

*Steep Hills: Stories of Food and Farming*

by

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## **Dedications**

I dedicate this thesis to the elders and leaders of my family who taught me the importance of heritage, hard work, and the value of homegrown food. To my children, Alexandra and Daniel, I dedicate these stories of food and farming with the hope you will carry them to Appalachia's next generation. Most importantly though, I dedicate this thesis to my husband, Joseph Graham, who has always encouraged me to pursue my dreams. This thesis would not have been possible without your continuous support and unfaltering belief in me.

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## **Bearing the Seed for Sowing**

“Grab Bob’s harness collar from the shed while you are at it,” Daddy hollers from the driveway as I race full speed to the barn.

I look down at the ground where my feet land in the soft dirt. Faded converse shoes blur across the paddock as I direct my feet to the lean-to shed. Skidding to a stop just inside the door, I look up to see two nails jutting out of the wall. One nail was left bare but the other held the oval harness collar that Bob wears around his neck when Daddy works him in the field. Putting my nose to the collar, I breathe in the musky scent of leather and sweat. On the inside of the leather, I can feel the worn wool rubbed flat from the horses’ strain as each pulls their share of the load. Bob, and his brother Todd, are two identical workhorses that Daddy uses to plow the field. It is corn planting day and I know not to be piddling around when there is work to be done. The spring rains have softened the ground, promising a good day to break the packed soil from the winter. It is a cool morning, but I can feel the sun rapidly warming the air. I already shed my jacket, now comfortable in a long sleeve pullover shirt and faded blue jeans. I turn my face towards the sky and listen to the morning songs of the sparrows and the shrill warning of the blue jays as they swoop and chatter at the barnyard cat. As the sun warms my body, I can feel springtime awakening not only me, but all living things. The budding trees and plants on the surrounding mountainside echo my thoughts of hope in a new season of growth.

“Ginny, where is that collar, I got to git going to meet David in the field and he won’t be none too happy anyway fighting that young, hard-headed mule of his,” Daddy bellers at me.

Jolting me from my thoughts, my eyes focus again on the draft horse's collar hanging a good two feet above my head. I jump up as high as my small body will get me and finally dislodge the collar from the nail that it hangs on. The heavy, leather collar pops off the nail and bumps my forehead. Grabbing the collar tightly with both hands, I dart out of the shed and set off at a run. The weight of the heavy workhorse collar, though, results in a part skip, part stumble and eventually a final stop on the gravel drive in front of Daddy. Daddy's large, calloused hand grabs the leather collar with ease. Then he opens up the collar and slides it easily around the large horse's thick neck, fastening it into place. Bob stands quietly as the sounds of the metal rings of the hames clang into place over the collar. The spider web of harness spread out over the horse's broad back as Daddy works to arrange it loosely over Bob's hind quarters. The team of horses, both brown with black mane and tail, are not the biggest of draft horses as they have a bit of Welsh pony in them, but they do everything Daddy asks of them and more. He has earned their trust and loyalty through consistent feed, kindness, and occasionally a pinch of tobacco from his back pocket as a reward for hard work. The team is so dedicated that he can work them in the field without lines, or what some less knowledgeable people call really long reins, used to guide the work horses. Nobody in the community had believed it without seeing it for themselves, but he will call to them "Gee" for right, and then "Haw" for left, and the horses will just walk along quietly all while the lines stay tied to the plow handles.

I rub Todd's soft nose with my cheek and nuzzle his whiskers. Todd is not the lead horse, but he is certainly the sweetest of the two. Me and my cousins like to clamber and heave ourselves up on his broad back. Then, all three of us seated and stacked chest to back, lumber along riding and surveying the valleys and hillsides of our community, Norris Run. He is too lazy and big to run so we don't have to worry about falling off. Todd never has offered to buck,

at least not on purpose. Although, a draft horse kicking at a horse fly can feel like a wild ride for a small kid.

Bob, however, is a different story. He is all business and the lead horse of the team. He isn't mean but as Daddy once told me, "He ain't for no foolishness." I learned this lesson one day when the team was harnessed and resting in the field as Daddy took a break from plowing.

I recall that the horses were still hitched to the plow as Daddy sat in the shade, taking a rest and drinking water from a jug I had carried to him. They both had their work bridles on, which had blinders attached. The leather flaps sat on the side of the horse's head, just outside of their eyes, and helped maintain their focus on the plow row ahead. As the horses dozed in the sun, I decided to give Todd some love and strode up the right side of the harnessed pair. When I stuck my face around the blinders and the horse got sight of me, I instantly knew I had made a terrible mistake. It was Bob instead who lunged at me. All I remember seeing was those big horse teeth and then Bob grabbed hold of what seemed like my whole face. As soon as I squalled, Bob just let go, and I ran for the safety of Daddy.

"Daddy, Bob bit my face off!" I whined and cried as I had turned my face up to Daddy. He had removed himself from the shade to see what was going on and looked down at me to survey the damage. "Oh, why it looks like Bob planted a big ol' kiss on you! He must've thought you had some sugar between your teeth," Daddy chuckled as he grabbed my face with his calloused hands and turned it roughly side to side in the light.

"You all right, go on and feed the chickens and collect the eggs," Daddy waved back toward the house. I sniffled and my hands shook as I touched my lips, chin, and cheek. It had mostly been my lips that were tender to the touch, but everything still seemed to be in the right

place. I remembered pulling my hands away and looking down cautiously as I examined them—no blood. Still, from then on, I kept my distance from Bob.

Daddy picks up the lines to the team and clicks to them, “Get on” as he walks them over to the sled. I run over to the sled, not wanting to be left behind while daydreaming. The sled is built on metal runners that sit on the ground with a flat of wood on top. Daddy holds the long lines in one hand, and in the other hand he carries the double tree that connects horses to their load. They call it a tree I guess because it is made from wood, but it has metal rings and hooks that connect the horses’ harnesses to the tree by these long leather and chain pieces called traces. Daddy tells the horses to “back...back...back” and drops the hook of the double tree down into the metal ring of the sled. The horses instantly stand ready to pull, haunches flexed and ears alert. Already loaded on the sled is the turning plow used for breaking ground in the field. We are ready now to ride the sled up to Pawpaw’s field on the hillside and meet Uncle David.

I love riding the sled and hop on staying clear of the plow in case it decides to shift as we bump across the rocky ground. Once I’m settled into a seated position, Indian style, Daddy hops on and stands beside me. He calls to the team again to “Get on” and guides them with a gentle hand, easing the horses down our driveway. The grinding sound of metal against rock and gravel is not pleasant as we slide along the road, but finally, we hit the cool, dew-covered grass in the field. A peaceful swish of the grass under the sled and the horse’s blowing their noses and shaking their bridled heads puts me at ease. I stretch my legs out in front of me and savor the ride through the fresh, spring meadow.

Surveying the rolling hillside, I can see my grandparent’s small cinder block house to the left with a vegetable garden in the back. Wisps of smoke are thinly floating out of the chimney as

the fire from the night dies down. My grandfather will still be keeping the house warm as even these late April mornings still hold a chill and my grandmother's joints ache terribly in the colder months. Pawpaw takes very good care of her night and day as the crippling disease has twisted her arms and legs until she can no longer walk. When visiting, I hear his labored breathing after dressing Granny in the morning. Black lung, from working in the coal mines, is stealing his life a little each day. He will just walk along slowly, always moving to somehow get the job done. Every year, he puts out his garden and tends it as regularly as the sun rises and falls. I have heard the stories from my Momma growing up during the Great Depression. Her daily chores consisted of feeding the chickens, like I do, and milking the cow every morning before school. She shared a bedroom with her three sisters and had one brother that got a room of his own. Clothes were washed on a wash board and then later, a wringer washer in the backyard. They had not always had the cinder block house either. She had taken a job as a secretary once she graduated high school and helped her parents purchase this home. Everyone had to survive the best they could, she had said, and sometimes children made sacrifices to help their parents. I wondered, would I be expected to stay on here, helping my parents on the farm into my adult years? Mom's brother, my Uncle David, had moved out for a while but returned recently and put in a double wide to take his place on the family land.

“Whoa, Mule!” Uncle David hollers. The sound of my uncle jolts me from my dreamy state and I sit up from my position on the sled, peering around Todd's left shoulder, curious at the racket up ahead. Daddy yells, “Get his head, you got ‘em! Hold on there a minute, I'll hep ya!” Daddy snaps a line on Bob's rump, hurrying the team on up to the corn field. Pulling to a stop, we both jump off the sled and he hands me the lines, signaling me to stand with the horses.

Hanging on tightly to the lines of a tall, reddish-colored mule with wild looking eyes is Uncle David. From the best I can tell, he has tried to start the mule turning rows with the plow, but from the looks of it, he's the one being pulled through the dirt. Red-faced and sweaty, the plow bouncing loosely side to side behind the mule, Uncle David continuously strains to pull the mule to a stop. Holding both lines looped tightly between each thumb and forefinger while twisting the stubborn mule's head, first to the right and then to the left, the struggle between man and beast goes on. From my position next to the work horses, I could see the mule jumping and kicking his hind feet up, flaring his nostrils, and making a crazy durn fool of himself.

Eventually, Uncle David will get him broke and it will be well worth the fight. I remember what Daddy had told me: "Mules can outwork a draft horse any day of the week and they don't eat as much." This makes a mule what you call an "easy keeper," that is, if you can get past the stubbornness.

I stand watching the scene as Daddy made it to the head of the mule. He retches up and grabs hold of the mule's work bridle, bringing him to a stop. Uncle David, loosening his grip on the lines, bends over and removes his wide-brimmed straw hat. He pulls a handkerchief from his back pocket to wipe his forehead and blow his nose. While regaining his breath, the two men talk back and forth. Too far away to hear their conversation, I think they might be giving the mule time to calm himself. Taking a closer look at the mule, I realize it was a bigger stock than I normally see farmers use on the local farms. His back stood as tall as the top of my head with long, pointy ears twitching constantly at every sound. Of course, him being really tall compared to me is not all that much I guess. I am what my Momma calls a shrimp measuring only four and a half feet at my last doctor's checkup. I got big feet for my age though, so they are guessing I

might still have a chance at not being too short. I ain't much help to Daddy right now so I am hoping that the doctors are right.

"Ginny!" Daddy calls to me from the place he was standing with the mule, still holding on to its head.

"Yea, Daddy?" I return.

"Lay them lines down on the ground and come over here. Them horses ain't going nowhere," he tells me. I quietly lay the lines on the ground and walk cautiously over to where the two men are beside the mule. The mule's hind quarters are still quivering from the excitement and I could see the whites of his eyes as he shoots me side glances at my approach. I stop about ten feet short of the men. I quietly whisper, "Yeah, Daddy?"

"Ease on over here now. Over here where I am standing," he now speaks softer to me, firm but gentle. I ease up to where he is placed himself next to the mule's head. With every step closer, I can see the animals' eyes following me with concern. Slowly I reach my hand out and start rubbing the forehead of the mule, down his jawbone and around to his soft nose where hot air comes out in short bursts.

"What's a matter, Jake?" I soothingly ask the young animal. His breathing starts to slow a bit and he drops his head a little as if breathing a sigh of relief.

"Ginny, I want you to walk along beside Jake here and keep him in the row nice and straight. You got that?" Daddy looks hard at me. I swallow in disbelief. I had just witnessed the crazy mule's antics and don't want to be no ways close to the mule if he starts acting up again.

On the other hand, telling Daddy I am afraid seems worse, especially in front of my uncle.

Disobedience is bad enough, but in front of another elder could mean a whipping.

“I don’t know, Daddy, he’s pretty tall,” I whimper back. I didn’t want Uncle David to hear me; to even admit my fear to Daddy felt embarrassing.

“Oh, Jake just is young and a little hyped-up is all. He likes you and will just walk along with you. You’ll be a distraction to him and you can talk him down the row. I know you can talk, that’s all you girls do!” Daddy laughs casually. I know what he is up to though. I don’t like being compared to no silly girls like my sister or cousins. They always play with their Barbie dolls and pretend house like they are marrying some handsome guy like on Dukes of Hazzard. I can’t help though trying to please Daddy and prove I can do helpful things just as good as a boy. He don’t have no boys so I would just have to do.

