

GAP CREEK

A Note from the Author

Questions for Discussion



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When I began writing *Gap Creek* I knew I wanted to tell a story loosely based on the first year of marriage of my maternal grandparents. They had gotten married about a hundred years before on Mount Olivet and moved down to Gap Creek in South Carolina. I knew them as elderly people when I was very young. Grandma, who kept me during the day while my mother worked in the cotton mill, died when I was three. I wanted to tell a story about a woman like her, who did heavy men's work on the farm, and spent her life working for others, for her sisters and her husband, her children and grandchildren, the sick and needy of the community.

I tell my students that you do not write living fiction by attempting to transcribe actual events onto the page. You create a sense of real characters and a real story by putting down one vivid detail, one exact phrase, at a time. The fiction is imagined, but if it is done well, it seems absolutely true, as real as the world around us.

The hardest work I did on *Gap Creek* was trying to get the voice right. Julie, who tells her own story, is not well educated and is not much of a talker. In fact, she feels inarticulate. She feels she expresses

herself best with her hands, with her work. The trick was to create a plain voice, with simple, direct sentences, that could express the complex emotions and intimacy of marriage, even poetic experience. When I finally heard that voice in my mind I was able to write the novel.

Questions for Discussion

1. Julie is only in her teens when the novel opens, yet she has already learned to face life's hardships with a resiliency that is remarkable in one so young. We think of adolescence as a time of rebellion, yet Julie offers very little resistance to anything Mama and Papa tell her to do. Why do you think she is so accepting of her role? Sometimes Julie inwardly simmers at what she is asked to do, "but I didn't have any choice," she says. Is that true? What choices does she have?

2. Even though two of her sisters are older than she is, Julie is the one everyone counts on. "Everything that was hard fell to me, and everything that nobody else wanted to do fell to me." Why? What is the author saying about Julie? About those who depend on her? About the time and place in which she grows up? "Because you're the strongest one in the family. And because everyone has to do what they can," is her mama's explanation. What do you think of that philosophy? In what ways do people live up or down to what is expected of them?

3. When Julie helps her father carry her dying brother down the mountain, "it was the prettiest night you ever saw . . . It was the first time I

ever noticed how the way the world looks don't have a thing to do with what's going on with people." Talk about both the beauty and the impersonality of nature in the novel. What is the author saying about the cycle of human life? Where does religion fit into Julie's world view?

4. Before Julie meets Hank she thinks about falling in love with "a strong man that knowed what he wanted and could teach you." Contrast this image with what she finds in Hank. "I don't know why his look stung me so deep at that instant. We don't ever know why we fall in love with one person as opposed to another," she says. Is this true? Is it something a young girl might think, but that a mature woman might have a different perspective on? Talk about the importance of chemistry in a love relationship. Is it more or less important to you than shared interests and values? Why? What do you think of love at first sight?

5. Julie imagined her marriage would be something wonderful, but finds it different from what she expected. Her mama's view of marriage was simple: "Like everything else it is work, hard work." Do you think marriage is hard work? Contrast the way Julie responds to their hard life with the way that Hank responds. How do you think the different outlooks of Mama and Ma Richards have contributed to their offspring's readiness for the responsibilities of marriage?

6. Throughout the novel, we are given very detailed descriptions of the difficult and often unpleasant chores that Julie performs—from butchering a hog to laying out Mr. Pendergast's body after he dies from the fire. Does this help you to understand just how hard life was in Appalachia at the turn of the last century? Do you find Julie's capacity to endure despite unrelenting sorrows inspirational? Depressing?

7. "It was like we formed a special kinship in the kitchen," Julie says after sharing some unexpected pleasant moments with her mother-in-

law. She experiences similar intimacy in her kitchen cooking a meal with her sister Lou. Discuss the special place that the kitchen can hold in women's lives. Julie experiences a similar bonding experience with two new women friends from church who bring her homemade jelly and clothes for the baby she is expecting. Why do you think the author has Julie find sustenance from women during the harsh winter and so little emotional support from her husband?

8. When Hank realizes Julie has been conned out of money by a lawyer, Hank smacks her across the face and cruelly insults her. Discuss Julie's reaction to his temper. When they make up in bed, Julie thinks "In the dark what mattered was we was together and naked . . . We would always find a way to live, a way to get back, as long as we could love." Do you share Julie's faith in their love? Why?

