

Home to Big Stone Gap

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Extract

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Cracker's Neck Holler

1998

As the wind blows through our bedroom window, it sounds like a whistling teakettle. As I wake, for a split second, I forget where I am. As soon as I see our suitcases piled next to the closet door, in the exact place where we dropped them, I remember. Etta's wedding, though it was just one week ago, already seems like a far-away dream.

When we drove up the road last night, our home in Cracker's Neck Holler looked like a castle in the mist. The first days of autumn always bring the cold fog, which makes every twist and turn on these mountain roads treacherous. Etta used to call the September fog the Murky Murk. She told me, "I don't like it when I can't see the mountains, Mama."

This morning they're in plain view again. Since we've been gone, the mossy field out back has turned to brown velvet, and the woods beyond have a silver patina from the first frost. I take a deep breath.

In a way, it's good to be home, where everything is in its place. The same beam of sunlight that comes over the mountain at dawn

splits our house in two, one half drenched in brightness and the other in dark shadow. Shoo the Cat sleeps on the same embroidered pillow on the old rocker, as he has every night since he came to stay. Small, familiar comforts matter when everything is changing.

I pull on my robe. Before I leave the room, I tuck the quilt around my husband. He's not waking up anytime soon; his breath is rhythmic and deep. I make my way through the stone house, and it feels so empty—as it did before there were children. I don't know if there is a sound lonelier than the silence of everybody gone.

The first thing I do is measure the coffee into the old two-part pot Papa gave me from a shop in Schilpario. I put the pot on the stove, and blue gas flames shoot up when I turn the dial. It's chilly, so I take a long, thin match from the box on the mantel and light the fire in the hearth. One of the things I love best about my husband is that he never leaves a fireplace barren. No matter what time of year, there's a crisscross of dry logs on a bed of kindling and a neat newspaper bundle good to go. The paper crackles, and soon the logs catch and the flames leap up like laughter from a school yard.

There's a note on the fridge from my friend Iva Lou: *Welcome home. How was it? Call me.* When I look inside, she's stocked us for breakfast: a few of Faye Pobst's rolls (I can tell by the shape of the tin-foil package), a jar of fresh jam, a crock of country butter, and a glass carafe of fresh cream, no doubt from her aunt's farm down in Rose Hill. What would I do without Iva Lou? I really don't like to think about it, but I do; in fact, I've been obsessed with loss lately. The past year brought my happy circus to an abrupt close—Spec died, Pearl moved to Boston, and I lost Etta to her new life in Italy. I don't like change. I said that so much, Jack Mac finally said, "Get used to it." Doesn't make it one bit easier, though, not one bit.

There's a deep stack of mail waiting for me on the table. Bills. Flyers. A letter from Saint Mary's College requesting alumnae donations. An envelope for Jack from the United Mine Workers of America—another cut in benefits, no doubt. A puffy envelope from the home shopping channel containing a pair of earrings I bought for Fleeta's birthday on back-order (took long enough). Underneath is a postcard from Schilpario, Italy, the town we'd just left a day ago. I flip it over quickly and read:

Dear Ave Maria,

By the time you get this, Etta will be married, you'll be home, and I'll be back in New York. This is a reminder. Start living your life for YOU. Got it? Love, Theodore.

I put the postcard from my best pal under a magnet on the door of the fridge. I'll take any free advice I can get. Noticing the clutter on the door—all reminders of my daughter and her senior year of high school—I begin to take things down. Etta's high school graduation schedule from last June is taped to a ribbon of photos she took in a booth at the Fort Henry Mall. She looks like a girl in the pictures. Her coppery hair in long braids makes her seem even younger. She is young, too young to be married, and too young to be so far from home. I close my eyes. Is it ever really possible for a mother to let go?

The coffee churns up into the cap of the pot, signaling it's ready to be poured. I grab an oven mitt off its hook and pour the coffee into the mug. The delicious scent of a hickory fire and fresh-roasted coffee is the perfect welcome home.

