towering cedars. She entered the barn and found a shovel. She filled the freshly dug grave half-hidden beneath vines that hung from the trees and stared for a moment at the crudely carved stone marking Angeline's husband's existence.

* * *

Emma killed him more than ten years past Angeline never said that she knew for sure what happened, but Emma believed that she knew in her own way of knowing.

Joe was away, and Emma went to stay with Angeline while they dried apples. Together, they peeled apples yellow and red, and the curling and twisting skins reminded Emma of a rock doll. The first time that Angeline's husband had

punished Emma, Emma was ten and it was for ruining the apples. Angeline made her a rock doll from a smooth, round creek rock still shiny and damp and freshly pulled from the water, and she made blonde curls like Emma's for the doll with yellow apple skins mounted with flour paste. Angeline wrapped the doll in leftover quilt pieces and called it Emma's baby.

Years later, when Emma climbed on the roof and laid out freshly cut apples to dry on the hot tin, he followed her, and Emma thought of that doll and of snow blowing through jagged glass. It was a simple thing to push the ladder, and pure chance that his head hit a rock. In the darkness, circled by vines waving gently and dogwood trees shedding their blooms like pink tears, it was an easy thing to remember.

* * *

Before morning dawned behind the mountains, Emma removed the white embroidered tablecloth from the trunk and folded it across her shoulders. She rolled Angeline in quilts and carried her outside. At the bottom of the porch steps, Emma had to put her down and drag her through the frosty grass that crackled and bent beneath the weight of the body until she reached the dark circle at the edge of the yard. She rested briefly, watching the lights dancing under the new moon, and returned to the house to get the baby and the kerosene.

She left the baby at the edge of the yard, where the road fell away with nowhere to go but over the edge of a cliff or into the cedar forest that was too thick to pass through. She carried the kerosene to the body and poured it slowly, allowing it soak through the quilt, before she struck the match. The flames burst up around her, almost scorching her hair and eyebrows until she jumped a step back. She picked up the baby and held her upright in her arms, flames dancing in her gray eyes, and together, they watched Angeline burn.

The heat turned Emma's skin pink like a sunburn, and the intense blaze died as suddenly as it started, leaving only a faint trail of kerosene smoke that disappeared in darkness before it reached the sky. In the moonlight, the ashes were strangely gray against the black circle and the red clay and the scorched grass.

Emma left the baby sitting in her basket, and she spread out the white table cloth a few feet from the body. She retrieved the shovel from the porch and scooped ashes and bone into the center of the cloth.

Hurrying against the rising sun, she tied the ends of cloth loosely together, embroidered roses twisting across the fabric, she carried it to the edge of the cliff. She lifted the baby in one arm while she tossed the bundle with other. The baby laughed and pointed at the bundle. It flew into the gray sky and ashes fell like snow while the cloth

floated and then snagged in a tree top, spreading out for a table set in roses barely discernable like gold lilies fading on a glass door, dimmed by a sun shining too brightly.

* * *

When fall blew in red and gold over the mountain and ripe apples fell from the trees like rain, Emma left food for Joe only when he asked for it. She hung quilts over the windows with the solid white lining turned inside to block the sun that had burned down upon them since Dogwood Winter lifted. The rooms were lit only dimly, the light filtered through frail quilts that had faded from years of washing in lye. She kept hanging quilts, moving from window to window with each hour that the sun moved, covering the light again and again and keeping the rooms dull but not wholly dark.

When the snows fell morning by morning to match the fall frosts, Emma threw water on the steps that froze solid and gray like the stone beneath it, until Joe's head cracked open, and his blood streamed into the white snow.

Emma was hanging the quilts, and she stopped when she heard crying. From a crack between the quilts, she saw pink blooms and knew that Dogwood Winter was on them again. She cocooned the baby in quilts, rocking until the baby felt heavy in her arms like a rock, and her face felt cool as water from a clear stream like the one she baptized baby ducks in until their down was soaked, and they died despite

the sun. She asked Angeline did she remember and would she mind the telling when the baby begged for a story?

VITA

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