

## THE AWFUL WONDERING

Imogene McGee could barely see ten feet in front of her as she drove over the Clinch into Spilt Holler. Hurricane Dora was seeding trouble all up the Atlantic, from Cuba to their own little nook of Tennessee, but that was nothing compared to the storm she was about to visit on Doo: she was two months along. When Doo's mother, the Memaw, invited her for Sunday refreshments at the house they shared, she knew full well that decisions would be made on both sides. And she'd finally get to meet Doo's wife and see if the woman was even in the ring for the fight. She pulled up into the muddy yard—they didn't have a proper driveway—and charged out with her gingham umbrella.

The Memaw arranged the folds of her pink-petaled dress on the piano bench and took a last long drag on her Salem. "I have never performed in another language, so bear with me. Please enjoy this great French classic, 'Sur le pont d'Avignon.'" 99

Tessie had been coming over all week to help her grandmother with the words, but it didn't matter; on the Memaw's tongue, the *pont* had become a point, the *tous en rond*, twos in round. The girl glanced at her French teacher, Miss McGee; she was smiling, leaning forward from her place of honor on the Memaw's rocking chair, fiddling with the reddish hair that curled from her beret. Tessie was surprised that the Memaw had gone to so much trouble to impress her fifth-grade teacher.

This last six months, Imogene McGee had become one of the butcher shop's best customers, the Memaw said, and wasn't that enough for a celebration? Miss McGee had explained to the class how *fantastique* it had been in Paris to buy fresh meat—oxtails, lamb shanks, sausages of all shapes and sizes—so Tessie told her how people came from all over to her Uncle Doo's shop behind his house. Miss McGee said, "That's some drive," so Tessie was surprised when Uncle Doo said her teacher had stopped by. *Ooh la la!* he'd said. Now she drove the twenty miles in from town at least once a week.

Finally the Memaw stopped playing. Tessie, Doo, and Miss McGee clapped loudly, but Aunt Sheba only nodded. Tessie had never seen her aunt up before five, when she came out of her room to fix Doo's supper.

"I would curtsy," the Memaw said, "but my knee won't let me. Flew down the church steps last winter, Imogene, and can you believe?—my kneecap shattered in a hundred pieces, but not one blessed nick in my pantyhose. Mysterious ways, mysterious ways."

"*Magnifique*, Mrs. Odom. The song was *très magnifique*," said Imogene.

"This dancing on the bridge at Avignon, I can actually see it when I play: everybody together up there by the railings, looking out over the water, laughing, spinning around. Can you see it, Doo?" the Memaw asked.

"Yes, Mama, a glimpse here and there," he said.

"Doo was in Operation Dragoon, they called it, down by Nice. August fifteen, nineteen forty-four. Almost twenty years, but my heart pounds just like it was yesterday. Old Adolf said that was the worst day of his life. Now can you beat that?"

100 "She doesn't want to hear about that stuff," Doo said. He'd already told Imogene everything he could remember about his year in France; this was what they shared, two people who had traveled, who loved the finer things and knew where to find them, but didn't yet know how to get there. Here they were in a county where nobody even drank red wine, much less cooked with it, and she'd come to him that first time asking for lean stew beef to make *boeuf bourguignon*. He couldn't believe how much she'd picked up in Paris in just a month; you'd think she'd lived there for years. The next time she came, he had Edith Piaf playing on the child's turntable by the sausage grinder, "Non, je ne regrette rien," and the time after that when she asked what cuts of beef made good bouillon, he said, "May I?" and touched the inside fleshy part of her upper arm to show her where the humeral is on the cow, and then he knelt and traced his finger down the back of her stockinged calf to find the aitchbone. "Also good for cutlets," he said, and that's all it took. He'd used that teaching tool too many times on too many women, it was true, but this time he felt a genuine something. And he'd never seen his mother take a shine to anybody like she did to Imogene; any time she saw her Dodge, she found an excuse to sidle down with some fool question. The phone rang, and Doo went to get it in the kitchen.