I kick the screen door open and go out on the porch to watch the sun take its place in the sky over Big Stone Gap. Autumn is my

favorite time of year; it seems to say “Let go” with every leaf that turns and falls to the ground and every dingy cloud that rolls by overhead. Let go. (So hard to do when your nature tells you to hang on.)

At the edge of the woods, a spindly dead branch high in a treetop crackles under the weight of a blackbird, which flies off into the charcoal sky until it’s a speck in the distance. I have to remind Jack that the property line needs some attention. He’s always so busy fixing other people’s houses that our needs are last on the list. The wild raspberry bushes have taken over the far side of the field, a tangled mess of wires and vines. Pruning, composting, raking—all those chores will occupy us until the winter comes.

I hear more snapping coming from the woods, so I squint at the treetops, expecting more blackbirds, but there is no movement. The sound seems to be coming from the ground. I lean forward as I sit and study the woods. I hear more crackling. What is it? I wonder. Then something strange happens: I have a moment of fear. I know there’s nothing to be afraid of—the sun is up, Jack is inside, and there’s a working phone in the kitchen—but for some reason, I shudder.

As I stand to go back into the house, I see a figure in the woods. It looks like a man. A young man. With curly brown hair. I can see that much from my place on the porch, but not much else—his face is obscured behind the thick branches. I raise my hand to wave to him, and open my mouth to shout to him, but as soon as I do, he is gone. I close my eyes and listen for more footsteps. There is nothing but silence.

“What are you doing out here?” Jack says from the door. “It’s cold. Come inside.”

I follow him into the house. Once we’re in the kitchen, I throw my arms around him. “Honey, I saw something. Someone.”

"Where?"

"In the woods."

"When?"

"Right now. This second. He was walking along the property line. I saw him."

"Well, it's hunting season."

"He wasn't a hunter."

"Maybe he's hiking."

"No."

"What, then?"

"It was Joe."

"Joe?" Jack Mac is confused—so confused, he sits. "Our Joe?"

I nod.

"Jesus, Ave Maria. You know that's impossible."

"I know." My eyes fill with tears. "But I think I'd know my son when I see him."

Without hesitating, Jack takes his work jacket off the hook, pulls it on, and goes outside. I watch him as he walks across the field and into the woods. He surveys our property line, looking for the young man. Sometimes he takes a few steps into the woods and disappears. I don't know why, but I'm relieved each time he reemerges. I stand at the window waiting as he checks the side yard and his wood shop. I half expect him to return with someone. With Joe. I hear the bang of the screen door.

"There's no one there. It was a long trip. You're tired. You're imagining things. Really." Jack takes off his jacket. "I didn't see any footprints in the mud. Nothing."

"I'm not making it up."

Jack sits and pulls me onto his lap. "What did he look like?"

"He wasn't four years old, like when he died, but older. Like twenty."

"You know that can't be."

"I know." I stand up. I go to the stove and pour a cup of coffee into a mug and hand it to him. I pull the rolls from the tinfoil and put them on a baking sheet. I slide them into the oven to warm them.

"It was someone else," Jack says practically as he sorts the mail.

"Or it wasn't anybody. My eyes played a trick on me. I hadn't even had my coffee, and I'm half asleep here in my big fat empty nest. I miss Etta, and that always makes me miss Joe." I pull the rolls from the oven and peel back the tinfoil.

"You're not going to lose it on me, are you?"

"I'm not crazy."

"Good." Jack Mac smiles at me. "I can handle just about anything but a crazy woman." He tosses the junk mail into the fire.

I slather the rolls with butter and jam. Jack studies a bill from the mail, so I feed him the roll. He takes a bite; I turn to get a plate. Jack grabs my hand and licks the jam off my finger. I look into his eyes and see the exact color of the morning sky. He looks at me in that way he never looks at anyone else. With all we've been through, that look still delights me. "What are you doing?" I ask him, but after nineteen years of marriage, I have a pretty good idea.

