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# The Unbroken Circle

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# The Unbroken Circle

Senior Honors Thesis

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Fall 2005

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## Preface

*“ . . . The heart of America  
A land of even tempo,  
A land of mild traditions,  
A land that has kept its traditions of horse racing,  
Ballad, song, story and folk music.  
It has held steadfast to its pioneer America  
And for the soil of Kentucky,  
That is filled with bluegrass beauty  
That is not akin to poetry  
But is poetry. . . .  
And when I go beyond the border,  
I take with me growth and beauty of the seasons,  
The music of wind in pine and cedar tops,  
The wordless songs of snow-melted water  
When it pours over the rocks to wake the spring.  
I take with me Kentucky embedded in my brain and heart,  
In my flesh and bone and blood  
Since I am Kentucky  
And Kentucky is part of me.”*

*-from “Kentucky is my Land” by Jesse Stuart*

I grew up in the small town of Beattyville, Kentucky. It’s just a blip on the map nestled in the eastern half of the state. Because I was isolated in a town whose only claim to fame is the fact that it is the place where the Kentucky River is born, a place that only has one high school, and a place that only has a handful of restaurants, including one named “The Purple Cow,” Eastern Kentucky soon became the place I longed to escape. However, today, it is the place that I cannot stop writing about.

Jesse Stuart often claimed that the “voices” would only speak to him in W-hollow, meaning that he could only write at home. Thankfully, I am able to write many other places, but I have been unable to escape the voices that speak to me from my home.

I grew up reading L.M. Montgomery's Anne of Green Gables novels, Louisa May Alcott's Little Women, Laura Ingalls Wilder's Little House on the Prairie, and James M. Barrie's Peter Pan. When I entered high school, my love for literature began to blossom. I discovered Austen, Thackeray, and Doyle. Flipping through my literature book, I stumbled upon a short story by William Faulkner entitled "Barn Burning." This was my first introduction to Faulkner and Southern writing, and I loved it. Once in college, I began to try to read more works by Southern authors and took classes based on them. I became enchanted with Jesse Stuart's novel Beyond Dark Hills and thoroughly confused, yet intrigued by Faulkner novels like The Sound and the Fury. I came to know Bobbie Ann Mason, Flannery O'Connor, and poets like Wendell Berry, Jim Wayne Miller, and Robert Penn Warren. I also discovered the works of Ernest Hemingway, who was not Southern, but whose novels were so poignant I could not put them down.

So, by the time I began to plan an honors thesis project, I knew that I wanted to do something involving creative writing, particularly dealing with fiction, and I knew that my project would be a work with content distinctly defined as Southern and Appalachian. Ultimately, I decided to create a collection of short stories that would focus on a particular family living in Eastern Kentucky. My collection of short stories entitled "Unbroken Circles" focuses on women belonging to the fictional Boone family and on the interactions of three women in particular: Shirley, Hazel, and Ann. The relationships of these women to each other represent the traditional importance of family and family history that are prominent in Eastern Kentucky.

In this area, family history, especially the oral re-telling of family history, is a continuous activity that enters into everyday life. Because of this influence, my goal for this collection was to present the history of several women belonging to one family.

Though their lives are often very different because of age, education, and experience, these

women's lives are irrevocably intertwined. Set in Eastern Kentucky, the stories, which take place from the 1960s to the present, not only represent the permanence of family ties among women, but also the permanence of place and culture in their lives. Though they struggle to discover their identities in their family and community and at times rebel against the society and culture that created them, these women are able to discover strength within themselves, solid as the Appalachian Mountains.

Obviously, the people that I have grown up with and the events I have been a part of in Eastern Kentucky have inspired my collection. My own family also inspired a great deal of the elements that are found in "A Woman's Time" and in "Dust Devil." My mother and father frequently recounted stories of getting the family Christmas tree from the woods, skipping school, getting fruit as gifts, and even receiving a baby doll in a burlap sack. They also discussed going to the drive-in on dates and having silly arguments. These family yarns—spilled out at the dinner table or at family reunions—helped give me central ideas for some of my short stories and directed how my characters might have behaved and what they might have experienced.

Also, the entire community that I grew up in shaped this collection. They provided me with a sense of local color and culture that became an important aspect of my writing. From funeral and sports traditions to colloquial phrases, the town as a whole influenced this thesis. The community, in my work, has a collective voice and opinion much like its own real-life counterpart. Social mores, traditions, and even gossip all play a vital role in small-town life. In the last piece of my collection, for example, Anne struggles with the community's view of her out-of-town boyfriend and her choice to pursue an education away from home. Ann, Shirley, and Hazel deal with these types of pressures from the community. They must hold their family together, are responsible for how their family is seen in the community, and must decide what parts of this community they are going to

reject or embrace. Hazel, for instance, accepts most aspects of the community and the role she must fulfill in it as she contemplates her life during her illness. Ann, on the other hand, rejects many of the traditions of the town, but still retains the parts that have made her the person she is growing into.

Though I mentioned some of the early literary influences that fostered my inclination toward Southern and Appalachian writing, there are specific works and authors which not only gave me certain notions about writing before I began my thesis, but whose literary devices, textual organization, and tone are manifested in my own work. First, Jesse Stuart's works, his novels and his short stories, often deal with the theme of the swift passage of time. When I first read Stuart's work, I felt as if he was able to describe perfectly one of my own deepest fears and concerns. Being able to see how well Stuart displayed this fear, whether it was symbolically or verbally, challenged me to want to try to portray this theme in my pieces. I feel that his use of this theme encourages self-reflection and produces notable changes in the characters. These are specific aspects that I wanted my own reader to notice.

William Faulkner, on the other hand, challenged me to stay away from the typical chronological ordering of my pieces. When I read The Sound and the Fury, I loved trying to figure out the different time periods and characters, and I feel that Faulkner's use of this technique enhances reader participation in the novel and makes one feel like a member the community. Obviously, Faulkner's work is much more complicated than my own, but my goal was to experiment with emulating his style to encourage my reader to take an active role in determining the characters' relations and the order of events.

To further enhance the organizational structure of my work, I looked at Ernest Hemingway's organization of his collection of short stories entitled In Our Time. Not only are Hemingway's short stories some of the best examples of this genre, but they often have

a precise organization in terms of their placement and their fitting together. In this collection, Hemingway frames his short stories with interim pieces that do not seem to be connected with the pieces themselves. However, Hemingway uses the obviously different storylines to enhance the themes or bring to light certain issues in his short stories that the reader may otherwise have overlooked. I saw how Hemingway's interim pieces enhanced the flow of his collection and allowed the pieces to be viewed as a whole instead of individually. I had read several of these short stories outside this collection, and because of the interim pieces, when I re-read them, my perception of them changed. I wanted to see if I too could create a collection of short stories in which individual pieces could stand alone and then, because they were tied together with interim pieces, could be viewed as a cohesive whole.

Once I began to seek a particular organization for my stories, I also began to concentrate on how the organization of my thesis could affect the reader's perception of the characters and the themes. The organization of my thesis may seem peculiar, but there is a method behind it. The short stories and interim pieces are not arranged in chronological order. This is perhaps the most notable conundrum. Frankly, I did not wish for the stories to be in chronological order because I wanted them to play directly off the ideas and people mentioned in the interim pieces beforehand. I did not want to use similar themes in back-to-back pieces because I did not want the commonalities to become redundant. Each short story can stand alone, but together they can also be seen as a connected whole. The interim pieces take place at family reunions. I chose this location so that the reader could see all of the characters together, interacting, at different times in lives. The interim pieces are also not in chronological order because this allows the reader to contrast the characters' attitudes and actions at different ages in their lives, and this contrast makes their changes more evident. We see Ann at eighteen, excited to get away



from home, and then we see her at twenty-two, mourning the loss of home. Since Ann is the most central character of this collection, it was very important that she be featured in each of the interim pieces. Also, the short stories themselves are meant to coincide with the interim pieces in that the larger pieces are the “stories” that would have been told at the family reunions. They are the background knowledge or the explanation for the characters’ actions or attitudes at the family reunion and, at times, a leap into the future so that the reader will know how the characters’ decisions affected their lives. When learning about a family history in reality, especially verbally, one would not hear the entire story chronologically, and I feel that this ordering of stories gives the pieces the feel of a storytelling session. The last piece of this collection also helps bind the individual pieces together. This list story reconnects the reader to topics previously discussed in the other sections. By seeing Ann contemplate her thoughts under a starry sky as she does at the beginning, the collection is able to come to a circular end. However, in order to quell the reader’s early confusion, I did opt to include a family tree to sort out the characters and their relationships to one another quickly. Determining the types of organizational methods I wanted to use for this collection was a difficult decision because there are many options. However, I do feel as though I chose methods that aid in the development of the characters and the development of their relationships to one another. I also feel that this style unifies the different themes in the collection.

The themes that I chose to work with and that are emphasized by their appearance in non-sequential pieces are the swift passage of time, which I have discussed a bit before, and the concepts of family ties and home. The time theme is prevalent in every short story. Characters are depicted at different ages that fluctuate with each piece. These large jumps in time help to demonstrate how swiftly time does pass and how life begins to seem like a series of snapshots as we lose detailed remembrances. These “snapshots” of the characters

depict them in crucial moments when the choices they make will affect the rest of their lives. They are presented with choices, and decisions are made or, as in “A Woman’s Time” and “Star River,” the maturation process becomes noticeable. When Shirley realizes the reality of someday becoming a mother in “A Woman’s Time,” she begins to doubt why she enjoys playing with dolls, and suddenly she is no longer a little girl. I wished to capture defining moments in my characters’ lives, then offer those as keys to the reader, allowing the reader to unlock the characters’ lives and be able to make accurate speculations on what their future actions will be.

In these pieces, I also wanted to deal with the interconnectivity of our lives, particularly in families and among women in those families. The title of this collection, “Unbroken Circles,” comes from an old hymn, “May the Circle be Unbroken,” sung at the end of the last interim piece. An important thread, religion, runs through these pieces and is the primary connector of the characters. Their faith in religion brings these characters the hope that the family circle will never again be broken in heaven. Once united in death, they will no longer have to worry about temporary separations. Not only do they display hope in the future in this sense, but because their lives are bound together through their common pasts, they have strong hope in the continuation of their ideas and traditions within their family.