“Okay, Daddy,” I nervously breathe out. Slipping my small hand cautiously between the bridle and the mule’s head, Daddy lets go and I stand for just a moment rubbing and talking to the mule some more. I look back warily at Uncle David. He is gathering his lines again and righting the plow into position. I keep on talking to Jake, “Easy Boy, you gonna be alright. He ain’t gonna hurt you.”

Glancing back one more time, I see Uncle David nod abruptly that he is ready. He has both hands on the plow handles and the lines are now tied together and diagonally wrapped around his back. I whisper to myself, “I sure hope my uncle don’t regret hitching them lines around his body.” My heart pounds and my hands are sweaty all of a sudden. I pull on the mule’s bridle and click to him, waiting for him to jump into action like I witnessed before. Instead, he stands still as a statue, not flinching a muscle. I jerk a little harder on his bridle and raise my

voice a bit, “Get ‘on Mule!” Suddenly, Uncle David snaps the lines across the mule’s back and Jake lifts both front feet off the ground in a little hop. He leaps a few feet ahead taking me with him. As he lifts me off the partially plowed rows of earth, all I can do is hang on.

Down the first row we go, Uncle David holding on to the plow and taking huge, fast steps to keep it in the row. I hold on to the mule’s work bridle with both hands, my feet coming down in the dirt and then rising up in the air again as I try but fail to pull the mule’s head down. Jake makes it about 20 feet and then stops dead in his tracks, slinging me around like a Raggedy-Ann doll. I blow out the air I had been holding in my lungs as my uncle snaps the lines again. Still tightly gripping Jake’s bridle, we bound down the field again. The mule’s front feet spring up and then down, lifting me several inches off the ground. I will say one thing about Jake, he isn’t a mean mule and ain’t trying to bite me, but he clearly doesn’t understand what we want from him either. As we head down the third row now, my arms are getting tired, and the mule is starting to given in as well. Jake has also worked up a sweat as evidence from the white lather on his sides, under his harness straps. We keep on moving though, my uncle at the lines, and me pulling on Jake. Sometimes Jake will slow down to almost a stop, but a snap of the line reminds him to move on again. Finally, my uncle hollers “whoa Jake, whoa mule” and we come to a stop. My uncle is taking a break and I finally can release my grip from the mule’s work bridle.

“What you got there is a Mule Skinner,” I hear another voice coming from the edge of the field rows. I can’t see him over the mule’s back, but I don’t need to see to know it is my Pawpaw’s voice. I hadn’t noticed his car pull into the field next to the corn rows because of all the commotion with the mule. Unable to now walk the length of the field from his house, he had driven his car up a road that ran along the side of the corn field.

He grins at me, and through his thick-lensed glasses, surveys the mule from head to hind quarters. Pawpaw is tall and thin with strawberry-blond hair and freckles, just like me. He always wears beige pants and shirts with the name *Dickies* on a little tag sewed to the pockets. Come to think of it, I have never seen him wear anything else but Dickies. Sometimes, if I am helping him string beans to hang on the back porch, I will catch a sweet scent off his clothes of the aromatic tobacco that he smokes in his pipe.

“That thar’ is a good-sized mule for such a little girl to hang on to,” Pawpaw chuckles to himself, which trails off into a suppressed cough. At the mention of “little girl,” I puff up my chest and draw my head up to make myself as tall as I can.

“What cha’ll ought to do now, is hook that mule to that log over yonder. Let him have that fit with the log, wear himself down a bit,” Pawpaw nods his head slightly to the right indicating a large, round tree that had been cut and tossed in the ditch along the side of the road. I watch as Uncle David and Daddy glance over in the direction of Pawpaw’s gaze. Both men nod in agreement and remove their hats, pulling their sleeves across their foreheads to wipe the sweat that had formed.

Pawpaw adds, “That’s a might bigger mule than I worked in the mines. You hitch him to that log though and he’s bound to calm down.” At the mention of the mines, the younger men grow quiet. My grandfather pulls his pipe out of the front pocket of his beige shirt and a white pouch from his back pants pocket. I watch with curiosity as he places the pipe stem in his mouth and slowly unrolls the package revealing the words, *Captain Black, Pipe Tobacco*, printed in black on the front. He reaches a thumb and index finger into the pouch and pulls out a pinch of tobacco, then sticking it into the pipe he still holds tightly in his teeth. He rolls the pouch back up

and returns it to his pants pocket. Reaching into his front, hip pocket now, he retrieves a silver lighter with a flip top and with a quick snap of his wrist holds the flame to his pipe. One, two, three draws from the pipe and smoke swirls about my Pawpaw's face. For a moment, time seems to stop as I look at the old man standing before me. Pawpaw looks into the distance, not across the pasture, but to some place that cannot come into focus. As he pulls on his pipe, his mind appears to have drifted away, much like the white swirls of smoke that escape his lips and are caught in the breeze.

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"Gerty, I'm heading out now," I call from the back porch. Sitting on an old wooden stool, I lean over to pull on my mining boots. The boots are black and coated in layers of coal soot that won't come clean no matter how many times Gerty has tried. I want to kiss her bye before heading to work but wouldn't dare dirty her clean floors. Reaching behind me, I shrug on my heavy coat and button it up. The last, but most important thing left to grab: my carbide light and hat.

"Frank, here's your lunch," Gerty pushes open the screen door and pulls her shawl around her as she steps into the early morning spring air. She reaches out the silver pail to me as I grab her wrist and playfully tug her to me. As I lean in to kiss her, she turns her head and swats at me.

"Now why you acting a fool, you ole' honky? What you doing? You gonna be late to work." Gerty tries to act like she means business, but she can't help but giggle. I hold fast to her wrist as she wiggles and twists like she is trying to get away. I let go then and take the pail gently from her small fingers. "I'll see you this evening. Tell David and the girls they's to hep you with

the garden. I best not hear of any squabbling from them. You got enough to do without them causing a ruckus,” I speak to her gently while I gather my gloves, tobacco, and pipe into my coat pockets.

Gerty looks up at me, eyes bright and clear and the prettiest skin like buttermilk. “Now Frank, don’t you worry. We’ll get the garden tended to. You just come home safe,” Gerty’s voice drops off as the last words fall softly from her lips, a shadow of worry passing over her face. I land a kiss square on her mouth and leap off the back porch, laughing as I start around the house. “Frank, you rascal!” she calls after me.

It is still dark outside, but the full moon makes for a nice walk to the mines. I make it to the other end of the yard in a few strides and cross the small creek that leads into the woods. The woods are a bit darker but cut a great distance off the small hike to the mines. The night animals are still awake too and I can hear the owl as he calls from a tree limb somewhere in the forest’s canopy. The hillside steepens for about 15 minutes and then flattens as I reach the top of the knoll. My father and I had cleared off this spot some years back in order to build a pole barn for stacking hay for the winter. Pausing for a moment to catch my breath, the moon shines especially bright on the hilltop and I feel a sense of satisfaction standing on my land. My father has always told me, “if a man’s got a piece of land and a set of hands, he can survive near anything.” He had been a hard-working farmer who grew a variety of things, like corn and sugar cane for molasses, never having to work outside of the farm to feed his family. I have argued with myself that the Depression has brought hard times though, and I have youngins’ to feed and put shoes on their feet. Going to work in the mines is something I have to do, not by choice. On that thought, I pick

up my feet and start moving again. It will be just another 20 minutes over the next hillside to the mines.

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Up ahead, I can see the edge of the tree line that opens up to a clearing. There are some torch lights and a couple of miners' carbide lights faintly bobbing up and down in the distance as they walk around the mouth of the mine. As I approach the front of the mine, a miner is coming out and I squint to see if I know him. Although the day has barely begun, his face is already partially black from his morning expedition into the deep darkness of the mine. I recognize him upon closer inspection as Samuel, the fire boss and first man in to check for gases.

"How's the morning treating ya, Sammie?" I throw up my hand as I speak.

"Fair to middlin', I reckon, Frank. How's the family?" Samuel pulls off his hat and blows out the lantern on top. He pulls a rolled cigarette from his front coat pocket and strikes a match on the pant leg of his coveralls.

"Ah, good, good. We faired the winter and looks to be a good spring planting, not too wet." I pull my hat off and set my belongings at the entrance of the mine. I will need to get the mules ready to go down the shaft and will pick up my gear later to take with me.

"Ah, Frank, you bettern watch that boy, Eugene around yourn lunch pail," Samuel rubs his head as he pulls on his cigarette. His eyes narrow as a flash of anger crosses his face.

"Something happen, Sam?" I question wearily.

"Ah, that nigger needs to know his place, that's all. You know my wife, now she's a good cook. She makes me the best apple fritters you ever laid in your mouth," his tongue flickers out

and he licks his lips, both remembering the taste of his wife's cooking but also savoring a good tale. "Well, I was working . . . I guess it was Monday last week, and it was dinner time. I ate my dinner and was planning to save that fritter for later on my walk home. At the end of my shift, I picked up my pail and popped the top off. Well, that wasn't no fritter left!" Samuel's voice rises loudly as he throws his hands in the air.

I busy myself with checking my coat pockets and avoid eye contact. The Lord ain't the only one knows that Samuel has got a temper. I glance up at Samuel who is leaning into me, expecting a response. I answer back with "Is that so, Sam?"

"Ah, you know you can't trust 'em. So, you know what I had to do? I whupped that boy. He won't touch my lunch pail no more, I will tell you that." Samuel's voice drops low at the end of his rant as he lifts his chin determinedly. I wonder if Samuel is telling the truth as he has been known to exaggerate, but I ain't in the arguing mood and need to get to the mules. I also know Samuel's wife keeps him in check and will not tolerate any rough treatment of anyone in the community, including them Negroes.

I keep my head down as I re-tie my boots. Glancing sideways up at Samuel, I impishly ask, "What did Myrtle have to say about 'ol Eugene stealing your dessert?"

"Oh well, uh, she don't understand. Ya know how women are. Can you believe she invited him to dinner?" Samuel throws his hands up in the air again in exasperation and storms off.

I chuckle to myself and shake my head turning in the direction of the mule lot. In my pocket, I pull out an extra piece of cornbread rolled up in a cloth that I snatched from Gerty's bread batch this morning. The mules, Jack and Jill, will be very appreciative of the extra treat. As

I stop at the stable doors and reach for the handle, I think to myself how I'd like to invite Eugene over to the house for dinner too. He doesn't have any family that I know of, and enjoys a home cooked meal when he can get it. Yup, I'll be sure and mention it to the missus when I get home this evening.

"Hallo, Jack and Jill" I speak softly to the mules as I divide the bread in half and offer each mule a piece. While reaching for the first set of harnesses, an old Jimmie Rodgers tune comes to mind. The mules munch silently while I sing,

"Good morning captain  
 Good morning shine  
 Do you need another muleskinner  
 Out on your new mudline?"

I like to work,  
 I'm rolling all the time  
 I can pop my initials  
 On a mule's behind"

A few minutes later, Jack and Jill are harnessed and standing at attention now. I call to them "Get on, mules" and head to the mouth of the mines. Yes, I think again, Gerty wouldn't mind a'tall if old Eugene came to dinner. I'll ask her this evening. I scoop up my lunch pail, hat, and other belongings as I direct the mules down the incline and into the darkness below the earth.

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"You youngins' get on up out of that bed," I yell up the stairs. The youngest child, Glenna, has yet to rise and David is still clomping around dragging his feet. I hear the bed creak

and can imagine her little blonde head drooping as she tries to sleepily open her eyelids to a new day. The oldest two children, Margaret and Opal, have already risen and are in the barn getting the milking done. My middle child Mamie scoots under foot in the kitchen, always tied to my apron strings. She is a good help though and has developed a knack for bread making, which relieves me to do other chores. Not having to knead the dough also gives my hands a rest from the constant aching every day. The weather is warming up nicely though, so it will be good to feel the heat of the sun on my body.

“Momma, after I run and fill the water pail, can I go say hi to Francis? She’s got a new puppy!” Mamie bounces a little on her toes as her eyes sparkle with excitement.

“I reckon so but don’t be long. We got to get the planting done, soon as David heps me get the mule harnessed and makes another pass through the garden rows with the plow,” I raise my voice to a shout on the last part as Mamie’s head disappears out the back door of the kitchen, banging the water pail against the door facing.