9. When Gap Creek rises and floods their house, something snaps in Hank who, shotgun in hand, threatens to shoot himself, and maybe Julie, too. "I ruint your life . . . I ought to kill us both," he shouts. As the disasters continue to pile up that bitter winter, Hank slides into a deep depression broken by fits of rage. Why do you think Julie continues to stick by him? What do you think of Hank?

10. All alone in the house with the nearest neighbor a mile and a half off, Julie goes into premature labor with no one to help her. She finds a way to deal with the agonizing pain and fear by simply looking at it as hard work. Discuss the concept of childbirth as the work women were "meant to do." Do you think this view of her role exalts or diminishes a woman?

11. When Hank arrives home to discover that Julie has given birth, there is a dramatic change in him. He lovingly tends to his sick wife and baby, does all the chores, and, as Julie observes, "It was like Hank had got a lot older." Why do you think he is now ready to take care of

his family? Do you think he is able to become strong because, for once in their marriage, Julie is in a weakened state? Or do you think the strength, faith, and gentle nurturing of his young bride have finally rubbed off on him? Is the change in Hank believable?

12. In her fevered state after childbirth, Julie is visited by her dead father in a vision and he tells her she will live and continue to work and love. How does Julie use work to get her through her grief when her baby dies? A continuous thread throughout the novel, work is always hard and necessary, sometimes ennobling, and often the only path to survival. Talk about the various functions that work serves in the novel. In our lives? What is your own view of work? If we didn't need to work for the material benefits it provides, what would its value be?

13. Novelist Robert Morgan is also a prizewinning poet, and critics have praised *Gap Creek* for its "starkly beautiful" imagery and "simple but luminous" prose. The *New York Times Book Review* says Morgan's "stripped-down and almost primitive sentences burn with the raw, lonesome pathos of Hank Williams's best songs." What do you think of Morgan's writing style? Can you think of any other fictional characters—in novels or in movies—whom Julie reminds you of? Do you enjoy reading this kind of fiction? Why or why not?

We hope you enjoy this preview
of Robert Morgan's next novel,

**THE ROAD
FROM GAP CREEK**

Coming in Fall 2013 from
Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill

A Note from the Author on

**THE ROAD
FROM GAP CREEK**

When *Gap Creek* was published, I kept telling myself and others I would continue Julie and Hank's story into the twentieth century and even to the Great Depression. After all, the novel was loosely based on the lives of my maternal grandparents, whom I had known as a child in the 1940s and early 1950s. But I'd already begun another novel, *This Rock*, and I'd promised myself to finally finish a story set in the American Revolution, which became the novel *Brave Enemies*. Though Hank and Julie appeared as characters in *This Rock*, I kept postponing the continuation of *Gap Creek*. And then I had the opportunity to write a biography of one of my frontier heroes, Daniel Boone (*Boone: A Biography*), and that led to the writing of *Lions of the West: Heroes and Villains of the Westward Expansion*. But when *Lions* was finished I knew it was time to go back to the lives of Hank and Julie. It had been ten years since *Gap Creek* had been published. Throughout that decade I'd assumed I would continue the story in Julie's voice. As I began writing I saw Julie had already told her story. Her later life should be seen through the eyes and voice of her daughter Annie. And I also saw it was important to have a fresh perspective on the events of Julie's later

life, her marriage, her children, the tragedies and satisfactions of middle and old age.

Once I began to tell the story in Annie's voice I knew I'd made the right choice. Rather than going back, I was moving forward, from a new point of view, seeing Hank and Julie and their world from an intimate but different angle. The events of their move to Green River, the typhoid epidemic, the life of the beloved German shepherd Old Pat, the anguish of the Great Depression, the death of their son Troy in a plane crash in World War II, unfolded with mounting intensity. *The Road from Gap Creek* became a story not so much of looking back to Gap Creek and those trials but of looking ahead to the uncertainties of the future, the struggle to define one's self, and, beyond all the grief and unforeseen losses, the discovery of enduring love.