In some way, each of these characters is forever linked to another character, changing and shaping their own and others’ lives. Hazel’s and Shirley’s lives directly influence Ann. They teach her country traditions, and they encourage her growth into womanhood. Shirley allows her daughter to sit in on an adult conversation, and Hazel teaches Ann the most maturing lesson of all: how to survive the death of a loved one. Shakespeare’s rings of connectivity in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* tie the lives of the

characters together. In the same way, I attempt to weave this tapestry of lives together so that the reader can not only see individual threads but the work as a whole.

The loss of home is another concept the characters deal with. Whether it is Hazel dealing with her illness and life in the nursing home, Shirley struggling with the trap of home, or Ann yearning to define it, each of the characters deals with this concept in some way. A common ideology in Eastern Kentucky is always defining home as a place, but when that place changes, the question of whether or not home is a feeling, person, or a self-created construct arises. At the end of the collection, in the last section of the list story, the reader hopefully learns Ann's true and final feelings about this process: importance should be placed on family and relationships, and though home may no longer exist as it once had, the people and place that once evoked that feeling will remain with her indefinitely.

Like Ann trying to discern her true feelings about her home and family, I too have been dealing with my feelings about this collection. Working on this thesis has been a very demanding but enjoyable experience. I have struggled, but through these struggles, I have learned more about the craft of fiction writing and have realized how I can stretch my own abilities when I push myself to do so. Most importantly, I have realized how much I still want and need to learn about this craft. So, after months of writing, editing, and re-editing, I am ecstatic to present to you, my reader, a collection of short stories that begins as I did, in the heart of Eastern Kentucky, and the history of the journey of several women, belonging to one family, that ultimately brings them back to where they started—with each other.

## Family Reunion: Ann, age sixteen

I hate family reunions. They are just an overzealous excuse for distant relatives to get together and eat. Everyone pretends to have missed me a great deal. Aunts and uncles that I haven't seen since the last family reunion three years ago fawn all over me. They exclaim and gasp about how much I have grown, how much I look like Grandma, how clever I am in school. I grimace at them through clenched teeth. They think I am smiling because they are too oblivious to notice the difference. How could they? They are no more knowledgeable of my moods than my parents, who prefer to ignore the ostentatious bouts of teenage angst, pretending that not seeing will somehow make the problems go away.

"Shirley, your little Ann is growing into such a beautiful young lady," some virtually unknown cousin tells Mom.

Aunt Lucy moves her way into the little circle that has surrounded me.

"Yes," she nods to them, "she certainly is. It's hard to believe she is sixteen. Why, at the last family reunion she was still nothing but a baby."

"She was a small little thing. I wish Momma could see her now," Mom tells them.

They all continue to nod mournfully like those wooden birds that dip their heads down into cool glasses of water. The swarm moves on, and I cannot help but roll my eyes at them as they leave.

## Star River

We watched the stars flow above us. They were drowning in a sea of deepening black sky. The world blurred as wind ran through my hair and I held my big floppy straw hat with one hand.

We were like Grace Kelly and Fred Astaire in one of those old Technicolor films, only the curvy Appalachian roads were not those of Venice or Prague that I had been dreaming of. But we did have the white convertible for the night.

“Pull over,” I demanded, as we passed a field of daisies and alfalfa wafting in the damp, heavy summer breezes.

“Why?”

“Oh, just go along with it.”

I looked up into the vibrant eyes and batted my own long brown lashes. He laughed at my silliness, and we coasted off the cracked pavement. The motor died and the only sounds were the clicks of the engine cooling and the katydids singing.

“There must be water near here,” he murmured, noticing their melancholy symphony.

“Let’s look. . . .”

“Why don’t you use the door?” he scolded as I clamored out despite my skirt.

“Heaven forbid that I scratch the car!”

“Hey! We’re lucky Dad let me drive this.”

“We are lucky we are alive.”

I grabbed his hand and we were off running. My flip-flops filled the night with click-clacking. Daisies squished beneath their soles, leaving yellow dust speckling my feet.

In the country you don't have to worry about being on neighbors' property at night. Most of the time if they own property that means they are older, and if they are older they are most likely in bed and asleep in the hours when the young venture out. Of course there could always be dogs around to alert their owners, but you know that pretty quickly.

So we abandoned the societal constraints we abided by during the day, forgot all the parental warnings, and headed straight into reckless youthful pleasure. I had never been the average good-time girl who had fun cruisin' town in her car or who went out with the boys to drink. I loved picnics, reading books in a hammock, playing the piano, climbing trees, and tonight. . .gliding through a field of daisies, feeling the pressure of his hand clinging to mine.

It was one of those distinct moments in life when the future is too far away to think about and the past is buried beneath some ancient sands, never to be uncovered. The present was all we were wrapped in, and its warmth and allure were smooth and kind.

He held out his hand to steady me before I spirited over the bank and into the water I now saw lying below. The area around the small pond was teeming with life. The katydids chirruped louder now, joined by the mournful moan of the bullfrogs hidden in the rushes. Cattails hovered around, defining the edges of the water, reflecting their slender and symmetric bodies on the perfectly still mirror.

"You were right about the water," I told him.

"Yeah, I wonder who this belongs to. . . . Hey, what are you doing?"

"It is so hot."

"It's July."

"Let's go for a swim."

"Who knows what is in the pond, and what if. . . ?"

His voice trailed off as I toss my hat onto the ground and kicked off my sandals on the bank.

“Fish won’t bite. . .too hard!” I warned him mischievously.

So, I dove into the cool water, breaking the serene surface and emerging out into the bright moonlight with droplets gracefully falling from the tip of my nose. He stood there gaping at me like one of the fish would if we tossed it out onto the hard, dry ground.

“Come on!”

“You’re going to ruin the car.”

“There is a blanket in the back. Besides, this is divine.”

“Contaminated is more like it.”

“Chicken!”

“You’ve had it!”

And he tossed off shoes, socks, and shirt in what seemed like one fluid motion to capture me in a not so elegant manner. Splashing ensued but ceased with his arms around me, as I had known they would be. I tousled his dark, curly hair.

“I can’t believe we are doing this,” he said, looking around to see if he could spot an overall-clad maniac with a sawed-off shotgun.

“Believe it.”

“What am I going to do with you?” he asked, and the intensity of his eyes suddenly peered deeper than ever into my own. It was too much.

I flipped over to float on my back. My white skirt spread around me like a halo. He floated beside me, taking my hand. I thought about what he would do with me for a moment. And reality came rushing back. Suddenly, I felt very small and very much sixteen.

“The sky looks like it goes on forever.”

“Yes,” I whispered.

“It looks like an ocean.”

“It moves more like a river flowing on, trying to get somewhere,” I replied, as I released his hand.

We swam toward the bank and waded out of the warm water into the suddenly much colder night air. My sandals squished as we dripped back to the car. He raced around the other side, bringing out the old quilted blanket that smelled like the sweet cherry fragrance of his house and dusty closet shelves. Wrapping it tightly around me, he held the door open, and I obediently sat on the slick leather seat. He paused a moment before placing the key in the ignition, and looked at me. It was a long look, and his eyes moved closer, peering deeper, pondering.

I closed my own. I could feel his lips press against my cold ones, and then our bodies moved without awkwardness. I was in his arms. He pulled away and looked at me for a long time. My eyes flickered back and forth, searching his own. Then he gently pushed my disheveled hair behind my ear, letting his hand rest for a moment on my cheek. I pulled my fallen spaghetti strap damply back upon my spindly shoulder. He tucked the blanket back around me, and I felt like a moth wrapped warmly in a cocoon. I held my hat in my hands as he rolled the top up so we wouldn't freeze in the wind.

We pulled out of the dancing field and could no longer see the river of stars flowing above us. I wondered how long before the blanket would start chaffing my wet skin. He put his arm around me and kissed the side of my head. I snuggled closer. I wondered how long I would hold on to the smell of crushed daisies and pond water.

I would find the answer to be always.



### Family Reunion: Ann, age five

Mom, Aunt Lucy, and Aunt Ruby are all in a circle. My uncles are playing bluegrass music on guitars and banjos. I sit on Dad's knee as he bounces me high to the music. It is July and hot. Tiny beads of sweat are forming over the top of my lip. My tangle of red braids bounces with me. Sometimes they slap me in the face. Sometimes they slap Dad and he laughs. When the song ends, I get down and run over to Momma. She is busy talking and ignores me as I tug on her hands. Finally, I cross my arms, stomp my feet a little, and start to cry. Grandma sees me and comes over.

Momma shakes me a little, asking me what I want and threatening to spank me unless I stop shrieking.

"Let that baby alone," Grandma tells Momma, taking my chubby hand in her own.

The tears come hard and fast. My chest is squeezed tight like a ketchup bottle when someone is trying to get the last drop out. I am hiccup-crying and wiping my eyes with the bib of my overalls.

"I . . . just . . . wanted my baby doll . . . outta the truck," I tell her.

She takes me over to our pickup and helps me get Bernard out of the seat. He is my first Cabbage Patch Kid doll, and I am very proud of him.

"Don't you think he's dressed a little warm for summer?" Grandma asks me.

I look down at his blue-and-white-striped snowsuit and hat.

"Grandma," I tell her, "this is the outfit he came with."

“Well,” she says, holding him and calculating measurements in her head, “I’ve had lots of practice with baby doll clothes, and I think we can manage better than this.”

## A Woman's Time

The whiteness rolled onwards, outwards, upwards, and forever. The sky settled low across the knobby hills that we now coated over in a mixture of ice and snow. The occasional blade of grass surfaced, protruding out of the thick blanket that covered the county. Stubborn, these blades stood, much like the small girl waiting, not noticing the chill of the December air.

She tugged her thin coat tighter, not to prevent heat from escaping, for she could not recall the last time she had been truly warm, but more in anticipation. She was always tugging at something—clothes, hair, her mother's arm—waiting endlessly it seemed, waiting and watching with large brown eyes staring out of a slightly pinched face, usually smudged with equally brown dirt.

Then she saw them dragging it out of the woods. She could hear its arms ripping against the harsh snow.

“Hurry up! What's taking you so long? I am plumb froze to death!”

“Hush up yourself and come on. We got to get this home.”

So she followed them down the steep incline, careful not to slip in her worn brown shoes. The white house faded in and out of the shimmering snow as they tramped up and down over hills. Smoke curled out of the chimney gray, matching the porch with chipped paint that was not so much gray paint as it was grayness of old wood peeping through.