“Dave, whar are you now?” I holler again, and David finally rounds the corner into the kitchen pulling up his coverall suspenders.

Grabbing a slice of cornbread and shoving it in his mouth, he murmurs, “Sorry, Momma. I will get the mule hitched. You don’t have to rush out iff’n you have something other to do. I can handle ol’ Delilah. Daddy taught me the secret to her heart.” David winks at me and grabs another slice of cornbread as he glides out the back door of the kitchen and off to the barn. He’s a sweet boy, I think, just as charmin’ as his Daddy. That is, oncet you get him out of the bed.

“Heavens,” I think to myself as I notice the slop bucket sitting outside of the back-screen door where David had just passed. I better haul that out or it will be stinkin’ up the place. I lift

the metal pail, full to the brim with scraps from the last few days. Egg shells wobble on the top as I carefully lug the bucket across the backyard towards the pigs' pen. The hogs sniff in the air as I near and snort with anticipation of the treat they are about to receive. I set the bucket down in order to grab a better hold with both hands. Then, squatting down, I lift it over the boarded pen and dump it in the trough. As I tip the bucket forward, I feel pain shoot through my fingers, my wrist, and into my elbows. Wincing with the pain and swinging the empty bucket to my side, I turn to head back to the house.

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The sun has risen bright and warm now and I shield my eyes with my hand to see how Dave is making it in the field with Delilah. He seems to be getting along at a good clip and will be ready for the seed soon. I set down the bucket on the back stoop of the house and head up to the storage shed. Swinging the door open, the sunlight shines in on the sacks of seed, potatoes, and corn waiting for planting. I decide to start though with the lettuce seed, tomatoes, beets, and green beans. Once we get them in, I will come back for the potatoes. I open up the sack of potatoes as I ponder how many rows we might be able to get and study the white knobs, or eyes, jutting out the sides of the potato halves. If we can get five rows, it sure would be nice for the winter next year. Potatoes are so easy to keep as we just bury them in an old metal barrel Frank had lucked across at the mine.

At the thought of the mines, my heart sinks. Just a year ago, a mine explosion caused two women to be robbed of their husbands along with them little children growing up without a Daddy. Every day is torture watching for Frank to come home. Kneeling at the shed, I say a little prayer for God's protecting hand over my husband and all that work under the ground with him.

Grabbing the door handle, I painfully rise from the ground hauling up the seed sack in both arms as I stand. The best way to pass time is staying busy and there certainly is no shortage of busy around here.

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A few hours later, the five kids and me was finishing up with the May planting. The younger ones are a blessing in how they work carrying buckets of water to give the newly set seeds a drink. David takes care of the mule and cleans the stalls. My heart swells with pride as I watch them happily work together.

“It’s time for lunch my darlings. Let’s all go down to the branch and wash up. Who is up for a little picnic in the backyard? I see five little hungry birds that could use a peck to eat,” I poke Glenna and Mamie as they giggle and dart around me flapping their arms like birds.

“Ah, Momma. I ain’t no bird. You seen the way I handled Delilah, just like Daddy,” David stands tall and squares his shoulders as he pulls a handkerchief from his back pocket and wipes his brow. His mannerisms are becoming more like his Daddy every day and I feel a little ache in my heart at his rapid growth during the winter. By the looks of his britches, he has grown two inches. I hope he won’t follow his Daddy into the mines too.

“You done a fine job today, Son. Your Daddy will be very proud and thankful to see what we’ve accomplished.” I pat his shoulder and feel his bony frame beneath. His growth spurt has thinned him out, so he is tall but wiry, not a boy but not yet a man.

We all look to be a dirty bunch as we laugh and circle the house. Making our way down to the end of the yard, we cross the dirt road, and then enter the creek on the other side. The

children have already kicked off their shoes earlier in the day and will likely stay barefoot the rest of the summer. The oldest two have outgrown their shoes anyway and with no hand-me-downs to give them from another child, they will have to wait until the fall when we can buy some more. They don't seem to mind though as they squeal and stick their feet in the chilly spring creek water. Enjoying their fun so much, I don't hear someone shouting my name at first.

"Gerty! Gerty, come quick!" I look up to see who is coming down the dirt lane at a run. It looks to be Eugene, from the mines.

"What's the matter, Eugene? Did something happen?" my heart races as I silently pray, "Lord no, not my Frank."

"Yes, ma'am, you's got to come on with me. They already sent for the company Doc and he's with him now. I brought the boss's carriage to ride ya there," Eugene points back to the house and I could see the truck parked in front. Rocking from one foot to the other as he continuously wrings his hat in his hands, I know he is waiting for me to move. With me and the kids laughing so loudly, I had not heard him pull in. My shaking hands cover my mouth as I study Eugene's face, trying to determine from his expression what type of tragedy my husband has met. I can see Eugene staring back at me, but for a moment, I cannot hear his voice. The only sound I hear is the sound of Frank's goodbye this morning as he stepped off the porch.

"Miss Gerty?" Eugene's voice brings me out of my momentary shock. Grabbing up my skirt and slipping my shoes back on, I am startled into action and start running towards the truck with Eugene. As my heart thumps in my ears, I glance back to see the kids all standing in the creek, frozen in fear.

Stopping before we reach the truck, I look at Eugene, exhale sharply, and retrace my steps back to the kids. Mamie runs to my side and buries her face in my cloth shift, “Momma, what’s wrong?”

“Now, it’s all going to be alright. I am going to go with Mr. Eugene and you kids are going in the house to have lunch. Margaret and Opal, help the younger ones with their plates. David, look after the fire and don’t let the little ones get too close,” I nod to David slowly as we share a quiet, unspoken look. His eyes are wide with fear but slowly he begins to nod with me and his face hardens into an attitude of solemn determination.

“Mamie, you come help me gather up the wood,” David picks up the little girl’s hand and gently pulls her from my apron. “Momma is going to be back in just a bit, and we will have a grand picnic ready for her,” he speaks soothingly as the children solemnly walk to the house looking back over their shoulders at me.

“Mrs. Gerty, we should go.” I turn to see Eugene standing by the passenger truck door holding it open. My mind fills with questions and worry as I climb in and sit down on the seat. Eugene shuts the door, runs around to the driver’s side, and we speed off down the dirt road. I sit silently, thinking about just this morning when Frank had gathered me in his arms for just a brief kiss before heading off to the mines. I look down at my hands, which I notice are balled into fists and aching from the tension. Slowly I release them and focus on my breathing.

“Eugene, what happened?” I am finally able to voice softly while continuing to take shallow breaths to calm my emotions.

“It was a cave-in on the north side of the mines. Frank was with the mules when it happened, and he was pinned under the slag when it fell. Poor ol’ Jack was buried beneath and

perished. It was the darnedest thing though. Jill broke loose and walked right on out of the mouth of them mines, all on her own. One of the other miners grabbed hold of her and followed her back in. She led them straight to Frank.” Eugene shakes his head in disbelief.

“Is Frank...?” I hold my breath and stare at Eugene as he takes off his hat and puts it back on nervously.

“Oh, Frank is alive! Mrs. Gerty, by the grace of God he is still breathing! I don’t know what’s been done to his legs though, ‘cause it took three of us men to free him. They fetched Doc before I left so, if anybody can hep him, he can.” Eugene attempts to console me as tears collect around the bottom rims of my eye lids. The children and I had worked so hard this morning, but the labor had been fruitful. We will have food to eat but without Frank’s mining pay, what will we do for other things we can’t grow? How will I tend to him if he’s needing care and the children and farm too?

“Lord Jesus, I pray he’s going to be alright. God, hear my prayers.” I close my eyes and bow my head. At this moment, I can’t think about the corn field yet to be planted, the hay that would need to be got in, or the many other needs to be met over the next months. My husband is still alive and there is hope that we will be together.

As we round the bend to the mine entrance, Eugene’s voice breaks the silence, “Mrs. Gerty, don’t you worry about your secret either. I ain’t never told Frank nothing about your aches although I see how hard you work to care for your family. It must be dreadfully hard sometimes to do it all, and now ...well, it’s gonna be alright though. I’m going to come by and hep you all.”

I reach over and grasp Eugene's hand. Looking down, I notice the beautiful contrast in color as I squeeze my pale fingers inside his dark hand. He has helped to save my husband's life and already done more than he could ever know. As the mouth of the mine comes into view and the truck rattles to a stop, I lift my chin and wipe my eyes. "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me," I resolve and step out into the sunshine onto the coal-dark, dusty road.

## On the Market Square

The sound of the alarm jolts me from my sleep. Slamming the snooze button, I open one eye just enough to squint at the clock. The neon numbers glare 4:30 a.m., hours before the sun will appear. Damn it. At the sound of the alarm, and my cussing, my husband rolls away from me pulling the covers with him. Within moments, a few heartbeats, I hear his breath deepen and slow. Amazing how he can sleep through anything. The roof could cave in and he would snore right through it.

Swinging my legs over the side of the bed, I sit upright and stretch my arms above my head. I feel the tightness in my back from the previous day's work. We were able to get most of the preparations completed for the farmers' market before we fell into bed exhausted. That would leave packing up the van for this morning. Thinking about the flurry of work ahead urges me into action. My bare feet touch the rough-sawn boards of our bedroom floor, and I feel the uneven grooves and ridges as I wiggle my toes. The one-hundred-year-old floors had been a selling point when we bought the old farmhouse along with the rolling farmland that was not easy to find in the Blue Ridge Mountains. The hillside that my father worked with his team of work horses was steep and difficult terrain full of stubborn limestone and impossible slate. For generations, my family had always found a way to make things grow, even with the constant erosion of soil washing down the mountain. Spreading manure, laying compost, and the constant picking out of the rocks were just some of the practices they applied to nurture the nutrient-poor land. Although our families were disappointed when Noah and I found land in the valley and not on the mountainside we had known so well as children, I think they understood our milky dream

of making a go on open farmland. Our home place is a little farther away from “civilization,” as the city folk call it, but we don’t mind the extra driving to get to town. Once a friend had asked to bring her children out to see the animals. I gave her the address for her GPS, and she responded, “Wow, you are a ways out there. I could never live this far away from the city.” Accustomed to this kind of remark, I just smiled and said, “Yes, we like our privacy.”

Working on the house while clearing the land and tending to the children had its difficult moments, although we would have never told anyone about our struggles. I had my doubts that we could mentally, physically, and financially survive this seemingly insurmountable challenge. We could see that the house had good bones and just needed someone to bring it back to life. It is a much larger house than we envisioned purchasing but it has allowed for the kids to have their own spaces to stretch and grow. Less sibling rivalry and fighting has certainly been worth the work, and we made renovating their rooms a priority. We went to work immediately after moving in with removing the aged and peeling wallpaper, painting, sanding floors, and replacing windows. Our first garden had been evident of the soil’s possibilities, rich in minerals and ready to support vegetation after lying fallow for so long. Noah and I had both grown up in the local area and we’re no strangers to country life. We shared the same childhood experiences that come from living in the steep slopes of the Blue Ridge Mountains. The homes in our neighborhoods were mostly occupied by family members, which meant that every door was open and welcoming. It also meant that no amount of misbehaving went unnoticed. We both learned at an early age that children were to be put to work at pulling weeds, whether we liked it or not. Mostly importantly though, we knew the land, when cared for, provided what we needed.

Noah and I met at the local junior college, drawn together as study partners in a math class that neither of us could seem to master. We instantly connected and were married six months later with the changing orange, red, and golden yellow leaves of the Appalachian forests providing a backdrop to our outdoor wedding. Noah finished school and went to work as a welder while I took a job as an accountant for a local law firm. Mandy came just one year to the day after Noah and I married, with Calhoun surprising us in the second year of our marriage. By the time Noah and I were twenty-four years old, we had a family of four and were living in a two-bedroom apartment in town. Miserable and far from home, we knew we had to find a way back to country life. Buying this farmhouse and land was certainly risky, but renovating this old house has brought us closer and I wouldn't change the drafty, slant-floored place and farm for any boxy new development sprouting up out of a cornfield.