Robert Morgan

**THE ROAD
FROM GAP CREEK**

A NOVEL BY
ROBERT MORGAN

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One

The thing about Mama was she'd never tell you how she felt. When she was feeling bad she'd just go on with her work, washing dishes or peeling taters or mopping the floor. I'd know she was feeling pretty low, but she wouldn't say nothing. Work was what she done, what she'd done her whole life since she was a little girl up on Mount Olivet, and she'd keep on scrubbing the dishes and cups with a rag in soapy water and rinse them in cold water and dry them with a linen towel.

It would make Papa mad that Mama wouldn't say nothing when her feelings was hurt or she had the blues. It was a difference between them that went all the way back to the beginning of their marriage, back to the days on Gap Creek. Papa would argue and say she'd spent too much money on flower seeds or a shrub for the yard. He never could see wasting money on beautifying flowers, while Mama was crazy about flowers and liked nothing better than a rose of Sharon bush blooming in the yard and attracting bees and hummingbirds, or colorful geraniums in pots along the edge of the porch. She once said that it was a sign that God loved us that He put such colors in the world as you seen in the red of geraniums or the pink of dahlias or the dark purple of ironweeds along the road.

“Julie, you’re going to break us up,” Papa would say if she paid a peddler a dollar for some bulbs to hide in the ground. Mama wouldn’t say nothing back. She’d just go on with whatever she was doing or maybe start something harder, like washing the chicken piles off the porch or sweeping the backyard. I never saw nobody take more pride in keeping the porch clean than Mama did. Chickens would get up on the porch looking for something to peck and leave their piles like big melted coins on the boards. If the piles got baked in the sun they’d be hard to get off, set hard as cement or glue in the cracks of the wood. So almost every day Mama would heat a bucket of water on the kitchen stove till it was near boiling. Holding the bucket with a towel or the tail of her apron she’d splash tongues of smoking water on the planks that made them steam like they was burning. And then with the broom she’d scour the chicken piles off, flirting the dirty water into the yard. She’d splash and sweep until the porch was clean as the kitchen table drying in the sun.

About once a week Mama done the same thing to the yard, splashing and sweeping, running away the chickens, sweeping again, sometimes sprinkling white sand she got from Kimble Branch, till the yard looked smooth as a piece of white twill cloth that had been washed and ironed.

That day when the black car stopped in front of the house and the two men in uniforms got out, my heart sunk right to the soles of my feet. It was November of 1943, and you didn’t see many cars then because of the gas rationing, even on the big road, and on our little gravel road you could go half a day and not see a vehicle pass except for the school bus. That car could not mean any good as it stopped there on Mama’s swept yard, beside the boxwoods.

Those two men walked across the ground she’d swept so careful, and I wished I could close my eyes and make them disappear. We’d read in the paper about two men coming to deliver bad news from the war. It made me cold in the belly to see them, and then it made me

mad. I wanted to fling open the kitchen door, and tell them to go away. They had no business coming on us all of a sudden like this. I wanted to tell them to get back in their black car and drive back to town or some army base or Washington, D.C., or wherever they'd come from.

They knocked on the kitchen door, and when I opened it the taller one said, "Is Mr. Hank Richards here?"

"No he ain't," I said. The truth was Papa was out cutting firewood on the Squirrel Hill with my brother Velmer.

"Is Mrs. Richards here?" the second man said. He took off his army cap and put it under his arm.

"No . . . I'll see," I said, trying to think of some way to keep Mama from having to see them. But the other man took off his cap and looked past me. I turned and seen Mama standing right behind me, in the light from the door.

"Ma'am, I'm awfully sorry to be the one to bring you this news," he said and handed Mama a tan envelope. Mama held the folded paper a minute without opening it, then handed it to me. As I ripped open the paper and looked at the telegram I told myself this was a mistake. We'd read in the paper about men reported killed who later turned up wounded in a hospital or lost from their unit.

The telegram was words printed on paper ribbons pasted to the page. "Dear Mr. & Mrs. Richards, it is with profound regret I report your son Troy Richards, Serial No. 34119284, lost in the crash of a B-17 heavy bomber on Nov. 10, 1943, near the village of Eye in East Anglia. Stop. A grateful nation mourns the loss of your son whose sacrifice for his country will never be forgotten."

I read the words glued to the page to Mama, and she just stared at the door like she didn't see nothing.