As Shirley looked at her home, she thought about how Lucy had told her the night she was born it had snowed. It had snowed so much more than this, despite the fact that it had been April. She said that because of the snow, the house slipped down from the hill

and nestled itself into the valley where it sat now, almost too close to the vegetable garden. As they climbed the crooked stone steps onto the slightly slanted and faded porch, Shirley did not doubt that it had skidded down the hillside on the night of her birth. She liked to think the earth had moved then, that something had welcomed her into the world.

The tiny Christmas tree was placed gently into the rusted tree holder that Sam had happened upon years ago. He had picked it out on a whim when more of the children had been at home. Although most of the red paint had rusted or chipped off, it satisfied the three children.

“We have to have a tree!” Shirley had exclaimed earlier that day.

And so they did have a tree, and the decorations would come from the careful cutting of magazines and newspapers that they collected throughout the month of November. There was some red and silver tinsel and a few brightly colored glass balls that their great-grandmother had given the family. These would receive the highest positions of honor on the front of the feeble tree, along with popcorn strung in great white loops and a silver star made from tin foil Ruby swiped from the kitchen months ago.

The tree was glistening in its own little corner of the room. Decorating did not take much time out of the day because of the tree’s size. Afterwards, the children fled to their own corners of the house. Shirley loved to sit on the roughly hewn short three-legged stool by the window in the kitchen. Her mother occupied this room from the early morning hours until supper was over. She always seemed to be baking something. She often told Shirley stories about how she had taught school when she and Shirley’s father were first married. Shirley loved to sit there trying to imagine what her mother looked like when she was as young as Lucy.

The frost was still thick upon the windows. She tried to count the number of individual stars that Jack Frost had painted there in the wee hours of the morning. Her hand

left a steaming print on the glass. She could hear shrieking from an attic above them. Ruby had gone up to play with the dolls earlier, and Shirley supposed Kenny had followed her.

They weren't really dolls anyway, she told herself. They were only rag children sewn together and dressed in scrap material. Their faces were drawn on with a blue ink pen and were now slightly smudged. She always wondered what they were thinking about with their crooked grins.

The shrieking increased, followed by the sound of footsteps overhead. No doubt Kenny, who was a few years younger than Ruby and loved to tease his big sister, had pulled some sort of prank on her. He was famous for squeezing Ruby's pinky finger as hard as he could. He called it "Milking the Mouse."

Hazel stood in the middle of the small kitchen and frowned at the noise she heard. "They are going to bust right through the ceiling one of these days."

Shirley giggled and ran to her mother, burying her face in her large apron. It smelled of lamp oil and flour. "Mama, do you think Santa will bring us what we want this year?"

"I suppose he will try his best, child. However, this snow might slow him down a week or too."

Shirley grimaced and twirled the apron string around her fingers.

"But," Hazel said, "I think with those reindeer, he ought to be able to make it. Why don't you help me make something extra nice for supper tonight? How about doughnuts?"

Shirley's blue eyes twinkled. Sweets were a real treat, indeed. This must be a sign that Santa would surely come and bring her the doll she had seen in the store when they had visited town during the fall. It was a large baby with pink cheeks, blue eyes, and real eyelashes. It even had its own little plastic bottle. A doll like that would be so much better than the rag children they had upstairs.

“Mama!” Ruby yelled, as she came running into the kitchen. “Kenny won’t stop pestering me. I ain’t feelin’ so good.”

Kenny came charging up behind her, a sly grin spreading across his face.

“Why, I didn’t do one thing to her!”

“Kenny, I am ashamed of you for lying. What would the church folks think if they could hear you? You go upstairs and play by yourself, and let me have some peace. Ruby dear, I know you are feelin’ bad again. It’s that time, so why don’t you go and lay down till I call you for supper. Shirley can help me get it ready. Lord, I surely can’t wait until the roads clear and y’all get back to school.”

“Kenny will only hide under the culvert till the bus goes by and skip,” Ruby told her.

“Hush your mouth, Ruby! I don’t do no such thing!”

“Get on upstairs, Kenny, and you, get in the bed,” Hazel demanded, pointing at each of them.

Shirley snickered as they walked away, still poking each other. She wished that she could curl up in their bed like Ruby, beneath the warm quilts.

“Mama, why does Ruby get to go to bed all the time?”

“Cause she ain’t feelin’ well.”

“What time is it that makes her feel bad?”

“Well, it’s the woman’s time.”

Shirley shook her head and moved her stool so that she could climb up to the counter and help her mother cut the doughnuts. The little black pot-bellied stove sputtered and grew rosy. It looked just like Mr. Davis at school when the boys were misbehaving. He always seemed on the verge of exploding.

Lucy came up for supper with little Roger in tow. She was the oldest sister who had been married, and her son Roger was slightly younger than Shirley. She usually came up during the week when her husband was out carousing around with the boys. Shirley knew her mother did not approve of him. Lucy was such fun though. Since she was married, she always wore stiletto high heels that were bright red, lipstick, and lots of fake jewelry. She had also dyed her hair so blonde it was almost white. Shirley hoped that she could be like Lucy one day.

Roger and Shirley played in the floor with a ball and jacks. Although several were missing, Shirley cherished her jacks, and she was very happy to know she had beaten everyone at school, including snotty Jenny Anne. They had to be put away, though, when Roger stopped being mesmerized by the bouncing and plucking action and grabbed one of the shiny jacks.

“Lord a mercy!” Lucy exclaimed. “That baby will try to eat anything. I think he is part coon.”

“They are all like that,” Hazel said, laughing.

“Well, I shore never thought about how much work they was until I had my own. Heck, even the having him liked to killed me.”

“It ain’t easy,” Hazel replied, shaking her head.

Shirley watched them with interest. If having babies and taking care of them was hard work, then why was she, a little girl, supposed to play with dolls all the time? They were like practice for babies. Why would she want something that caused pain?

“Let’s see this Christmas tree!” Lucy told Shirley, taking her by the hand.

“It’s a tiny one,” she whispered, “but good.”

Lucy touched one of the ornaments and the popcorn. “Did Ruby help you?”

“Some, and Kenny cut it down and drug it back to the house.”

“Where is Ruby?”

“In the bed.”

“Why?”

“Cause it’s her time, I reckon,” Shirley repeated, causing Hazel and Lucy to giggle.

“Then she deserves to be in the bed,” Lucy smiled.

“What does that mean?” Shirley demanded, tugging on her sleeve.

“It’s a sickness that comes upon a growing woman.”

Shirley sat puzzled but soon forgot about the event as her mother hustled her off to bed. Sam came through the door, finished with the day’s work, as she was being ushered away.

“Daddy!” she cried, jumping into his arms, staring at the same vibrant blue eyes as her own. “What did you see outside?”

“Why, the blue moon of Kentucky, of course!”

“You didn’t see Santa?”

“Nope, but I am sure he is on his way. Be sure to leave him a doughnut.”

“I will!” she told him, kissing him on the cheek and running off to bed.

Christmas morning dawned with gusts of wind and snow blowing heavily against the house, making it creak as it rocked back and forth in the violent thrusts. Shirley scampered to the tree before everyone else. It shimmered in the flickering waves of weak sunlight that occasionally managed to break through. Three full stockings were lying around the bottom.

“Hurry up, y’all! Santa made it!” she called.

More footsteps tripped down the hall, and soon the house was filled with the sound of items being dumped from thin socks. There were oranges and apples, a treasure this



time of the year. They each got a small eight-pack of crayons, some peppermint, and a new pair of socks.

Hazel had made Ruby a new dark green dress and had knitted Kenny a new sweater. Shirley held her orange softly in her hands, wanting to drown in its juicy flesh. She was not even paying attention when her mother placed a large burlap sack in front of her. Shirley sat up and tucked the bottom of her worn nightgown beneath her to keep out the draft. She peeled open the scratchy sack and peered inside. Sprouts of blonde hair peeked out at her. It was the doll, complete with white plastic bottle and pink pin-tucked dress. She cradled it lovingly in her thin arms. She had never had anything so marvelous, especially from the store in town.

Ruby snatched it out of her arms and looked it over, even examining the white underpants beneath the skirt.

“Dolls are for babies!” she sputtered, throwing it back down into Shirley’s lap.

Shirley straightened the doll’s clothing, tears stinging in her eyes.

“Don’t you mind Ruby,” her mother told her. “She’s just mad because she can’t play with dolls anymore because the girls at school will tease her.”

“Pretty soon she will be married and have a real live doll of her own,” Sam chuckled.

Shirley sat on the floor, holding the baby beneath the Christmas tree. She picked up her apple and took a big bite. She would save the tantalizing orange for later. The juice ran down her lips and made her fingers sticky. She looked down at the doll in her lap and wondered why girls had to go through the time and have babies that only caused them problems.

“There must be something I don’t understand,” she thought.

She crunched loudly another bite of her apple and held the plastic bottle in her free hand. Suddenly, it did not seem so appealing. Outside, the snow pelting the house became quiet. Shirley thought about spring and the smell of the damp earth that would soon come. She wondered if James would carve their names on the oak tree by the school. He had held her hand the other day. She placed the baby on her shoulder and patted her back a bit. It was comforting. She took another bite of the apple and tossed out the stem. She had eaten seeds and all.

## Family Reunion: Ann, age twenty-one

“Are you seriously nervous?” Dean asks me, as he pulls the car into the graveled parking lot.

“Yes,” I tell him. “What if you hate my family and decide to break up with me?”

“First of all, I have met most of your family and I love them. Second, I am never breaking up with you.

I smile one of those sappy smitten smiles, but my stomach is still churning. He may have met most of my family, but they weren't in their element. I am afraid that at the first strain of bluegrass music or with the first whiff of soup beans and cornbread he is going to head for the door.

Everyone pours over Dean for a while, wanting to be introduced.

“He's a fine young man,” Aunt Lucy is telling everyone. “He's awfully good to our Annie.”

I feel like jumping off a cliff, but Dean is sitting there smiling through the whole thing. He is polite and talkative and perfect. I feel like strangling everyone. As we move through the line to fill our plates with food, he pauses over a huge plate of golden cornbread.

“Would you like some, Annie?” he says, laughter teasing his lips.

## Grave Diggers

“Well, they’ve done gone and dug up ol’ Mrs. Perkins’ grave,” Aunt Lucy tells Mom.

“I always knew them Reed boys were vandals, and sure enough, they go right ahead and prove themselves to be,” Mom says.

“Yep, the deputy caught them this mornin’, filling up that ol’ beat-up Chevy at the mini-mart.”