We each spent our childhoods on family land just about an hour from where we now live. Some of our family still reside on the land and others have moved away after getting married or attending college. However, few do more in the way of farming or agriculture than raise a small patch of garden each year. Our friends would laugh and tell us, "Ya know, there's this thing called a grocery store now, Ma and Pa Kettle." Noah, the kids, and I always take our chiding well though and just shake our heads. We hold a secret that they don't know: the work can be backbreaking but rewarding. As I still sit on the side of the bed, lost in my own thoughts, I think back to the harvesting we did yesterday. I was picking tomatoes to sell at the farmer's market. Now, as I close my eyes, I can almost feel the tenderness of a red sun-warmed tomato as my palm encloses its flesh and I pull it from the vine. I am standing with my toes deeply buried in the freshly tilled garden row. I gently brush a spot of dirt from the tomato and then sink my teeth

into its thin skin, as juice drips down the corner of my mouth and the sweetness explodes on my tongue. I smile thinking of it. Let them find that experience at the grocery store.

Reading the clock, now at 4:40 a.m. and realizing that I daydreamed away the 10 minutes I could have stayed in bed longer, I reach for my grey chinos and slide them on. On the chair beside the bed, I had neatly draped my work shirt with our farm logo on the pocket. I have my friend Trish to thank for our farm advertising. She was sweet to surprise our family with each of our own farm shirts with the logo we designed. Willow Springs Native Farm, LLC shaped into the arc of a setting sun as it drops behind a steep hill, so common to the mountains of the Blue Ridge, serves as the backdrop of our logo. A large willow tree springs up behind a barn and silo in the forefront of the emblem. Our son Cal was the artist in the family and had worked relentlessly through numerous revisions until finally feeling satisfied with his creation. Trish took Cal's drawing and made us into walking billboard signs for our new farm. Trish wasn't the only supporter of the small farmer in the area though. The market we sold at every Saturday morning and Thursday evening had many other strong supporters as well. These customers wished to see small-scale agriculture and local farming practices continue in the area. Others, however, had a different perspective on what should be offered at the market. I don't think this is the customers so much as the sellers, eager to see the increase of capital. They brought commercialized products that, to me, seemed to belong in a mall rather than a farmer's market. Essential oils, silk scarves and stylish purses, jewelry, exotic flowers that were not grown locally, art not handmade by artisans from the mountainous area, were all products that had taken over the market and were popular amongst the customers. Unfortunately, these vendors ensured a crowd and that was our best chance of the local farmers making a profit too. The town council had recently hired a new manager, Journi, to do just that: bring in more people and revenue for

the area. I can only imagine the look on my face when I first saw her stroll into the opening day of the farmer's market in March. She was difficult to miss with her long blue hair braided into a fish tail under a beanie, crop top sweater revealing a belly button ring that peeked out just above low-rider jeans, topped off with black combat boots. She was supposed to be educated in market management with experience working at the Asheville farmers' markets in North Carolina. Out of curiosity, I had googled the Asheville Farmers' Market website and was astonished at the size of their customer base as well as the prices they brought in for their produce. Pulling my work boots on and lacing them up, I continued to think about the organic, colorful vegetables and heavily scented herbs we painstakingly nurture and harvest. The chickens we feed, slaughter, clean, and package with our own farm-raised corn. Every detail we carefully select in order to make our food not only look good but provide healthy nutrients for our customers, food free from pesticides and hormones. If Journi has worked in a place like Asheville, surely she has a feel for the small, traditional farmer.

Fully dressed now, I gently nudged the lump of covers loudly snoring again, "Honey, time to get up. I'll get the coffee and bacon started." Noah rolls on to his back, groaning and stretching his long six-foot frame. "I'll never understand how I ended up marrying a morning person. You really are annoyingly chipper to be up so early, Ginny," he says quietly with his eyes still closed as a smile tugged at the corners of his mouth.

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As we roll our van slowly into the parking lot, I glance at the clock on the dashboard. The time is 7:30 a.m., which will give us a half hour to get our stand ready. Not as much time as we typically allow ourselves, but we have all-hands-on-deck today. I check my side mirror and

confirm the kids are close behind in the old station wagon. Waking up at the crack of dawn on a Saturday is a teenager's worst nightmare. It would be impossible for Noah and me to harvest and prepare the produce, load the van, and get everything set up at the market in time without their help. Their grumbles do not go unnoticed by Noah and me, but deep down they know we cannot afford to hire help, so they usually put forth some effort and we try to give them a little allowance when we can. Plus, once the stand is set up, the kids are free to roam the market (and find people their age). But before they find other teenagers, it is easy to predict the first place they will make a beeline for—Mrs. Sally's stand.

Mrs. Sally makes the best homemade blueberry muffins and is considered a legend amongst the market vendors. She is what I like to call "the real deal" because she's a true local farmer and artisan of the region. She grows her own blueberries rather than buying them in the store and passing them off as home-grown. Customers can buy her fresh blueberries by the pint or quart, and they are guaranteed to be organically raised and free from pesticides. Just the sight of the deep-blue plumpness piled inside of the green produce containers, each carefully displayed on her table, never fails to catch the eye of new market customers too. Offering this select item, only available for a season, has traveled by word-of-mouth. Customers are always eager to get her baked goods before they sell out, which usually happens well before mid-morning. Mrs. Sally is not only a long-time member of the farming community but is also personally admired for her tenacity and marketing wisdom. She always has a variety of produce in addition to her homemade baked goods. I envy her knack for arranging a stand that best showcases her weekly stock. Sally's face beams under her wide-brimmed sun hat as she shouts a "Hallooo!" to us and waves an arm in a half-circle as we roll into a parking spot behind the market square. I wave back and smile as I tease Noah, "Looks like another annoying, morning person. Getting up early

though looks like it's paying off for her this morning." Sally's stand had early customers already lining up in front of her tent waiting to be served. Noah turns to also wave at Mrs. Sally as he responds back to me, "And she's one early bird that always gets her worm."

Noah and I come to a stop as the kids roll into the parking spot beside us. We move quickly and efficiently to first set up the tent, which will protect us from the strong sun already heating up the July pavement. Our pop-up tables come next along with our farm banner, with Willow Springs Native Farm LLC in big black letters, and logo hung neatly across the front. Then the coolers with the whole chickens are arranged along the front left and right of the tent's corners. We had packed them with plenty of ice to keep the meat frozen until mid-morning when we would add more as the summer heat increases. The chickens are our niche in the market with no competition at the time from other farmers. Growing chickens requires some extra work but they are ready for slaughter in 6-8 weeks, making them a good economic venture for a small farm looking for a product that would turn a quick profit. The state of Virginia, along with our county government office, requires us to have a license to do business and document the whole chickens we sell. Each package must contain a warning label as well stating important information about safe handling of uncooked meat. As a small farm, we can process and package a whole chicken without USDA inspectors coming to our place of business, but we cannot sell the chicken divided into pieces like legs, thighs, and breasts. Customers do not cook whole chickens like they once did, which requires some creative salesmanship. One marketing strategy to aid in selling more chickens is our herb packets. Along with each packet, we provide suggestions on flavoring and cooking their purchased chicken and recipes they can try. Offering fresh vegetables from our stand as well allows us to present a full meal to customers in one-stop

shopping. Selling companion products is one of the skills we have learned from farm-stand veterans like Mrs. Sally.

As we continue to unload the van and station wagon, I set up my display of packaged herbs on the table and place the box of additional herb packages behind them. This was one of the time-consuming harvests I had to do the day before. Cutting the herbs, cleaning, sorting into one-ounce packages, and then applying labels is a process taking a minimum of two hours. It hardly seems worth it sometimes, but they do help sell our chickens. We are not the only vendor selling herbs though. The Stanleys, a married couple in the culinary business, sell seasonings that they purchase through the mail and combine into various flavorings. They are quite good but not locally grown. Sometimes we notice customers selecting the other vendor's seasonings to use on our chickens. This does give us an opportunity to work together with other vendors and share in our successes. In addition, we've bartered with them for the seasonings we do not grow on our farm in exchange for our fresh vegetables that they love. Fresh is better but convenience seems to be what the customers want.

With the table ready to go, I turn to see Noah writing our "Daily Specials" on the chalkboard display to alert customers to the fresh produce we had on sale today. Squash, tomatoes, green beans, cucumbers, bell peppers, and strawberries had been carefully picked from our garden the day before, arranged in baskets on one of our tables, and listed on the sign. Noah would also add a "Coming Soon" list of potatoes, sweet potatoes, blackberries, and grapes to the display board.

Mandy picks up the last crate of squash from the van as Cal closes the doors to the station wagon. "I think that's everything, Mom," Mandy exhales as she walks under the tent and sets the

crate on the table next to a basket of green beans. She smooths her long, blonde hair back into a ponytail and twists it into a bun on top of her head, securing it with a hair band. She is the elder of the two at seventeen years old, although her brother Cal stands several inches above her in height. Since his recent sixteenth birthday, he now anxiously awaits his turn behind the wheel of the wagon. Mandy will be heading to college in the Fall, putting Cal into the driver's seat of the rust and faded-blue 1992 Oldsmobile Custom Cruiser. Mandy's new favorite pastime is chiding her younger brother about passing the keys to the "Swaggon Wagon," as she sarcastically calls it. Honestly, I am amazed that the old relic is still running too. It was the first big purchase Noah and I made when we realized a farm truck didn't very well accommodate baby car seats. They are mostly responsible, hard-working kids and I couldn't be prouder of the support they provide to our farm. Although Noah and I want them to be well-informed and appreciative of farm-to-plate processes, we would not want them to feel beholden to the family farm. It's the life we choose, but it's not for everyone.

"Thanks for the hard work this morning. Ya'll take a breather and get something to eat if you want," I tell the kids and pull a twenty-dollar bill from my pocket.

Cal takes the money and answers, "Can I get you and Dad anything?"

"Sure, a couple of Mrs. Sally's muffins if there are any left. If not, a ham biscuit for me and what do you want, Noah?" I glance back to see my husband setting up our chairs under the tent.

"Sounds good, same for me," he agrees.

People are quickly filling up the square, milling around from table to table. I survey the vendors to see who has made it in today. July 4th weekend could result in profits going either

way. If we have a stream of visitors in the area for the weekend looking for fresh food for their cookouts, we are in business. However, it could also turn out to be not so good with our regular customers out of town on vacations. From the looks of the early morning crowd though, I think we are in for a good day.

A middle-aged woman approaches our tent and is appraising the brightly colored peppers of red, green, and yellow sitting piled in their round wooden basket on the table. She picks up each pepper and turns it over carefully, seemingly puzzled by something. “Good Morning, can I answer any questions for you?” I smile at her as I work my way around under the tent and out of the sun.

“Yes, I was just wondering what type of peppers these are? They don’t look like the normal ones I buy in the store.” The woman picks up a large and colorful yellow pepper, slightly odd shaped and bulbous like the head of an alien and thrusts it out to me for inspection.

Taking the pepper, I instantly know what the problem is. “These are heirloom peppers. They are organically grown and fertilized on our farm. The taste is phenomenal. You are right though, these are not at all like the ones you find in the grocery store,” I smile as I hand the pepper back to her. As she stands looking at the pepper another moment, she raises an eyebrow in disapproval. I add, “I have some recipe cards on the table behind the tomatoes, if you would like to give the peppers a try. These Yellow Bull Horn peppers are my favorite to use in stir fry.”

The woman gingerly places the pepper back inside the basket and glances around the table before turning on her heel away from me. Speaking over her shoulder, she retorts, “I’m afraid those are not the variety I am looking for.” I watch her walk away as her other market purchases swing freely from her arm. I recognize the name “Mellow Moon Farms” printed in

large blue and green letters on the side of one clear plastic bag. Inside the bag, I could make out three navel oranges and an avocado. Contemplating the woman's thumbing her nose at our heirloom produce, I grumble under my breath, "Talk about not normal. I didn't realize oranges and avocados are now locally grown in Southwest Virginia—it must be global warming."