"Ma'am, if there's anything we can do for you just let us know," the tall man said. But Mama had already turned away from him. I thought she was going back to the fire in the living room, but she didn't. Instead she walked to the far side of the kitchen and set down in the

chair by the bread safe. The two men said more things. They talked real gentle, like they was truly sad, and asked again if there was anything they could do. I reckon it was what they done every day, going around and delivering those telegrams and telling people how sorry they was. Finally they said a letter would be coming in the mail, along with a box of Troy's personal effects. And then they put on their caps and walked slow back to the car and drove away.

"Mama, you go back to the fire. You'll get cold setting in here," I said. But she didn't answer. She just set in that chair by the bread safe looking down at her hands clasped on her apron. I still held the telegram, and didn't know where to throw it down on the floor or fold it back up in the envelope it come in.

"Go tell Hank," Mama said.

"I don't want to leave you," I said. Mama's face looked gray, the way somebody with a bad heart looks.

"I can make you some coffee," I said.

"You go on," Mama said. "I'll be fine." She waved me away.

I put on a jacket and tied a scarf around my hair. Clutching the envelope, I stepped out into the chilly breeze. Chickens scratched around the edges of the yard. The cotton mill whistle sounded three miles away. It was the end of the first shift. I wished Muir was there so I could tell him. He couldn't tell me what to do, but just knowing that he knowed would help. That's what a husband was for. When something bad happened he was supposed to be there, not off building army barracks at Holly Ridge or Wilmington or preaching at a church down there. It would be comforting to just let him know. Papa had come home for a long weekend, and Velmer had come from Columbia, South Carolina, but Muir had stayed in Holly Ridge to preach at a little church near there.

To get to the Squirrel Hill I had to cross the road and then the cornfield. The corn had been gathered and the stalks leaned this way and that. We'd cut the tops and pulled the fodder back in August, and the

stalks was mostly bare and broke. The field looked bad as I felt. I stepped around briars, going real slow. Every second I delayed give Papa a little more time of peacefulness. I wished I could just turn around and go back to the house.

It took me a minute to find Papa and Velmer in the woods. The Squirrel Hill was hit by lightning more than any place I ever heard of. Some said there was iron in the ground under the hill and that's why lightning always come down there. Every time there was a big thunderstorm a bolt hit an oak tree and split it down the middle, flinging splinters and limbs all over the woods. There was dead wood all around the hill to cut up. It was also a place the squirrels loved because of the acorns and hickory nuts, which was how it got its name.

Papa and Velmer was using the crosscut saw. It took a man at either end to pull the saw back and forth. They was cutting up a big limb that had been blasted off that summer by lightning. Papa seen me coming and he must have thought I brought bad news because he turned away like he hadn't even seen me. My breath was short from walking.

"Two men come to the house and brought this," I said and held out the envelope. Papa looked at the telegram and sighed and put down his end of the saw. Fishing his reading glasses out of his shirt pocket he slid them on and read the words pasted to the page, then let the telegram drop to the leaves.

"Poor boy," was all he said.

"What is it?" Velmer said. I picked up the paper and handed it to him. Velmer read it and shook his head. I was going to say Papa should go back to the house, but he'd already started. His head was down and he stumbled against a bush, and that was how I knowed he was crying. It was the only time in my whole life I'd ever seen him cry. He never cried when his mama died that I could remember. And he never cried when his oldest boy nearly died of typhoid. I followed him as he lurched between the trees and fallen limbs toward the house.

Now when we got to the house, Papa walked straight to Mama

where she set by the bread safe. He put his hand on her shoulder but she didn't even look up at him. I'd seen her do that before. She couldn't stand to be comforted, or show affection in front of anybody. He'd touch her, try to put his arm around her, and she'd just pay him no heed. I thought she was too shy to show her feelings when another person was looking. Maybe she thought her and Papa was too old to act intimate. But when she just set there paying no attention to Papa reaching out to her at that awful moment, I seen it was something else. She'd give her life to working for other people and caring for other people. She'd put up with Papa's whims and rages, and all it had led to was this. She'd lived on grits and molasses when they was young down on Gap Creek. She'd give everything to raise her children, and she had lost her favorite child. She didn't want to show no emotion anymore.