“Surely he got all that jewelry back?”

“Yep, and I am glad. Maybe her poor sister will finally hush her moaning.”

I lean back into the plush green sofa and press my hands deep into the caverns where buttons sit idly at the bottom. They are waiting like me.

Aunt Lucy grins at me for a moment, and I yank at my strawberry braid and fidget with the buckles on my overalls.

“You want a coke, Annie?”

I nod and head towards the kitchen, carefully dodging a host of antiques that are positioned for attack, and gracefully stick out my tongue at her once I am past. I hate the name Annie.

The soda in the refrigerator isn’t Coke but RC Cola. Everything is coke to Aunt Lucy. I shake my head at her ignorance. Yet, I reach for the blue striped can. I hate visiting days when Mom loads me into our little blue Toyota and we head up to Owen County. Aunt Lucy will never turn on the television, and I am always left to rummage in

her attic filled with mothball-scented stuffed animals and oddities like a bright purple lava lamp from the 70s, assorted umbrellas, ugly china dolls, and naked Barbies.

“You find the pop, Ann?” Mom asks.

“Yes!” I yell, slamming the door.

“Honey, you can go up to the attic and play if you want!” Aunt Lucy offers, smiling and shaking her platinum blonde hair and making her large gold necklace jingle like the chimes on her porch.

“It’s ok,” I say. “I’ll just sit here and drink this.”

Mom smiles at me. She is probably thinking about what a good girl I am for not wanting to spill my drink in Auntie’s precious attic. I’d like to have a baptizing up there like they did at church a few Sundays ago: me and all those horrid dolls and a river of sticky RC Cola. But I am surprised she lets me stay.

Aunt Lucy watches me for a moment as I slurp the cold soda, then nods to Mom approvingly.

“So, they went up to the Perkins’ cemetery and just opened her casket?” Mom asks.

“Well, you know Bobbie Jo was buried in one of those mausoleum things,” Aunt Lucy says.

“That big stone building?”

“Yep. Her husband had it built. Old money, you know,” Aunt Lucy says with a wink.

I don’t know what old money, which probably smells like mothballs, has to do with being buried in a stone house, but I slurp and listen.

“Well, those Reed brothers. . . .”

“Rob and Dan?”

“No, it was Bob and Dan.”

“Ah . . . ,” Mom says, as if she knew Bob would have robbed a grave long before Rob ever would.

“They snuck up there in the middle of the night and slid her right out of that mausoleum. Then they cracked the glass and stole every bit of her jewelry.”

“She was probably covered head to foot in diamonds,” Mom says.

I can just picture an old dead lady, sleeping in a silk-lined casket in an old tattered purple dress, with two young boys taking all of her glittering diamonds. I get goose prickles.

“Well, the family didn’t notice anything till the next afternoon when they walked up the hill to make their weekly visit,” Aunt Lucy says, pausing for effect.

“No!” Mom gasps.

“Reckon so. And there was poor ol’ Bobbie Jo in her busted-up casket sprawled out, and all her purty jewels gone a-missin.”

Mom shakes her head, causing her short brown curls to bounce.

“So anyways, the sheriff had good suspicions it might have been those Reed boys, seeing as they was downtown the night before carousing around, plumb drunk on whiskey. And sure enough, when the deputy ran into them the next morning, he found all those diamonds right inside that old blue pickup.”

“But the deputy didn’t have a search warrant?”

“Don’t need any warrant with a .38 and good suspicions.”

“Well, my lan’ . . . ,” Mom says.

“So the Perkins are going to have Bobbie Jo put back, and may the Lord let her soul and body rest in everlasting peace!” Aunt Lucy exclaims.

“Amen!” Mom says.

I sputter on my soda, and Mom notices me sitting there slack-jawed and wide-eyed, like a jackrabbit, Dad would say.

“Ann, honey, why don’t you go outside and play?” she asks, more as an instruction than a request.

I nod and head toward the front porch. I look back at Mom and Aunty Lucy sitting in those high-backed green velvet chairs amid the throng of old whatnots and beneath the plastic chandelier dangling from the slanted ceiling of the old house. I shake my head and let the screen door slam behind me. Mom yells, but I pretend not to hear as I tie up my white Keds and cinch up my overalls.

I tiptoe carefully down the steep steps and head over to the little white building where Aunt Lucy keeps all of her junk. Inside, I find a burnt-out old lamp, the globe black with soot, sitting atop a wobbly three-legged stool. I riffle through an old box, producing two odd high heels—one red, the other black—and a chipped plate with a picture of Jesus carrying a lamb.

I lay that down on the stool by the lamp and go outside to sit under the holly tree by the thorny rose bush. The sweet fragrance sweeps through the air, and I think about going fishing with Dad later, the hum of katydids hidden in the grasses, and picking a cattail in the rushes where the bullfrogs sleep.

The RC has left a bitter taste in my mouth.

“Come on, Ann. It’s time to go!” Mom calls.

I bolt toward the car.

“Tell Aunt Lucy bye!”

I skid to a halt, my shoes stirring up dust, and turn around.

“Bye, Aunt Lucy. I love you.”

She bends down and kisses my cheek, smearing candy-apple-red lipstick across my face.

“Bye Darlin’. Come back and see me now.”

I nod. The smell of pungent perfume lingers. Mom and I climb into the old car and pull out onto the curvy highway.

“Mom,” I ask, “why didn’t you make me go up to the attic today?”

“Well, Ann, I figure you are getting big enough for grown-up talk.”

I fidget in my seat, peeking out the window.

“Well, I declare,” Mom stammers, jerking the steering wheel hard to the right to avoid a swerving vehicle.

I prop myself up on my dusty Keds, fighting against the seatbelt to get a better view. An old blue Chevy creeps past after pausing a moment to get straight in the road again. We are moving slowly now, and I can see into the cab of the truck. The two grimy-looking boys in the front seat grin at us, but I swear I see the sparkle of diamonds in their eyes.



### Family Reunion: Ann, age eleven

Grandpa and Grandma are sitting at the head of the table with Daddy. He is talking to Grandpa about tractors and planting corn. They both have calloused hands, and I wonder if Dad's are going to look as much like tree bark as Grandpa's do. I never met Dad's parents. They died before I was born. Sometimes, I think Daddy loves talking to Grandpa because it makes him feel like he has a daddy again.

Momma told me that Grandpa had a lot to do with "straightening Daddy out" when they first got married. She says that because of this, Daddy will be very strict about whom I marry. I stick my tongue out over this, because boys are gross and I'd rather be at home with Momma and Daddy than married anyway.

"Ain't it nice to see how well James and Daddy get along?" Aunt Lucy asks Mom.

"It sure is," Mom tells her. "Law . . . there for a few years I thought they'd kill each other!"

## Dust Devil

James called and said that he didn't want to go to the drive-in tonight. This news is fine with me since we spent our dates last week arguing. He loves to argue, and we fight about how fast he drives, how much he drinks, and if we are ever going to get married or not.

"If you'd just slow down when you come to pick me up instead of sending dust dancing all along the road by our house, I am sure Daddy would let me go out more often and I am sure he'd let me marry you."

But James won't change. He hasn't yet, and part of me doesn't want him too. There is something exciting about his wild demeanor, something not from the tan Kentucky earth that we have been brought up on. He spends his days going to school and helping his daddy out on the farm. They live in the next county over, and it's a real treat when he is able to come over and take me cruising. We drive around the town square and then park and talk with the other couples that are there. Sometimes, we drive out to a deserted country road and he kisses me quite a bit. We have to be extra careful about where we park, though. Nobody in this town wants to see the minister's daughter out with a wild boy from the rival county.

We have been arguing a lot, and I have threatened to go back to Michigan and stay with my brother again unless he promises to marry me. I am tired of being stuck in this little hollow with Momma and Daddy. I am tired of working out in the garden, hoeing potatoes and doing sewing to make a little money. I wish I could have finished high

school, but seeing as there wasn't enough money for books, I just want to get out of here and go anywhere. I even heard that they are opening up a new shoe factory in his town, and with my sewing skills I am sure I could get a job there as easy as anything. We'd be fine. I know he'd stop drinking and settle down.

I love sitting out on the front porch when Momma and Daddy are gone to town. There's no one here to tell me to get up and clean anything. Since my sister Ruby left and got married, things have been awfully dull around here. There's no one to pick out dress patterns with, no one to hitch-hike to town with to buy a pop. I even miss the way she used to pinch me with her toes at night when we slept together.

The sun beats down on the perfect rows of corn that block my view of the main road, but I can still hear the cars passing. They hiss-whoosh down the highway, and the sound echoes in my ears. The only other noise is the trickle of the creek that runs along the dirt road beside the house. I decide to call Tina and see if she wants to go to the drive-in with me instead.

I don't really like Tina all that much. She has a high nasally voice and sounds like a pole-cat getting run over when she screams during the scary parts of the movie. But she does have a car, and I know she'll be ready to go out. No one else is going to ask her. So, I call her up and we make plans to leave around eight. It won't be real dark and the movie won't start until almost nine, but there will be plenty of other people there to talk to.

"I'll be back later, Momma!" I say.

"Take your sweater, darling."

"I got it!"

"And take some of this money."

Momma is always giving me money. She cleans house for a little lady down the road, and since I am the last child at home and the baby of the family, she is always giving

me something. A few weeks ago, she bought me a brand-new hairdryer. One day, I am going to buy Momma one of those pins at the Novelty Gift Shop in town. Probably the butterfly with pink-and-white swirled wings and the diamonds down the center. She always looks at that one when we go.

Tina is waiting for me in the yard. The windows of the white Impala are all rolled down, and she has the radio on.

“Hop in here, honey, and let’s hit the road!”

We crawl down the driveway, and I miss the way James puts the pedal to the floor and we fly away. I miss the way his red hair stirs on top of his head and his deep molasses-colored eyes twinkle.

“James didn’t wanna take you out tonight?”

“Nah. Say, where did you get those sunglasses?”

Tina is wearing a pair of cat-eyed sunglasses with big thick white rims. They are perched on the end of her short nose, and her blonde bob swishes around them.

“Dollar General. They got some real nice stuff in this week.”

“I like the diamonds on the sides,” I say.

“They’re just fake, honey,” she says, fumbling for a cigarette in her purse as we swerve all over the road.

“I know,” I tell her.

“Give me a light?”

“Sure.”

