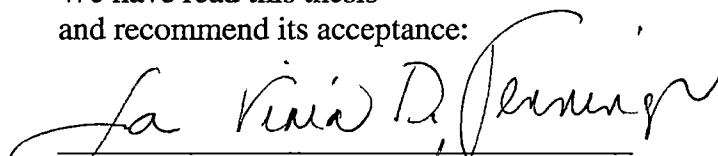
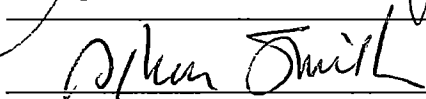


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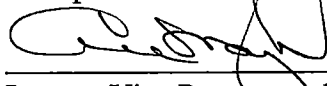
I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Jennifer Griffith Langham entitled "A Picture of Strength: Life Stories of Four Grandmothers." I have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.


David F. Goslee, Major Professor

We have read this thesis
and recommend its acceptance:

Accepted for the Council:


Interim Vice Provost and
Dean of The Graduate School

**A Picture of Strength:
Life Stories
Of Four Grandmothers**

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

Jennifer Griffith Langham
August 2000

Dedication

"My grandmother called us by our full name; she didn't use nicknames.
'If you don't use people's names when you're talking about 'em,' she said,
'when you're gone, nobody will know about you.'"

--Virginia Nance

To the four women who made this project and my family possible.

Edith Smith Griffith

Ella Ruth Knox Langham

Shirley Bohannon Lumpkins

Virginia Ramsey Nance

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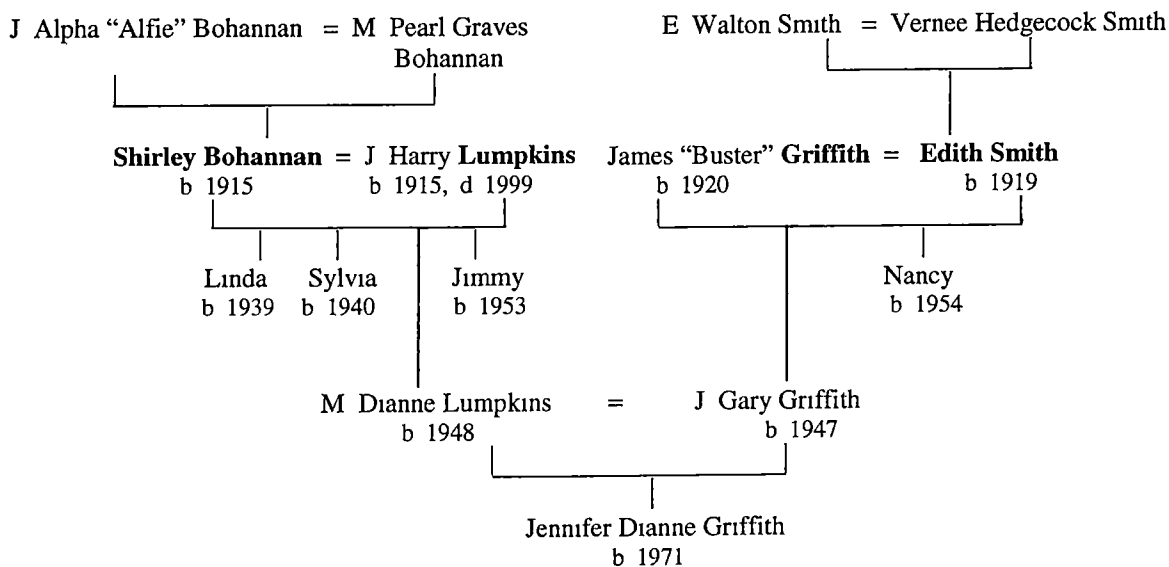
I also must thank my husband, Patrick, and my sister, Joanna Griffith, for their help in reading and editing drafts and for their unrelenting encouragement. They have given me the strength to finish.

Abstract

This creative nonfiction thesis explores how four grandmothers, those of the author and of the author's husband, define strength. The thesis uses information gleaned through interviews with the four women to tell their life stories. The conclusion examines how these stories have been shaped by factors such as race, class, gender, age, and religious beliefs. The author finds that the women demonstrate strength both through life choices they have made and through the repetition of certain stories which define strength for each individual woman.

Table of Contents

Chapter	Page
I Introduction	1
Objective	4
Methodology	6
Role of the Interviewer	9
II Virginia Ramsey Nance	12
Strength: To "Do For Myself"	
III Edith Smith Griffith	25
Strength: For the "Normal Things of Life"	
IV Ella Ruth Knox Langham	39
Strength: "I'll Just Take Anything"	
V Shirley Bohannon Lumpkins	52
Strength "I Didn't Let It Bother Me"	
VI Conclusion	66
Race and Class	68
Gender	70
Age and Generation	71
Religion	73
Works Cited	80
Vita.	84



Chapter I

Introduction

One photograph shows the bride on her father's arm walking the last of the tread-worn path leading to the pastor; the hazy image of Edith is in the background. Edith sits in one of the wooden folding chairs and looks forward towards the keyboard rather than at the bride. The bride, her oldest grandchild, played the piano as a child. In the girl's childhood, Edith sat in many other uncomfortable chairs, listening to children fight their way through "Für Elise" and "Tarantella Song" in talent shows and recitals, all to get to that moment when the quiet blonde girl with glasses would walk to the bench and play her piece

In another photograph, a wide-angle lens pans the amphitheater from the top of the hill. A small figure in a cream suit sits in a chair just behind where the stone benches ripple down the hill. She grips the handle of the three-pronged cane beside her. Virginia helped to raise her only grandson, the groom. She's hot and she knows that Pat's hot, too, down there in his tuxedo, and she can see that he's nervous.

A third woman is photographed from the bottom of the amphitheater as she walks down the steps on the arm of a groomsman. The bride and her father are in the picture's background, waiting for the older woman to be seated. Shirley held up the ceremony, she was still deciding what to wear when her son Jimmy arrived to pick her up for the two-hour drive to the wedding. Shirley has been told to hurry up her whole life, by her husband Harry and her children, especially the bride's mother Dianne. She's grateful to be nearing her seat, so that the focus will be on the wedding and not on her



“Do I have all the grandmothers?” Barry is trying to move things along so that the bridal party and family can move over to the reception hall across the street.

“All the ones who are here.”

He motions the group. “I need you to move in closer. Lean in toward the newlyweds, ladies.”

The three elderly women shuffle in next to the bride and groom. The photographer aims the lens at the group. “Heads together. Say wedding!”

The four women and the young man smile, and the photographer snaps the picture. The background is dark, in the shadow of the trees, slices of sky show at the top where the pines and poplars thin out. Shirley and Edith frame the gathering in blue dresses. Virginia leans into the groom, who is turned protectively toward her and away from the bride at his other side. The bride is wide-eyed and nervous-looking, the groom hot and relieved. Two black faces, three white, all smiling broadly. A small white poplar bloom, caught on film in its descent from the branches above, is suspended above the bride’s head.



And where the words of women are crying to be heard, we must each of us recognize our responsibility to seek those words out, to read them and share them and examine them in their pertinence to our lives. That we not hide behind the mockeries of separations that have been imposed on us and which so often we accept as our own

— Audre Lorde, “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action”

My husband Patrick and I were born in the same hospital, Bradley Memorial in Cleveland, Tennessee, nine months apart, and we grew up two counties away from each

other I lived on a farm with my family, the cows, and books to keep me company; he lived in the city of Cleveland, riding his bicycle around town with his friends, swimming at the Boys Club, and learning to play the saxophone I was a pale white girl at a small school with only a handful of black students; Patrick was one of only a handful of black students at one of the largest high schools in the state.¹ His parents divorced when he was a toddler; mine are still married. There are many differences in our backgrounds, to be sure, but one of the many things we have in common is the significance of our grandmothers in our lives.

Ella Ruth Knox Langham and Virginia Ramsey Nance, Patrick's grandmothers, have both lived in Cleveland almost their entire lives, and both cared for him and disciplined him when he was a boy. He admits that he thought of the two older women as extensions of his mother when he was growing up; they had no problem with spanking him just as his mother would

Edith Smith Griffith lived next door to me throughout my childhood, she and my grandfather were practically the only babysitters my sister and I had. Shirley Bohannon Lumpkins, my mother's mother, lived two hours away, too far for babysitting but close enough that she was a regular part of holidays, graduations, and other life events.

Soon after Patrick and I married, I began thinking about interviewing our four grandmothers, perhaps because I felt that I now shared some sort of adult experience with them. Hope Edelman notes in Mother of My Mother: The Intricate Bond Between Generations that the grandmother/grandchild relationship, particularly among female

¹ I use the racial descriptions "black" and "white" in this project because those are the terms that all four of the women use to refer to themselves and to other people in their communities

generations, often changes when the younger woman begins having experiences—career, marriage, motherhood—which resemble those of the older generation (184) Perhaps, too, going through a “cycle of life” experience reminded me of the how close to the end of the life cycle these four women are But my motivation for interviewing these women also stemmed from a desire to break through the “mockeries of separation,” to use Audre Lorde’s term, that made it so difficult to talk to these women as women and not as grandmothers I wanted to listen to their stories respectfully, as stories from which I could learn

Objective

Because of the facts I already knew about the women’s lives—poverty, alcoholic husbands, and lonely distance from family, for example—I chose to focus on the subject of strength I wanted to have the women evaluate, in their own words, their lives and how they have been strong during their difficult experiences. I wanted, specifically, to ask the women to define strength in its myriad forms

The subjectivity of the term “strength” made it a difficult topic to explore “Strength” is popularly used to describe women in contrasting circumstances. At one end of the spectrum is the spectacular, successful woman, the title of a book featuring women like Joan of Arc and Geraldine Ferraro—Women of Strength Biographies of 106 Who Have Excelled in Traditionally Male Fields, A.D. 61 to the Present (Baldwin)—describes this type of strong woman. The opposing stereotype is the woman who has attained strength through long-term labor or suffering. A famous example of this type of woman

might be Oseola McCarty, the elderly black woman who washed clothes for a living and donated her life savings of \$150,000 to the University of Southern Mississippi. Although she achieved the extraordinary, Ms McCarty's strength was gained through a life of selflessness and physically demanding hard work.

For older women, the issue of strength is a poignant one, because they are often losing physical strength. Their personal associations with strength are then affected by the amount of control they have, or perceive that they have, over their lives (Gannon 14). A lament I heard from all four women I interviewed was not being able to get around as easily as they could just a few years ago. And yet the women pride themselves on controlling pieces of their lives. Edith commented: *"I've always enjoyed just piddling in the house. You know, changing things and making things for the house. Some days, once in a while—and I need to once in a while, you know, everybody needs to change things once in a while. But some days I'll get into it, and I'll just change pictures."* Changing the pictures would not seem like strength to most young, healthy people, but for these aging women, the ability to change something, to create beauty in one's space, to make a decision and carry it out, appears in a different light. Changing the pictures, or making a cake, or babysitting grandchildren—anything besides sitting and waiting to die helps to remind them that they are still alive, still useful.

Hearing about the women's life choices, from moving pictures to staying with an alcoholic husband, clarified the direction of my project. I came to realize that strength would not be summed up in pithy definitions but could instead be found in the women's stories themselves. I focused on what their individual stories could tell me about how the

women were shaped by social factors—race, class, gender, and religion—and how they shaped their own lives through the choices they made.

Methodology

My goal in the interviews was to let the four women define strength in their own ways. I used an open-ended interviewing technique; I developed a set of questions to ask all the women, but let them digress, let them elaborate on their answers and on their stories in whatever way they chose. The open-ended method has political implications, as “an antidote to centuries of ignoring women’s ideas altogether or having men speak for women” (Reinharz 19). But flexibility also allowed these women to construct their ideas about strength instead of being boxed into narrow paradigms.

In the interviews, I listened not just for what the women said but what they did not say. Silences in interviews can sometimes signify that the person being interviewed thinks a topic “goes without saying” and needs no further explanation (Poland and Peterson 8-9). All the women assumed I knew facts about their lives and backgrounds which I did not always know. When Ella Ruth describes her mother’s work experience as “*these kinda day jobs, you know how you do that,*” she assumes I know what day jobs are, though I had never heard the term “day-work” before talking to her.

In addition to assuming that some information didn’t need to be explained, the women also consciously omitted or censored certain elements of their stories that they didn’t want me to know. I did not include sensitive information about the women’s lives which I discovered from other family members over the course of this project. Joyner has

noted that interviewers can use interviewees' lies and omissions to show the interviewee's "deepest value system—that elusive 'why?' of his [sic] motivation" (296). But my respect for the women's privacy and for their decisions to tell their stories on their own terms overrode my interest in exploiting sensitive areas in order to present more intriguing narratives.

I conducted these interviews during visits with the women between June 1999 and February 2000. I tape recorded and transcribed most of the interviews with the women, although I also conducted less formal interviews, moments in which I told the women I wanted to ask them quick questions for my thesis project and took notes after the conversation. The women were initially a bit uncomfortable with the tape recorder, a discomfort other researchers have also found in older women interviewees (Berry 352; Gluck 222). The tape recorder probably added to their worries about "not saying the right thing," because it created a permanent record of our conversation. Edith, a teacher from a family of teachers, was the most concerned about saying the right words; she glanced at the tape recorder often and spoke haltingly, as if trying to think out her stories. But the women usually forgot the recorder was there as the interviews progressed. When a tape finished and I reached over to turn it to the other side, I often heard exclamations like, "I forgot all about that thing!"