"Julie . . ." Papa said as he squeezed her shoulder, but his voice broke and when he seen she wasn't going to answer he turned away and shuffled into the living room and set down by the fire.

"Mama, let me make you some coffee," I said.

"Too late in the day for coffee," Mama said. "I'd never sleep tonight if I had coffee now."

"You could drink just a little; that wouldn't hurt you."

Mama set there, and I wondered if she was going to stay in the chair all evening. It bothered me the way she wouldn't say nothing. Ever since I was a little girl it made me afraid when Mama was unhappy or disapproving. I guess that's the way girls feel about their mamas, much more than boys do. A girl has to be close to her mama, and the bottom falls out of the world when your mama is mad at you. Nothing can go right if your mama is angry. Even though I was a married woman it still seemed everything depended on how Mama felt. There was a big cold empty place in my chest as I watched Mama just set there like she wasn't noticing anything.

And then she looked up like she'd come back to life. "It's time to fix supper," she said. "Look how late it is."

"I'll fix supper," I said. "You just need to rest."

Mama ignored me and stood up, looking around the kitchen like she couldn't decide what to do first.

"You go on into the living room and rest by the fireplace," I said.

"Are you giving the orders here?" Mama said. A pain shot through me. Mama hadn't spoke to me in that tone of voice for a long time.

"I just thought you should rest," I said.

Mama wiped her hands on her apron like she was drying them, though her hands, like her eyes, was perfectly dry. "This is my kitchen," she said in a short voice like she almost never used.

"I just want to help," I said and felt my eyes getting wet.

"Then you go down to the basement and get some beans and beets and a pan of sweet taters," Mama said, like she was all business now and time was running out.

I got the saucepan for the taters and stepped out into the gray air. By mid-November it was already getting dark around five. The door to the cellar was at the front of the house. You had to stoop under the front porch to reach the cellar door. When Locke Peace had made the house a long time ago that's the way he'd fixed the basement. There was always cobwebs over the door and I brushed them aside. As I stepped into the dark cellar I remembered what I'd forgot, the flashlight. There was just enough light so I could see the shelves of can stuff. Since I knowed where the beans and beets was I got the jars and set them at the door. But the tater bin was at the back of the basement, and I had to feel my way there, trying not to stumble over any box or keg left on the floor.

When I was a little girl and had to go down there to get something, I always imagined snakes was watching me from the walls and shelves, big snakes with gleaming eyes. There was a smell in the cellar, the smell of old dirt and mold, of wrinkled or rotten taters, of dust and mildew, which I thought of as a snake smell. I shivered in the cold, sniffing the scent, and reached into the bin of sweet taters. Something

scurried away, and I jumped back and listened. All I could hear was pots banging in the kitchen above. My breath was short.

And then I remembered what had happened that afternoon and felt silly to be afraid of snakes or mice. Besides, it was almost winter-time and snakes was asleep deep in the ground.

"Troy is dead," I said, not sure who I was speaking to. It just come out, "Troy is dead." I said it to the dark in the back of the bin, to the smell of old dirt and mildew, to the dust. Troy had come down there as many times as I had to bring jars still warm from the canner or to get spuds for baking. He'd never come again for a can of peaches at grave level. "Troy is dead," I said again and grabbed enough sweet taters to fill the pan.

When I got back to the kitchen Mama already had water boiling for rice. She'd made a cob fire in the cook stove and the kitchen was warming up. "You wash the taters and put them in the oven and I'll go milk," she said.

"No, you can fix supper and I'll go milk," I said.

Mama give me this hard look and I seen it was no time to argue with her. Papa still set by the fire, and Velmer had gone out to bring the horse from the pasture. There was nothing to do but humor Mama and try to help her. I run some water in the sink and started to scrub the taters with a brush. Mama poured some rice into the saucepan of steaming water.

The kitchen door opened and there was Aunt Daisy holding a bowl covered with dishcloth. Mama had lit the lamp on the table and the light reflected off of Daisy's glasses. She was married to Papa's brother Russ, and they lived just on the other side of the Squirrel Hill.

"Julie, I'm so sorry," Daisy said. She handed me the bowl and I set it down on the table. "It's just some soup beans," she said. The bowl was warm and I could smell the sweet beans in their broth.