I light her cigarette and take one out of the box for myself. Riding in the car is relaxing, and with the windows down we can hear the bullfrogs and crickets singing.

The drive-in is already crowded, but we find a pretty good spot to park near the front, and we get out of the car and sit on the hood, listening to the radio. Our long, tanned

legs dangle off the front of the old car, and Tina leans back on her elbows and pushes her chest out a little more.

“Isn’t that James’ car?”

I follow her gaze to the row behind us. It sure looks like his green ’57 Chevy. I am not sure though, and I have to squint in the dim light to get a good look. I don’t have to wonder very long, because I can see the light shining off his red hair as he opens the door to get out. The dim electric lights that will be turned off before the movie starts give him away.

I jump down off the hood of the car and head straight toward him. He doesn’t see me at first, but his head jerks back and forth as he hears the click-clack of my flip-flops and tries to see who is walking toward him.

“What are you doing here?”

“Shirley?”

“What are you doing here?” I repeat, stopping in front of him.

I place my hands on my hips and begin tapping my foot. He rakes his hand through his hair and fiddles with the buttons on his checkered shirt. The passenger-side door opens and a tall, dark-haired girl emerges.

“James, is something wrong?” she asks.

The next thing I know, Tina has both of my arms and is dragging me back toward the Toyota. I’m yelling to the top of my voice, and James is standing there, looking at the ground. Everyone around us stops talking and pays attention. More foul language is flowing out of my mouth than I even thought I knew.

Tina pulls me into the car, and we leave the drive-in before the movie even starts.

“Lord, I’ve never seen anyone to make such a commotion.”

I don't say anything back to her, but I sit there grinding my hands into the plush seats. When I get home, I don't say anything to Momma and Daddy, but I know they'll find out soon enough. You can't do anything in this town without everybody else knowing about it. I'll know when they know because I am sure Daddy will break out his belt to whip me, even if I am eighteen.

I hide in the bathroom for a while, staring at my own face in the mirror. Soft brown skin frames bright blue eyes, my Daddy's eyes, and my hair is slick on top of my head in a beehive. My bony shoulders poke out of my orange tank top. I don't have many pictures of myself, but I wish I could have kept the image of myself that stared back at me from that mirror: eyes red from crying and looking wild and dangerous.

I hear the '57 coming up the road and Daddy opening the screen door and letting it slam behind him. I hope he is sending James away. I hope he scares him to death. A few minutes later, Momma knocks on the door. I know it is her knock because it is too soft to belong to anyone else.

"James is outside."

"So?"

"Shirley, go out there and talk to that boy."

"No, Momma. I can't"

"You gonna stay in the bathroom for the rest of your life?"

I splash cold water on my face and tuck my hair back into place. Then, I wait a moment and open the door.

"What do you want?" I yell at James before I am even halfway out the door.

"I came to make it right."

"Who was that girl?"

“Just a girl from school. I thought you was mad at me and wouldn’t want to see me anymore. I figured we both should just find someone else to date. It don’t seem like I am the kind of man your daddy wants you to date or to marry.”

“We always fight and make up. Why was this time different than all the rest?”

“I started thinking about how maybe I wasn’t good enough for you, and about how your daddy is always yelling at you for going out with me. He doesn’t like me at all, and I don’t think there’s enough church-going in the world to make me good enough for him.”

He looks down at his tennis shoes.

“Where’s your girl?”

“I left her with Dan at the drive-in. He can take her home. She was awful dumb anyway.”

I can’t help but smile at him.

“You going to let this happen again?”

“No.”

“You promise?”

“Yeah, but I still don’t know if I’ll ever be good enough to suit your daddy.”

“Baby,” I say, coming up close to him and putting my arms around his neck, “you suit me fine, and that’s all that matters. When two people got each other, it don’t matter a bit what everybody else thinks.”

We hop in his Chevy and speed out of the driveway. I don’t look back, but I know that the dust is flying up all over the place and Daddy will be fit to kill when I get home.

## Family Reunion: Ann, age eighteen

“Annie, it sure is nice to hear that you are getting ready to go to college,”

Uncle Kenny tells me.

“Thanks,” I tell him. “I am very excited about going.”

Momma looks at me from across the room and smiles. It is the first time that she has smiled since my acceptance letter came. She is very upset about the fact that I am going to a school that is almost five hours away from home. She and Daddy are happy about the scholarship money and the grants, but less than enthused about dropping me off in some strange faraway town for the next four months.

Frankly, I am glad to be getting away from all of this. I am glad to be going to a place where I will not feel like an outcast for carrying around a book all the time. I imagine that I will come back in five years in an incredibly glamorous way. I'll have a college degree, be published, and be a local celebrity on my way to graduate school. Perhaps I'll run away to England and send back elaborate postcards that Momma will show everyone. No matter what, I am going to duck out of family reunions for the next four years, and after that, after seeing the rest of the world, I am positive that I will never have the incredible desire to come back to Kentucky again.



## Home

“Yeah, I’ll be home around six,” I tell my mother, propping my notebook up on my knees and trying to turn more toward my dorm room window so I can hear what she is saying. I hate cell phones.

“What did you say?” Mom yells and then asks, “What are you doing?”

“Nothing,” I reassure her. This is the fourth time she has asked me these questions. My parents want me to stand or sit perfectly still while I talk to them. They need to know, despite the fact that I am two hundred miles away at college and have been for almost three years, that I am giving them my undivided attention.

Finally, we hang up and I slouch down on my bed and look over at my empty suitcase lying on the floor. As a freshman, I had been all too eager to pack up my bags and head home for the weekend. This kept up for a few weeks until I realized that going home was actually a very lonely and unsettling experience. Sure, I loved seeing my parents and I did miss them at school, but our county felt too small now. It was almost suffocating. All of my friends were either away at other colleges or still trapped at home trying to recreate the past. It was like they were being strangled and didn’t realize it. Mom, who had either guessed my dilemma or happened to stumble upon my concerns by chance, had tried to reassure me, in a crackling voice, that “Everyone comes home for the festival.”

I contemplate starting a revolt, not going home, but I keep packing. When I slide the zipper closed, I reach for the phone and call Dean.

“I just hate the thought of seeing everyone.”

“You’ll have fun and I’ll be there.”

I smile at the eagerness I hear in his voice. “Yeah, I can show you off.”

“I should be out of my last class around noon, so that puts me at your house around seven.”

“I can’t believe that you are driving over three hundred miles to go to a dinky town festival,” I tell him, almost wishing he would change his mind and stay at home. I keep hoping that his college will institute Saturday class or some other educational miracle. After all, these things were rather embarrassing.

“I am coming for you. Besides, funnel cakes are a bonus.”

When we finish our conversation and I am lying in bed again, I think about how much fun the festival was in high school. I loved marching with the band in parades, getting roasted ears of corn and bloomin’ onions with friends, who were always eager to share, and walking up and down Main Street simply to see whom everyone else was walking with. My last festival at home, however, had been a different experience. I had spent the majority of the day with my Mom, looking at various booths. I spoke to several of my friends. Most of them had decided to stay in town for a job or to attend community college. They would ask me how school was, and when I would go more in depth in my reply, they would suddenly remember that they were hungry, that they had to meet some one, or that they were in search of a bathroom. How bladder functions could be so easily ignored was beyond me, but I let them go, feeling oddly like I had been ostracized.

Despite my reservations, I make the almost four-hour journey back to my tiny eastern Kentucky hometown. Almost all of the leaves have fallen off the trees by now. A few retain their bright garb, but most of them litter the ground and are now a dark brown color. Town has already been blocked off by the time I get there, and I take the back road to my Mom’s office. Well, really, it is the only other road in our town. I pull my jacket

tight as I get out of the car and take my first breath of fresh air. I can hear bluegrass music playing down the street and the constant hum of many voices. Mom rushes out of the door, wrapping me in a hug. She is filled with a hundred questions. Her first, however, surprises me.

“Do you want to walk down the street and get some lunch?”

I look down past the orange barrels set up to stop traffic from going down Main Street. Already, people are strolling up and down. My stomach growls, and with the astute logic of any twenty-year-old college kid, food wins out over a trial by fire.

At least with Mom, I am protected. She answers all the questions, tells everyone I am doing fine, and buys me a huge Polish sausage. The fact that the weather is chilly also helps. There aren't as many people on the streets as I had originally anticipated. I don't see anyone my age at all. We stop by a booth selling antique jewelry. Mom seems thrilled that I am interested in the pearls and brooches. I tell her how they are getting to be rather fashionable again, and we both pick out a few strings of fake pearls and huge rhinestone brooches.

Mom links her arm through mine on the way back down the street and says, “I am glad you are home, Ann. I miss you so much.”

I rest my head on her shoulder for a second, noticing the gray that is creeping in around her ears. I try to imagine all of her brown curly hair turning gray and cannot. “I love you too, Mom.”

Dean makes it to my house right at seven. He's wearing a polo shirt with his college logo emblazoned on the breast and khaki pants. Our glasses clink together when we kiss. I admit it's sappy. The whole scenario of being part of a desperate romance of two young lovers attending colleges across state lines, though annoying in reality, is sort of like

some old Victorian romance novel, and I revel in it. Our conversations about the oddity of our relationship usually go like this:

“It’s weird that we met in my hometown.”

“Yeah, I never thought I would date a girl from eastern Kentucky.”

“Then why are you?”

“The accent, I guess. I love your accent.”

“You’re a liar.”

“Yep. I just love you.”

So that’s how it usually goes with us. Yes, we had met in my town while he was doing volunteer work with his church one summer. He understood the culture and even knew a lot of the same people I did. Dean was still an alien though. He might as well have had a big green head and antennae. According to our county rules about a general dislike for outsiders, especially dating them, he was illegal even.

The next morning, we head downtown with my parents. The streets are packed. I see several people I know, and they smile and wave politely at me. When they stop to talk, I introduce Dean and tell them I am fine. I ask the same questions to them, and then we move on to our separate paths. People I ate lunch with every day, pulled scams on teachers with, ditched class with, nod and smile and move on. Thirteen years, I keep thinking, and nothing.

I pass several shop windows and stop to look at my reflection. Yeah, my hair is longer, the bangs are gone, and maybe it is a little darker, maybe auburn now. I am still the same weight, thinner perhaps, with spindly arms and legs. Those are pretty much the same. My small oval glasses that look like they should belong to a librarian, could not have made that much of a difference. I have the same cheeks, lips, and small nose.