I made several authorial choices about using the interview data which should be addressed. First, I wanted to be as true as possible to the women's own words, thus, wherever I have quoted the women, I am using words they used. For uniformity, however, I chose to rearrange pieces of the women's stories so that all four chapters were

told in chronological order I also chose to “clean up” quotations where those quotations became distracting with fillers (e.g , “you know”) and repeated or unnecessary information. Here, for example, is part of Shirley’s original description of teaching:

I had one boy, well I had two troublemakers. One was fourteen and in the fourth grade I had—in the first two years I taught, I had first grade through fourth grade. Can you imagine? In one little-- That was a three teacher school but it had got down to two teachers And there was one good sized room there. But the room I was given, with all those kids, was small, and had a wood heater in it, of course. One good thing about having this big boy in the fourth grade was having somebody to put wood in and keep the fire going! But there was a big room there completely empty

I distilled this quotation to:

I had one boy—he was fourteen and in the fourth grade. I had—in the first two years I taught, I had first grade through fourth grade. Can you imagine? The room I was given, with all those kids, was small, and had a wood heater in it, of course. One good thing about having this big boy in the fourth grade was having somebody to put wood in and keep the fire going!

The information I omitted here seemed to distract from the primary point Shirley was making with this story While a different, interesting project could be done using discourse analysis techniques to look closely at the women’s speech patterns and discourse markers, such a project was not my focus here I also chose not to include detailed dates from the women’s lives (dates of births, deaths, marriages, etc.) both because the women did not tell their stories with those kinds of details and because creating an exact family history was not my goal

The personal portraits of these women that I present here are only one version of several that might be created An interview is always, as Ruth Frankenburg describes it, “an incomplete story angled toward my questions and each woman’s ever-changing sense of self and of how the world works” (41) From the incomplete stories of the interviews, I

chose what information was most important. Space limitations necessitated leaving out much of the data from the interviews, and I am solely responsible for choosing what information is presented here.

Role of the Interviewer

My relationships with these women obviously affect both the information I was given and the information I have chosen to present. My grandmothers, Edith and Shirley, may tell me less about their lives than they might tell a stranger, because there is more at stake in sharing unpleasant or difficult facts with a family member. On the other hand, I know more details about these two women than about Ella Ruth and Virginia. And I knew more about what interview topics made my grandmothers uncomfortable. I did not push Edith, for example, to talk about race, because I felt that she was concerned with saying the "right" things and was uncomfortable talking about the subject of race.

Ella Ruth and Virginia spoke openly with me, but racial differences between the two women and me undoubtedly affect these interviews. Etter-Lewis claims that when an interviewer is from a dominant group (e.g., white) and the interviewee is from a minority group, there will be an "asymmetrical relationship" in which the interviewer has an advantage, regardless of the interviewer's sensitivity (139). But as a white researcher who did interviews with black and white women on Maryland's Eastern shore, Margaret Anderson, notes,

I also know that the Black women did not likely report the same things to me as they would have to a Black interviewer, but that does not make their accounts any

less true. If the task of sociology is to understand the multiple intersections between social structure and biographies, then the many ways in which we see ourselves and our relationships to others should be part of sociological accounts.

(50-51)

Anderson's point is one which applies to my interviews with all four women: that the relationships between interviewer and interviewee are always part of the story.

This project was challenging for me on a number of levels. I was breaking down the roles the women and I had constructed for each other; using their names in this project rather than the childhood names Patrick and I have for them (e.g., Mamaw Edith, Mama Ella) was one way of changing these roles. My fear of seeing the women as real people and not just as adored grandmothers was probably paralleled by their fears of having a more real interaction with me.

The project thus became for me a coming of age of sorts. I created more complex ideas not only about these four specific women but also about women's lives in general, about the cycle of life, and about the strength necessary to endure. Hope Edelman notes:

We count on our grandmothers to remain static throughout our adulthood, to offer us, through their permanence, the opportunity to revisit our childhood whenever nostalgia or desire strikes... The beauty of being an adult granddaughter is that you're relied on as a woman yet still embraced as a child. With no one else are you ever so comfortable being both at the same time. (196)

These interviews forced me out of that comfortable granddaughter/granddaughter-in-law relationship with these women. I was challenged to think about issues of race and

marriage and aging in new ways. I was challenged to see these women as more "like me" than I had before; I could imagine them at my age, in their own wedding pictures or with their babies, with their own grandmothers by their sides. And, finally, the stories from Ella Ruth, Edith, Virginia, and Shirley continue to challenge me to think about how they, and all of us, use stories to define our lives.

Chapter II

Virginia Ramsey Nance

Strength: To "Do For Myself"

I started cookin' when I was nine years old. My aunt Jessie made me a little box, with a little ruffle on it And then they didn't have cabinets like you build in houses now. But they had kitchen cabinets I don't guess you know nothing about that. This was like a cabinet, it didn't go all the way around the wall, but we called it a kitchen cabinet, and my aunt fixed me a little box where I could stand on it and make cakes, and make cornbread, stuff like that.

Well, I couldn't get up soon enough in the morning to get to my aunt's house so—Her husband would tell me things. He had more patience. Well, my aunt had the patience but my uncle had more patience I could just mess up anything and he thought it was good

I had a stroke when I was nine months old. I couldn't climb the steps with my right leg. They didn't know what stroke...what do they call it now? Well, they called it strokes, and now they call it...

"Polio?" I suggest.

Polio. That's exactly what it was The doctors wanted to break my leg and reset it but my daddy wouldn't let 'em. They thought I could walk straight if they did that but my daddy wouldn't have it. So I walk crippled.

For a while my daddy sent me to a country school at Georgetown where you just walk in You didn't have no steps [like the city school did] Then after I came out of the eighth grade, I went to College Hill [high school]. And that's where I finished

I started day work, well, working for people in their homes, when I was about thirteen. Would go to school, then go to people's houses. I could do most anything when it came to cooking, cause I liked staying around old people, and I had learned stuff. So I'd cook, clean, whatever they needed. I wouldn't wash windows or blinds I told 'em that up front

After [graduating high school], I went to beauty school to learn to do hair In Chattanooga. I rode a bus, the Greyhound bus, every day. The name of the school was Madame C.J. Walker. Black school. I learned how to do hair I already had been out of school two years before I started the beauty work I already had two kids I borrowed different people I trusted to keep 'em.

*I had a beauty shop in the front of my house. I had just a little place, like a little office
You walk out like on a little porch, and I made me a beauty shop in there. And I did hair
right there at the house. So I could be with my kids*



Patrick mentioned his Granny, Virginia, many times before I met her. Patrick's parents divorced when he was a toddler, and Virginia helped care for him, her only grandson. Patrick made her sound like such a tough character that I am surprised upon meeting her how fragile she appears. She is just over five feet tall and petite and uses a walker to help her maneuver with her limp. Patrick has told me that she wears a wig, but I could have been fooled. The short black bob looks natural and makes her look younger than her seventy-three years. She wears blush and lipstick in rosy shades when she goes to church, but around the house she wears no make-up and the freckles on her brown cheeks are just barely visible below her lightly tinted glasses.

Virginia agrees to let me interview her with a hesitant bemusement, as though she thinks telling me about her life is a strange topic indeed for college work. Our initial interview is the first time that she and I are alone together and there seems nervousness on both sides.

The few stories Virginia tells about her childhood feature women in her extended family. Aunt Lola, who spanked Virginia for climbing up on the table and getting jelly in her hair; the grandmother who made her get down on her knees and take out her chewing gum to pray in church; Aunt Jessie, who taught her to cook and told her about race relations. *"My aunt almost had me hating white folks, she'd talk so bad about how they whipped 'em during slavery,"* Virginia remembers. The discipline, faith, and reality that

these women instilled in Virginia gave her the strength to endure her father's drinking and abuse of her mother. But, she says, her home situation probably led to her marrying too soon, because she was so eager to get away from her father.

Virginia was about twenty-three years old when she married Ernest Nance. He had come from Georgia to work in Cleveland at the Bowater paper plant and he was making good money. I ask her how long they dated before getting married. She laughs.

"Not long. Not long enough!" Her voice becomes quiet.

He was good to me He never—you know he always let me have my way about things, I guess.... [But] he didn't care too much about work. And after, I'd say maybe ten years . we had problems. After the kids had gotten so old, well, he was really crazy about the kids. But after so long, he started drinking. And the problem wasn't good at all So I told him he had to go.

I never would let him bring whiskey into the house, and if he did I would pour it out He would hide it all around, but seem like the Lord would lead me to where he hid it, and I would pour it out. Patrick can tell you that

Virginia and Ernest had been separated for years before Patrick was born, so he is no eyewitness to any of the drinking events she talks about. But her saying that Patrick can tell me about Ernest is true, because these stories are a part of family lore. And like much family lore, the stories shift and change through the telling.

Another of her stories about Ernest's drinking explains why Virginia did not want him to bring alcohol into the house

One time Ernest bought me some wine. It was just one little small bottle And so my aunt came to my house one day, and my kids were acting funny They were sniggering and carrying on. I said, 'Them kids is the silliest kids I ever seen ' Ernest said, 'Where's that wine I brought you?' He said, 'You like blackberry wine. Where's it at?' And I said, 'In the Frigidaire ' And he went in there and said, 'There ain't nothing in that bottle ' And my aunt said, 'Virginia, you know what's the matter with them kids? They drunk.' It was sweet like wine Like blackberry And they drunk it ever bit.

There is a note of fear, a mother's fear, to this story. Virginia clearly feels that she needed to protect her children from Ernest's drinking. She says that when his drinking got heavier, *"I told him that he had to go. I wasn't going to raise my kids under that type of living. I told him if he thought more of the whiskey than he did me and the kids, he had to go I said that's the end of our life."*

When Virginia talks about Ernest's drinking and its effect on her life, her voice, already high pitched, becomes louder, and she punctuates sentences with dramatic pauses. She clenches her jaw and presses her lips firmly together; she looks at me evenly. I can see why, as Patrick tells me, Virginia's stories were a regular part of his family gatherings. "We'd get her riled up and talking trash," he recalls.

While I think that Virginia also sees these stories as entertaining, the importance of the stories about Ernest are about how his leaving shaped Virginia herself, how being on her own made her rely on only herself and her faith



We never did divorce We just wasn't married. I wanted to be left, and he went somewhere—he just run around He would call ever once in a while. I'd let him talk to the kids, but I'd never have nothing to say to him. Cause after he left, I didn't want him to come back.

[Ernest] told me I didn't want to work. But I told him I trusted in the Lord, and He would help me to make it. And I was going to take the chance. I'm gonna be that strong, I told him'

I done hair, then I worked at Holiday Inn I kept getting raises up. Cause when I felt like I was due a raise, I'd go ask for it' Cause the business got so big, it wasn't nothing for me to serve 2000 people in just a little while, when it comes to salad. Start out early making up a big Waldorf salad, tossed salad, whatever kind of salad they had on the menu was what I made.

I was head of the salad department. I ordered everything, and I did everything. It was hard work. No kidding. But I had buggies to push the stuff on. Yeah it was hard work.

And then I day-worked on top of that. I worked for a guy.... I went there in the morning and straightened up the beds and all that cause his wife was kinda sick and wasn't able to do it, and then I worked for another lady and I would go to her house early in the morning after I got my kids straightened out for school. I fixed everything to get 'em out of there. I was going to cook breakfast for her and her mother

The odd jobs—day work—that Virginia did in addition to her work in the kitchen at Holiday Inn were hard physical labor. It is difficult for me to imagine where this small woman with one leg shorter than the other found the physical strength to get through her days. She says she didn't consciously think at the time that she was being strong, but that she worried about staying healthy and doing well in her work so that she could keep her job. Being strong to Virginia was a practical consideration. *"I prayed a lot that God would let me live to raise my kids because I didn't want nobody else to have 'em and mistreat 'em,"* she says

The determination that Virginia remembers having doesn't mean that she didn't get help from other people. Mr. Benton, the owner of the Holiday Inn where she worked, often loaned her money when she asked him for it, though she makes it clear that he did so because she worked so hard for him. Then he helped her in a life-changing way.

I learned how to drive when I was in my forties! I didn't have a car, and this guy that I worked for, I was such a good hand to him he said to me one day [that] he was tired of me paying cab fare and he was going to help me to get a car. And he run the car lot. He said, 'I got a man that teaches you to drive.' He paid this guy, or this guy done it. But anyway, that guy would pick me up every day between 11.30 and 12:00, and I had to get in there and get my work done so I could get away and go and take this driving lesson. And I never told a soul, none of 'em in [Holiday Inn], that I was learning to drive.

And one Christmas, we had our Christmas party. And Mr. Benton, he said, 'I want ya'll to give me a few minutes.' And he said, 'Virginia has bought her a car, and I brought the keys,' and he just throwed 'em across the room. And all of 'em just almost fell out, cause

he told em that I'd bought me a car. He told em it was a Pontiac LaMans He said, 'She picked it out.' And I was so happy I jumped up and shouted.

She tells this story with obvious joy, both, it seems, for her own hard work and the results it brought, and for the kindness of this white man she obviously cared about, a man who killed himself a few years later during legal battles over ownership of the business.



Virginia's Pontiac still sits under the carport adjoining her house. The tires are flat, the white vinyl top is moldy and peeling, and rust freckles the blue body and chrome trim. She says that if her kids hadn't meddled with her, she would have disobeyed the heart doctor who told her several years ago to stop driving. She tells me emphatically that the hardest thing about getting older is not having transportation and being dependent on other people to take her places.

I interview Virginia again at her house with Patrick present. He and I sit on a slip-covered couch with our knees crushed against the coffee table in front of us while Virginia sits in a straight-back chair on the other side of the table. Around the living room are mementos of Virginia's life and work: plastic roses in vases on the window sill, photographs of Virginia and of her family members, a ceramic Bible, and a plaque honoring her for twenty-four years of service with Holiday Inn.

Virginia reminds Patrick, "*You used to play right here on the floor, do you remember that?*" She kept Patrick after school while his mom worked, and, she says with a smile towards the grandson she adores, "*He was no trouble at all—just watched the TV there and played on the floor.*" In the summers when Patrick spent all day at the Boys

and Girls Club, he was the envy of the other kids when Virginia drove by at lunchtime and delivered him a hot lunch from the Holiday Inn.

Patrick encourages Virginia's storytelling. He laughs in the right places and keeps up a stream of "uh huh," "mm," and "right" throughout. She retells the car story, elaborating this time that her LeMans had been a floor model at Mr. Benton's dealership and that she had paid him \$60 a week for the car.