"Thank you," I said.

"I just heard the news from Velmer, and I'm so sorry," Daisy said.

“Won’t you set down,” I said. I glanced at Mama and at the milk bucket on the shelf. It was past time for milking.

“I’ll go get the cow in,” I said and grabbed the milk bucket and flashlight. I still had on my scarf and jacket.

“Troy was an awful sweet boy,” Daisy said, and set down at the table. “I always said he was the best this family has seen.”

I slipped out into the twilight with the milk bucket. Velmer had gone to the pasture for the horse, but the cow was still at the milkgap, waiting for me. I put the rope around her horns and led her along the road to the barn. The cow was named Alice and she was a Jersey and the best milker we ever had. She had a tendency to get mastitis after she freshened and was nursing a calf. But otherwise she was a perfect cow. Jersey milk is richer in cream than any other kind of cow’s milk.

Once I got Alice to her stall I mixed crushing and dairy feed and cottonseed meal in her feed box. The smell of molasses in the dairy feed was so strong it seemed to light up the dim stall. I got a bucket of water for Alice, too. Careful to avoid any fresh manure, I got the milking stool and set the bucket down under her bag.

Alice was nervous because she was used to Mama milking her and because I was late bringing her from the pasture. At first she didn’t let down her milk easy, but as she begun to eat from the box and I leaned my head against the side of her belly and talked to her, she relaxed. A milk cow likes to hear her name said, and I said it again and again. And I told her Troy was dead and wouldn’t be coming to the barn ever again. I told her she was the best cow and give the best milk we ever had, sweet golden milk with an inch of cream on top of every quart. The secret of milking is you don’t squeeze the teat you pull down. I talked to her and she give down her milk so fast it shot into the bucket with every pull and foamed and filled the air with the scent of sweet warm milk.

“That’s a good cow,” I said.

“Who’re you talking to?” somebody said in the barn hallway. It was Velmer.

“Where have you been?” I said.

“I had to see a man about a dog.” It was what Velmer liked to say when he’d been out in the woods to do his business.

“Well you’d better water the horse,” I said.

“Thanks for reminding me,” Velmer said.

Two weeks before, I’d had a dream about Troy. Maybe not really a dream, more like a vision. It was a still night at the end of October and the crickets was loud, a weekend when Muir was home from Holly Ridge and we was staying in the Powell house down by the river bottoms. I was about ready to go to bed and had turned off the lamp, and Muir was already asleep.

It was the kind of night when there was just enough light to see by, though the moon hadn’t come up yet. I was thinking about the war and all the bad news we’d heard about the Air Corps in England where Troy was stationed, how many planes we lost every day, though men sometimes got fished out of the channel or North Sea before they froze to death.

Troy had joined up in the summer of ’41 when he was working at Fort Bragg with Papa and Velmer and Muir, building barracks. It was mighty hot there in August, and he watched the soldiers training, the paratroopers climbing ropes and crawling through mud while sergeants yelled at them, jumping off platforms and towers. Everybody knowed the war was coming. The war had been going on for two years overseas. Because he’d been in the CCC and studied welding and learned to use dynamite when they was blasting rocks on the Blue Ridge Parkway—they called him a powder man—maybe they offered him a special deal when he went to talk to the recruiter of the Army Air Corps. Anyway, the next thing we heard was we got this card in the mail addressed to Mama saying her son Troy had volunteered for the Air

Corps and was training at the base in Georgia. Though she didn't say nothing I could tell it made Mama sick to get that little yellow card. She put it on the mantelpiece above the fireplace where it was still gathering dust.

After Troy was sent to England in 1942 we just got these little letters that had been photographed with half the words blacked out. When I seen Troy's girlfriend, Sharon, she'd say there was nothing in Troy's letters and rather than get such empty messages about nothing but weather and mud she'd sooner get no letters at all. That showed how she didn't think about nobody but herself. She didn't worry about all Troy was going through day after day. All we knowed was what they said in the papers about airplanes catching fire or getting shot down. But we'd get a card saying Troy had been promoted to sergeant with four stripes. And then one saying he had been raised to a master sergeant.