“Gosh, Ann, you look fine,” Dean exclaims, pulling me from the shop window.

“Thanks,” I tell him. I had to look in that window though. Perhaps no one recognized me any more.

Dean’s arm rests comfortably around my waist, and when the crowd thins out, he holds my hand and shuffles his feet to fall in line with my step. We buy kettle corn and a gift for his mom.

“Ann! Ann!”

I can hear Sara before I can see her. She wiggles through the crowd and hugs me. *Finally*, I think to myself, a *friend*. Sara is one of the only people I have kept in contact with after high school. She goes to a college that is close to my own, so I don’t have to spill out my story of the last few years to her.

“Isn’t this crazy?” she almost yells.

“What is?”

“I just saw three girls we graduated with and they are all pregnant or married.”

I laugh at her wide, brown eyes. A smile teases her lips. “I told Ryan that I am not marrying him any time soon.”

Ryan fights his way up to us, breathing heavily. “Geeze, these small town things are nuts.”

Sara pokes him in the ribs, brushing her black hair out of her face. “You know you love it.”

“I love the food,” he tells her and grabs Dean to get something deep-fried.

Sara and I browse a booth selling candles in every kind of fragrance invented.

“How many times are you coming home this year?” she asks me.

“Mostly for holidays,” I tell her, “but I’ll be at Dean’s a lot too.”

“Yeah, I just like staying at school with Ryan. Coming home is too weird.”

“Depressing,” I tell her.

“Exactly.”

We find the guys and head up by the courthouse to watch the parade. The band has lost about forty members, and there are only five floats compared to the twenty we had when I was small. The Shriners are out in large numbers though, cruising in their miniature semi-trucks, almost running over a few people. The hillbilly pick-up rolls by, blaring banjo music, and the riders squirt water from fake pistols at the crowd. Everyone laughs hysterically, and I feel sick. A bad funnel cake, perhaps.

I pull away from the crowd and start to walk back to where we are parked. Dean runs after me, finally grabbing my hand.

“Hey, are you ok?”

“Yeah, just a little tired,” I tell him. “Can we go home?”

“Sure.”

When we get to my house, we decide to carve a pumpkin. Dean cuts a hole in the top, and I dig out all the seeds and slime. We are sticky up to our elbows, and Dean has to stop and pick a few seeds out of my hair after chucking a handful of the gunk at my face. Finally, our pumpkin’s features begin to take shape. Like Victor creating his monster, we bring life to our new friend. At last, we stick a candle inside his stomach and watch him come alive. Soon, cool air sends us inside for hot cider and blankets.

Later, lying on my bed, I think about going back to school, visiting Dean next weekend, and picking out an apartment for graduate school the next fall.

“You know earlier when I said I wanted to go home?”

“Yeah,” Dean says, moving his arm so he can see my face.

“I just realized I don’t have one.”

“Of course you do. Multiple ones,” he tries to remind me, pulling me closer.

“I think everyone comes to a point where they lose home, but some people try to keep it.”

“Do they succeed?” he asks me.

“No,” I tell him, “they only lose something else.”

I don't mention the loss of home or the festival again. Dean falls asleep beside me. I remember him telling me that if home is where the heart is, then I was his home. It was corny, but it felt more right than a place being home. I trace his hairline, noting the brown curls forming around his ears. His green eyes are concealed behind closed eyelids that twitch in his sleep. People aren't always home either, I think. When they stop trying to be home, home dies. Dean pulls me closer to him. I lie beside him for a long time, trying to quell the hard knot that has formed in my stomach.

“Please, don't let go. Please, don't let go. Please, don't let go.”

## Family Reunion: Ann, age twenty-five

Dean holds the door open for me, and as soon as I step into the hot little room, saliva begins to collect in my mouth. Fried chicken . . . the craving of all cravings. I feel a bit like Buddha as everyone circles around to rub my protruding stomach. I always imaged this tradition would annoy me, but I feel proud. I waddle around the table talking to everyone, finding the plates and forks, and loading my plate up with the stuff I have been wanting for the past month.

I kick off my sandals and sit down by Mom. When we are finished and Dean is amazed at how much his once abstemious wife has eaten, Mom hands me a large box. Everyone is silent.

“Anne, we all wanted to give you this, seeing as you are the youngest grandchild and you have a baby on the way.”

Inside the box is a quilt. It is small with red and white octagon shapes stitched together. I cradle it in my arms, letting it drape over my stomach.

“Grandma made that right before she got sick. She said she wanted it to keep one of her grans warm.”



## Trembling Hearts

*Those nurses don't know what they are doing. They run in and out of this room like a bunch of chickens with their heads cut off. If they'd only open the curtains a little more and let some sunlight in this place, a body might start to feel better. They want to keep it freezing in here like a morgue. Well, I haven't gone yet and don't have it in my mind to go.*

*This place isn't so bad though. The food is pretty good, but it ain't like what I could make. Honey, I could make the best mashed potatoes you ever tasted, but no one cares about that now. When you get to be what they think is too old, they throw you in here, and you don't get to cook a darn thing.*

*The only fun we get to have around here is listening to the singers and preachers from all the different churches that come in here during the week. There are always more on Sundays, but a pretty good little gospel group comes in here on Mondays and they can make that guitar and piano really talk. We get to play bingo a lot too, and it seems to me, that they are always playing bingo. It's only on the calendar once a month though. I can still read the calendar. My eyesight isn't too shabby for an old lady. I remember that when I was a schoolteacher, I could catch mistakes on papers a mile away. Of course, I never talked proper like those stuck-up city folk, but that ain't no excuse for havin' a danglin' modifier in an English paper.*

*My family comes to visit me often enough, and my little granddaughter comes in every afternoon 'cause her momma works down the street and she rides the bus here, bless her little heart. I love it when that child comes. Seems like it was only yesterday that she*

*was bouncing on my knee or clinging to my leg in the kitchen as I tried to make cornbread or jam. Haven't seen her in a few days, though. I wonder if she's caught cold. That one, she's always getting sick.*

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I walk down the long hallways back to C Wing. I hate coming here. I hate how when I open the door, the scent of baby powder and urine overwhelms me. I hate seeing her here like this. When Mom and Dad first brought her down here after the bout of pneumonia, she was on A Wing, and I didn't think it was so bad. The nurses seemed friendly, the room airy and bright. But coming here day after day, watching her get moved from one wing to another as her body failed to recover, made me see the true desolation of this place. Old people sit parked out in the hallways like trash thrown out of car windows. A man in a yellow t-shirt asleep in his wheelchair, drool dripping down his chin, is the discarded McDonald's bag. An old lady pushing herself along on a walker, mumbling, wearing a long blue robe, floats by like a Wal-mart bag emptied and tossed away.

There are always nurses gathered around the two stations. I pass the first one. They stop talking, smile at me, and ask me how my mom is doing. I make the appropriate response and continue on my way. Mom sings here every Monday, but Grandma doesn't even recognize her anymore. It's been a long time since she has said anything either. She sits and smiles and nods while I talk to her. She grins when I crank her bed up so that she is sitting while I brush her curly short gray hair and wash her face.

The walls are a washed-out cream color with blue handrails running up and down. There is a ramp to the dining room. The smell of food and the feel of the heat as I get close to C Wing make me nauseous. Mom says that because I am a teenager, I am disgusted by all of this, but if I were older I would appreciate this place. I cannot appreciate the stench

of death, I told her one day. I watched her brown eyes fill with tears, and she told me, "Momma isn't going to die, Ann."

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*I sure wish they'd bring dinner already. They'd like to starve a body to death, and I'd sure like to have something to eat before I head down to church. It's so cold in this room that I sure will be glad to feel the Lord put a little fire in these old bones.*

*I remember the old days at church when we'd have dinner on the ground and everyone would bring something from home: fried chicken, potato salad, and even Ale-8 pop in those green glass bottles. Sam would pry the top off for me with the bottle opener on his knife. The knife I got him for Christmas. Cost me a whole \$1.10. And we'd stay there all afternoon and they'd preach up a storm and get tired and we'd eat some more and then they'd start up again. Those things lasted all day, and sometimes we'd all walk down to the little creek by the church and have a baptizin' for all those lost souls that had been saved. You've never seen such a time! Bright blankets spread every which way on the grass, children running back and forth, seein' as they can't sit still and eat.*

*I don't believe churches have those anymore. It's a cryin' shame. These young folks need to come back to the Lord or He's gonna come back for them before they are ready to go. Can't get right with the Lord too soon. That's my motto.*

*I shore am ready for dinner!*

\*\*\*\*\*

Grandma got her feeding tube put in last week. It's a long snake-like tube that creeps out from beneath her hospital gown. It's supposed to be clear but is always filled with yellow mush the nurses reassure me contains all sorts of nutrients to make her well. The little white control box hangs on an IV pole and clicks when Grandma is being fed. I

watch the blue dial shift clockwise a bit with each click. Occasionally, the apparatus beeps. A nurse with a wrinkled brow comes in and fidgets with the dials, checking the tube going into Grandma's pale belly like a new umbilical cord. She wipes the drainage off with a washcloth and puts some more cotton around the new opening. When she is finished, Grandma's stomach is red and blotched like a baby's face when it has been crying for a while.

Grandma is thirsty all the time now. She reaches for her pink hospital cup, the kind with a big bulky handle and a lid with a slot to drink out of where a straw never quite fits. She can't have one drink of water. The nurse has given me some swabs to moisten her mouth with. They are individually wrapped in cellophane and are pink on the end. Almost like a lollypop, I tell her. I wet one under the sink and run it around her blue-tinted lips and gently around the inside of her mouth. She tries to suck on the end of the swab, wanting to draw one real drop of water from it. The inside of her mouth is chalky and white. The end of the swab is the same color when I pull it out of her mouth.

I think about what the preacher talked about on Sunday. He told us how sinners in Hell beg for one drop of water from Heaven. Hell is a completely different place than Heaven or Earth, he told us. It may be, but sometimes Hell is definitely on Earth.