Virginia does not avoid the subject of race. She tells a funny story about Patrick as a child lying out in the yard to dry off after he returned to her house from swimming in a community pool. Virginia's son Teddy came by and said, "Get up from there boy! You black enough!" and Patrick started crying. Virginia howls with laughter as she tells this, adding, *"I had these white women that I worked with in the house there, and they just thought that was the funniest thing."*

She is less comfortable talking about some of the more serious effects of race on her life. Virginia describes the end of her cooking career with Holiday Inn:

They were good to me. The man I worked for [Mr. Benton] Until after some people came out of Georgia and they took over I don't think they cared so much about, uh, black people Or they was kinda hard Hard on the, uh, black kids. They would say things that—they'd never say it to me but they would say things that would kinda push you over You know what I mean?

"What would they say?" I ask.

Oh, they used that word, that 'nigger' a lot And I'd tell em, I'd say, 'You better get from over here Cause I don't call ya'll out of ya'll's name ' And that bothered me. And so I told the head man about it I walked in the office one day I got enough nerve on me I went up there and told the head man about it I told him I wouldn't put up with it, it was his place, and I would leave if it didn't stop

He said, 'Well, they might not been talking to you Did they call your name?' I said, 'No they didn't call my name, but I know what they meant ' Soon after that, after he got in the

place, I left. They begged me to stay. They give me that plaque there, for the 24 years I had been with 'em, [gave me] a cake, and I don't know what.

Racism affected Virginia's family life, too, when her son Teddy married a white woman, Linda, in the late 1960s. Someone set fire to the trailer that Linda and her mother lived in before the couple married, and Virginia got anonymous calls from someone threatening to burn down her house, too. Virginia loved Linda and cared for her when the younger woman was dying of complications from diabetes. When Linda got so sick that she could no longer talk, Virginia remembers, *"She would pat the back of my hand, and I know she was thanking me."* Virginia chokes back tears remembering this.

There is no way of knowing how talking to me, a white woman and the wife of her grandson, shapes what she says about race and how she thinks being black in the south has affected her life. But she tells me that most of the white people she has worked with and for have been nice. *"You know they treated me like a human,"* she says *"You never heard much about racial stuff"*



To younger, more cynical ears, these claims of relatively harmonious race relations sound inaccurate. But Virginia's stories about the past are always told in light of the present, of how things turned out. And when she sees both of her children working hard, not drinking, and living in nice houses, when she sees Patrick, a college professor and talented musician, I believe she thinks that whatever she endured was worth it.

God's brought me this far. I don't feel like I have ever really wanted for nothin' that I couldn't do without. You know the Lord says that He'll give us what we need, not everything we want. And I've always thought like that. And I think, we never had to go hungry. I had everything for the kids to eat. I fixed it for 'em. I knew I had to, 'til they were grown.

After a life of responsibility and hard work, Virginia enjoys the laid back life she has now. She is physically weak, with diabetes and heart trouble, but she controls her daily life. *"Some people talk about how things used to be better,"* she tells Patrick and me, *"but I don't want to go back. I like how things are now I don't do anything! I sleep late, maybe to about 8:30, get up, make myself a little breakfast and take my [insulin] shot, make the bed—it's 12:30 before I know it, and it's time to watch my stories."*

Virginia's present dramas now come in the form of soap operas and westerns.



Thanksgiving dinner at Patrick's mother's house is a small gathering: Patrick, Azella [Patrick's mother], Azella's husband Len, Virginia, Virginia's cousin Mr. "Baby" McClendon, and I. Baby says grace in a practiced, but halting voice, and I notice that he has lost weight since the last family dinner. He will die four months later with Azella holding his hand. Conversation goes back and forth with the sweet potatoes and cranberry relish, and the subject of Ernest and his drinking comes up again. Suddenly, the story takes an unexpected turn.

Azella and Virginia begin telling how, when Virginia met Ernest, he was going by the last name Watkins; this was the name Virginia took when they married and the names both her children were given at their birth. One day, as Azella played with a doll in the bedroom, officers showed up at Virginia's door with a picture of her husband and the news that he was AWOL from the military and that his real last name was Nance

The news was a shock. Virginia got a lawyer to have her name changed on her marriage license and on her children's birth certificates. *"Then,"* she says emphatically, *"I kicked him out."*

Azella stands to clear the table. She revises this version of history "My daddy was in and out of our life so many times. . . They'd fight, and mama would pack up his clothes for him and he'd leave—would stay gone a few weeks, a few months, who knows, maybe a year—then come back. He could talk some sugar. And mama would take him back. And mama doesn't want to admit this, but she loved him."

Everyone laughs, and Virginia responds indignantly: *"Oh, I can admit it. I loved him. When he wasn't drinking, he was a good man. He had the best manners. Couldn't find better manners in a real educated person. Wouldn't talk mean. Just drank."* She shakes her head over this fatal flaw.

The men leave the table for the living room and football. Azella clears the table and Virginia and I are left talking alone across the table. We sit in the darkening room for an hour. She tells stories about church members and folks she has known in the small black community in Cleveland, folks who have been fools in the eyes of the community—wives whose husbands openly cheated on them, a drunk who would go out in broad daylight in a housedress. I begin to understand how humiliating Ernest's lie about his name and his background must have been for Virginia. She says that there was a newspaper article about it.

She grips the cane beside her chair and tells me how she felt when Azella, still a teenager, got pregnant with Patrick *"I knew for a long time before she told me, but I*

didn't say anything, cause it just hurt me so much." But Virginia's love for her grandson started as soon as Patrick was born, when she got a department store credit card and bought \$400 of clothes for the new baby.

"*I'm ready to go on,*" she tells me several times in this conversation. She has gone to church her whole life and now, she tells me, she feels ready to go on to Heaven.

My faith has gotten stronger, you know, than I was when I was young. Because I always went to church with my grandparents, you know, [and] my aunt and her husband And that's the way that I always took my kids. We went to the little Methodist church. Just a small little church, but it was real spiritual. You went there and you really felt good. And that's where I joined at, was Lee's chapel. AME [African Methodist Episcopal] church.

[Now] I read the Bible before I go to bed. But I should read it—I should read it every morning and every night. But I don't do it. Before I lay it down, I always just pick me out a verse that I want to read it and I stick something between it, so when I get ready to go to bed I've got it there where what I know I'm going to read. And I say my prayer. That's it. Very short prayer. In truth, I should pray more but I don't.

But I thank Him for my life. I make sure I do that And then I ask Him to take care of the whole family, keep us together strong, and then when I get where I'm not able, that somebody else'll take over in the family

It's dark when we finish talking, and the dining room is lit only by a candle and by light from the adjoining kitchen. Virginia has missed her usual job at family gatherings of washing the dishes and she fusses at Azella for not leaving those for her to do.



The way I look at being a strong woman, after you have kids, you get stronger, because you know that you got something you got to take care of. And you know, if you alone by yourself, you going to have to be real strong, cause everything depends on you. Nobody else. I never had an extra dime to come in this house but what I made. And then after we got burnt out, I had to build the house back So I look over the times that I went through all of that, I didn't ask nobody for nothing, that I was strong. I was stronger than I really thought I was!

The house fire is new information to me. Virginia explains that the older house she was living in when her children were school-age caught fire, probably from faulty wiring, while she was at work and her mother, in ill-health, was staying at the house.

"This guy I worked with was bringing me home, and I saw all this smoke, and it was my house!" Virginia pulled her mother from the house, but the structure was destroyed.

"And my daddy tried to get me to stay [with him], and he said I was crazy to build another house with just my salary, and I told him that I'd just be crazy! Because if I didn't get it built, I'd just stand on top of [the foundation] with an umbrella, keep the kids dry!" Virginia's house is small and not particularly well made—she will point out the tops of the walls where her brothers did a mediocre job with the drywall, for example—but it is her house and she is proud of it

This spring, Patrick's mother Azella moved away from Cleveland to Atlanta with her husband. Virginia, despite her dependence on Azella for transportation to the grocery store, to the doctor, to church, and anywhere else she needs to go, is insisting on staying in Cleveland in her own house. *"I worked too hard to let this place go down,"* she says *"I was born in Cleveland and I'm going to die in Cleveland."* But Virginia also tells me that her daughter's move *"took ten years off my life"* She misses Azella immensely

Virginia has defined herself as strong and independent for so long that death is preferable to giving up that identity *"I don't want to live to get real old where I can't do for myself,"* she says *"As long as I can do for myself, I'll be glad to be here I'll thank the Lord for it. But I don't want to get where, if I can't do nothing, and I got to depend on my kids Uh uh I don't want to be here"*

Virginia can still do for herself, and for her family, as well. If she knows we're coming to visit, she will cook piles of food for us to take home a chocolate cake, a ham, green beans, and, Patrick's favorite, chitterlings. She'll pack the food carefully in plastic containers wrapped with aluminum foil and she'll put the containers into plastic grocery sacks so they are easy to carry. She'll be so tired from the hours she stood on her feet washing the chitterlings and cooking all of the food, that she'll lean against the door frame as she watches us load the food into the car. She'll wave slowly as we drive away

Chapter III

Edith Smith Griffith

Strength: For the "Normal Things of Life"

I was raised almost like an only child. Helen was six years older and then she married so young. I never got lonesome, cause I was a tomboy I did a lot of exploring and hunting birds nests and all that silly stuff. And I went to that little, it was an eight-grade, one-teacher school. There was a little girl that I grew up with, Pauline Cole, and we challenged—we wouldn't let each other, one of us get ahead of the other one. We couldn't stand for either one to make a better grade. (laughs) And when I went to Kingston [high school], I was better prepared than a lot of 'em were.

We took a daily paper. My dad. Ever since I can remember, we had the daily paper. But we didn't—there were no libraries to amount to anything. At school we had nothing to read. No library books. They's one or two old books that had been there and the backs tore off, you know. And I look at all these books that the kids have—beautiful books! And I am so envious that I missed that opportunity. We didn't know about it

Now, Mama did take The Comfort, which was a little magazine. It was really interesting. It had a teddy bear, a story about a teddy bear on the back. She'd always read me everything in it.

Mama, I guess, just went to the grammar school. Now she read and, you know, could write, and she wrote letters. Daddy went on to normal, that was the college equivalent, and it was really quite something. Really, I have seen a record of it; they had Latin and a lot of things. He taught school ten years, partly before he's married, and then he taught a few years when they were married

But I guess my mother's family influenced me more. They had cars and hacks and you know all kinds of transportation back before most people did.

Grandpa [Hedgecock, Edith's mother's father] was ahead of his time. They had problems with water . . . So he rigged up something that would go down to the spring and then it'd come up. Later on, they built a reservoir up on the hill, and they had an old gasoline pump, and they'd pump the water up there, and it'd run down by gravity into the house. So they'd have running water in there.

They had a canner that they would can for neighbors. .. I think it was mainly for kinfolks. But I've heard 'em talk about it. They'd go up and stay all day, and they'd can. And at that time, that was rather unusual, because that was before there were very many glass cans.

They were managers, I guess Grandma and Grandpa always buried their potatoes. They'd mound 'em up and everything. And they'd keep all winter. Miss Lane came over one day and—back during the Depression, it was hard times. She asked Grandma if she could have a mess of potatoes, said, 'We just don't have a thing in our house.' So Grandma went out and got 'em some potatoes.

Grandma Hedgecock was such a special person. She was always thinking of others I remember her telling Uncle Frank to get a mess of corn and put it down at the mailbox for the mailman.

Now, Grandma sewed. Grandma was a real seamstress. [The] first Sunday in May, May Day, that was the big day in church, and they all had to have a new outfit. And Grandpa would give Grandma a hundred dollar bill, and she'd go to Harriman, at Miss Stone's. They were Jews. And she'd go there to trade all the time, and... you know, with ten kids, time you got 'em all, there wasn't much left for her But she had, she had a little sailor hat, little straw—it was nice looking.... And she asked Miss Stone, said, 'Have you got any little flowers or something that I can add to my hat?' And she'd redecorate that every spring.



I grew up in a house two hundred yards away from Edith's house, and I wore a path into the grass in the field between our homes Edith always seemed happy to see me. She sewed, she cooked and canned, she gardened, she created the weekly flower arrangements for her church, she hiked in the woods, she painted, she read—and she always let me help with whatever project she was doing.

Edith is almost eighty at the time of our first interview, and yet she seems little changed from my childhood. She has deep wrinkles around her dark brown eyes, and her wavy gray hair is flat in the back from leaning back in the recliner to drink her morning coffee and look out at the birds. She wears no make-up and she smiles easily, though often with her lips together, perhaps self-conscious of her slightly crooked teeth. The only jewelry she wears regularly is her wide gold wedding band, a ring almost exactly

like the one I chose when I married. She walks a bit more carefully than a few years ago; she touches the backs of chairs as she moves through the house.

The sewing room we talk in looks the same as when Edith let me pick out the fabric for my Easter dresses and, later, taught me how to sew. The bulletin board with pictures of her kids and grandkids, the bureau with drawers full of fabric, the sewing machine in front of a window facing the garden, the peg board holding scissors and thread and other notions, the twin bed across which the current sewing project lies—nothing has moved.

Now, as in my childhood, Edith seems more comfortable talking about her family, about birds or her garden, or about my yard sale finds, than about herself. She is a private person, not inclined to show her emotions, and yet her words catch in her throat when she talks about her grandmother, Grandma Hedgecock. Edith still admires my great-great grandmother, for her talents and character, for her thoughtfulness and creativity.

Edith was cared and provided for as a child. When she was growing up during the Depression, Edith says she didn't realize other people in the community were going hungry, because her family always had food. *"We didn't have any money, but we had food. Because daddy had hogs and he had chickens and mama canned. We always had a big garden and mama canned everything."* She remembers some of her father's family who lived in Knoxville and, *"just delighted to get down to the country"* to eat food from the garden. With an ironic stab at these relatives' apparent lack of appreciation for the work her mother did to cook and serve them, Edith says, *"'Course, it'd [the food would] jump from the garden to the table."*

Despite the picture Edith paints of a relatively carefree childhood, she sympathizes with the hard work her mother did.