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I could feel the day's heat progress from rather warm to sweltering, as the crowd began to thin, also succumbing to the baking sun. The market would close soon, and a few customers still linger around the square, drifting in and out of the shade provided by the vendors' tents. Some merchants are already beginning to pack away their produce and merchandise. Sitting in our folding lawn chairs, Noah and I rest a moment under our tent behind the folding table. The table still held many varieties of vegetables and packaged herbs, with only a portion diminished since arriving this morning. I notice the cash box hidden under the table as Noah gulps water from a Coleman thermos. Throughout the day, we had noticed that sales had been lower than expected, even with the unpredictability of the July 4th holiday. I open the cash box and count the money, subtracting the \$40 in small bills and coins we always bring to make change with customers. Shaking my head sadly, I lean over and whisper our profits for the day into Noah's ear. Without a word spoken, he removes his hat, wipes the sweat from his brow with his handkerchief, scratches the back of his head, and replaces the hat again. I know that gesture well—he is as frustrated as I am. He confirms my thoughts as he mutters, "Well, shit, we couldn't get a kick in a stampede."

With the kids back to the tent now, the four of us make quick work of packing the station wagon with our produce and other perishables. Mandy and Cal have a couple of stops they will

make to some elderly neighbors on the way home that can't make it out to the market. Not only does it lessen the waste of leftover produce from the market, the recipients of free veggies always appreciate our traditional farming practices and know the work behind these oddly-shaped vegetables. It would be Thursday's farmers' market before we can sell more produce so there is no way we could eat it all anyway before it turns bad. I chalk it up to another advantage the large growers have over the small farmer. They have the ability to transport their produce weeks after harvesting without damaging the food.

As I end my musings with a slam of the station wagon hatch, Mandy and Cal take their seats in the front of the vehicle. Their long, tan arms reach out of the windows as they wave goodbye to me and their father and pull out of the parking lot. A sense of pride lifts my spirits as I consider the impact Noah and I are making on their knowledge of home-grown food, even if we aren't making money. As the saying goes, some wars are won one battle at a time. It is clear that we are fighting a battle up a steep hill when it comes to organic and traditional farming.

I walk back to the tent where Noah is taking down the farm banner from the table. I grab the other end and meet him with the corners to fold it neatly for storing. He takes the folded banner from me, and I turn around to come face-to-face with a petite, young woman holding a clipboard. "Well, hi there Ginny, Noah. How'd things go today?" she smiles as her long blue hair cascades down her shoulders. She certainly doesn't seem bothered by the heat, although selling essential oils is her niche and it typically takes her all of ten minutes to pack up her wares.

"Hi, Journi. We did okay, well, not as good as we hoped but it was a holiday weekend," I respond, trying to muster up a smile back to the perky woman but with little success.

“I did notice that woman earlier who was examining your peppers. She didn’t buy anything, did she?” Journi questions as she raises one eyebrow and takes on a more serious tone.

“No, Journi, she didn’t buy any peppers. I guess she wasn’t interested in our produce.” I spoke slowly and carefully trying to control the increasing agitation in my voice while picking up the remainder of our personal belongings to load in the van.

“Organic produce certainly has its place at the farmer’s market but it’s hard to compete with the presentation of contemporary vegetables. Mellow Moon Farms has the most beautiful veggies and fruits that I have ever seen.” Journi practically beams as she gestures to the farm’s vendor spot across the market square.

I could feel the acid rising in my stomach and knew I could not hold my tongue any longer. “Of course, they have the most perfect produce I have ever seen—it’s too perfect! Their vegetables are practically manufactured, and their fruit is not even local. You show me where in the Blue Ridge Mountains an orange or avocado can be grown? When our family joined this farmer’s market, farms were required to be locally grown within a 100-mile radius. We can’t compete with that!” I finish with the last words coming out louder than I intend.

Journi’s bow-shaped mouth turns down and she squares her tiny shoulders. Locking eyes with me for a moment, we stand silently as if waiting for the other person’s next move. Finally, she takes a deep breath and blows it out slowly. “Ginny, let me remind you that I am the Farmer Market Manager. With that responsibility, I must decide what the customers prefer and make sure they come back for more. The old ways may have worked when your family started here, what’s been ten years ago now by my books? Times have changed, Ginny. If you can’t adapt to the customers’ needs, well, then we may just have to move another vendor to the front row. As a

matter of fact, a rising star in the modern farming community is wanting to develop a presence in this region. They are well known and could bring in a lot of customers. It might be best if they try out this spot next weekend.” She lowers her voice and looks down at her clipboard as she writes furiously.

“You are going to push us out of our spot?” I explode, pointing my finger at her. Journi takes a step back and glances around the square. My eyes follow hers as I see the vendors who were moments ago packing up, but they now have stopped moving and are looking our way. I could feel their stares but the heat from my anger enveloping my face overruled any desire to back down.

“It’s my job, Ginny, and it’s not personal, just good business. When I was in Asheville working at the farmer’s market, there was certainly stiff competition with many markets available for customers to choose from. I learned the first rule was to keep the crowds coming back to your market. You and Noah might be better served to reconsider your marketing practices if you want to stay in the farmer’s market business. Old-fashioned methods of farming are just not going to make you money,” Journi says, shaking her head in dismay. She surveys our tent where a few bell peppers were left resting on the table. When we packed the station wagon earlier, I had held out a few to share with Mrs. Sally. Pushing past me, she picks up one of the peppers, and turns to face me. Shaking the disproportionate pepper in front of my face, she exclaims, “This is good, but abundant, recognizable produce is better.” As she says this, as if in slow motion, something snaps, and my arm, as if disconnected from my body, flies up to reach the oddball pepper and snatch it out of her hand. As I do, she recoils, and falls backwards into the neighboring tent’s display of fresh eggs. *The Crazy Chicken Lady*, the neighboring farm stand to

our tent, had not yet dismantled her display and two dozen carton of eggs were still on the pop-up display. In an attempt to catch herself, Journi's arms flail behind her and she lands hard on the pavement with the display, cartons and broken eggs landing on top of her lap.

"You shoved me," she stammers, eyes wide with shock as she cleans yellow egg splatter from her pants' legs.

"I ... I'm sorry. I just meant to get my pepper," I mutter, knowing full well that I had just dug a hole I couldn't possibly get out of. I reach out to offer her a sticky hand up.

Ignoring my offer for assistance and attempting to shake the gooey yolk from her hands, she pulls herself up from the ground. Mrs. Sally, seeing the heated exchange and Journi's fall, picks up the fallen clipboard from the ground and hands it quietly to her. Taking the clipboard and slowly starting to walk away awkwardly, Journi leaves a stringy trail of egg slime in her wake. As she reaches the center of the market square, she stops and turns back to where Mrs. Sally, Noah, and I stand at the tent. "Ginny, I think it is best that you and your family take a few weeks off. We will see how things shake out with the vendor spot after that." And without a chance for response, Journi quickly turns and walks away.

I could see the other vendors were still watching, but when they hear the manager's last remark, they all quickly turn back to their work. Shocked and mortified, my mind races with questions. What were we going to do now? A headache begins to form behind my temples. Mrs. Sally gently places a hand on my shoulder, "It's okay, Ginny. It will blow over and be forgotten in no time. And you and Noah will find your place in the market again. Things weren't always great for my little stand either. Sometimes it's just the nature of the business. Remember, no one farms to get rich." I turn and look at her as she squeezes my shoulder and smiles. As she walks

away, my heart aches at the thought of not seeing her at the market next week and how much we will all miss her blueberry muffins.

I turn around to see that Noah had taken down the tent and is awkwardly standing by the van, obviously wanting to exit the scene. I open the passenger door and slump in, close the door, and shrink into the seat with exhaustion. Noah climbs into the driver's seat and puts the key into the ignition. I look over at him and suddenly feel a wave of sadness wash over me. My thoughts spin dizzily with the disappointment in my behavior at the market, the lack of today's profits, and the stress I've now put on our family to find another way to sell our produce. Noah drops his hand from the ignition and turns to me, his emotions hidden under a stoic face that I've come so accustomed to turning to when life on the farm is difficult. His eyes leave my face and travel down to my lap where I'm holding the suspect yellow heirloom pepper from the earlier dispute. He slowly takes the pepper and lifts it up to the light for examination. Turning it around in the light, the shiny, bright yellow skin glimmers in the sun streaming through the driver's side window. "Capsicum annum," Noah enunciates prophetically while still turning the yellow pepper around in the light. Noah had special ordered the bell pepper seeds from Thomas Jefferson's Monticello garden shop. He had been excited to see the seeds arrive in the mail, and again weeks later when their first green stem reached courageously through the soil towards the warmth of the sun. Noah and I had tended to the pepper vines, keeping them off the ground and free from rot and pests. All of that careful planning and tedious care for what?

Noah brings the pepper to his lips and bites slowly into the juicy rind, pulling and tearing the skin into his mouth. His jaw muscles work as he slowly chews, savoring the pepper's sweet

fruitiness and flavor. Swallowing, he continues gazing at the pepper, a smile creasing the corners of his mouth, “Yep, still good.”

## Out of the Darkness

I bring my hand to my forehead in an attempt to shield my eyes from the sun as my gaze follows a bird crossing the sky. The bright red head of a woodpecker catches my attention and I watch as it lands on a branch of a tall white oak. Beyond the tree, I can see the cloudless blue sky present a striking contrast of color to the greening, spring forest. I begin to walk along the trail and the sounds of the creek running parallel to the path grow louder. The calming sounds of the running water and the chorus of the birds envelop my senses as a sigh escapes my lips and my shoulders drop. This is my place of refuge, my very own Garden of Eden, where I can disconnect from the chaos of the world. Just as I feel the last of tension drain from my body, a furry four-legged creature bounds past me knocking me off balance. Matilda, my black Labrador, runs off the path and down the embankment into the cold mountain water. The large dog slows to a walk and plops down abruptly, her stomach in the middle of the creek, lapping up the water as it streams in between her front paws.

“Did you get a little warm on our walk, Tilly?” I chuckle to my companion. The dog stops drinking and raises her head, ears forward and head turning slightly to the right inquisitively. Water and slobber drip from the side of Matilda’s mouth.

Our daily walks are not only for the exercise, but also the mental relief it brings from the worry of recent events. As I watch my four-legged companion climb back up the embankment and join me on the path again, my mind drifts to the most recent trip I took to the grocery store last week. In previous trips, I had first noticed the absence of certain products from the store shelves, canned vegetables mostly. Then, other products had been slowly increasing in price. There had also been the store signs that had started to appear limiting customers to “ONE

PACKAGE OF BEEF AND CHICKEN PER FAMILY.” The confusion and alarm were clearly visible in the faces of anxious mothers and fathers, elderly, and even young college students as they bewilderingly left the store with little food in their carts. But for Noah and me, we have been most shocked by the produce aisles. We have always raised a garden and only supplemented our pantry with the items that we did not grow. Fruit like oranges and apples in the winter are always a nice treat. However, we could not help but notice how bare the produce aisle has been lately. The wide variety of vegetables typically available to customers are greatly diminished to only one or two. Even the picked-over produce left in the bins looked wilted and weathered. As I reimagined all the recent events, it almost seemed as if we were characters in a bad science-fiction movie. “Why is this happening?” I whisper to myself.

Suddenly, I hear the sound of a twig snap in the forest behind me and turn to see Matilda’s fur rise across the spine of her back. A nearly inaudible growl rumbles from the dog who now stands low on her haunches by my side, nose pointing to the direction of the sound, as the hair on my arms also rises. I could see a tall figure approach with a deliberate and hasty gait. The distance and the trees prevent me from identifying who is interrupting my solitude. The person appears to be a man by his size, but I must again guard my eyes from the sun now peeking through the leaves as I strain to see who is in this part of the woods so close to our house. My heart is racing as I ready my body to run or hold my ground. Suddenly, Matilda darts from my side, sprinting in the direction of the invader.

“No! Matilda!” I call and start to run after her. I only manage a few quick strides in the direction of my dog and the impending stranger when something I notice stops me in my tracks. My dog is wagging her tail and I could now see why. Noah. The air I was unknowingly holding

in my lungs rushed out in a huff. Planting my feet squarely and bending over at the waist, I attempt to control the dizziness from the adrenaline overload. I take in a couple of deep breaths to calm my rattled nerves. The crunching of leaves grows stronger and closer as man and dog come to a stop in front of me. I could see Noah's size 13 hiking boots standing in front of me. I follow his boots up to his legs, torso, chest, and then his face. Creases of concern deepen his forehead as his eyes meet mine.