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*I remember the first real bed Sam and I bought. He had just finished building our house, one with a real gas stove and a porch with a swing. We'd had a bed before, of course, when we were livin' up by my Momma and Daddy, but it had been a loaner. I came home from work one day and that old bed that had been in our new bedroom was sittin' right outside in the middle of the front yard. I let in screaming and Sam came bolting out of the house. He wanted to know what all the commotion was about, and I wanted to know*

*why in God's green Earth our bed was sitting in the front yard for all the world to see. Well, he took me right by the hand and led me back through our pretty little house. I've always been a right smart housekeeper, so it was in tip-top shape. And there, in the middle of that bedroom, was a brand new oak bed. It was a beauty: four little bedposts with leaf carvings up and down them, and the biggest headboard I'd ever seen. It went halfway up the wall! He'd even bought us our own mattress: a big fluffy thing that slept like a dream.*

*I loved that bed, and I'd still be sleepin' in it too if they hadn't stuck me down at this place because of a silly little cold. Sometimes, I still like to think about sleeping in that bed with Sam beside me and his big arms holdin' me tight. It was like a little bit of heaven sleepin' on that bed, like floating on a cloud.*

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They've put Grandma on some sort of air-filled bed. It puffs up every so often, and the air shifts her body back and forth. The nurses say that it is good for her circulation and it will keep her from getting bedsores. I want to choke them when they say that. If they'd been turning her every half-hour as they should have, she wouldn't have any right now. They might not admit that she had them, but I can hear her scream when they change her diaper. It's the only time she makes any noise, and afterwards, when they have gone, she lies in her bed whimpering for a while. I try to put all the water I can in her swab so that she can have something to drink, but she sucks at it desperately and cannot be satisfied. I hold her hand until she stops and seems to be sleeping. The clicking of her feeding tube lulls me into a sort of hypnotic trance. I think about making jam with her, having it in my hair, in my ears, on every finger. She never yelled at me, but would dump me in the tub before Momma got home and clean my handprints off of all the walls and cabinets. I'd haul my book bag home from elementary school loaded with books, and she'd sit on the couch patient and quiet while I read to her, often adding items I thought should be included

in the story anyway. Sometimes, I'd get tired of reading and lie over on her chest. I could hear her heart beating, and the realization of this mechanism always troubled me. By hearing its whoosh-whoosh I was suddenly confirmed as being human and susceptible to death, but the noise was ceaseless and like the clicking of the feeding tube it lulled me to sleep.

Grandma lies in bed, her chest filling, releasing, filling, releasing. The curtains are pulled shut so the bright summer light does not disturb her. I brush beads of sweat from my forehead and touch her hand. It is cold. I pull the blankets up around her and kiss her crumpled cheek. She moans, and I leave.

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*The one place I'd go back to would be the ocean. I've only been there once, mind you, but that's a lot more than most people from around here. Sam decided one summer when the kids were still small that he'd like to see the ocean. He checked out some books from the library. Well, really he got the kids to check out some books from the library because he didn't have a card and he didn't have a need for one since he couldn't read a word. But he spent hours pouring over the color photos of the beach. I'd sit grading papers and he'd sit there with those books. We did that for a few months in the winter. Sometimes, I'd try to get Sam to learn how to read, but he never took much interest in it. He'd just say that he'd stick to farmin' and I should stick to reading, which was more suited towards women. Now, I know I was lucky in those days to have some sort of education. Not many women did, but my Daddy was sorta affluent around the town, and he made sure I got an education and some sorta skill. Well, I'm sure he regretted it, because when I met Sam, who was as poor as dirt, I made up my mind to marry him and told Daddy that I would take care of Sam instead. He liked to have keeled over right there. But once he*

*saw what a hard worker Sam was and knew Sam's daddy was going to give him a bit of land, he was all right with it.*

*But boy, everyone sure was shocked when we packed up and drove out to South Carolina. It felt like it took us a hundred years to get there, and in those days with the blazing heat and two kids fightin' in the back, it wasn't no easy trip. When we finally made it into the city, I was bone tired. We stayed in a hotel right up close to the water. It was pink and green on the outside with seashells painted on all the doors. We had two full beds, and the kids slept in one while Sam and I took the other, but we didn't spend a lot of time in that room. The ocean was right outside, and it was the biggest thing I'd ever seen. It went on forever. I'd never seen so much water. It made the pay lake at home look like a puddle. We walked up and down that beach so many times I think I knew every grain of sand. I picked up a whole glass jar full of seashells to bring back. One was so big that I had to put it in the car because it wouldn't fit. It was cream with a tinge of strawberry color swirlin' around on it, and when I put it to my ear, I could hear the ocean hissing back at me. At the beach, big white gulls would fly in every morning. We'd watch the sunrise together, and the air would already be warm and breezy. I remember that peach light flooding around me and the peaceful feeling of Sam's hand in mine.*

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Grandma passed away while I was at school. Momma came and picked me up when the last bell rang.

"Hurry," she said. "I got a feelin' Momma's gonna pass soon. Your daddy and auntie are with her right now."

Momma drove so fast back to the nursing home. We were soaring down the street toward the building. The magnolia trees and cherry blossoms lining the road hovered above us. They gently swayed in the breezes, letting the sunlight wrap around them.

I could see Daddy standing on the sidewalk as we got closer. He had his hands in his pockets, and he was pacing back and forth. Momma slowed down as we got near him and parked crooked right in front of the doors. Daddy walked around and opened the door for her, and Momma started crying before he could even say a word. I'd never seen daddy hold her like that before, like he did me when I banged my knee or got a bee sting. He wrapped his big arms all around her and had one around the back of her head, pressing her face to his chest. I sat in the truck with the doors open. The scent of cherry blossoms washed over me. I held on to the door. I didn't cry or move. I didn't want to. I just wanted to sit there, watch Daddy waltz Momma around on the sidewalk in their dance of mourning, and smell the cherry blossoms bright and sweet.

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They had Grandma's funeral a few days later, and it wasn't long before relatives started squabbling over everything from the funeral flowers to her pots and pans. Momma fought them off as long as she could, finally producing a list that Grandma had hand written years before. It wasn't official, but it seemed to satisfy them. Grandma left Momma her old oak bed. It seemed too tiny for Momma and Daddy to sleep in, but momma took it home and set it up in the spare bedroom. Grandma left me her Bible, a big black affair with all sorts of church dates penciled in the margins, the names of her children and grandchildren, and the dates of their baptisms. She also left me a big dusty jar of seashells, one grotesque one poking out from the top. I remember putting it to my ear as a child and hearing the ocean for the first time.

It was a long time before I cried over Grandma. For a while, I kept an old seashell in my pocket, a pristine white one that was tough and didn't break. Sometimes, I'd lie on her bed, sinking almost to the floor on the old mattress and thumb through the pages of her Bible. I'd find my name, Ann, scrawled in her slanted cursive. She'd left a blank space



beside it for my husband and children. I always smiled and blushed a bit over this. But even these sacred activities failed to make me cry. Grandma was alive in all those things, so to me she hadn't gone anywhere.

A few weeks later, when school had resumed, I got off the bus at the usual stop and started walking toward the nursing home. The autumn leaves crunched dead under my tennis shoes. I got halfway there before I realized that Grandma was not living there any more. She would never be. I sat on the sidewalk right there and cried. I lay back into the fading grass. The scent of the earth, rotting leaves, and pine needles filled my nose. I closed my eyes tight and tried to hear the ocean and tried to see cherry blossoms floating in the air. I lay there a long time, but they never came to me in the old way again.

## Family Reunion: Ann, age thirteen

All the women are inside the kitchen. We are cooking, getting ready for tomorrow. Aunt Ruby is staying all night at our house, and Aunt Lucy has driven down to help us. Momma is boiling eggs and I am waiting to peel the shells off so we can make deviled eggs. These are my favorite and I can't help but like the name. It feels good to eat something that is "deviled."

Grandma is sitting at the kitchen table, telling everyone what to do. No one minds, though, because she is not bossing and we all know her way tastes best. Grandma has been living with us for three weeks now. I have learned how to make cornbread, apple pie, and fried green tomatoes since she came.

Momma drains the hot water away from the eggs and fills the pan with cold water. She sets it in the sink so I can peel the eggs. I love how they feel cold and smooth in my hands, but how as I flake away their thin hard shell, heat still escapes. Aunt Lucy turns the radio on. The windows are open in the kitchen, and I can hear the frogs singing over the music as the sun sets.

In her raspy voice, Grandma sings along with the old song "May the Circle Be Unbroken." Momma and Aunt Lucy join in. Aunt Ruby laughs about how she can't sing a lick and got left out when God gave away musical talents. I sing with them on the chorus, thinking about peeling eggs and teasing my cousins at the reunion tomorrow.

"Will the circle be unbroken, by and by Lord, by and by? There's a better home a waiting, in the sky, Lord, in the sky."

## **Ten Things a Girl Needs to Know Growing up in Eastern Kentucky**

### *1. In small towns, news travels fast.*

Women of the hills, where a weekend forty-five-minute drive to Wal-mart is a luxury, never fail to talk about every other person in the county. They always know who is getting married, who is cheating on her husband, who is dating in the high school, whose kids are drinking, and if anyone at all dares to do the most awful thing . . . leave.

I dared to do that thing. My ears burn from their gossip. They ask questions about my recent travels and stand and stare at me with a slight grimace that twinges the corners of their lips when I tell them I went to visit my boyfriend. Strikes one and two: traveling and not dating a local. They try to be polite, struggling like fish trapped in a styrofoam bucket bumping their heads and tails against the sides. They ask about my parents and then come to the inevitable question of when I will graduate. I tell them May, and I know strike three is coming up fast. They will ask if I am going to graduate school. I'll say yes, probably out of state. I'm out of the game.

### *2. What "cruising town" really means.*

We learn it the hard way. Something we once thought was so cool before we could drive, especially when Sara's older sister borrowed our car and took it downtown for a spin. I thought there had to be something enchanting, something more to driving through the three stop lights of a small town where the only possible destination for a social gathering could be Dairy Queen or in front of the Dollar General where everyone parks and talks. I can't remember the first time I went cruising. It must have been with

Sara after school, before tennis practice or a basketball game. We'd roll down the windows of my Mustang and blare some Backstreet Boys as we did the "circle" around town. After two trips, we'd stop and get a cherry coke and head to my house, where we'd sit on the porch or in the kitchen and wonder where the thrill was supposed to be. "Maybe it's better with a guy," Sara said.

Her sister had always been with a guy, and maybe it was a dating thing. I didn't go cruising very much after that, but I noticed the girls who did. They were always with a boy. It was the reinvention of Southern debutants whose daddies threw them a big party to say it was ok for them to be courted. It had changed a little, though. Now, the fathers bought their daughters new cars and sent them downtown. The old tradition and the new system were equivalent. Cruising, like dating, failed to enthrall me in high school, but knowledge of this custom is necessary when deciding what type of country girl one wants to be.