Daddy couldn't fry an egg. He didn't appreciate Mama. She did all the work: kept up the garden, all the cleaning. And I never heard her complain. But it was hard on her. When Grandpa and Aunt Eileen [relatives of Edith's father] moved in, that shouldn't have happened, because Mama wasn't strong enough to handle it. But what could she do?

Back then women couldn't do anything. They didn't have any way of making their own money. Times have sure changed. And I think that's good.

Edith knows me well, and when she talks about changing opportunities for women—"I'm definitely for women's lib."—perhaps she does so with an idea that this is what I want to hear. Her uncomfortable looks towards the tape recorder give me the feeling that she wants to be sure and say the right things. She worries, "I don't use the right words, Jennifer," and I assure her that whatever she says is fine.



After high school, Edith attended Maryville College for one year then transferred to Tennessee Wesleyan College where she graduated and then received her permanent professional teaching certificate from the state. She says that her career choice is one thing she would change if she could live her life over.

I wanted to go into nursing. That's really what I wanted to do. My best friend and I had this plan that we were going to be nurses. But Daddy wouldn't have that. See, at that time some of the nurses had bad reputations. And he didn't want me to do it. There were only three choices for women: nursing, teaching, and secretary. Well I was going to take what I could get. So I went to college to be a teacher. Who knows if I even would have liked nursing? I might have got into it and not liked it. You never know. And it all worked out all right. But that is what I wanted to do.

Edith taught for four and half years before marrying James "Buster" Griffith, a high school classmate from Kingston. The couple moved into a half-built home on

Buster's family farm, which was 350 acres of mostly woods, with fields for livestock grazing and rocky garden plots. Buster ran a service station for a while and then worked for a lumber and hardware store. Living far from her own family, Edith gave birth to my father.

The birth was one of the life events Edith recalls as difficult. Gary was a big baby and was breech. Caesarians were not as common in those days, and Edith's labor was long and difficult. Gary was a fussy baby, and Edith didn't have enough breast milk to nurse him. She describes mixing the baby formula that was available then as a complicated process, requiring "*so much Carnation, so much syrup, so much of this, then sterilize the bottles*."

The stresses of new motherhood on Edith were not helped by living on the Griffith farm. Edith's mother-in-law, Jack, lived next door; on the other side of Edith lived Buster's Aunt Ina and Uncle Herb, who had cared for Buster after his father died when Buster was a child. Edith's halting descriptions of the overwhelming attention the two older women on the farm gave to the baby hint at an uncomfortable situation for the young mother. "*I should have stood up for myself. I should have just let my feelings, you know, let myself be known.*"

Edith says this tentatively, as though to avoid offending the long-dead women she's speaking of. Remembering one time when she did get frustrated and let her feelings be known, she says, "*I just said it straight. We should do that more.*" Saying it straight could not have been easy for Edith under those circumstances; she is a reserved person for whom talking about feelings is still difficult.

Because of the difficulties of her first child, Edith did not plan on having another baby—*"I was scared to! Scared of another breech."*—but her doctor told her that Gary shouldn't grow up alone and that she should have another child. Seven years after having Gary, Edith had a daughter, Nancy. Technological advances came to Edith's aid: Semilac formula was available by this time and, Edith says, made feeding the baby much easier.

As she settled into motherhood, Edith also settled into the farm. She says that she never quite felt that the farm was hers, but she now feels connected to it. *"I know every inch of this farm. More than Buster. He wasn't into exploring like I was. I wish he had been."* She doesn't venture as far back in the woods as she did in younger days, but she and her dog still take regular walks around the farm. Her dining table is often decorated with some tiny wildflower, or a seedpod, found and brought back to identify in one of her botany books.

I ask if she hopes that the farm stays in the family and she answers with more nonchalance than I expected. *"Well, there's nothing I can do about it. You can't predict the future. I don't lose any sleep over it. As long as everybody's happy. Of course I'd like it to stay in the family, but you don't know."* She tells about selling her daddy's farm when he and her mother died. *"He never would have wanted that. But what could we do? I was down here on this farm, Helen was on another farm... That's what we had to do."*

Edith's stories reflect her determination not to impose on future generations the way others imposed their expectations on her. When another young mother, my mother, moved to the farm, into the house Edith's mother-in-law had lived in, Edith made a vow not to meddle. *"I like my daughter-in-law and my son-in-law. Now Nancy, you know*

she's always lived away, and that's different. [But] I've tried real hard to leave 'em [Gary and Dianne, my parents] alone and let 'em do their [thing]."



Edith shows me one of her current sewing projects: Christmas stockings shaped like Victorian-era ladies' boots. The stockings are her contribution to an upcoming church bazaar and are made of pieces of lace, velvet, and other fancy fabrics from her scrap bag. This is the second set of stockings she has made, since the first ones she took to the church were immediately bought by other women setting up for the bazaar.

There are few items Edith hasn't sewn over the years. She made a prom dress each for my sister and me (and swore she would never again work with sequins), made every Easter dress I wore until I was in high school, made quilts and pillows and pajamas and first-day-of-school clothes. She says that sewing for her grandkids has been one thing she has enjoyed more than anything through the years. *"That was just therapy,"* she says. *"You know when Nancy and them were up there [living in Connecticut], I could get to wanting to see 'em. You know they'd get home twice a year, and we'd go up there. And I could make 'em a dress or something and send it to 'em [Nancy's children], and that kindly filled in."* The therapy Edith found through sewing explains the many evenings I'd pop over for a visit and find her still sewing at 9 00 p.m., the room filled with the whir of the sewing machine and the sound of crickets outside

She smooths the hem across the top of the stocking's opening. *"That might iron out, that pucker. No, I believe I'm just going to have to take that [seam] out. It's not going to lay right."* I peer closer and see a miniscule flaw in the seam. I'm reminded of

one of my first sewing projects, a dress for a 4-H sewing competition with a side seam Edith and I took out seven times in an effort to get the plaids to match exactly. One perfectionist learning from another

Teaching others has been a significant part of her life Edith's formal teaching career lasted a total of twenty-three years, between the teaching she did before marrying, the one year she taught when Gary was four, and the years she taught after her daughter started school. She taught fifth grade and describes one teaching project with particular pride. her wildflower project. She would have students collect native wildflower samples into notebooks and identify the flowers. She says that sometimes parents of the students told her that they learned as much as their children learned, that they hadn't known the wildflower names prior to the children's project. She also introduced her fifth graders to Spanish, by having high school students from Spanish classes come in and teach the children basic words.

Near the end of her teaching career, Edith became disheartened. She says that more children started acting out in the classroom and that their parents didn't seem to care. On top of this, teachers could no longer paddle. *"You can't teach if you don't have discipline,"* she says. She decided to retire from teaching. *"I told Buster, I said, 'I don't care if we have to do without, if we have to eat cornbread with milk every night.' But you know, I don't know if we were any worse off. By the time you buy gas and everything, I wasn't making that much money."*

Edith shrugs as she describes giving up her paycheck. Though she says later that she has always wanted to have her own money and independence in spending it, her personal philosophy about money is not to worry about it:

I guess one thing I realize more than anything else is it's not really the amount of money. Now, I've had times, you know, I go somewhere and their house is so fine and pretty and fancy and big and shiny, and they're not a bit happier. You know, it's what you do with what you have. And the home you make. Sometimes I think you're better off without too much money.

And another thing I think, very strongly. Don't wait—do all the things you can do right now. I mean, if you want to take a trip, don't think, 'I can't afford this...we better do this or we better do that.' If you want to do things, right now's the time.

Our interview ends when my grandfather comes into the sewing room and takes the third chair. This is the first time I have ever seen him in this room, which I think of as Edith's domain. The two of them begin talking about the last big trip they took before my grandfather's health began to decline, a senior citizen trip to Victoria, Canada. They remember the cleanliness of Canada's highways—"No trash anywhere!"—and the blue of Lake Louise. And the food in the resort where they stayed. They describe the buffet in mouth-watering detail, down to the assortment of pretty, perfectly presented desserts. Edith says, with surprise, "*They looked so fancy. I couldn't believe they tasted good, too!*" Buster chuckles with her.



It's a bright October day, blue sky with clouds like polyester quilt batting tucked in the corners. Edith and I leave Buster in her kitchen peeling apples for a pie, and I am driving the two of us to see what she calls "Billy's museum." Billy, Edith's first cousin and a woman despite the male name, lives in the Lawnville community where Edith grew

up, on the farm where Edith's and Billy's Grandma Hedgecock lived. Billy has converted the shed that the Hedgecocks used for a cannery into a family museum

As I drive, Edith talks about how hard Buster's health problems—treatment for prostate cancer a few years ago and now eye problems—have been on her. He can no longer see to drive, which has had a huge impact on Edith's life. She explains,

When Buster retired and we started driving places together, I just let him drive. That was my mistake. And I just got out of the habit. And now... I'm doing better, though. I can drive us to town, to church. And I drove us to the tomato farm. I'm still not driving after dark, but there's not many places we need to go at night

She seems to feel badly for complaining and adds,

I've spent so much time wishing things would be better, but you know they could be so much worse. He can get around the house, can give me directions when I drive somewhere—he'll say, 'Turn up here at the top of the hill.' He gets out here in the yard, he can go out in the garage and find most anything he's looking for. I hope it doesn't get worse but we'll deal with it if it does

Buster's declining health has made him more dependent on Edith, which has been a double-edged sword. He is softer, more loving, but more needy, too. She is his world now, and she misses being able to leave him without thinking about it. *"I need a change of scenery sometimes. You know, you need to be around women some."*

The door to the museum is open—Billy knew we were coming—and we sign the guest book on the porch and go in. The plank walls and rusted tin roof cover one room packed with relics big and small from several families' pasts. It's Cracker Barrel squared. In one corner is an iron-framed twin bed covered with a handmade quilt, the bedside table has a book, reading glasses, and needlepoint work. Along the walls are old tools, black and white photographs, books, pitchers, dishes, flatware, a display box of costume jewelry, and clothing. From the roofing timbers hang oil lamps and peach baskets.

In the center of the room is the object Edith wanted me to see Grandma Hedgecock's dining table. It is plain: three wide walnut planks connected by pegs, round, unadorned legs. A set of black marks—burns, I guess—mark one corner of the dull wood surface like a swipe of tiger claws. Along one long side of the table is a drawer, about two feet wide with a simple wood pull. Edith repeats the stories about the table that I heard countless times during my childhood.

"I've never known that drawer not to be full of teacakes or little apple pies. Flat, you know, and they'd stack 'em. Maybe they'd be four or five stacked up. And they didn't get stuck together. I've wondered about that, you know." She shakes her head in amazement at her grandmother's cooking skills. *"Curtis [Edith's cousin] said—He was pretty ramsnoogous when he was little. He's Wayne's brother—said he never could get that drawer open without it screeking."* Her shoulders heave with laughter.

When Billy and her younger sister Ernestine join us in the museum, the three older women move through the room, sorting out memories. Where did you find that old basket? Is that the bed Aunt Ada slept in? Do you remember seeing this pump out beside Grandma's porch? Who wore that dress? Edith compliments Billy on the jewelry display boxes she made, and Billy describes using her husband's tools to cut the acrylic. She informed him, "This is my project!" and shooed him away when he tried to correct her cutting technique. The women laugh.

Suddenly, there is a crashing noise above. We all jump, then relax when Billy says, "walnut," and points to the tin roof. There is a tree just outside the museum. "It doesn't help to be ready for it," Billy says, "it still scares you to death."

We move outside and stand in the warm sun. Edith gives Billy a grocery sack of tomatoes, which she and my grandfather picked earlier in the week. Billy tells how everyone in her church has been making muscadine wine. "I can't drink the stuff. It makes me dizzy," she says. *"Isn't that the point?"* Edith jokes and touches Billy's arm. The women laugh

On the drive home, Edith tells me about the tragedies of Billy's life, her sick husband, the son they lost in a car accident. *"I think he may have been on drugs or something. I never asked,"* she says.



Two days after Christmas, Edith and I are again in the sewing room. The overcast day sends gray light into the room. She runs a small electric heater to cut the chill and we chat about the Christmas party her Sunday school class had at night, which she drove to. A few years ago, after fifty years of attending the Baptist church close to the farm, Edith and Buster became members of the Cumberland Presbyterian church my grandmother grew up in, in her home community of Lawnville. They love the preacher—*"He can say more in twenty minutes than a lot of 'em would say in an hour"*—and Edith is back among some of the cousins and friends she grew up with. Her mother's youngest sister Ruby, age ninety, still plays the organ at the church.

We talk for a while about a retired teacher friend of hers who is in a nursing home with multiple health problems. Edith shakes her head in wonder.

I've been so fortunate. Healthwise. You know I've never been in the hospital, only when the kids was born. I can about keep up with anybody. I mean, not hard labor, but I can work all day and that. I painted the back porch last year, you know. That's a pretty good job! I tell you something else I did that's a big job. I cleaned the decks.

Edith sees herself as lucky, as fortunate, but doesn't think that she has been strong. *"But then,"* she explains, *"I never had to go through anything really traumatic, only the normal things that are a part of life. death of parents, of grandparents. I just believe the Lord just gives you strength to get through things "* She does mention an incident when Gary was a child and a playmate struck him in the face with an arrow, missing my father's eye by less than an inch. She shudders to remember how scared she was

We sit quietly. The heater buzzes and she strokes a piece of fabric on the bed next to her chair. When she speaks again it is about getting older

I tell you the worse thing about aging, and you have to get there before you realize it, is you don't know what's out there. You know. You don't know what shape you're going to be in. And that's what's, you know, scary. I think you realize a little bit more and more, you know, time's running out.