He doesn't answer; instead, he kisses my neck and loosens the belt on my robe, which conveniently drops to the floor—I say "conveniently" because I'm still holding the roll, which I lob into the sink like a fly ball. As Jack kisses me, my mind begins to race, never a good idea when you're making love—the whole point is to stay in the moment—but I'm in my memory bank, trying to recall if we've

ever made love in the kitchen. Pale blue ribbons of smoke are curling up from plastic windows on the junk mail; I watch until flames engulf the envelopes entirely and turn them to black flakes that float up the flue. I sit on the kitchen table and pull my husband close. The very idea of this makes me feel like laughing, but I don't. I feel his heart racing with mine, and I think, This is what's good about being married—knowing everything about someone and yet still being surprised before breakfast.

I hold Jack's face, then I slide my hands down his neck and outline his broad shoulders, down his arms, muscular from all that construction work. He is drenched in sweat, so I pull him away from the fire. He smiles and takes in deep gulps of air. I listen to his heart, which beats loud and clear and true and, in an instant, too fast.

"I have to sit," Jack whispers. I help him to the rocker by the hearth. He sits down and leans back in it, closing his eyes.

"Are you okay?" I go to the sink and run a glass of water and take it to him.

"I'm old."

"No, you're not. If you're old then I'm old, and I'm not old."

"Dream on." He smiles.

I put my head to his chest. "Wait here," I tell him.

I go to the hall closet and reach up to the high shelf and pull down Spec's emergency kit from the Rescue Squad. Leola, Spec's widow, gave it to me when he died. I've never opened it. Every time I go into the closet, it glares at me from the shelf, hand-painted by Spec in Day-Glo prison orange. I even remember the day he painted it. I was in his office, and he sat at his desk, which was covered in newspaper, and painted the tin box with a tiny brush like it was a Monet. I take it into the kitchen.

Jack is standing by the sink. "What are you doing?"

"Sit down. I'm going to take your blood pressure."

Jack sits down in the chair. I open Spec's emergency kit reverently. He always took such good care of the Rescue Squad equipment—the ambulance always gleamed, the sheets for the stretcher were always bleached a pristine white, his own vest was always pressed; he was very particular. The blood pressure gauge and cuff are nestled neatly among boxes of bandages, iodine, small bottles of tinctures, and tins of salves. I lift it out.

"Give me your arm," I say. I strap the band around his arm. I pump until the numbers spin around like a betting wheel: 170/110. "Honey, you need to go to the doctor." I loosen the band and try not to panic.

"What for?"

"You're off the charts."

"I feel fine." He pulls me close. "You're so good you almost killed me."

"Not funny. How's your vision? Blurry?"

"It's normal," Jack promises.

"I knew something was different. It sounds like an arrhythmia." I put my ear to his chest again. My days on the Rescue Squad taught me a few things—Spec and I dealt with plenty of heart patients—and numbers like Jack's are a pretty good sign that something is very wrong.

"Yoo-hoo!" Iva Lou calls from the front door.

"Just a second," I holler back. I grab my robe and hand Jack his clothes. Jack makes a beeline for the downstairs bedroom and closes the door behind him. I sit down at the breakfast table. "Come on in!"

Iva Lou comes into the kitchen and puts her navy blue patent-leather purse down on the bench. She wears a navy blue suit with a slim skirt and peplum jacket, nipped at the waist by a matching belt with ruby-red grommets. Her high-heeled pumps are navy-and-white striped with flat red patent-leather bows. Her blond hair is blown straight to her shoulders. If you didn't know Iva Lou by her voice, you'd know her by her perfume. It's not just one perfume either. It's a grab bag—always strong but never too loud. Today she smells like vanilla and peaches with a whoosh of amber.

"Thank you for the breakfast treats." I give her a kiss. "You look so pretty. So professional."

"I hope so. I have a meeting up in Wise at the li-burry. And then I'm having lunch at Bonterra's with the girls." Iva Lou surveys the empty kitchen table. The mail and newspapers are on the floor, exactly where they went when I cleared the table. "From the looks of things round here, there's been a rockin' robin in the empty nest."

I'm all set to deny it, but I've been friends with Iva Lou too long. "How can you tell?" I say softly as I pick the mail up off the floor.