3. *Lightning bugs are really fireflies.*

"Squish their tails with your fingers and rub it on your hand!"

"Why?"

"You'll glow in the dark. Duh!"

Mom would bring me a mason jar out from the house, and I'd sit on the cool sidewalk while Dad poked rectangular shaped holes in the gold lid with his pocketknife. I'd twist the ring from the jar and take the top off, dropping it inside the ring on the steps and race off barefoot in the dewy summer grass to catch lightning bugs. My cousin, Jason, told me that if I pinched their butts off and stuck them together, I could make a glowing ring, or I could rub the residue all over my hands or paint my face. Then, I could run all over the yard and be an Indian ghost with him.

In the hazy fading light, we'd shriek when a slight blink appeared directly in front of us. I loved catching the bugs, noticing their slick-looking wing covers that opened and closed, revealing real paper-thin wings beneath, the red lines that covered their backs, their tiny legs that I could barely feel on my skin. I liked the strangeness of barely feeling something, not knowing if I imagined the feeling because I knew the bug was crawling on my bare flesh or if I could really feel all those tiny feet.

I could never rip their butts off. I kept my new pets in a jar once all night in my room. I fought sleep for the longest time as I watched them climb. They would crawl up to the lid and sit there blinking at me. They were all dead in the bottom when I woke up the next day. I never kept them in the jar all night again.

I was shocked to learn that the fireflies of fairytales and our lightning bugs were the same things. I thought fireflies were more closely related to fairies. Lightning bugs are ugly close up, but they don't deserve to have their tails ripped off.

#### *4. Fish can hear you.*

I tiptoe along the bank beside the pond carrying my new hot-pink fishing pole. My overalls are too long and the edges of my pants carry the mud along with them. Stained denim will cause Mom angst later, but Dad always makes me wear pants so that my legs don't become speckled with pink mosquito bites.

I am not allowed to try to learn how to skip rocks across the still surface. The fish can certainly hear that. They can also hear footsteps that are too quick around the edge of their home. Occasionally, Dad brings a coffee can of fish food and I am allowed to toss handfuls out onto the water. The little brown morsels float

on the green waves, and the fish gulp them down. Sometimes, I can see their thin lips break the surface and hear the “Glurp!” as they snatch the food.

We stay out until darkness wades closer to the water’s edge. In the twilight, Dad picks a cattail for me to take home. With muddy tennis shoes, I clamber into the pickup and feel the cool breezes playing with my stringy hair and listen to the crunch of the gravel and the bullfrogs’ gulping sob.

We have been sneaky after all, and I am sure the fish did not hear our whispers since we did not hear theirs.

5. *Prom is the biggest social event of the year.*

I am fighting with the lock on my locker. My arms are loaded with books and I try to push the hair back behind my ears so that I can see the lock. My hair slips forward quickly, and I miss how it used to catch behind the leg of my glasses.

Phil is at his locker beside me. We have been locker neighbors since middle school, trapped in the system of alphabetical order. His head is poked in his locker and he talks to me through the door, mentioning something about *Star Wars* and English homework. Finally, my door pops open and I tug my backpack out of the mess. He slams his door and I lean back into his view so that I can explain what an indirect object is. He stops for a moment, asking why I am not wearing my glasses. He’s staring. I tell him about the wonders of contacts, and he runs his hands through his blond hair, trying to comprehend it all. I continue to shove books into my backpack, and he continues to stare at me. When I slam my locker door, he takes my backpack from me, and we walk to the parking lot together. He asks me to prom on the way, and I think he is joking. He presses the issue. I tell him that I would love to be his date. Afterwards, I sit in my car, hands holding tightly to the steering wheel. The only thing I can think about is how he didn’t call me Annie, but

Ann, and I like the way my name sounded sweet, sticky, and nervous as it floated from his lips.

6. *Everyone shakes hands during Sunday morning church service.*

They'll sing "I'll Fly Away" again this morning, and this thumping hymn will send everyone out of their pew and around to shake hands with everyone else. Women in hats will rush to the kitchen for a chance to check on the food for the potluck dinner. Kids will run in circles at the back of the church, glad for a chance to squirm off the stiff pews and stretch their young legs. Those elderly, who can't walk, will sit patiently, old women with hands in their laps, until a hug or pat on the shoulder greets them.

Years of tradition are carried on every Sunday morning. Shaking hands is an interlude between the singing and the preaching--a moment where hands of different sizes, some calloused over, others smooth and young, some wrinkled, all touch. Past and present meet with a sturdy shake when the call comes from the song leader.

"Let's all stand and shake hands with somebody."

7. *Football doesn't exist, but basketball is everything.*

Winter chill is forgotten once we are tucked away in the sauna of a gym, waiting for the basketball game to begin. I know Matt is going to be angry, but I am going to wear the number anyway. After all, Phil has been my friend since middle school, and he deserves to have someone sport his number and cheer him on during the game. Besides, Matt is at college and he'll have to get over his little ego trip when he sees the photo of us girls that will grace the front pages of the local newspaper. Matt's been especially jealous of Phil because of prom the year before we started dating.

I slip on a white t-shirt with a snake-like “S” painted in blue on the front and the number 30 blazed on the back. The rest of the girls slip on wife-beaters, those thin tank tops. At least three layered over each other are needed to sufficiently hide the peachy color of their flesh. Most opt for less than three, and we head out to the bleachers to sit behind the team. The fronts of our shirts spell out “Go Bobcats!” and the backs contain a number of each of the senior basketball players. I feel a bit awkward sitting behind the guys instead of taking my usual spot with the pep band, but the boys deserve to be cheered on at the district game. I also feel awkward about not being able to pull off the sexy tight top like the rest of the girls, and a bit too seventeen to try. With a blue and white pom-pom in my hand and my blue bow fluttering in my eyes, I yell and cheer with everyone else.

After the game is over and more than half of the town is on its way home, we mingle on the court. Tennis shoes crunch over dropped popcorn and stick to the smooth floor from soda residue. The janitors have a huge mess to deal with tomorrow, but tonight they are as thrilled by the win as the boys themselves.

“Dear, I just wanted to thank you.”

I glance up, startled. “For what?”

“You were the only one of those girls that looked modest tonight. I was very proud to have you wear our son’s number.”

Blushing a bit, I look down at the toes of my white sneakers and smile. I always was a pleaser.

“You’re welcome.”

I walk out of the din and into the cold December air. My hands are nearly numb as I grasp the steering wheel. I can’t stop thinking about those tank-tops and



how, despite the compliment I did receive, I wish that I hadn't been the girl in the t-shirt just this once.

8. *Small town festivals are like family reunions.*

Festivals based on honey, strawberries, Daniel Boone, and even woolly worms, call to the restless natives like birds flying south in the winter.

They usually take place in the fall of the year, when the leaves are still barely hanging on the trees, a breathless time of beauty in Eastern Kentucky. Small towns close off their streets for days at a time and bring in every sort of vender imaginable. Locals and visitors can buy funnel cakes sprinkled with powdered sugar, quilts, corn meal, flour, wooden wagons, Christmas ornaments, hamburgers, knock-off name-brand merchandise, and even water-balloon yo-yos.

Bluegrass music trickles down the streets, along with the sound of clogging. There will be a parade on Saturday complete with the one local marching band, the Shriners, and even the Hillbilly clan decked out in costumes driving an old black Ford that squirts water at everyone.

But the most intriguing thing is the high school reunion-like atmosphere. It is a weekend for family visits, when all the college kids flock back to their towns as if their homing devices were finally switched on. There is the inevitable uncomfortable moment for those who have been away for several years, of seeing someone they meant to call or write to but never did. Everyone survives, everyone goes home, cars piled with useless antiques and Southern fried chicken, and planning begins for next year.

9. *Funerals and food go hand in hand.*

Sara's grandmother is standing in the kitchen, looking at the long tables filled with food at church. She is alone for a moment amidst all the chaos that has

enveloped her the past few days. I think about being a widow one day. How do they feel? What do they think?

“I never thought he’d pass so quick, but sometimes I guess that’s the best way for them to go. I never thought I’d be alone in this old house after all these years. I had just gotten used to all the young’uns being gone, and now he goes off and leaves me too. But I’m not one to question the good Lord’s timing. If He thought it was time for him to go home, then I reckon it was time. It sure was nice of all the ladies from church to fix all this food. My goodness! I don’t know how I’ll ever finish it all: peanut-butter cookies, macaroni salad, mashed potatoes, and even chicken and dumplings. At least the children will have something to eat while they are here. Heavens, they even brought loaves of bread and milk for us. Robert would have been mighty pleased. He would have been proud that we have such nice friends. He always said that the Lord would provide, and He certainly has. They even sent over jugs of coke for us to drink. They must have thought of everything. I suppose I’d better fix myself a little plate to eat. I can’t let all their hard work go to waste. Robert would understand and he would have eaten too. My, how he would have loved that banana pudding.”

10. *Stargazing is a popular sport.*

Dewy grass tickles my bare feet as they slip off of the edge of the quilt. The sky is wide and vast and filled with little twinkles that wink at us from millions of miles away. Sometimes I wonder if they think we are winking back at them. Crickets and the “swoosh” of cars passing on the highway are the only sounds that break the solitude. Occasionally, a whippoorwill calls out into the darkness. Its voice makes goose bumps creep down my arms, despite the July heat.

Dean's arm tucked beneath my head shifts, and suddenly he is blocking my view of the heavens.

"What are you thinking about?"

"The vastness of the sky. How because of it, I know we are not alone."

"You're beautiful."

The comment doesn't come off as trite or tired, because he's never said it before, and I know he's not trying to trick me into making out with him, because we've never kissed.

He lies back down on the blanket, and the heavens open before me again. I've been telling him about how I can't wait to get out of here, to see the rest of the world, to explore. He tells me about growing up in the city and about wanting to live in Utah. I think about living with him there. The thought stalls the breath in my throat. I like how the beginning is feeling with him. It's limitlessness.

But the heavens are also limitless before me, and I can feel the smoothness of his arm touching the skin around my neck and the slick, suddenly intimate touch as his toes stroke the bottom of my foot back and forth.

I know I am of the Kentucky bluegrass. I know the shadows of the hills will follow me forever, and I know I will always wink like the stars as they hang over a field in the middle of July. I know I am--and will be--a country girl, no matter where I go.

**Boone Family Tree**