Imogene considered following him, but the time wasn't right yet. "Heavenly *gâteau*, Mrs. Odom," she said, picking at the cake that was as dry as July mud. "Did you or your daughter-in-law make it?"

"I made it all myself, the *gâteau*," the Memaw said. "I wanted that Julia Children's recipe book that just come out, but we couldn't get over to Bristol to get it. Sheba can only cook meat."

Sheba's eyes were half-closed, and Imogene thought she must not have heard. She'd never caught even a glimpse of Sheba Odom in the six months she'd been jiggling with her husband in the refrigerator room of his cinder-block shop. It was something else indeed to *let go*, surrounded by the partial carcasses, red and marbled like ghastly candy canes, hanging from hooks in the ceiling. She wondered if he'd ever taken Sheba in that freezing room, if she'd ever shivered there with pleasure and with cold, trying not to be marked with the slithering tracks of animal blood. She could see why Doo cheated; the woman could barely fit into the vinyl recliner and was made up like the worst kind of beauty pageant contestant: a black beehive bun teased a good six inches above her bangs, false eyelashes, and a shiny turquoise dress splitting the seam on one side. But the eyes, Imogene had to admit, when they were open, were spectacular—a deep near-violet, like the shock of discovering amethysts glowing on a bullfrog. Imogene heard Doo laughing, and he came out of the kitchen and sat back down on the ugly beige sofa that needed a new slipcover. She would start making a list for the redecorating—the worn, green plaid carpet had to go—but first things first.

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"That was your daddy in town," Doo told his niece, "worried about his best girl in this weather. I told him the Clinch River always gets her back up like a woman, and then before you know it, just like a woman, the whole thing blows over."

"I don't get it," said Tessie. Sometimes her uncle treated her like she was older than ten, which was great, but also confusing.

"Nor should you," he said, winking. "But you will, like it or not."

"She hasn't come up over the banks since, what, fifty-five?" the Memaw said. "And we barely got our toes wet then. Like playing in a baby pool. How swolled up was the river when you come over, Imogene?"

"It was rolling a couple of feet under the bridge, but not enough to make me nervous. It's a good thing we've just got the hard rains from Dora without the hurricane winds."

"It would be like we're in *The Wizard of Oz*," Tessie said. "And I could be Dorothy!"

Imogene, too, felt a little prick of excitement, but she knew she was being foolish. "As your teacher, I have to say that it's one thing for grown-ups to

have an adventure, but when there are children involved, it's a whole different story."

"Amen to that," said the Memaw. "Baby Polly should be up from her nap now. Generally, I'm the one who does all her bathing and dressing, but today was too hairy with the cake and the recital, so I let Sheba." She took up her steel-tipped cane and tapped her way down the hall.

Well. She was about to meet his child. Imogene offered up a little prayer, though since the highly regrettable ending to her relationship with the assistant pastor in Johnson City last year, she had lost much of her faith. As for the girl, Doo had told her she was slow, but Imogene reckoned if she was going to end up with a stepchild, better one too slow than too fast. The Memaw was another story, but if she wanted it to work out—and she did—she'd crack that nut one way or another. She was twenty-eight, and there had been enough that hadn't worked out: she'd had her heart well and truly wrecked by one Hugh Joe Banner, who, like her, had been studying to teach French at Clinchfield Teachers' College. Two weeks before the wedding, he threw her over for a piece of river trash who hadn't even graduated high school. "*C'est la guerre*," he'd said, and for that stupid cliché, she'd bloodied his ear with the kitten heel of her wedding pump. At least the shoe had gotten some use. After that, there had come Orvil, the assistant pastor, and then an old friend of her uncle's, but Hugh Joe had been the last man who spoke French till she met Doolittle Odom. As far as she could tell, she loved him. It wasn't the split-the-sky-open love she'd felt for Hugh Joe, but damned if she wanted to risk that again, anyway.