Troy sent me money to get Sharon a Christmas present. He sent ten dollars to buy her something nice, because he had no way of giving her something from way overseas. I went to the best store in Asheville, riding on the bus with all the soldiers, standing room only, and I bought the prettiest comb and brush and mirror set you ever saw. It was amber and brown and gold, the finest vanity set you could get. Because of the war, stores didn't have as much stuff as they used to, so I was lucky to find it. Would you believe Sharon didn't even like it? She said if Troy wanted to get her a present he should get it hisself. Just sending money and letting somebody else buy it wasn't the same. I was ashamed for her, to think that she didn't care what he was going through in those dark days over there.

In his letters that summer of '43 Troy told us he'd been moved to a new unit and a new job. But he couldn't tell us a thing about it, not even where he was exactly. He just said it rained all the time and the place was an ocean of mud. He was going to be promoted again, but he didn't say what there was above a master sergeant with six stripes.

Troy was smart and worked hard, and I guess they was going to make him an officer.

That night two weeks before as I set by the window before going to bed, looking across the branch toward Chinquapin Hill, which is in the pasture to the west of the Squirrel Hill and makes a kind of bluff above the bottom land, I could see the trees clear against the sky. The moon wasn't up yet, but you could see there was light back there, like the light of a distant town or the light of a fairground. Stars seemed stuck in the limbs of trees like tiny Christmas lights. Maybe it was dew sparkling on the trees and in the pasture, beyond the springhouse and smokehouse and the old molasses furnace above the branch.

Suddenly I didn't see none of that. It was like a light had gone out and instead of the window I saw Troy, and he was almost close enough to touch. He was setting with his head down and he looked worried. I was so surprised I didn't think to say nothing. He just looked down at something and he seemed terrible sad. And he looked older. His hair was still light red and curly like it had always been. Whatever he was thinking about it was bad, and a weight seemed to be crushing down on his shoulders.

"Troy," I wanted to say, but my tongue was set like it was froze, the way your throat and voice are in a dream. I couldn't reach out to him, and I couldn't say nothing, not even his name.

And then he looked at me. It was like he seen me there, so close to him. He turned and it was like he was going to say something, though his expression was awful sad. I thought he was going to tell me where he was and what he was doing. He just wore these drab work clothes, like a mechanic would, not a uniform. He looked like he'd been working a long time without sleep.

But suddenly there was this roar, as if a thousand shotguns had gone off at once. And a whoosh of flame that covered everything fast as lightning. It was a many-colored flame with purple and green but

mostly white that flooded out unfurling like a big cloth and burned up everything. And then it was all gone. I wanted to see what happened. I wanted to reach out and save Troy, but there was nothing but the window and Chinquapin Hill and the sound of crickets. And I heard the roar of Johnson Shoals over on the creek.

When I told Muir the next morning about what I'd seen he didn't hardly seem to listen. Muir sometimes preached at different churches, though he wasn't a pastor yet. He didn't like people to talk about superstitions. He said superstition showed a lack of faith. He was making coffee when I told him what I'd seen.

"You must've had a bad dream," he said.

"How could I have dreamed when I was awake before it started and awake when it was over? I was looking out the window toward Chinquapin Hill, and I was awake as I am now."

"You just dreamed you was awake. Looking out the window and across the branch was part of the dream."

Nobody can make me mad the way Muir can. I guess it's them that you love that can rile you the most. I reckon a difference with somebody you love scares you cause you expect them to be of one mind and one feeling with you.

"How do you know if you didn't see it?" I snapped.

"Ain't saying you're lying," Muir said. "I just think you forgot you was dreaming." He dipped water from the bucket on the counter into the coffee pot before lowering the holder with the coffee in. Ginny, his mama, had never got running water into the Powell house and we had to carry water from the spring house out near the pasture fence. The spring itself was way around the pasture hill, beyond the molasses furnace, but Muir's grandpa Peace had piped it all the way down to the springhouse. Muir had got electricity run to the house but had not put in plumbing.

"No one can tell you nothing," I said, and put on water to make

grits. The way Muir acted when I told him I'd seen Troy as close as on the other side of the window made me decide not to tell another soul. Everybody was worried about the war and about getting gasoline and tires and sugar because of the rationing. You had to have stamps to buy almost anything, coffee or meat or tea. Mr. Sharp that was the principal of the school give out ration books and he'd signed some for me. You took the ration books with you to the store, and when you bought sugar or coffee you had to give a stamp with your money. The stamps didn't make nothing cheaper.