I've always said this and I still feel it: I never want to live with either one of the kids! Cause it just ruins their whole life. You know. And I've been fortunate, and I've done a lot of things I wanted to do, and uh, it's their time to do their thing .. I hope I never have to go [to a nursing home]. But I've always said, that's just something you've got yourself

I can see myself in the full-length mirror on the wall behind her, the mirror I stood still in front of while Edith pinned up the hems of many dresses. She says that she's most proud of her kids and grandkids but says, *"I don't feel like I've accomplished anything great or anything else. I've tried to help a few people a little bit, but that's not enough, not nearly what I should have done "* I watch my face over her shoulder, nodding and smiling through the lump in my throat.

We walk back to the living room, where Buster sits in his recliner looking at his hands. The newspaper is beside him on the coffee table, where a newspaper has been for years, passed back and forth between his recliner and Edith's. Now that he can no longer see the newspaper, she reads the funnies to him and they listen to the news on the radio.

Edith gives me a jar of the chowchow she and Buster canned in the fall, and I put on my coat to go. I walk through the field to my parents' house, along the shadow of a path barely visible in the grass.

Chapter IV

Ella Ruth Knox Langham:

Strength: "I'll Just Take Anything"

My mother, her name was Maggie. And I was little and I can't remember, but I believe she worked on these kinda day jobs, you know how you do that My daddy, he was in the service And after he came out, he died He didn't stay too much longer. I think he died of pneumonia

Honey, I was... I guess I was about twelve, something like that, when he died I was pretty young. And I was nine when my mother died. And the rest of 'em [Ella Ruth's siblings] was under me. Katherine and Adella was under me I'm about four years older than Katherine And Adella's a bit younger She was a baby

My auntie took us and raised us. My auntie was named Ora Kates. I was the oldest, and she [Ora Kates] took washing in. Took in washing I didn't get to go to school much, and I would have loved to go to school. And I was smart, too, when I was in school. Don't ask me nothing now, cause I don't know nothing now

Adella was my younger sister. Her and Leah would get together like they'd been in school, and they didn't go to school I'd cry about that. I'd say, 'Ya'll don't want to go to school but I love school ' But Katherine, my other sister, now she was in twelfth grade and stopped in the twelfth grade! I say girl—oh I was married then She said, 'Well, you got married ' I said, 'Well, don't do what I done! Go on and get your schooling.' But you know you can't tell people nothing.

I got to seventh grade I could have went on, if I got to go to school, but I'd go two days this week, maybe one, and oh, just—I just regret that now But that's the way we had to do because we didn't have a mother and she [Ora Kates] was taking care of us. I appreciate what she done for us though, but she's dead now.



Patrick relates few memories of Ella Ruth to me before I meet her After his parents divorced and his father Raymond remarried and moved away from Cleveland, Patrick spent less and less time with Ella Ruth and other members of his father's side of the family Patrick has seen his grandmother only a handful of times in the last decade, mostly on holidays, and the two rarely talk on the phone

I meet Ella Ruth for the first time after our marriage, at the Thanksgiving dinner hosted by Patrick's father and step-mother. All four of Ella Ruth's living children and several of her grandchildren are present, so I have little opportunity to talk to her and mostly watch her from a distance. She is a small woman, thin and long-limbed with wispy black hair and glasses. She wears no makeup and thin gold hoop earrings; she is dressed in a coordinated loose knit outfit and lace-up shoes. Her children fuss over her: Mama, can I get you a drink? You want another piece of this pumpkin pie, Mama?

I watch Ella Ruth playing cards that night at the kitchen table. She grips her hand with determination, her long fingers cupping the cards stiffly. The game is poker and she wins as many hands as anyone else. She resists one of her daughter's hints about going to bed, and someone laughs and says, "Mama Ella can play cards all night."



Patrick goes with me to interview Ella Ruth in her one-bedroom apartment in an apartment building for seniors. Ella Ruth greets us warmly and seems to have no reservations about doing the interview with me. She is babysitting her granddaughter Ebriana, the seven-year-old child of her youngest son Garland, and sternly tells the child to quiet down when I start the tape recorder, that my questions are "*business, not play.*" Ebriana mutes the Home Alone video she is watching and sits beside me on the couch, fidgeting and giggling occasionally at the soundless movie scenes. But Ebriana also listens to her grandmother's story and tries to contribute her own. When Ella Ruth says, "*I was born here in Cleveland, Tennessee,*" Ebriana chimes in, "I was, too!"

After dropping out of school to help her aunt with her laundry work, Ella Ruth met Willie B. Langham, who had caught a train in Alabama and ended up working in Cleveland. *"He was staying with Miss Daisy Little, course she dead now And I met him through that and didn't know beans about nothing. We went together a while, then we decided to get married and I said yeah So. I just—I been married all my life seems like When he died—we had been together thirty-seven years when he died."*

She was seventeen years old when she married Willie B. Langham. She had her first baby a year later. They lived in Chattanooga briefly, then moved back to Cleveland, where Ella Ruth has lived since. Only two times in my recorded discussion with Ella Ruth does she say her late husband's name. She refers to Willie B. as "he" and "him" the rest of the time.

As soon as we start talking about Willie B., Ella Ruth tells her version of a story Patrick has told me several times *"But he scared me."* She laughs. *"Patrick, remember when he scared you? Oh lordy I was so embarrassed And all day like he was drinking I tried to tell him not to. I never did drink."* She and Patrick laugh One day, when Patrick was about six years old and visiting her, Willie B., who had been drinking all day, backed his car the wrong way out of the yard and down a steep embankment to the street. Ella Ruth continues:

I was so embarrassed when he come down—people were over there standing. Church people I was so embarrassed I didn't go out the door, cause I was ashamed I stayed back in the house Raymond [Patrick's father] and them was out there laughing A woman was hollering, 'Children! A man's coming off the bank! Get in here!' I said, 'Lord have mercy ' People can do the stupidest things That's what whiskey'll do for you.

When we leave Ella Ruth's apartment, Patrick drives me past the house where Ella Ruth used to live and where Willie B. backed the car off the bank. The yard on one side of the house drops straight down, about fifteen feet, to the street below. Willie's drunken maneuver undoubtedly made a terrible crashing racket in the neighborhood, and it is surprising, given the drop, that he was not hurt. Ella Ruth and Patrick laugh about the incident, but Patrick remembers crying at the time and being comforted by his grandmother, who told him, "Everything's going to be all right, baby."



Ella Ruth has lived in this small but comfortable apartment for almost ten years. The living room has a picture window with a purple fringe of African violets on its sill. A parakeet chirps and gurgles incessantly from his cage by the window. Knickknacks, likely presents from well-meaning children and grandchildren, decorate the coffee table and the top of the television. There is a pair of taper candles, still wrapped in plastic, in a matched set of brass holders. Ella Ruth sits in a recliner with a mechanized lift to help her get up.

During our visit, Patrick nods and says "Mm hm" as Ella Ruth talks about Willie B.'s family from Alabama, about someone named Joe and about Joe's daughter, although I feel pretty certain that Patrick does not know who these people are. But Patrick does know about a cousin who plays in the NFL, and Ella Ruth tries to remember how this cousin is related to her late husband. They both talk about how proud they are to see the name "Langham" on the back of his jersey.

I ask, as a matter of verification, if Ella Ruth had five children I know that there was one son, Ben, who died, in addition to the four children I've met. She says, "*Mm mm. Right.*" But when she begins listing the children, and she names six. This is the first Patrick has heard of her son Alvin, who died at age eight from a ruptured appendix

We had went, been coming back from visiting [Willie B.'s] parents. And he [Alvin] was crying with his stomach. So we stopped there at Specks. You don't know about Specks Used to be a hospital. They didn't know what they were doing.... He died on the operating table He was eight. And smart! Oh, he knowed the Bible through and through. He was really a smart little boy. Alvin. They said I'd never raise him because he was too smart But he knowed that Bible. And smart in school Mm.

Ella Ruth says this calmly, showing no outward emotion except for mystification at the death of such a young child. Later in the interview she talks about Ben, the other son she lost when he was in his late twenties. *"I was kind of bitter, you know? I said, 'Lord, you took my children!' But I asked the Lord to forgive me for feeling like that You know, cause that was God's will. He never made a mistake. He knew what he was doing. I asked Him for forgiveness. And I think He did. Forgive me."*

She recalls that she quit eating for a week or two when Ben died *"But you got to pick up the pieces and keep going, you know. I had other children [and] I had to take care of them "*

Raising what she calls "good kids" was Ella Ruth's primary parenting goal. She stayed at home, "*washing, ironing, and cooking*" until her children were in school. She told her children, "*Don't never bother nothing don't belong to you Don't steal a thing "* Ella Ruth's children were told that if they went to someone's house and wanted an apple or something, that they should ask the woman in the house if they could have it. "*They*

wouldn't take a thing, honey. No they wouldn't. And when they'd go to people's houses, they'd sit down "

Ella Ruth was the parent responsible for every aspect of disciplining her children *"He [Willie B.] didn't whoop those children at all,"* she says. *"I done the whooping."* She remembers one time when her husband came in and told her that he had seen their youngest son down at the pool room, a place the son was not supposed to be. She remembers, *"I said, 'You were down there. Why didn't you get him out?'* [He said], *'No, that's your children.'"* She shakes her head.

Willie B. worked for TVA and made good money, Ella Ruth remembers, but *"wouldn't have a dime when he got home to us."* One of his vices was gambling. He would refuse to buy their children new shoes, she says, *"But he wasn't stingy when he'd go to them crap games. Playing them cards and things. I hate to talk about him bad with him dead, but I'm telling the truth. That's the truth."*

Ebriana hears her grandmother talking about games, or perhaps hears the twinge of resentment in Ella Ruth's voice, and says earnestly, "You can play with me."

Ella Ruth half-heartedly swats her hand towards Ebriana. *"Well, listen. Will you hush and stay out of this?"* She sounds irritated, but she looks at the child with amusement.



Patrick remembers riding to elementary school with Ella Ruth when he was a child. She was a cook in the cafeteria and drove Patrick and his cousin Terry to school in the morning—the two boys fought daily over who got the front seat—and then monitored

them at lunch Ella Ruth sometimes gave him a bigger scoop of mashed potatoes than the other kids, Patrick remembers, but she yelled at him and at Terry from behind the food line if she saw them misbehaving. "Pat! Terry! You all be good!" he would hear from across the room

Ella Ruth cooked at Arnold Elementary for eighteen years, and she became known for her rolls. When she runs into people nowadays, they often ask if she's still making rolls

I say, 'Honey, no, I'm retired now. I don't make no more rolls ' Oh, but I had a lot of little friends. Cause she [her supervisor] wasn't wanting to give away nothing ... But I had some [schoolchildren], I said, 'Listen. Don't ya'll get me in trouble now. Get your little rolls and go now.' They would They'd hide and run with the rolls. She'd rather put them things in the garbage or something than give them children rolls. She was kinda a mean lady.

Ella Ruth continues with a story about how she handled this unnamed supervisor's meanness.

She jumped me one morning. I was making bread. And she said, 'All of ya'll. I want to tell you something.' I said, 'I haven't done anything!' She kept a-talking. I pulled my apron off, went over there to the sink, going to wash my hands and go upstairs and talk to the principal I told 'em, 'I can't work under these conditions.' But she said, 'Ella wait. Come here ' She took me in the back room She said, 'Honey, I am so sorry.' Said 'I shouldn't take things out on ya'll.' I said, 'No you shouldn't.'

But she was good to me. After I got her told. I told her in a nice way, I told her, 'I can't work under these conditions ' And she said, 'Well, I know it. I'm sorry. Don't quit.' I said, 'Now I can't stand this, I ain't going to be doing this Now you just have to get you somebody else.' And she kept begging me so, until I just—I turned, washed my hands again, put my apron on, and made the rolls Cause nobody couldn't make 'em but me!

Ella Ruth says this matter-of-factly She knew her worth in the kitchen, and this gave her the confidence to stand up for herself. Also, she felt that she always had the option of getting day work if she left the cafeteria "But I don't like day work," she admits.

She sometimes did day work after getting off work at the school *"You work hard doing day work. They want you to wash and iron, clean up, and if you can, cook, clean the stoves, and things. All that in one day. You can't wash and iron all in the same day! Well, see, they just got you that one day, they going to get all out of you that they could."*

The money Ella Ruth made from doing day work and from cooking was hers to spend as she wanted. *"I didn't pay no bills, didn't pay no nothing. I spent it. Way I wanted to spend it Course I'd get the children paper when they run out and stuff like that. He [Willie B.] took care of all the other bills. I didn't pay nothing He was the man of the house, making more money than I made."*

She sits back in her recliner, crosses one arm in front of her body, and puts her other hand up under her chin, with her long fingers extending up and covering half her face She looks at me expectantly, ready for the next question. I sit stiffly on the edge of the couch I'm not ready for the answer when I ask her about the hardest thing she's gone through in her life. Ella Ruth snorts *"Whew. Being bothered with a drunken man. Made good money but when he'd get to us he was broke. He spent it all, honey On women and drink and everything else. Now that's the hardest thing "*

The parakeet chirps and Ebriana's movie flashes silently on the TV screen, and Patrick hears for the first time why his grandfather is spoken of so disparagingly by Ella Ruth and her children

He died at this woman's house. I don't probably like to tell people, but I tell the truth He was dead when he left [her] house. They called me one morning, I was going to work. He was dead Had a massive heart attack. See, he drank. You can't drink and take blood pressure pills It'll kill you You know you can't make grown folks do nothing

You know, God is so good. He didn't leave him sick to linger on me, for me to take care of I thank God for that. I see that woman, I speak with her just as good, and I had to pay the ambulance to bring him to the hospital! They sent the bill to me. It ought to be sent to her, cause he died over at her house!

Patrick and I laugh, which seems the expected response, and he says cheerfully, "That makes sense!" It makes sense, too, that Ella Ruth would see her philanderer husband's sudden death as a God-given blessing. Her faith is in an active God, one who willed her two sons to die and one who saddled her with a drinking, gambling, cheating husband, but a God who didn't make Ella Ruth take care of a man who had never taken care of her.