Last week, when she'd driven straight from the doctor's office to tell Doo but didn't, he'd told her he was buying her a goose. A goose! He said he would stuff its gullet with corn boiled in lard until it grew the biggest, juiciest liver in the history of the world, and he would make foie gras for her. *Foie gras*. In Hunnicutt, Tennessee. Now that was love. She'd found her almost-bona-fide European, or, as her daddy two towns away broke himself up saying, "Peeing Urine." Peeing urine—that's what her family thought of her dreams, her City of Light—and not a one of 'em had wanted a French lesson, asking only could she cook a French omelet with fatback. But she and Doo, they'd pop corks and feed each other snails in a bistro one day, moon over paintings older than America, then have their usual on top of the Eiffel Tower, her silk scarf swirling in *l'heure bleue*.

With her cane in the crook of her elbow, the Memaw rolled Baby Polly into the middle of the room in the red chair that Doo had made out of a regular baby stroller and a wheelbarrow. They'd had her in a wheelchair for a while, but the Memaw couldn't stand her looking handicapped like that. Tessie stole a glance at her teacher, who was trying on too big a smile. People didn't know how to act around Baby Polly, and she probably wouldn't either if she hadn't grown up with her. She couldn't believe her cousin was fifteen now and wore a bra.

"Come on over and meet Miss Polly," the Memaw said. She wiped a trail of drool from the girl's open mouth, and Imogene realized she was expected to kiss her. She managed a swipe on the cheek, and Baby Polly gurgled. She was taken aback by the girl's size, the shock made worse by the rigid bows of her arms and legs. How Sheba got her into that absurd Peter Pan-collared blouse and poufy pink skirt she'd never know. Her feet dangled over the edge of the terrible chair in lacy bobby socks and black patent Mary Janes. Why did they bother to put shoes on her? Oh, Lord, here she was thinking mean thoughts, but what if her baby turned out like that? She couldn't cry looking at her, but she couldn't laugh either. She tried not to stare but also made a point of not looking away.

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"What do you think of my little darling, Imogene? I got my two other grandbabies, but Tessie here will testify that Baby Polly is my favorite, since the day she was born and I seen how much she favored after me and Doo. You see it, don't you?"

"I do," said Imogene. She was thankful that she'd fortified herself with those two Pabst Blue Ribbons before driving over, because the same wide-set blue eyes that she found so beguiling, so soulful, on Doo were indeed the eyes of this child. "She has the prettiest hair." Like Doo's, shaggy hay, but in pigtails looped with tiny velveteen bows.

"That's my girl," Doo said. Imogene appeared a little peaked; he probably should've given her more of the lowdown on Polly, but he hadn't been able to make himself. All he'd said was, "A sweet thing, the sweetest thing," and that was true, though of course he wasn't the one who changed her diapers. Now he realized he was going to have to say more to try to make it right. "I guess for all the regular stuff you might reckon we've been robbed of with Polly, we have been spared the worry of what might happen to her out there in the world, if she's gonna turn out a good girl or a bad'un."

The Memaw wiped at her eyes with the back of Baby Polly's bib. "I've been overseeing her since the accident," she said. She looked down demurely. "I don't know if you know, but the accident is why Baby is the way she is."

"Mama," said Doo, but that's all he said. That's all he ever said. He stared at his hands, laced on his knee.

"It's all right, Mrs. Odom, you don't need to tell me anything that might give you pain," Imogene said.

"But when you see something like this, a beautiful child brought down senseless, any reasonable human being stops and wonders why—how can the Lord have done something so cruel to a baby with them big eyes the color of the river and skin porcelain like her Memaw's—and so when there is an explanation, a most earthly explanation, it's only right to give it. It's a humane obligation to give it, to stop the awful wondering. Doo, isn't that fair? If by sharing the particulars, you might ease any anguish in this world—"

"Yes." Sheba didn't realize she'd spoken aloud until she saw everybody staring, Doo most of all. Usually, it worked the opposite: she thought she'd said something, but it turned out she'd never opened her mouth.