Now I kept thinking about what I'd seen in the vision or whatever it was. Maybe it *was* a kind of dream. In the Bible it said young men will see visions and old men will dream dreams. Didn't say nothing about girls or women. What bothered me most was how worried Troy looked bent over that way, like he was waiting for something. Couldn't see where he was, but the awful blast and flash of light just seemed to come out of nowhere. And then as I played it over in my mind I remembered there was something else, something I'd forgot. After the flash and just before it all disappeared there was a smell for an instant, a smell like burnt paint or some burnt chemical. It was a terrible smell, like leather had been scorched, and maybe hair, like when a cat gets too close to a hot stove. That smell come back to me and it made me a little sick.

"How come you know everything?" I said to Muir, but he just laughed and shook his head, like he usually does when I get mad, acting like I'm not worth arguing with, just being an emotional woman. I've seen him do it a hundred times, backing out of an argument and shaking his head and chuckling, like he couldn't make sense of what I said anyway. And that always makes me madder still.

When I got back to the house, Aunt Daisy had left and Mama was warming up the soup beans and the rice was about ready and the sweet taters smelled almost baked. I strained the milk into pitchers and

put it into the icebox. Mama placed bowls and spoons on the table while I washed out the straining cloth and the milk bucket. When I put the rice and taters on the table I called for Papa to come.

“Don’t feel like eating,” he called back.

“You come on,” I said. “You’ve got to eat something.”

Papa shuffled in and set down at the head of the table while I poured each a glass of cold milk. Velmer was still outside, but I knowed he’d come in when we set down. Papa said a short blessing and helped hisself to the soup beans but didn’t start eating. “I told that boy to stay away from old airplanes,” he said.

Mama set with her bowl empty. “Let me give you some rice,” I said.

“He never paid no mind to what I said,” Papa said.

“Best not to talk about it,” I said. “Won’t do no good.”

Velmer come in through the kitchen door and set down at the table. I passed him the bowl of soup beans. Just then the front door opened and somebody walked into the living room. “Come on into the kitchen,” I called. I looked through the door and there was Preacher Rice.

“If you folks are eating, I’ll just stay here by the fire,” the preacher said.

“Come on in and set down and we’ll find you a plate,” Papa said.

The preacher stepped into the kitchen but didn’t set down. “I just come to say how awful sorry I am,” he said, holding his hat in front of him.

“Won’t you have a sweet tater?” I said. Last thing I wanted to do was discuss Troy’s death with the preacher. And I guess Mama and Papa felt the same way. For when a preacher comes to comfort you it always makes you feel worser. I don’t know why that is, but a preacher’s kind words make you feel more miserable. Maybe I shouldn’t say that, being married to a preacher. But a preacher’s words always seem far away. You know what he is going to say and what he has to say. And somehow the fact that he goes ahead and says them makes you even

sadder. For the preacher will say God's ways are mysterious and beyond our understanding. What seems unbearable to humans must be part of a plan. If something bad is an accident, it's bad, but if it's part of a plan, that's much worse. I've never understood why preachers think that is comforting. They make you feel so hopeless and stupid. For they remind you there's nothing you can do. Your suffering is all part of God's plan. You don't have control over nothing, no matter what you do. It makes you feel weak and sick in your bones, the way a bad fever does.

"The Lord is looking down in His infinite mercy," the preacher said, "but with our limited understanding we can't always understand."

"That's right, Brother Rice," Papa said and took another spoonful of soup beans. Mama didn't say nothing, and she still hadn't touched her plate. I eat some sweet tater just to be polite.

"The Lord tries us as he tried Job," Preacher Rice said, "because he loves us he tries us."

Somebody else opened the front door and walked into the living room. I called out that we was in the kitchen. Helen Ballard stepped into the firelight holding a plate, and her husband Hilliard was just behind her.

"I have brought a chocolate cake," she said.

"Your chocolate cake is my favorite," I said.

"Come, pull up a chair," Papa said.

"We'll just stay here by the fire," Helen called. "We was awful sorry to hear about Troy."

I got up and took the cake from her and put it on the counter.

RANDI ANGLIN



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