Ella Ruth found the strength to stay in her marriage, she says many times, because of her children. She remembers being determined to endure *"I said, I got to raise my children. So I'll just take anything "* She pauses

They used to tell me, 'Why don't you leave him?' I said, 'I can't drag my children from pillar to post ' You know So I just stayed with him And took care of my children And when they got grown, they said, 'Mama, if it wasn't for you, I don't know where we'd be ' I took care--me and God took care of [the children]... They told me I was crazy I guess I was I loved my children I wanted to take care of them Oh yes, honey. I could tell you some stories would curl your hair.

Ella Ruth is proud of her children and proud of *"how we made it and how I made it, cause God knows, I had a hard time "* She talks most about her pride in her children's characters, in their good manners and morals, but she is undoubtedly proud of their professional successes, as well Ella Ruth's two sons and two daughters have careers in banking, in education, in sales, in corporate human resources They live in beautiful homes, send their children to college, and take exotic-sounding vacations

Ella Ruth remembers her children putting up with “*mouthin’ and stuff*” when the high schools in Cleveland were integrated. Perhaps her determination to be strong for her children makes it easier for her to remember racism in her children’s lives than in her own. Ella Ruth doesn’t remember seeing racism in her own life. “*Every home I would go in, they was nice to me. If they did [make racist comments], they done it behind my back or something.*”

The one story Ella Ruth tells illustrating how some people are racist shows that she sees racism as behavior that God will take care of:

I don’t hate nobody. Some of these people [do]. One day I was sitting [downstairs in the lobby] at the desk. A lady had moved in here, I forget her name, and she was black. A woman sitting there said, ‘Leroy, who is that moved in?’ I heard the very words she said. He said, ‘A lady.’ She said, ‘What is she? Black or white?’ He said, ‘Black.’ She said, ‘We got enough of them in here.’ There ain’t no more than ten black people in here. I just looked at her. And now she’s sick. Can’t hardly get around. Can’t hardly walk or nothing. You don’t talk about people like that. We’re all human beings.

A cause and effect relationship between the woman’s comments about black people and the woman’s subsequent illness is only hinted at, but Ella Ruth’s animated discussion of faith and race makes it clear that she believes God is colorblind:

When we get to heaven, we ain’t going to be in one corner or another. We all going to be together. We all God’s children! When I see people, white people, any kind of people, I don’t see no color. I see people. Like you. I love you just like I love Patrick. Cause you humans. We all humans! And Patrick loves you, and you love Patrick, and that’s fine.

Ebriana bounces on the couch beside me, swinging her braids from one side of her head to the other and humming to herself. A wedding photo of Patrick and me is on the coffee table beside her, the frame flanked by ceramic figurines of black angels in flowing white gowns. I wonder if Ebriana will remember this day and these stories from

her grandmother as she grows up, if she will also believe that we're all humans, regardless of our skin color



Ella Ruth's health has made getting older difficult. She goes to dialysis three days a week, a routine she's had for eighteen years, and she has rheumatoid arthritis. *"I got arthritis so bad, honey, when I sit down it's hard for me to get up. So I got a stick. Joan [Ella Ruth's daughter] sent me a stick. Cane To hold on to. Cause honey, I'll just—my legs just go down."* She has had several falls and a recent one, so severe that doctors thought she had broken her neck, put her in the hospital for several days.

Ella Ruth no longer drives—she good-naturedly blames her kids for ganging up on her and taking away her car—and she relies on her two children living in Cleveland to do her shopping for her. She dislikes having others get her groceries. *"Garland says 'Mama, just make you a list ... and I'll get your groceries. That's the biggest lie. He ain't getting no groceries. He might bring something over here, wouldn't be what I want.'"*

Despite these inconveniences, Ella Ruth has few complaints about her present life. She scoffs when I ask if she dated other men after Willie B. died. *"I guess I made the wrong choice in a man,"* she admits of her marriage. *"When you're young, you do a lot of things. But I stayed for the children. And I got 'em grown now, they're doing well, and I don't have to see a man no kinda way. I don't care if he's dipped in gold! I don't want no man in my life. All I need is Jesus."*

Ella Ruth's need for Jesus is nourished through her church, St. James Cumberland Presbyterian Church, where she has worshipped her entire life. She went there as a child with her grandmother, then took her children there, and now goes by herself. She describes an experience of faith, however, that is far from just a Sunday morning phenomenon. Recently, she has heard voices and seen visions.

I was laying in the bed about two weeks ago, 'bout two o'clock in the morning. I was.. facing the window, and I wasn't asleep. And somebody said, 'It's going to be a better day.' And I said, 'Who is in the house?' I come in here to look and see who was in the house with me. Wasn't nobody. So I often wonder about that. It is going to be a better day. But I didn't know what that meant. I just believe it's God's angels talking to me, I guess

Another night, she tells us, she looked up from bed and saw a man walking up the hall of her apartment. She got up and looked all around, and saw nobody. She says that it scared her but that she believes it was her angel watching over her. *"I'm getting where if I see things now, hear things now, I just say, 'Thank you, Lord.' Cause I don't know just what they mean."*

Ella Ruth describes her acceptance of visions and voices with the same even tone she uses to talk about the deaths of two children and her husband's drinking. She doesn't know just what these things mean, but she thanks the Lord nonetheless. She sits in her lift recliner surrounded by the accessories of the old and infirm—large-button telephone, pill bottles, her cane—and fusses at her granddaughter for her restlessness. *"Ebriana, you making me nervous, twisting. Sit down and be a good little girl. We busy"*



I glimpse Ella Ruth again at Christmas, when we drop off her Christmas present. She is sick and says she doesn't want to risk infecting us, so we ride the elevator up to the

fifth floor and set the package outside the door she has left cracked open. We call out "Merry Christmas" and turn to leave, as her hand and a sliver of her face appear in the open space. She reaches down for the present. "*Thank you, baby. Thank you. Merry Christmas. Sorry I can't see you.*" Her long fingers flutter at us before she softly shuts the door.

Chapter V

Shirley Bohannon Lumpkins:

Strength: "I Didn't Let It Bother Me"

My mother's family all, as far as I know, all liked to read, but in a poor family, poor farming family, there was no money coming in. The only way my mother could make money was to sell a few eggs and butter. But somehow they managed to always have at least one farm magazine. Well, in one of the little magazines we got there was a club for children. And one thing they did was bird study. So my mother sent off whatever notes or whatever for that, and one summer at least my sister and I wandered around through the woods studying birds. And we found that quite interesting.

I remember Mama saying we [Shirley and her sister Lorraine] 'uz either always in the field or in school. But ... it was nice that she thought that—she knew we needed something; besides, all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy, and the same thing for Jull I'm sure.

But you know back then children made up their own games. We had practically nothing to play with. Dolls was about all. Now are we taping all this? (laughs) This sounds simply gross. But we would—sometimes there would be a nest egg left in the nest, just so that the hen would go back, I reckon. And it would get rotten. I remember one time when we got rotten eggs and made mud pies. (laughs hard) Isn't that terrible?

We didn't have much communication in those days. So I don't know whether we even knew that there was a Depression or not. But something that has stood out in my mind is one time I did have to go to the grandparents for something, and I remember walking down the dusty road, and I always went barefoot in the summer, but I remember looking way over in the field, way over a good distance, and seeing my great uncle. Now he wasn't old. This is my grandmother's younger brother. But saw him over there hoeing, and that seemed so strange to me, cause the women usually did the hoeing. He had a job in Chattanooga or somewhere in that area, but he had lost his job and probably could not make ends meet. He probably just came to help 'em make the crop. I don't suppose they were able to pay him anything but least he was able to make his board while he was there. His wife may have gone to her parents. I don't know. But that just stood out in my mind, looking over there and seeing him hoeing.



Shirley and I sit in her den on couches covered with sheets to catch dog hair.

Keeping her dog Maggie indoors and eating dinner on a TV table are two lifestyle

changes she has made since my grandfather moved into a nursing home. To my left is the closet in which Shirley found a rat earlier in the week. An exterminator discovered an extensive rat problem in the basement; my grandfather had left open containers of seeds before his dementia required him to move into a skilled care facility. I sit tensely, imagining rats jumping out at me, but Shirley is calm.

The walls of this room, like those of the living room, kitchen, and bedrooms, hold pictures of her children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren at various ages. I spy a school photo on the shelf above the television of me, circa third grade, in a red jumper. The white-blond hair I had then was often compared to Shirley's as a child.

As a child, I did not think of Shirley as particularly strong. Around my gregarious, center-of-attention grandfather, she seemed to fade into the background. She was always busy, usually cooking or cleaning or telling my mother a story about someone at her church and how that person was related to one of Mom's high school classmates. Shirley did not drive, and even as a young girl, I think I realized that this made her quite dependent on my grandfather.

Shirley's permed gray hair and age-spot covered hands look much the same as they did in my childhood. Osteoporosis has shortened her and she has deeper wrinkles in her cheeks, but her eyes are bright and the dental partial she got a few years back flashes when she laughs. Overall, though, she seems tired.

The stories of Shirley's childhood are new to me. We usually visited Shirley at the holidays, when many other family members were around, and I did not have time alone with her to hear about her past. I knew she grew up on a poor cotton farm in middle

Tennessee, but I didn't know, for example, that she had a sister who died in childhood. Shirley was just eight at the time, and remembers people coming to the house and her grandmother saying something about Shirley not crying *"Seem like she said something like, 'If it was my little sister, I'd be crying.' She probably realized it'd be good for me to cry. But I guess I was just in a state of shock [And] who wouldn't be,"* Shirley remembers. In just a few months after this interview I would see that this emotional stoicism had remained a lifetime trait.

Shirley asserts that *"you just can't figure how poor we were,"* and she is right. She tells of her family's house *"thrown up between when the crops were laid by in the summer"* and made from lumber that hadn't seasoned, *"so [the floor] had cracks in between and the wind would come up through there."* The house was never painted or wallpapered and was, she says several times, cold. She tells of doing homework by the light of an oil lamp and then sleeping around the wood stove in the bedroom she shared with her sister and her maternal grandmother.

I ask if she felt that she had to be strong to endure the poverty of her childhood, and she brushes off the idea. *"I do believe that sometimes I felt like we's poorer than everybody, but I didn't let it bother me."* We break for a snack of saltine crackers and creamy peanut butter. Shirley prefers crunchy, she tells me, but the creamy is usually on sale.



Shirley graduated from high school at age seventeen and went on to Middle Tennessee State Teachers College for two years to get her teaching credentials. She lived

in private homes and cooked food she had brought from the farm—canned foods, eggs, cornbread—on old stoves in the basement.

But now imagine how hard it was on our families, having to get stuff like that ready! I'm sure I never realized—I know I didn't realize then how hard it was. They had to give me up as a work person on the farm, and I was used to doing heavy things like mopping, which Lorraine [Shirley's sister] had to do. It was hard on her too, cause she had to take over what I'd been doing. [And] when I would go home, the few times I got to go home, I'd take home dirty clothes, and we'd have to get them washed some way.

I ask, given those hardships, why it was important to her parents, neither of whom graduated high school, that she go to college.

Well, I just think that it was Mama. She was hoping that I would have a better life than she had. That one's not hard to figure out at all, Jennifer! She wanted me to be able to take care of myself and not have such a hard life. So I only taught school for three years, and I always did feel like I let her down, in a way.

I ask if her mother had ever said that she was disappointed in her and Shirley says no.

She sighs as she says this. It is a sigh I have heard from her many times. Shirley's sighs are musical, a descending note of hum. This sigh and this guilt are habit to her, a matched set like the wedding bands worn thin on her left hand.

Shirley's description of her brief teaching career touches on the difficulties of being an educator in a poor, rural farming community

I enjoyed just trying to help the kids. And most of 'em did seem to want to learn. Course I had some cases that were really hard. I had a little boy who was handicapped. I mean, he looked OK, but he'd been in a buggy accident of all things, he and his parents when he was a baby, and I think that's what they said was wrong with him. He could learn to memorize, but he could not learn by the written word, and I sure did spend a lot of time with him

I had one boy—he was fourteen and in the fourth grade. I had—in the first two years I taught, I had first grade through fourth grade. Can you imagine? The room I was given, with all those kids, was small, and had a wood heater in it, of course. One good thing about having this big boy in the fourth grade was having somebody to put wood in and keep the fire going!

But it didn't take me long to find out this older boy, his name was... I know it was Brown. I can't remember the first name. I just found out if anybody did anything, that he was usually accused with it, whether he ever did it or not And so I sort of, I'm sure, treated him better than he'uz used to.

Shirley does not elaborate on the better treatment she gave this teenage boy in her school. She says little about any small gestures of kindness she extends. But she keeps boxes of greeting cards and never misses sending them for the birthdays or anniversaries of her four children, eight living grandchildren, or other extended family members. The dates are not written down but stored, liked the last name of this student from sixty-five years ago, in her expansive memory.



Shirley's husband Harry telephones in the middle of our interview. He is obviously agitated and anxious for Shirley, my mother Dianne, and me to come see him.

"Yes, Harry, I got the groceries"

"Maybe somebody could walk you. Or take you outside "

"OK Harry. OK Harry. OK."

"Well, Harry, I have to wait for Dianne to get back to bring me to see you."

"We'll be there in a little while."

"The car wouldn't be running without gas, Harry. I'm sure Dianne has put gas in the car."

"OK. Bye."

"Bye Harry "

"I'll tell her, Harry "

"OK Harry Bye."

Shirley sighs as she hangs up the telephone. She gets a ride to the nursing home to see Harry almost every day. She takes his favorite candy bars and listens to him. She misses having him home, and this seems to make her want to talk about him more.

My grandparents met at a revival, where Harry told the cousin he had come with, who was one of Shirley's students, "You have got to introduce me to that blonde." As she tells it, *"He asked if he could walk home with me. I guess I really didn't have any good excuse, so I accepted. Then we stood there talking [with other people], and Harry says, your grandpa says, 'Well, what are we waiting for?' to get started walking. And he's been saying that ever since! But he had a way with him."*

We both laugh at this memory, which captures so perfectly a theme of their marriage, Harry's impatience to leave for places clashing with Shirley's almost inevitable lateness. Their wedding is not such a funny memory for her.