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The Memaw wagged her finger at her daughter-in-law, and the flesh hanging from her thin upper arm wobbled. "Sheba, on that day fourteen years ago, had a hankering for pantyhose, she *had* to have her some new pantyhose, so she put Baby Polly in the Rambler, and off she flew, over the—"

"Over the bridge," Sheba interrupted her, and the Memaw fell silent. "And she wasn't paying attention like she should've been; she was thinking how her legs would look long and smart and gleaming in those new pantyhose when she danced with her husband at the fiddle 'round up at Bart Camp, and then she slammed the rail on the right side, and there you have it. There you have... this. *C'est la vie*."

"You don't know any French," the Memaw whispered savagely. "Stop making things up."

Sheba was fully awake now. "'*C'est la vie*, say the old folks, it goes to show you never can tell.' Chuck Berry's new single."

"So that means 'you never can tell?'" Tessie asked. She liked to understand what everything meant. She'd heard the pantyhose story a hundred times; the Memaw brought it up at every family gathering and even at church. But Baby Polly had been a retard *before* the accident, and everybody knew it. Almost a year old, and she could barely lift her head, much less crawl. But

the Memaw swore that she had never, ever been the least bit slow until that day. Tessie thought it was sad for the Memaw that she had to keep telling it wrong, but she didn't understand why Aunt Sheba didn't defend herself. This time she'd even joined in.

"Chuck Berry, my fanny! Is it that low hairdresser girl bringing nigra songs into this house?" the Memaw asked Sheba.

"Yep. When you bang on the door and we turn it up, that's Chuck Berry." Since Sheba'd stopped leaving the house a few years back, Lavelle, her last friend, came once a week to bouffant her hair and bring her magazines. Every December for the last five years, Lavelle had taken her to J.P. King's in Bristol to buy presents and underwear, and on those trips she had felt lost and exotic, like a blind hippopotamus dropped into a Christmas pageant.

"Mama, you love Nat King Cole, and he's black," Doo reminded her.

"That's a whole different kind of bird, mister, and you know it. What do you think of that Chuck Berry, Imogene?"

"I think Nat King Cole is much smoother. He has a certain *je ne sais quoi*."

"What's that?" the Memaw asked.

"It means...it means 'I don't know exactly what.'"

"But you're a French teacher! You got to know what it means," the Memaw said, her blued pin curls shaking like sprays of tiny carnations.

"Mama, it actually *means* 'I don't know what,'" Doo said. "Some people just have that special something you can't put your finger on." Like Imogene sitting there with her perfect posture in her pale lemon shift, her imperfect size-nine feet tucked beneath her.

"*Exactement*," Imogene said.

"*Je ne sais quoi*." The Memaw rolled the words on her tongue, and Tessie repeated them. "Yes, yes, I can see what you mean. Mr. King Cole does have that special something. And here I was always wondering at myself how I could ever be so taken with a nigra."

"You know, in France they love the Negroes," Imogene said. "They just eat 'em up, like chocolate. Especially the jazz types."

The Memaw shook her head in amazement. "Your sweet little brain knows so many things, so many, many things. It seems near impossible you could be that pretty and know so many things, don't it, Doo? We are all getting an education right here in this very room." She paused. "And you know who else has a big *je ne sais quoi*?"

"You?" Tessie asked.

“No, honey, you flatter me. It’s our own Baby Polly, don’t you know?”

“Watch this,” the Memaw said, and she knelt, with difficulty, beside Baby Polly’s chair. She waved her hand above the child’s head—“Looky up here”—and then blew a smoke ring. Baby Polly’s eyes followed it for a second as it drifted toward the ceiling. “Now what do you think of that? Even something like a smoke ring, she’s on it right away, som’at that disappears into thin air, she nails it. Hmm, Imogene?”

“Why, yes,” Imogene said. She listened to the rain thrumming on the roof, slapping puddles in the yard. “That Dora’s turning out to be some mischief-maker.”