"Did I startle you?" he asks and offers his hand for me to take. I accept his hand and take a shaky step towards him. Noah pulls me close and embraces me tightly, too tightly. It then occurs to me that something feels wrong. I can feel his breath quicken as he continuously caresses the soft backs of my hands, rubbing his thumb in a circular motion. My heartbeat begins to pick up speed again.

"No, I'm fine. Just getting away for a few minutes and I reckon I had let my mind wander. You just surprised me. Is everything okay? The kids?" I study his face intently when I propose the last question. Even though the youngest of our children had moved away from home five years ago, I have yet to stop worrying over them.

"The kids are fine, but Ginny, the investigators were just here," Noah exhales sharply and pulls me back to look in my eyes.

Oh God, I thought. I guess our name finally made their list. I knew this day was coming soon. They had already visited two families we knew from our days selling at the farmers' market. And Noah had been there to deal with them alone. Still holding on to each other, I study his face carefully.

"Did they come into the house?" I quietly ask.

“No, thank God. They seemed satisfied to walk around the garden and see the seeds and plants we had started. I showed them the lettuce and onion rows but this early in April, we had yet to plant anything more. There was one curious thing though.” Noah’s eyebrows furrow in thought as he rolls something over in his mind. He removes his ball cap and rubs his greying brown hair with his hand. Noah then places the cap slowly and painstakingly back on to his head, still unsure how to proceed as he measures each word in his mind.

“What was that?” I ask. I love my husband, but he could really draw out a story.

“Well, you remember they told us when we picked up them damn seeds that we would also need to purchase their special pesticide to use with the plants?” He stares at the ground as if it wasn’t really a question. His eyes then move to mine as his face changes to a look of confusion, “They said, ‘the company would be discontinuing future pesticides and to give them any remaining unused portions you still have.’” Noah and I stood in silence, my face mirroring the same bewilderment as his as I process the meaning of his last words. As we stood motionless, speechless, I notice a chill in the air and the wind starting to pick up. Raindrops begin to fall making large round circles in the dirt around our feet.

“Let’s get to the house,” and I nod towards the path that led out of the woods towards home. Noah, still holding firmly to both of my hands, turns towards home.

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“Spring showers bring May flowers” I recall chanting as a child while dancing around in the cool April rains. After five days of soaking rain, I am happy to not hear rain pelting the tin roof of the farmhouse this morning. I open my eyes, roll my head on the overstuffed pillow, and blink at the rising sun peering between the window shades. And what better day for bright, fair

weather than planting day. Of course, the way Noah and I plant doesn't necessarily require the best of weather. Today we will plant our "real" garden, or at least how we refer to it.

The GMO, or outside garden, is just to keep up appearances and avoid a run-in with the government investigators. When the local government first issued notices that anyone growing food, from a backyard gardener to a large farm producer, should now only use genetically modified seeds, we were in denial. They couldn't possibly *force* us to grow their seeds, could they? We had always preferred to use heirloom vegetables and save our own seeds from year to year. Our neighbors and like-minded growers at the farmers' market had even created a group where we could freely share a variety of seeds. Noah, the kids, and I had all loved the camaraderie and incredible knowledge gained as a result of these relationships. Our garden had grown in size, efficiency, and variety over the years too. We learned about the importance of matching the best seeds to our geographical location, organic practices to enrich our soil, and companion planting that benefited not only the plant but naturally prevented predators from eating our food. They had all become our family and we depended on each other, much like the way previous generations of farmers had once done.

Out of bed and fully dressed now, I prepare a small plate of scrambled eggs and add a sliver of pickle on the side from my canned reserves. Pickles are one of my favorite vegetables to can. Noah especially loves my spicy pickles, so I always make sure there are plenty put back in our food stores room. I thought about Sally from the market and how much she also loves to get a jar of my pickles. Possibly I could get some for her if we meet somewhere.

Communicating within the group is risky, much less presenting food to each other without notice. I am thankful that many of the original market community implement

underground gardening practices in an effort to continue growing food our way. We have to be both creative and cautious in our new gardening designs. Through the careful collaboration and experience of skilled growers and carpenters, we have implemented a creative system of hidden solar and reflective panels that are useful on sunny days and LED lights when the sun isn't available. We don't want to bring attention to ourselves or our practices that are now deemed illegal though, so buying the materials necessary to move gardens into privacy is treacherous as well. But the biggest problem is in finding enough space to grow food for the year and still have a space for saving seeds too.

I could recall as a child reading in amazement how Thomas Jefferson would save and share his seeds with family and friends. He would write letters and fold them inside the envelope, always enclosing a handful of seeds from his farm. Of course, mailing seeds now would be a sure-fire way of getting caught. One good thing about owning an old but very large farmhouse is the ability to expand an underground garden. For the past winter, Noah and I, along with the kids when they could come home to help, would dig at night under the house. For two months, we worked down in the earth, clearing a space that would allow for a seed bed. It was finally finished though, and with the expansive area we transformed for planting, we hope to even have extra seeds to share with others. It would be early fall before we would really know for sure.

With the latest rain pattern behind us, I woke up feeling particularly hopeful and ready to get started with planting. With breakfast out of the way, and the dishwasher out of commission, I considered the day's work over a sink full of soapy dishes. The underground garden is cooler than a typical above-ground garden, but we have the unique benefit of not having to worry about a late frost. We have established a combination of ways to grow our vegetables depending on

supplies available at the time and the required cultivation of the seed. There are rows of hydroponically grown vegetables, clusters of large pots are used for other varieties, and still others are directly planted in the ground. Most importantly though, all are raised with our heirloom seeds.

I have collected, bartered, and saved a collection of seeds over the past year labeling and storing each variety in small seed sacks. The sacks are kept in a wooden box that had once held my father's farrier tools, which I hide in a secret space between the kitchen walls. Recent stories whispered between neighbors have increased my paranoia and I leave nothing to chance that the investigators may someday be permitted inside our home to look around.

Noah and I are still puzzled by the investigators' statement about the pesticides we would no longer be needing for the GMO garden. After their unexpected visit, we mulled the possibilities over for a few days, racking our brains for an answer. The pesticide is specially formulated for GMO plants. We knew from previous summers how pesticide drift from a nearby GMO farm could destroy our heirloom varieties of vegetables. However, oddly enough, it did not harm the GMO plants. These plants are scientifically engineered to produce more efficiently and be more resilient than what the government believes a traditional farm crop can provide. Yeah, I get it, but at what cost to the environment, the wildlife, and most importantly, to humans? Research has shown for years that the pesticides and genetic modification of the plants contain the same chemicals found in household weed killers like Roundup. Not that I needed research to tell me something I can see with my own two eyes. I think about cousin Henry's wife, Anita. It was about two years ago when she became ill. She slowly became weak in her joints to the point she could no longer walk. The doctors ran test after test and could not figure

out what was wrong. Before becoming sick, she had been so vibrant and healthy, singing in the church choir, working in her flower gardens, she had the most beautiful rose beds. We thought she would never recover. I was visiting with her one day and shared an article I read about the health benefits of an organic diet. I did not want to give her false hope, but if it might give her some minor relief or energy, what could it hurt? She was willing to try anything. Within two months of avoiding GMO food at the market, she was walking again, almost fully recovered.

This has stirred increasing controversy in the traditional farming communities, healthcare departments, and even in the education system as children are increasingly discovered with birth defects and learning disabilities too. Noah, myself, and many other local farmers had rallied to bring awareness to consumers in previous years with little change. I recall one particular morning that we were passing out brochures on the benefits of organic farming when a woman with two children in tow stopped at our stand. Upon hearing our pitch about the downside of GMO farming, the woman politely but firmly bantered back, “Not all of us have farmland and the time to grow our own food the old-fashioned way. My family needs to eat, and the grocery store should have safe food for me to feed them. I trust that the government is looking out for my best interest.” She was right, people have to feed their families and with whatever means available. I did not say it at the time, but what if the government makes a mistake? What if, in an attempt to feed the masses, farm corporations revolutionized food production to the detriment of the people?

Reminding myself to focus, I finish the dishes and dry my hands. After a few minutes of preparing my second morning cup of coffee, I make my way to the hidden panel to remove the seeds. The panel is behind a family picture frame dating fifteen years back when we had taken a

vacation to the beach. The kids' faces are sticky with cotton candy, their hair sweaty and sticking out in all directions from a day's fun playing in the ocean and building sand castles. Noah and I look happily exhausted, faces flushed from the heat but grinning from ear to ear. It is my favorite family memory. I remove the picture frame revealing what appears to be a normal looking section of the kitchen wall. Placing both hands side-by-side on the wall, I give a firm push and the panel pops out a couple of inches from the wall. I pull gently on each side of the panel and a drawer slides out with it. One of Noah's clever designs from an old filing cabinet we discovered at the trash dump. Reaching my hand inside, I feel for the wooden box containing my seeds. My hand finds the box, but I pull it back suddenly.

"No!" I scream as my heart picks up pace. "No, no, no!" I pull the box out quickly and run across the room as water drips onto the floor leaving a trail of spots leading to the kitchen sink. Frantically, I open the box and dump the contents out onto the kitchen counter. The box is full of water and so are the sacks of seed. I grab a towel from the drawer and begin emptying the seeds out, fanning them flat with my hand to see how much damage has been done. Some break apart in my hand as others lay shriveled and lifeless. I grab another towel and another sack of seeds, spreading them out again. Over and over, I spread them out on every space available, the kitchen counter, table, and even the stove. The last sack is emptied and spread on towels on the floor, but few seeds are viable for planting. Sitting on the floor, I slump back against the refrigerator and survey the room. What now?

"What...happened...here?" Noah sputters as he walks around the room. I did not hear him come in, but his voice jolts me out of my daze.

“The damn roof happened. I had not checked them in a while. That last five-day downpour had to be the culprit.” I stare at the floor in shock as I responded.

“Ginny, they are all ruined! I don’t think it was the most recent rain that did this though. Look, they’ve swelled at some point and it appears they have dried and split. They prematurely germinated. Is this all the seeds?” he asks shakily.

“Yes,” I whispered back. “That’s all of them.”

Noah starts pacing back and forth across the kitchen floor. He removes his hat and rubs his hair. Placing the hat back on his head, he stops suddenly and looks at me, “Ginny, do you know the old saying ‘don’t put your eggs all in one basket’? I guess we should have listened.”

I knew he was trying to lighten the mood, but “we” had not put all the eggs (or seeds) in one basket; I had. I could feel the heat rising to my face, “Noah, I didn’t do this on purpose you know! I can’t believe this has happened but pointing fingers is not going to fix it.”

Noah tried to console me, “Honey, I didn’t mean to point fingers. I was... I don’t know what I was doing, I’m sorry.” Noah starts to cross the kitchen towards me and reaches out a hand to touch me.

“I can’t do this right now; I need to think. I know you don’t mean it, but I was already thinking it. I’m going out,” I almost hiss back as I stomp out of the room. Knowing as soon as I spoke that it is me I am angry with. The guilt is too much. I just need to clear my head.

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“Long time no see, Ginny! I wondered where you had been and why you had not been to see me.” The middle-aged man behind the bar loudly greets me as soon as I make my way through the front door.

“Hi, Garry. Yeah, I know. Noah and I have been meaning to stop in, but things have been a bit crazy lately.” I struggle to offer a polite smile.

“I heard about the farmers’ market.” Garry lowers his voice and leans in to speak at a whisper. Unfortunately, Garry’s softest speech still sounds a bit more like an announcer at a livestock auction. “It’s a strange world we are living in when you can’t even grow your food the way you want. Have you heard the latest news about the GMO farms?” Garry asks but does not pause for my response. “It’s the craziest thing. Insects are devouring the fields. It’s part of some science experiment gone wrong. These damn super-engineered insects were supposed to be uninterested in the GMO plants, and dang’d if they didn’t go right for them. To make matters worse, the flying pests multiply at an alarming rate and predators won’t touch ‘em. Like something out of a science-fiction movie, except it’s not fiction, it’s real.” Garry’s eyes grow large, his nostrils flaring in fear as he finishes his tirade.