Every girl ought to have a very pleasant, not expensive wedding, but something pleasant to look back on. Mine wasn't all that pleasant. It was October twentieth when we got married, and so Harry was getting really impatient to get married, and meantime my grandmother that had lived with us had just died. So you can understand why I hadn't told Mama we's going to get married, but when I did, she said, 'You've not got any clothes!' She wanted me to wait 'til she could help me plan a little. But no, your impatient grandpa, when he came to get me that day—Distance was so much different then, and my folks never had a phone. But when Mama was still trying to get us to wait, he said, 'Well, if I don't get married today, I'm going back to Leoma.' That's where he was from. And you know if I'd stood up to him like—I should have said, 'Well I don't care if you go back to Leoma or not.' But anyhow it was so unplanned.

Shirley and Harry went to a nearby town and called a Baptist preacher they didn't know. They stood in front of the desk in the preacher's office and got married; Shirley wore a new blue dress which she remembers costing five dollars. I ask where they lived after getting married, and she laughs. *"We did not have anyplace planned!"* She notes the

irony of older people talking about how irresponsible teenagers are today, this, despite the spontaneous decisions these same elders made in their younger days *"I am glad that some of you have got more sensible,"* she says.

My grandfather ran a filling station and fried hamburgers on the side, then worked construction, while Shirley continued to teach. Their first baby was born ten months after the wedding, and, she says, *"That was the end of my teaching. And now that's just something people didn't do back then, is leave their babies with strangers."*

A year after the birth of the first baby, when she was seven months pregnant with a second, Shirley moved to Cincinnati, where Harry had gotten a job making airplane motors for the war. She remembers this as a stressful time.

Where we lived, in the housing—low-rent housing apartment—the kids, even though they's little, would get into things. And you got the feeling that, I did, that there was some . . . prejudice. A little bit. You know. The North and the South. Anyhow, I was always real nervous, when the kids would get into something. Afraid I was going to get into it with one of the mothers or something . . . Course maybe everybody was on edge on account of the war or something.

Her first three babies, the girls, were born at home, of the births, *"I don't remember it being all that bad,"* she says. The final child, Jimmy, was born in a doctor's office with a young doctor who had just completed his medical training in the Army. Shirley speculates, *"I guess he'd only had men. Maybe he didn't know a thing about birthing babies. He liked to killed me with too much medicine."* Shirley had gone to a different doctor early in the pregnancy, but, she says, *"Some of the men that Grandpa [Harry] worked with said, 'Oh, I'd take her to Clarence,' so he did. Always would listen to anybody but me! But now that was a mistake. I had a hard time."*

Harry worked seven days a week in Cincinnati during World War II, and he began telling Shirley, 'When this war is over, I'm going back to Tennessee and buy me a farm.' Shirley remembers now, *"I had some doubts about him liking farm life. Now of course we're both brought up on farms, but it's quite different being responsible, being responsible for one. I just had an idea that he wouldn't like it as much as he thought, and that turned out to be the case. Too much hard work and too little money coming in."*

During those years in middle Tennessee, Shirley thought about going back to college and finishing up the coursework for her lifetime teaching certificate. *"But I tell you, Jennifer,"* she says, *"I just didn't feel like I could do all that I had to do at home and work. Your grandpa so often worked construction, so he had to be away from home. Now I just think it's most important for somebody to be at home with children, even after they're school-age, when they get home from school."*

When Shirley interjects her opinions—her prediction that Harry wouldn't like farm work, or her feeling that children need someone home with them, for example—into her stories, she usually accompanies the opinion with a distinct hand gesture. She extends her hand, bent back from the wrist with the palm up and open, as though she has nothing to hide. Even when she feels that her opinions are perhaps old-fashioned and inappropriate, she has no problem expressing them. *"Back in those days especially, and even today, I don't think men are capable as much as women at raising children and doing their job "* She laughs and motions toward the tape recorder with the hand she already has extended. *"Now, that ought to be off the record, Jennifer "*

After farming and then working construction for several years, Harry decided, on his brother's recommendation, to move his family four hours east to work in a glass manufacturing plant in Kingsport, Tennessee. Shirley knew no one in the area except for Harry's brother. She doesn't mention the move bothering her but says that it was hard on her mother, who had gotten used to having her grandchildren nearby when Shirley and Harry lived in middle Tennessee.

We started attending First Baptist right away, but I hadn't met many people, staying home with the kids, of course. Then one day these two women from the church stopped by to welcome me to town and they became my best friends, and we've stayed best friends all of these years.

We did feel like outsiders, though I can't remember the specifics. There were so many people in Church Hill who had lived here for generations, and they would always talk about 'so-and-so who's related to so-and-so'.

Shirley has little to say about her own life in the forty years she has lived in Church Hill; perhaps she thinks that I have observed a good portion of those years and don't need that information. But she has learned about the connections between people in her new community. Throughout our interviews, she talks about how people are related, where people used to live, how people she has known for decades have died. These stories of connections are not told in a gossipy way—she does not speculate, generally, about people's personal lives—but as simply the facts of lives.



The daily visits to the nursing home are wearing Shirley out. Finding transportation, deciding what to wear, cooking for one—these manageable-sounding tasks are difficult for an 84-year-old woman who does not drive. She has a neighbor who usually takes her to see Harry, and some of Harry's nephews who still live in town take

her to the grocery. She feels guilty asking folks for these favors, but with no children or grandchildren living close by, it's all she can do.

Aging is making it hard for Shirley to take care of herself, too. She laughs that she's always been slow but that when she looks back, she used to be able to do much more than she can do now. She also rues the mental part of aging: *"Putting things down and forgetting what I did with 'em. Then spending time hunting and maybe never find it."* She adds to the list of age-related difficulties.

And of course I never have been the best person at talking about personal things, and now I have a hard time thinking of the words that I want to say, so that is a bad part of it, believe me. But I try to be thankful, Jennifer, that I'm as well as I am. There's many of those people down at the nursing home that are younger than I am. And when I see them it reminds me to thank the Lord for my blessings

She may have a hard time talking about personal issues, but talking about her faith comes easily to Shirley. Her memory of getting saved at a revival meeting when she was thirteen years old is telling for its honesty:

[T]his old man spoke to me, and I went to the altar, and they was a girl that I was in school with, about my age, went, too. She was just exactly the opposite in appearance to me. I was a blonde, something like you when I was little, and this girl had black hair, real swarthy-looking complexion. I heard this old man say, 'She sure is a good girl.' Well, he was talking about her, but I didn't like it cause he wasn't talking about me. That turned me off, him talking about a good, good little girl she was. Cause my mother wanted me to be perfect, I want you to know. And she had her reasons, which I understand. But that just turned me off. I did not accept the Lord that day.

The preacher told us to go home and find a quiet place and pray. [There] was a little sloping hill behind our house, and there was a place down at the foot of the hill where the water ran, and it made a real pretty place. There was an old dead log there. I went down there and knelt by that log and prayed. And the Lord forgave me for my little mean streak about being jealous of the other girl, and I accepted the Lord right there. No big thing like you might hear some people tell about their conversion.

The raw details in Shirley's memories—petty jealousy of a classmate in the midst of a significant life moment, the simplicity of her prayer by the log—belie her claim that her memory of the past isn't good. She is apologetic that her experiences themselves are not particularly dramatic.

When I ask Shirley about what she thinks it means to be a strong person, she immediately talks about her faith, and yet she questions how she interpreted her faith in the context of her marriage.

I think our faith in God—I have said before that I am not as mature as I ought to be, as mature a Christian as I ought to be, as long as I've been a Christian. I think one thing we women expect, know, that the Bible says a man is supposed to be a leader of a Christian family. Well, your grandpa never was, so I didn't feel it my place to, so I'm thinking maybe I made a mistake there. He wouldn't say grace at the table, which I know that can or cannot mean very much, but we never [did that] ... My mother was probably a lot like that too. I do know she was a good Christian in order to get through all the things she went through in her life. Strong. But she kept it mostly to herself.

The specter of Shirley's mother rises again and again in these interviews. Shirley sees her mother's suffering as worse than her own and regrets not living up to her mother's model or expectations. And yet in this final way—of keeping problems to herself—Shirley is as much like her mother as a daughter could be.



Just three months after this conversation, my grandfather Harry dies, and the family gathers in Church Hill for the funeral. Before the service begins, the pastor asks the family to join him in a side room for a prayer. As we shuffle out of the pews, Shirley touches my arm and leans towards me with a whisper, *"I'm sure that it must be difficult for Patrick being the only black person here. He seems to be handling it well. You know the nurse who took care of Harry at the end was a black woman, and it turned out that*

she was the granddaughter of a woman your grandpa and I used to take Meals on Wheels to."

The pastor asks us to bow our heads, and I reach for Shirley's hand. At the funeral of her husband of sixty-one years, she continues thinking about connections between people, sorting out who is related to whom and what people's stories are. Perhaps Patrick is easier to worry about than her own loneliness and loss. He is, here at the funeral, like Shirley has been much of her life: a part of the community and yet somehow just outside its boundaries.

Shirley never cries during the funeral or at the family gatherings before or after the service. She looks pale and tired but she speaks to everyone who brings food to her house or who comes to the funeral home. Perhaps she cries later, in the privacy of her empty home.



On a cold Saturday a month after the funeral, my sister Joanna and I drive to visit Shirley for the day. She has cooked hamburger patties, baked potatoes, and baked beans. It is one of the biggest meals she has prepared in months. She sets out pickles and mustard and remembers, *"Harry used to only eat mayonnaise with his hamburgers, but I've always liked mustard with mine. We didn't used to buy mustard regularly"*

Joanna and I finish eating our lunches before she is even halfway through her own. She is describing the events leading up to Harry's death as though we have not heard the details before, how he was taken to the hospital in the middle of the night for dehydration and while there, doctors discovered cancer. Her telling is smooth,

unemotional, and practiced, these are details she has told many times in the weeks following Harry's death. She still sounds surprised at how quickly Harry died

The subject of Patrick comes up in conversation and I ask her if she'd known many black people growing up in middle Tennessee. She gives a candid response

No. Practically none. And then when I would get around them, I felt uncomfortable because I'd never been around them. Now Jennifer, I'm just being honest. That's how it was! But you know, I'm glad you brought that up, Jennifer. After the funeral, so many people commented on how good-looking Patrick was! Linda [Shirley's daughter] said, 'I see why he swept her off her feet.'

I remember when Linda was going to Belmont, there were a lot of blacks in Nashville. They were moving into that area and a lot of the whites didn't like it and were selling their houses. But anyhow, I remember Linda saying something about some of the black men being good looking. I don't think Papaw and I would've accepted it at all if she had married a black man. None of us like to think we're prejudiced, but that just wasn't done then.

Shirley gestures with her hands again. She has nothing to hide. She accepts life as it is—cold wind blowing through the floor, communities where she knew no one, rats in the closet, a granddaughter in an interracial marriage. She has had little control over many facets of her life, but she is confident in her opinions, and in changing those opinions over time.



Joanna and I take Shirley grocery shopping before we leave. We fall easily into patronizing her: "Don't you like grapefruit juice, Mamaw? This sure is a good price on it. Why don't you get two cans, then you'll have one in the pantry." Joanna and I have learned these techniques, which Shirley may well see through, from our mother. Shirley seems overwhelmed at the quantity of groceries we convince her to buy, but she agrees

with us that the extra food will keep her from asking someone to take her to the store for a while.

At the grocery store, in the car, and back in the kitchen—there is no place that Shirley is not talking. Her stories, about people we don't know at her church or at the nursing home, seem easier for her to talk about than the stories of her own life. She sighs her musical sigh when we have to leave and she thanks us for taking her shopping. She offers to give us some of her old Guideposts magazines and tells us to drive safely.

Chapter VI

Conclusion

I would like to promise her that she will grow up with a sense of her cousins and of rivers and of her great-grandmother's teacups, would like to pledge her a picnic on a river with fried chicken and her hair uncombed, would like to give her home for her birthday, but we live differently now and I can promise her nothing like that I give her a xylophone and a sundress from Madeira, and promise to tell her a funny story

Joan Didion, "On Going Home"

Guess what [Patrick] said to me one day, girl He called here, and I said, 'Are you coming home for the holidays?' He said, 'Yes,' said, 'I'm coming to Mama's ' I thought to myself, now what did he mean by that? It finally come to me well, he don't call this home no more Well, see, I call here in Cleveland home for him! But it was real funny, you know, to hear him say I'm coming to Mama and not coming home

Virginia Nance

One of the curious things I discovered in my interviews with Edith, Ella Ruth, Shirley, and Virginia was that they assumed I knew more about their lives and about their histories than I did. When I asked Shirley what she did after graduating from high school, she responded, with real surprise, "*You don't know that I have almost two years [of college?]*" Stories may have been told and Patrick and I were not paying attention. Stories may also have been kept from us because we were considered too young

But, as Joan Didion already saw in 1967, we live in a different time from the one these four women grew up in. And one of the things that has changed, in addition to a sense of home as a static place, is the experience of hearing and telling life stories. When Edith says, "*I remember hearing a story about [Great-]Grandpa Roberts,*" she is referring to a time when there was less competition for her attention—no TV, no movie theater in town, no telephone My generation on the other hand, the generation of Phil Donahue and Oprah, may not know the stories about Great-Grandpa, but we are skilled in

talking about ourselves and in analyzing the minute details of motivation and blame in our lives. This difference in communication style between generations meant that the question I set out to ask—"How do you define strength?"—got answered in a very different way than I had imagined.

These women, it turns out, were less interested in giving me a definition of strength or in exploring how that idea might apply to them than in telling me the stories of their lives. And then telling me the stories again. The women repeated themselves both within and between interviews, telling me some stories three or four times.