"Nobody ever wastes one of Faye's rolls." She points to the sink. "You must've had a sweeter offer." Iva Lou winks.

"It's like you're a psychic or something."

"Honey-o, I'm what you call a Detective for Love. Some people have a nose for business, others for crafts and sewing, and then there's me—I specialize in the Call of the Wild."

Jack comes out of the downstairs bedroom, waving to Iva Lou before he goes up the stairs.

"Good to have ya back," she says gaily, then she turns to me. "We got big news around here. You won't believe it. Fleeta and Otto are getting murried."

"You're kidding. She won't even acknowledge that she's dating him."

"Let me tell you something about your friend Fleeta. Deep down, she's a true romantic. All that crust on her is an act."

"Whatever you say." I think Iva Lou's observation is nuts, but I'm not about to argue. Fleeta Mullins is far from romantic. One time we went to the mall in Kingsport, and a man and woman were singing a duet with each other on "Play Our Organ Day" at Witt's Instruments, and Fleeta turned in the opposite direction and walked the long way around the mall to avoid them. "I hate PDAs," she told me at the time.

I look at Iva Lou. "Why would they get married?"

"I asked her that." Iva Lou cuts one of Faye's rolls in half and spoons some jam onto it. She stands over the sink, holding the roll away from her suit. She leans forward and takes a bite. "She said it was for the insurance."

"She *has* insurance."

"Right, but he doesn't. Fleeta is a-fear'd of Medicare not holding up to cover Otto's various conditions, and she don't want to get caught holding the bag if Otto gets sick."

"So it's sort of an act of charity on Fleeta's part."

"A little. But there's also the fear of God."

"Fleeta thinks churchgoers are a bunch of hypocrites. Believe me, God is more afraid of Fleeta than the other way around."

"Not for nothin', Preacher and Mrs. Mutter made a stop over there one day when they was collecting cans for the food bank. And they got to talking. Fleeta ain't been in church since she was a girl, and Otto never went at all. Evidently, the singing convention and revivals don't count as churchgoing. Who knew? Anyhow, as they

was loading cans into the truck, some sort of conversion took place, and Preacher Mutter convinced them that they should honor their love with a proper ceremony, set a decent example for their children, and simultaneously become members of the United Methodist Church.”

“So Fleeta had an epiphany.”

“Truth be told, she was humiliated. She couldn’t believe a preacher would actually have the guts to say anything to her about her private life. For the record, Otto’s the one who’s afraid of hell.”

“Is he gonna be baptized?”

“Oh yeah. I’m buying front-row seats to that shindig. Wait till you see old Otto dunked in the Powell River like an old tire. That right there is reason number one I leave my donated cans on the porch when the Methodists come collectin’. I don’t need to be saved, I have no interest in it. Here’s a tip for you: never get into a conversation with a preacher on a weekday. It starts out as idle chitchat, then next thing you know, they got you volunteering to do God knows what and agreeing to things you’re dead set against.”

“When’s the wedding?”

“Soon. You’re in charge of the decorations, and I’m doing the food.”

“What is Fleeta doing?”

Iva Lou dabs the last bit of jam from the corner of her mouth with a napkin. “She’s gonna show up.”

When Jack and I head up to the hospital later in the day, the road to Norton is slick in spots from the frost. Jack drives as though it’s the

middle of summer, taking the truck around the curves like he's Dale Earnhardt. I hold on to the handle over the window. "Slow down, would you, please? I want to live."

"I don't have time for this."

"You have to make the time. It's your health." What is it with men, anyway? Why do they hate going to the doctor? As a pharmacist, I've seen it all—I even knew a wife who mashed up pills and put them in a pie to get her husband to take his meds. When a husband comes to the Mutual's to pick up a prescription, he carries the sack out of the store like he's holding a dead rat. I don't get it.

"I don't need a lecture."

"I'm not lecturing."

"The last thing I need is to take a morning off to run up to Saint Mary's. The trip to Italy really messed me up. We were gone for three weeks, and I'm backed up through the new year now."