So that’s what is happening. The grocery store, the investigators and their pesticide, it all makes sense now, I think to myself while looking around the mostly empty bar. It is late morning, so patrons are mostly drinking coffee. Garry runs a bar but also serves a small selection of morning biscuits, and a light sandwich menu. “What can I get you?” Garry asks as he unloads a tray of freshly washed glasses into the holders above his head.

“Any chance you can put together a whisky sour with a twist of orange?” My face flushes in embarrassment. I never drink much and definitely not this early but desperate times call for desperate measures.

“You bet I can. Sit anywhere you like, and I will have it right out to you,” Garry beams back.

I choose a seat near the back in a comfy leather winged-back chair. Garry’s bar is a brewery by night, offering a selection of pale ales, dark stouts, IPAs, and vintage beers, and he has built quite a reputation for himself and his business. I figure it will be fairly quiet here for at least another hour when the local lunch crew would come in. I lay my head back in the seat and close my eyes for a moment.

“Ma’am, I know it’s none of my business but, are you okay?” I hear a man’s voice that I do not recognize and hope he isn’t talking to me. I hear feet shuffling and then a thud against the coffee table in front of me.

Groaning, I open my eyes and turn my head towards the direction of the sound, which happens to be straight in front of me and up towards the ceiling. As I strain my neck to take in the tall stranger, I notice his ripped and faded blue jeans and a rock t-shirt displaying the band KISS. Although his face revealed a few days of going without a razor, his hair appeared to be short and neat. From the sound of his accent, he could not be a local, so probably just traveling through and lonely for some conversation. I am not in the mood for making small talk though. “Yes, it’s none of your business and no, I’m not okay. I just need a few moments of silence,” I bark back.

The man chuckles, “Sorry, I do not mean worsen your day, but I overheard what you and Garry were talking about. You’re a farmer, eh?” he raises an eyebrow inquisitively.

“Yes, I am. Listen, normally, I am all up for a farming chat but not today. I do not mean to be rude, but maybe another time.” I turn my head away from the stranger.

“I can respect that, Ma’am. Sorry to have bothered you.” Sounding slightly injured, he takes a step back putting his hands up in defense.

Glancing at the table in front of me, I notice today’s newspaper. I pick it up and offer it to him as a token of consolation, “Newspaper?”

He chuckles again, “You know, ‘The man who reads nothing at all is better educated than the man who reads nothing but newspapers.’”

Garry walks over and hands me my drink as the stranger gets up to leave. Taking a long sip of the whiskey sour and setting the glass down, I suddenly remember where I have heard the stranger’s quote before. “Thomas Jefferson,” I announce proudly at the man’s back as he walks to the front counter. As he pulls out his wallet to pay Garry, he looks back over his shoulder with a grin, “Old T.J. knew a lot about farming too.”

I ease back into the chair, holding my drink, and smile a little to myself. I sip on my drink and ponder again how I am going to find more heirloom seeds. It took me a whole year to gather the ruined batch and it is time to plant now. There is no way in hell we will eat the GMO plants. We typically burn the plants slowly over the summer in our burn barrel so that no one else would consume them either. As I ponder, I realize the glass of whiskey is empty with only ice left at the bottom. I walk to the counter where Garry stands.

“Can I get you another one?” Garry asks.

“No, I guess not. Drowning my sorrows won’t make them disappear. They just rise back to the top again,” I respond as I hand Garry a twenty-dollar bill. He makes change and I place a dollar in the tip jar by the cash register.

“Oh, and this is for you too.” Garry puts up a finger telling me to wait as he fishes out a folded piece of paper from under the cash till. I take the paper from him and open it to see a handwritten note. “Meet me at the pull-off just past the New River Junction, tomorrow, 2:00 pm. Come alone.”

“Where did this come from?” I question Garry. Without responding, Garry looks around the room and points to where the stranger had been sitting, where I had been sitting too.

“That’s just great! I try to relax and now I got some creepy guy trying to meet up with me.” Throwing my hands in the air, I start to tear the paper up.

“Wait, don’t do that!” Garry reaches across the counter and grabs my hands. He looks around the room again to see if anyone is watching, “Don’t ask, just go. Trust me.”

I look at Garry’s face one last time. He knows something I don’t. Noah and I had both known him for a long time and he would never do anything to harm me. Slipping the paper slowly into my pocket, I turn towards the door and head out into the sunshine.

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I really hated lying to Noah, but I made up an excuse to run some errands. There was no way I could explain what happened at the bar though. Nor could I explain how I felt that I must go meet this mysterious person. If the tables were turned and Noah told me he was going to meet

a strange woman from a bar, I would think he was crazy. In all honesty, the stranger and I spoke little to each other, so why would he want to meet with me? And why did Garry urge me to meet with him too?

Now, as I pull into the meeting location that the man had written down, doubt and a little fear twisted inside of me. What if this is some crazy lunatic that charmed Garry and he will actually kill me? It didn't seem to be the case from the way Garry was urging me to go, though. I was about to find out as I noticed the man pull in behind me driving a faded blue International Scout.

I hop out of my Jeep Wrangler and lock the car. When I turn around, he is standing behind me. I jump a little and grab my chest. Apparently unaware of his startling presence, he orders, "Leave your phone and all other electronic devices in the vehicle."

"What? Are you out of your mind? I don't even know you or why I am here," I raise my voice in concern.

"My name is Kermit. Garry said you are an heirloom grower. I have someone you need to meet. Enough said? We need to get off the main road," he urges, while glancing up and down the road nervously.

I stand a moment longer considering what he said. Quickly, I unlock my door again and throw my cell phone on to the driver's seat. Turning back to him, I find he is no longer behind me but already back in his vehicle motioning me emphatically towards him. Glancing nervously around too, for what I am not sure, I sprint to the passenger side of his vehicle and hop in.

After riding down twisting gravel roads, making multiple turns, I lose all bearings on my location. I try to catch a glimpse of a landmark or road that I know but my surroundings are oddly unfamiliar to me. We slow to turn left on Old Bridge Hollow and then right on Twisted Oak, where we finally come to a sudden stop at an old clapboard house. The house is enormous but looks abandoned and dilapidated. From the front of the structure I take in a large bay window, wraparound porch, and what appears to be three stories with various balconies jutting out from each visible side.

“What is this place?” I ask Kermit.

“It was once a stagecoach stop and hotel. She’s a beauty, isn’t she? My grandfather used to bring me here when I was a kid. The rooms are unlike anything you have ever seen. You are not going in there though. Do you see that door going down into the cellar? That’s where you need to go. Once inside the cellar doors, you will see another door and you will need to knock.” There is an urgency in his voice as he points towards the side of the house where I can see two cellar doors laying horizontally.

“Um, are you sure?” I eye the house as I hesitantly reach for the vehicle door handle. He murmurs in response but does not offer any other words of encouragement. I glance sideways briefly as he again checks the rearview mirror and puts the vehicle in reverse. As soon as I step out of the car, he backs out onto the road. “I’ll be back in 30 minutes so be ready,” and with that, he is gone in a cloud of dust back down the dirt road.

I walk to the side of the house with the cellar doors and gingerly pull at the right one. It is a bit heavy and creaks and groans in protest, but I am able to slip inside and down the steps. A dimly lit bare bulb lights the top of a doorway ahead. I pause for a moment, my heart beating

wildly, as I knock three times on the door. The door quickly flies open and I am greeted by an elderly man, standing several inches shorter than me.

“Well, girl, you coming in or not?” he blares at me with a gruff voice as I stare at him in disbelief. What have I got myself into I think as I step inside the darkness of the house. He slams the door behind me and motions me to follow him as my eyes strain to adjust to the darkness. I can see some streams of light coming in from my left and figure we must be near the front porch. I continue to follow the man deeper into the innards of the house, rubbing my hands together to stop them from shaking. I watch the strange man’s head bobbing in the shadows ahead of me, wondering where we are going and why. The silence becomes more than I can stand.

“Did you ever work in the mines?” my voice cracks as I try to speak loud enough for the old man to hear. We pass through a dark corridor and the only sound is the shuffle of our feet on the dirt floor. Reaching for a dangling light bulb overhead, he pulls the switch illuminating the room with a yellow light.

“I shor did, the Great Valley Mines ‘for they shut down,” he garbles through the large plug of tobacco in his cheek. He turns sideways revealing a red, plastic cup in his hand, with the edge of a brown stained paper towel just visible inside. Pursing his lips, the lines and wrinkles of his face deepen into ridges as he spits the dark juice expertly into the container. I wait for the older man to offer more information, but he just adjusts his hat and proceeds through the dark passage. His hat I recognize from a book I once borrowed from the library, while doing some research for a high school paper. It’s called a Breton cap, with a short bill and a deep brim. It was fashionable in the 20<sup>th</sup> century for men to wear them cocked to one side and pulled low just above one eye. Like the rest of his clothes, the cap is faded but clean. His dungarees are brown Dickies,

much like my grandfather once wore, with the knees white from wear and work. A button-down denim shirt with a front pocket can barely be seen under his heavy Carhartt coat. From the coat's pocket, he pulls a silver set of keys and shakily raises them to fit in a door that has now appeared in front of us. The dim light makes it difficult to see more than a few feet in front of us.

Still feeling a little shaky, I again break the silence with the old man. "My grandfather was a coal miner in the Great Valley mines too. Frank from Norris Run. Did you know him?" I blurt out.

He successfully slides the key into the keyhole but does not turn the doorknob. The man turns to look at me. "Frank was your grandfather? Good man, hard worker. If he was still 'alivin he would want to be dead with what is going on right now." I could see a look of disgust on his face as he grumbles the last part through gritted teeth. He shakes his head and turns back to the door, "Let's see what we got in here."

The door opens to a room in complete darkness. I stand at the entryway and wait as I listen to the old man scuffle deeper into the darkness. A few moments later, lights begin to illuminate from above, each flickering on one by one. As my eyes adjust to the light, I can see that we are now in a large room with a concrete floor. Metal shelves line every wall from floor to ceiling. Each shelf holds neatly arranged clear plastic containers with brown paper bags containing a letter and number written on the outside. I stand in amazement as I survey the room.

"Do you have a list?" his rough voice pulls my attention away from the shelves and their contents.

“A what? I’m afraid I don’t understand,” I sputter as I try to make sense of my surroundings.

The old man shuffles towards me in a rush and reaches his hand to touch me. I start to put my hands up in defense, but he slips his hand inside my front jacket pocket and pulls out a white piece of paper. “Kermit takes great satisfaction in the whole cloak and dagger bit.” The man shakes his head and grins revealing his tobacco stained teeth.

He starts to walk away but turns to command me to, “Wait there” as he then swiftly moves around the room grabbing bags and emptying contents into other paper bags. As I stand cemented to the floor, I can hear the sound of seeds rustling in the bags. I recognize the red of the corn seeds, the small green peas, and the brown beans. I look around the room again and the realization of this underground seed storage washes over me. Like an answered prayer, just as I thought there was no hope, and a way reveals itself. I am speechless yet want to cry out in excitement.

If a place like this exists, then there must be more people just like me and Noah and the kids who are willing to work for food that is healthy and free of dangerous chemicals. Just like the seed savers and the underground gardening network, and people like Kermit and this old man.

“Miss, snap out of it. Your time is up and you got to go,” the old man stands in front of me snapping his worn, stubby fingers in my face. He hands me a baby diaper bag.

“What is this?” I laugh, sounding a bit hysterical.

“Your seeds?” he responds in frustration.

I place the strap over my shoulder as he grabs my elbow and turns me around to the door I came through moments before. Once he locks the door back, he quickly directs me back through the maze of darkness and we arrive at the door leading out of the damp cellar. Before I can utter a word, he opens the final door and gently but urgently thrusts me out into the stairwell of the cellar. I stand under the yellow naked bulb unmoving for a moment and take a deep breath. I hear a bluejay sing noisily from somewhere outside the house. I think of Noah waiting back home and the kids coming to visit this weekend.

“Thank you!” I whisper back to the closed door. I push the cellar door open and step out into the sunshine.