This redundancy could have been dismissed as a byproduct of old age. But I began to see in these repeated stories a use of stories to show a certain version of themselves to the world. As Bonnie Dill says of her own series of interviews with women:

[L]ife history provides a means of exploring the processes whereby people construct, experience and create meaning in both the interactional and structural aspects of their lives.... [T]he stories which the women told can be seen as metaphors of their lives; their recollection of events, and their organization of them in a story which gives them meaning and structure at the moment of the telling. (24-25)

As I looked at the content of the interviews themselves, I found that these women used stories to "create meaning," in Dill's words, out of the events of their lives. The stories the women tell—specifically, the stories the women tell me and others in their families—show examples of their strength as well as how telling the story has given them strength

The lives of these four women have been shaped by a number of social factors, including race and class, gender, age, and religion. The women's stories reflect how those factors have created differences and similarities between the women, and also how the women individually confront those factors in the stories they tell about their lives. Although these factors intersect in a number of areas—career choices, for example, were determined by race, class, *and* gender—looking at the factors individually provides an overview of the sources of the challenges and opportunities through which the women developed strength.

Race and Class

Race and class are the most obvious differences among the women. All four women have spent their lives in racially homogenous communities, the two black women in predominantly black churches, schools, and neighborhoods, the two white women in predominantly white institutions and neighborhoods. But Ella Ruth and Virginia worked for and with white people, and have had white friends and family members, while Edith and Shirley rarely interacted with non-whites in any context. Part of this difference stems from the white women living in rural areas and in small towns with very few non-white residents, compared with the black women living in the relatively more diverse city of Cleveland. Part of the difference, too, can be attributed to the women's differing occupations. Edith and Shirley, as teachers, likely worked with other white women and reported to a white male principal, the day-work and cooking that Ella Ruth and Virginia did was done exclusively, as far as the interviews show, for white employers.

The educational and career differences among the women reflect both racial and class influences. Shirley and Edith were born into families with some formal education and a desire to see their children educated, compared to the working class backgrounds of Ella Ruth and Virginia. When Edith lists the limited career choices for women at that time—“*nurse, teacher, or secretary*”—she is describing choices available primarily to middle-class white women who could afford college. Ella Ruth and Virginia did not see college as an option at all and worked in low-skill, low-wage positions. However, their careers in cooking and in domestic work, in addition to the hair styling Virginia did on the side, provided these two women with a flexibility of scheduling that Edith’s and Shirley’s careers did not.

For Ella Ruth and Virginia, race is a defining fact of their lives. They talk about race factually, referring to “*a white woman I worked with*” or “*the black school*” comfortably. Skin color has affected these two women in ways I can only speculate about based on my interviews with them. They both told me that the desegregation of public schools in Cleveland was difficult, as they helped their children decide whether to move to the integrated high school or to stay in the predominantly black school. They also shared stories about encountering white people who held racist views. Neither woman spent a great deal of energy talking about racism, but they acknowledge race as a fact of their lives.

For Edith and Shirley, on the other hand, race does not seem to be a factor they see as applicable to them. This is consistent with Ruth Frankenberg’s findings in The Social Construction of Whiteness: White Women, Race Matters. Race is often invisible,

or “normal,” to those in the dominant white culture Frankenberg notes, “Whiteness, as a set of normative cultural practices, is visible most clearly to those it definitively excludes and those to whom it does violence. Those who are securely housed within its borders usually do not examine it” (228-29). In talking with me, Shirley admits feeling uncomfortable around black people when she was growing up, and Edith doesn’t mention the subject of race at all.

Race and class are, finally, part of several complicated factors affecting how the women see me and my marriage to Patrick. His grandmothers accepted our relationship and eventual marriage with no comment; in their community, it is not uncommon to know someone in an interracial relationship. Edith and Shirley, I suspect, are still a bit taken aback. They have spent very little time around black people, and interracial marriage is a rare occurrence in their small-town, white communities. But Patrick’s career as a college professor made accepting him easier. His occupation makes him “like them” in one way

Gender

Gender has shaped the four women’s choices and responsibilities from the time they were young girls. Virginia was the eldest girl in her family and remembers having to help her mother with the laundry and cooking for the younger children, while her older brothers did not. As adults, gender impacted the choices the women felt they had in their careers, in their marriages, and in their parenting responsibilities

None of the women said that they considered not marrying, and they recall their decisions to marry, ironically, as a means of gaining a measure of control over their lives. Virginia tells me several times that she got married to get away from her father. She says, *"People didn't just go live together like they do now. So I knew I had to get married to get out on my own. That's what I had in my heart from the beginning."* Edith's father's veto power over her career choice might have been a motivation for her marriage, as well. And Ella Ruth, orphaned and cared for by her aunt, probably saw marriage as a way of finally establishing a life for herself.

Gender affected these women most significantly when they had children. Edith and Shirley both halted their careers—Shirley permanently—after having babies. Shirley's belief that women are more suited than men to care for children was a belief that seemed to be shared by all the women. Ella Ruth's choice to stay in her marriage and Virginia's choice to end hers were both motivated by their devotion to their children and their determination to do the right thing by them. None of the women seemed to have expected hands-on help from their spouses in caring for their young children, and none, as I interpret their stories, received such help.

Age and Generation

The four women are in their late 70s to early 80s, and their health is not what it was when they were younger. Edith is the only one of the women without any health problems that require regular attention; the lucky start she had in life, as the woman born into the family with the most resources of food and money in the group, may still be

paying dividends. But all four women bemoan how “not getting around like I used to” makes their lives more difficult.

The women share the hope of many in their generation that they can be independent as long as possible. Mary Pipher notes that the emphasis Americans place on independence and self-sufficiency makes aging difficult, since most elderly people need more help as they age. “Many would rather pay strangers, do without help, or even die than be dependent on those they love,” Pipher writes. “They don’t want to be a burden, the greatest of American crimes.” (52). All four of the women are dependent to some extent on relatives, but they all said things like, “I do not want to live with my kids!” and “I do not want to be in a nursing home!”

Lack of transportation already limits the independence the women have. Edith is the only one of the four who still drives, and she does so with trepidation. Although the other three women live in less rural settings and have neighbors and family members who can drive them places and run errands for them, they miss the freedom of driving themselves. Ella Ruth says, with pain, of driving, “*That’s your privilege!*” Even Shirley, who has never had a driver’s license, finds life more difficult without my grandfather to provide her with transportation.

Perhaps more profound, even, than the physical and circumstantial effects of advanced age are the emotional and spiritual ones. Three of the women live alone, and the funerals of friends and family members are a regular part of all four women’s lives. They realize, as Edith says, that “*time’s running out.*” They all talked to me about dying, about either being afraid of it or about being ready for it. This sense of being at the end of her

life moves Edith to share some of her life lessons with me—*"If you want to take a trip, do it now,"* for example—and Virginia to pray for somebody else to *"take over in the family"* when she gets too weak.

Religion

These women have gone to church since their childhoods, when they attended with their grandmothers. Their grandmothers instructed them in how to worship (*"My grandmother and them used to make us get down on our knees and pray,"* Virginia remembers.), how to behave (*"I learned respect for the church, cause I know I was made to sit still and behave!"* Shirley says.), and how to treat others (*"On Mother's Day...she'd have a box of roses. White and red And pins. And she'd take 'em so if anybody didn't have one, everybody could have a rose to wear that day,"* Edith recalls) Their grandmothers were role models for their own faiths.

The four currently attend conservative, mainline Protestant churches—Methodist, Cumberland Presbyterian, and Baptist—to which they have long-standing attachments Ella Ruth, Virginia, and Shirley have all been members of their present congregations for at least the last forty years, Edith attends the church she went to as a child Ella Ruth says about going to the same church her entire life, *"You know, there's God in all the churches Everywhere you go there's God But just where you been used to going, you know."* These churches are the women's primary source of fellowship, friendship, and gossip outside of their families.

When they talk about their concept of strength, all four women describe strength in terms of their faith in God. *"That's just the Lord helping you out,"* Ella Ruth says when I ask her what she thinks it means to be strong. These women believe in an omnipotent God who has planned and guided all the events of their lives. Ella Ruth even states confidently that her two sons' deaths were part of God's purpose. We might imagine that this kind of faith was, at times, an opiate that kept them from trying to get out of difficult situations by believing that those situations were God-ordained. But as they talk about their lives now, their faith in God comes across as the wisdom that they did not survive life's difficulties by their own individual efforts. God has been there, perhaps in the form of Mr. Benton helping Virginia buy a car, perhaps as a wildflower Edith found tucked among some dead leaves during a walk in the woods.



The stories I heard in my interviews were mostly about small, ordinary choices the women made and continue to make in their lives. They talked about cooking, about stretching the budget to buy a teddy bear for a child, about listening to a preacher's sermon. Kathleen Norris notes that "what we think we are only 'getting through' has the power to change us, just as we have the power to transform what seems meaningless—the endless repetitions of a litany or the motions of vacuuming a floor" (82). For these four women the small choices they made over time helped them negotiate transformative change in their lives. I'll briefly touch on three examples of such choices.

One way these women negotiated change in their lives was by emphasizing the importance of education to their children. These women saw that education could expand their children's career choices and income potential, and they made sure that their children took education seriously. Ella Ruth's daughter Joan says that when she was young, her mother, who just had a seventh-grade education herself, talked constantly to the children about how important going to school was. All four grandmothers have college-educated children, which has changed the women's lives as well as their children's. Virginia, for example, gets occasional financial help from her daughter Azella to supplement the Social Security check that is Virginia's only income.

The four women also brought about change in their lives by serving as an example to their children of certain values. Ella Ruth and Virginia stayed away from alcohol and preached their disapproval of drinking to their children, none of whom, to my knowledge, have had problems with alcohol. Edith sewed and taught her daughter how to sew, and Nancy is now as talented a seamstress as her mother. Shirley remained devoted to her husband through the dark times of his dementia, showing her children how much she believed her wedding vows.

Accepting difficulties as a part of life is a third example of a small action which gave the women strength over time. When the four women talked about the hard times of their lives, they did not waste a lot of time analyzing who was to blame for the difficulty or what they themselves could have done differently. They were raised in what Pipher calls the "pre-psychology" culture, when you kept your problems to yourself and figured out how to cope, for good or for bad (18). Whether it was Ella Ruth talking about her

mother and father dying when she was young or Shirley mentioning the lack of reliable birth control available when she was young, the difficulties these women encountered were simply a part of the landscape

These are just three of the many examples the women give of small, transforming choices they have made. Ultimately, though, the act of telling the stories, even just to themselves, has given women strength by providing a means for them to define themselves.

Virginia's stories define her as independent, in the past and in the present. "*As long as I can do for myself,*" she says, "*I'll be glad to be here.*" Two of Virginia's most-told stories are those about her decision to kick Ernest out of the house and about buying a car with help from Mr. Benton. These stories illustrate Virginia's determination to support her family on her own through hard work and individual effort. When she describes kicking Ernest out of the house as though it happened in one fell swoop, she's creating a story without doubts, a less messy version of events than what seems to have actually happened. Virginia is not lying to herself—she did separate from Ernest, and she did raise her children on her own—but her story defines her as a decisive, self-reliant woman who made the best possible choice for her children.

The stories Edith tells most often are not directly about her and her choices at all. Edith's strength for what she calls the "*normal things of life*" comes from models from her past. As a woman who is a talented seamstress, who cooks and gardens, and who is involved in the lives of her grandchildren, Edith's stories about the past, specifically about her Grandma Hedgecock, define her strength as part of a lineage of strong, talented

women. Edith's stories about what the women before her accomplished and endured serve as reminders about the strength required in everyday life simply to put food on the table, to stand up for oneself, and to care for those one loves.

Ella Ruth's stories about having the strength to stay in an impossibly difficult marriage are about selflessness and sacrifice, about her determination to "*take anything*." When she says, several times, that she did not want to drag her children "*from pillar to post*," Ella Ruth is justifying a decision that she knows many women would not have made. Telling stories about her husband's many flaws reminds her—and her family—of the strength Ella Ruth possessed to endure hardship and to ensure that her children focused on education and on their futures.

Finally, while Shirley tells stories of childhood poverty, of moving far from her home and family, and of the recent death of her husband, her strength comes through in the stoicism and flexibility with which she has handled such difficulties. "*I didn't let it bother me*," she says. Talking about other people, about the nurse who cared for Shirley's husband, for example, keeps the focus off of Shirley herself—"*I never have been the best person at talking about personal things*," she admits—and on to her ability to notice life, to notice others' problems, and to keep her own problems to herself.

Ursula Le Guin describes the stories of women, what she calls "the mother tongue" as "language not as mere communication but as relation, relationship", this language has power, she says "not in dividing but in binding, not in distancing but in uniting" (149). The stories Ella Ruth, Edith, Virginia, and Shirley tell offer examples of strength both in their content and in the definition their telling gives to the women's lives

But the women's stories also connect them to other women, other ordinary women. Their stories connect the women to me.

As both interviewer and family member, I am an heir to these stories. In a literal sense, the stories tell our family about its heritage. Many of the specific experiences in the women's stories, like picking cotton or leaving school in the seventh grade, will seem foreign to future generations; other stories, those about marriage and children and work and death, contain elements of human joy and suffering that will always be recognizable. On another level, I also inherit from these stories a more complex concept of what it means to be strong. I might not have made the same choices Virginia, Edith, Ella Ruth, and Shirley made, but I admire the women and their strength immensely. Finally, I am left with a nagging challenge to think about my own stories. What stories will I tell in "the mother tongue"? What stories will I tell to define my strength? The grandmothers' stories tell me where I have come from, but I have to create stories of strength for myself.



Shirley tells me a story about searching a few years ago for a specific place from her childhood. She discovers that she is left with only her memories and this story. And the stories are what I am left with, as well

We [Shirley and her sister Lorraine] didn't have a lot of time to play. But we had just one friend, Katherine, that we played with. And we had a trail through the woods to her house. But so often we would meet down about halfway and play in—there was a stream that ran through their property. We liked to play in it.

And there was one tree that we used to climb in, and we would play like we were in a tall building, which we knew nothing about, but that's what we played like And a good many years ago now, we went, Lorraine and I—I guess Harry must have driven us—went down that way [to the farm where Shirley and Lorraine grew up] And we tried to find that tree And we couldn't It was a sycamore But Lorraine had talked to Katherine, and she said that tree just was not there anymore

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