"That's enough, Jack. It's not like I posted your name on the online Baptist prayer wheel. It's a checkup. That's all. Let's not argue. It's not good for you to get upset."

"Why? Because I'll have a heart attack?"

"Now you're just sniping. Knock it off," I tell him.

We pull into the parking lot at Saint Mary's Hospital in Norton. I reach over and pat my husband on the leg and then climb out of the cab. "Well, come on," I tell him. He sits staring straight ahead. "We'll be late," I say. He doesn't move, so I climb back into the cab. "Please. They squeezed you in. I begged. Let's go." I look at my husband's profile; it's every bit as strong as the day I married him. The set of his jaw is still like stone, his nose as regal and straight. Most of the light brown hair is gone, but he's not one bit less handsome without it. Sometimes I feel I know everything about him, and other

times I think I'll never crack him. I put my hand on his face. When I do, he breaks his faraway stare and looks at me. When I look into his eyes, I know. "You're scared."

"Wouldn't you be?"

"I guess I would," I answer. "You know, Jack, Theodore always says, when we're afraid and questioning everything, that deep down we know the truth. We just don't want to face our feelings sometimes. What does your gut tell you? What do you know?"

Jack exhales and looks away. "I think there's something wrong with me."

It's as if I've been stabbed. I try not to show any panic. "What?" I hear the squeak in my voice and cough to try and hide it.

Jack looks at me. "I haven't felt right in a while."

"How long?"

"A few months. I get foggy in the afternoon, and I don't have the energy I used to. Sometimes I can't catch my breath. Now, part of that is being fifty-four, and part of it isn't right."

"Let's go in and see Dr. Stemple. She'll get to the bottom of things. Okay?" I give him a quick kiss. We climb out of the truck, and I take his hand as we go up the steps into the hospital.

We sign in at the desk and take a seat outside the glass partition and wait. I put my arm around my husband. We don't talk. What is there to say?

I must be the worst wife in the world. He hasn't felt right for several months, and I didn't even notice. Of course, there were other things on my mind. My daughter decided to drop college and get married in a foreign country, for starters. The truth is, I wouldn't have noticed anything about Jack unless he keeled over in front of me. I was wrapped up in my own feelings and worries about our

daughter's future. I promise myself that from this moment forward, I will stay alert to his needs. He deserves that.

The nurse calls his name.

"You want me to come?" I ask him. He shrugs, so I follow him into the examining room, a sunny, small space painted pale pink. "This is the tough-guy room," I joke.

"I'm not feeling very tough," Jack says as he goes behind the changing screen to undress. He throws his sweater over the top. Instinctively, I pull it down, shake it out, and fold it neatly over my arm.

Dr. Stemple pushes the door open. "How are we today?" Jack emerges from behind the screen. Dr. Stemple extends her hand to him. "You look pretty good."

"You think?"

I take a seat on the chair near the door and watch as Jack is examined and answers the doctor's questions like Gary Cooper in *High Noon*: he yups and nopes and occasionally gives a silent shrug. When she asks about dizziness and indigestion and shooting pains down his arms, Jack says nope each time with conviction. I'm relieved. Maybe it's not Jack's heart. Maybe it's some small problem, easily fixed.

"I'm going to send you over to Kingsport for a stress test," she tells him. She tears a sheet off her clipboard and hands it to Jack. "You check out fine, except that blood pressure. It's on the high side."

"Too high?" I chirp.

"I don't like it," she says simply. "I want them to do a tissue sample on your lungs too."

"Why?" Jack's voice breaks.

"You worked in the mines for almost thirty years, Jack. It's

important to stay on top of any changes in your lungs. You have some congestion.” She makes a note on her clipboard. “Look, it could be nothing. You just took a transatlantic flight—that’s a regular germ bath. Don’t worry.” She pats his hand and smiles at me. “I’m glad you came to see me,” she says as she leaves the room.

I look at my husband. “See, it’s good news.”

“Now I gotta go get poked and prodded in Kingsport. Great.”