The End

## **Journey to the Top of the Mountain: A Thesis Analysis**

When I began writing my thesis, the struggle to find a topic was not a problem. In fact, I had always envisioned myself writing a thesis about food and farming in Appalachia. The setting of the story, a rural community called Norris Run, is very real and a place I knew well. Located along the New River outside of Blacksburg, Virginia, near a once vibrant coal mining town on the rolling hillsides of the Blue Ridge Mountains, is my childhood home. As a youngster, I can recall sitting at the knee of family members, neighbors, and other local Appalachian agrarians as they told tales of working the rough mountainside and living off the land. The characters I describe are mostly fictitious, although the horses, Bob and Todd, were real and belonged to my father who utilized their strength and surefootedness to plow, cut and harvest hay, and haul timber on our 35 acres of hillside land. Other characters described in my stories were not real people but may reveal an individual characteristic of someone I once knew, read of, or heard about through the tradition of Appalachian storytelling. There is a strong projection of myself in Ginny. Although the people and events are creative embellishments and fictional imaginings, I believe there is truth in what these stories hold. Creating fictional short stories, but with historical relevance, brings together the tradition of mountain storytelling with topics of survival and hardship that people from this time period are either unable or unwilling to share through personal interviews.

With the impact of the pandemic, stories of my past have weighed on my mind more heavily than ever before. At the initial onset of the pandemic in March 2020, food shortages became a topic of discussion. Food and other daily staples could not be transported to the

grocery stores as efficiently as before, resulting in an urgency for people to buy as much as they could as soon as it became available. Most people will always remember the shortage of toilet paper as a symbol of the pandemic. For me, the most alarming indication that our way of life had suddenly changed will always be the image of empty store shelves and the limitations of meat and canned foods. Food is a central and necessary element of survival for every living being. The stories I tell are about the struggles people have experienced with feeding their families spanning a period of almost a century. Now more than ever, we must be aware of our food processes as fewer people are participating in agriculture. Through these fictional, yet loosely historically based stories, my hope was to bring awareness of the journey we have taken in the Appalachian Mountains as once independent and sustainable agrarians to an alarming dependence on industrialized food production. At the same time, I would like to acknowledge the traditional farmers who continue to strive for wholesome, organic food and a sustainable way of living. I hope my thesis and the following analysis represents a continuous journey in food and farming, forever climbing (and farming) steep hills, in search of the top of the mountain.

The first chapter, “Bearing the Seed for Sowing,” introduces Ginny, an Appalachian girl who is the main character and the connecting thread throughout the stories. Ginny’s awareness of earth and its potential for food and sustainability is witnessed early in her adolescence in this opening scene as she helps her father prepare to plow the fields with a team of draft horses. Although she feels the urgency from her father in beginning the day’s work, she is distracted by the spring day that is awakening the life around her. Her body feels a yearning from her environment as she takes in the sights and sounds of nature, feeling “springtime awakening not only me, but all living things” (Graham 1). There is a biological connection to the living, nonhuman world that she recognizes as a part of her. Cherokee and Appalachian poet and writer,

Marilou Awiakta eloquently expresses this in her words “Everything in the universe is one family. We are all ‘relatives,’ all strands in the Web of Life” (Crowe 42). Awiakta expresses both beliefs of her Cherokee people and Appalachian values, in that people are tied to nature both spiritually and physically. The external conflict of man versus society continuously interrupts these “strands of life,” however. As Ginny rides her father’s horse-drawn sled, the gravel and rock against the metal runners create an unpleasant grinding noise that is only resolved when the sled glides on to the soft green grass. This serves as only one of the first examples of the disconnection that happens between human and nonhuman living things throughout the story.

Ginny’s desire to be involved in the cultivation of the soil as the men prepare for planting is coupled by her innate need to please her father and uncle. She is more fearful of disappointing her family than the idea of holding on to a wild mule intent on freeing himself from the work harness and plow. Loyal Jones, author of *Appalachian Values*, emphasizes these as important principles, described as familism, independence, and self-reliance. Jones describes Appalachians as “a feeling of not wanting to be beholden to other people” while remembering that “the person who could not look after himself and his family was to be pitied” (3). Ginny may also feel sympathy towards the mule as she is harnessed to a way of life as a farmer’s daughter, not born a son.

Although the time period of Ginny’s youth is not mentioned, I imagined it to be the 1980s. Tractors had been utilized in farming production for decades but these men continued to work the land by the strength of animals and humans. They did not choose this method of farming out of practicality as Jones discusses, but out of a desire to do things in their own way

and to suit the earth. Ginny also wants to learn how to plow and work the fields much like the narrator in James Still's novel *River of Earth* who asks his Uncle Jolly to teach him. The boy seems to do well behind the plow until he realizes that he doesn't know how to control or even stop the mule. This scene in the novel helped me to reconstruct a similar event that happened to Ginny, and myself, when my father once told me to "hold on to the mule." Much like the narrator in *River of Earth*, Ginny is jostled and jerked along at the mule's discretion. Similarly, Uncle Jolly watches the narrator pulled along behind the plow until he finally calls "'Hold thar, Bully!' [and] the mule stopped in his tracks" (Still 137). Still's novel and my stories reveal a desire to continue traditional ways of farming of the ancestral land. The appearance of Ginny's grandfather as the elder and role model for the family reveals the passing on of these resilient tendencies.

Frank and Gerty, Ginny's grandparents, exist in the conflict between industrialization and subsistence farming. As Frank watches his son, son-in-law, and granddaughter working the mule behind the plow, he has a flashback. In his mind, he returns to the 1940s when he worked as a coal miner, specifically holding the position as a mule driver. He gathers his mining gear in the early hours of the morning as his wife, Gerty, prepares his dinner pail. There is light-hearted banter between the couple but an underlying fear for his safety is always present. The family is dependent on his paycheck now with Gerty and the children doing their best to work the garden and provide food for the winter months when money and food might be less available. Along with the danger of mining accidents, the mining industry was not always stable, resulting in reduced hours and wages if business slows down. This period of World War II presented the peak of family farms for this region of Southwest Virginia according to Mary Lalone in her article "Running the Family Farm: Accommodation and Adaptation in an Appalachian Region."

Lalone explains that “the 1930s marks the largest number of farms in the region during the study period,” (65) which she establishes as “over a seventy-five year period, from the 1930s into the beginning of the twenty-first century” (62). Employment provided through industrialization and the military pulled the younger generations from the mountains, leaving fewer people to work the farms. The “family farm” in this region was generally maintained by the nuclear family consisting of the parents and children or siblings that took over the farming business from their parents, according to LaLone (64). For Gerty, the pressures of raising her young children, worry of her husband’s safety in the mines, and her declining health are heavy burdens to bear.

In this part of the story, we also see a sense of community and friendship between Gerty and the miner named Eugene. As an African American miner, his status and position during pre-Civil Rights, would be considered lower than Frank’s as a white male. It is clear that Gerty considers Eugene a friend and neighbor and leans on him for comfort at the news that her husband has been injured in the mines. There also is a secret shared between the two of them concerning Gerty’s joint pain that she is keeping from her husband. Gerty had feared she would put Frank in more danger if he knew of her worsening health condition, causing him to worry over her extra work at home instead of focusing on staying safe in the mines. Now with Frank hurt, she reels with the thought of added responsibility. Eugene’s offer to help the family survive in the midst of tragedy was a common theme in rural Appalachia and Gerty is appreciative of his offer. As they approach the entrance to the mine, a resolve comes over Gerty as she asks for God’s strength. We again see the values of strength and determination of the Appalachians, particularly in the story’s women, as Ginny seems to inherit these characteristics from her grandmother.

Ginny reappears in “On the Market Square” as a grown woman and mother, working her own piece of land to provide for her family. There appears to have been some conflict within Ginny’s family as she and her husband Noah moved from the slate and rock-covered part of the county to a more agriculturally hospitable region. Working the steep hills of the Appalachian region required special skill and knowledge shared from one generation to the next. A theory of cultural trauma can be applied to Ginny’s family, beginning with Frank’s introduction to mine work pulling him away from the farming life he was once dedicated to. Similarly, Ginny does not wish to continue the tradition of working the harsher mountain landscape and has disconnected from her family’s traditional farming culture. Such a theory is “offered as a framework for working with disruptions when an ‘original’ culture is exposed to an ‘arriving’ culture,” as described in “Considering a Theory of Cultural and Trauma Loss” (Stamm 91). A disruption in cultural identity due to an arrival of a new, imposing culture can result in positive or negative changes. Ginny and Noah see this as an opportunity to be independent and start their own family traditions, although separate from their parents and extended family. There is a consistent theme of connection to place resonating in Ginny as she carries an obvious love for the mountains and farming the land.

This part of the story also discusses the intense conflict felt within the small farming communities. Ginny and Noah are traditional, organic growers. Like many agrarians, they are finding it difficult to compete with larger-scale industrial farms and agribusinesses. Some of the reasons behind these struggles are brought to the forefront during exchanges that happen within the farmer’s market square. Ginny is frustrated by the lack of understanding customers have about the appearance of organically grown food. She needs to earn a living but her ethical standards for growing and selling wholesome food is in direct conflict with what consumers are

looking for. The market manager forces Ginny to consider their farm's position as a minority in the market. Ginny and the manager, Journi's, conflict reveals a commercialization of a region's identity, creating less of a place for acquiring traditional fare and more about tourism and industry.

The last part of the story takes a futuristic approach to the loss of control in how we raise our food along with a complete dependence on the federal government for survival. This story idea came to me in the midst of a pandemic. The COVID-19 virus and subsequent closing of many businesses, schools, and workplaces initiated a panicked rush to grab food from the stores' shelves. Additionally, "the closure of restaurants and disruption of farmers markets due to the COVID-19 outbreak is having an immediate and potentially devastating impact on our region's farmers," Appalachian Sustainable Agricultural Project (ASAP) stated in an article including extensive projected losses (1). Even one year later, many people and communities across the United States continue to see impacts from the lack of food availability or money to purchase it. The economy continues to struggle as many people are still working from home. As a result of the food scare, many people began to grow vegetables in backyards and on porch stoops in an effort to return to an agrarian culture. In a continued chain of events, a shortage of seeds, food canning equipment, and even baby chickens for the purpose of having eggs were all a result of the pandemic. Although somewhat brief, this "woke" period of the pandemic brought people to a realization that few could subsist independently.

Saving seeds, especially of the heirloom variety, is important to Ginny. When her seeds are damaged by a leaky roof, reminiscent of the fairy tale "Alice in Wonderland," she is led down a rabbit hole of secrets to an underground exchange of organic seed savers. Ginny

discovers she is not alone in her determination to maintain her culture as a traditional farmer. The idea of man versus society or doing what is morally right even at the risk of breaking the law is drawn from a favorite author and farmer of mine, Joel Salatin. In Salatin's book from 2020 *Everything I Want to Do is Illegal: War Stories from the Local Food Front*, he shares his views on government as "a pretty hard taskmaster, and the more freedoms that we have, the better" (Chesky 238). Salatin goes on to suggest that there is no perfect resolution to the problem of farming and food regulations. If we relax restrictions on food processes, an opening is allowed for "shysters" (238) to enter the industry. Too many restrictions on small farmers put them out of business leaving only big corporations to provide the bulk of our food production. As Ginny exits the underground seed community and walks into the sunshine, there is only the suggestion of hope for future generations.

The characters that came alive to me during the creation of *Steep Hills* became so real and their voices so necessary to share that I feel there will be more stories in the future. The female characters, Ginny and Gerty, have much yet to reveal about their strength and resolve in supporting their families during difficult times. There is also an apparent gap in generations with little mention of Ginny's mother, only her work as a secretary that removed her from the farming scene. It would be interesting to see Gerty and Frank's response to their daughter's employment, as well as the dramatic increase of women accepting work positions outside of the home and away from their husband and children. This pull from the family land is also evident in Ginny and Noah's decision to establish themselves on their own land, possibly creating conflict with Ginny's parents. Finally, Eugene's character reveals both the comfort of friendships and community in his relationship with Gerty, but also the racial tensions still very prevalent during this period as seen amongst the miners. There are plans to see Eugene's life and experiences

further unfold in a future story as well. My hope is to continue to share the stories of food and farming; past, present, and future. I would be both humbled and exhilarated to have my characters' experiences and voices published in a scholarly journal publication and maybe even a novel someday.

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