The Memaw waved her hand. “Oh, Dora, Flora, Snorra. I’m sick of hearing about her already. This ain’t no Florida. But even if it was, we leave ourselves in God’s hands. Which here church do you go to, Imogene?”

“First Baptist,” Imogene said, though she’d only been once since she came to town, to see if there were any decent men. Nope. All bald heads and horn-rims and wrinkled shirts, nothing like Doo’s lean muscles moving beneath his bloody apron. Hunnicutt only had five thousand people, but they were divided among its fourteen churches, all Protestant, some so small they could fit only a handful of pews, or in the case of Mount Olive Evangelical Freemasons, a dozen folding chairs and a picnic table. She should know; she’d been to all of them.

The Memaw stroked her chin, where to her horror she grazed a coarse hair. All those manifold preparations, and she’d forgotten to pluck! She kept her hand cupped to her chin, declining to say, for once, exactly what she thought of Baptists. She wasn’t surprised, though; she prided herself on being able to read people’s practice with a quick study. The human heart revealed itself to her immediately. This girl had a liberal streak about three feet too wide, but that could be worked on, if all the rest of her fit through the door. “We’re Church of God of Prophecy ourselves, but I’m sure Doo told you that already.”

“Yes, of course,” Imogene said. Damn, they were Pentecostal; at the least, she should’ve hedged her bets with Freewill Baptist. Thank God she hadn’t picked Methodist or Presbyterian.

“Sheba stopped worshiping way back, as you might imagine. But me and Doo load Baby up and take her every Sunday of the world so she can hear the sermon. Just being in the presence of Christ, she might be alit with a miracle one day, you never know.”



Doo got up. "Checking the radio," he said, and walked into the kitchen.

Sheba watched Imogene smile and bobble. She knew what she was thinking, and trying not to think: *vegetable, vegetable, vegetable*, the same word that had clanged in her brain when Dr. Pinkerton had told her that her baby girl would probably never walk or talk or crawl, because the IUD that Sheba had had him put in, unbeknownst to her husband, not only hadn't worked, but had stayed with Polly in the womb. She had been born with the inch-long copper T clenched in her fist. You're lucky she even made it with that thing in there with her, the doctor said. Today when she dressed Polly, she saw that the girl's nipples had grown big as silver dollars. What did she need nipples for?

After everything, she couldn't begrudge Doo his females, but this was the first one the Memaw had taken an interest in. He seemed opened up lately; she could feel him staring at her late at night across the divide that separated their twin beds, and last week he'd complimented her pan gravy. Doo always said he could cut a pork chop better than any man, and she could cook it better than any woman. Meat had been the thing they had in common. She hadn't set foot in the shop for years, but she lay in bed and pictured him there, the way he threw his whole weight into separating a hog's ribs, the unfiltered Camel clamped between his teeth. The girl was pretty enough in a skinny, nervous kind of way, like a greyhound, but she had the thin, stretched skin of a natural redhead that was going to start showing age by thirty. Wonder did she take it from behind like he needed sometimes.

The last time Sheba'd ever had her husband inside her, she'd been on top. He'd grabbed for the chain with the copper T swinging between her heavy breasts, still full of milk for Polly, who wouldn't nurse. She'd stopped moving, stopped riding him, sat motionless with her hand clasped around his. "I can't do this when you make me think of that," he'd said to her in the dark. "Take it off. Get rid of it." "No," she'd said. "Can't." She knew everybody thought he had his women because she got fat, or that she got fat because he had his women, but the truth, like most truths in a marriage, was more complicated. In her mind, he'd never really played her false. He'd kept the secret—against all odds, and even from the Memaw—of why his daughter was the way she was, and that was worth more than anything he'd ever given Sheba, and much more than he'd taken away.

Doo came back in and lit a cigarette, squinting his eyes against the smoke. “Radio says wind’s coming up in Scott County, and we’ll be getting some. I’ve seen harder rain, though, many a day.”

Imogene turned and looked out the strip of window not covered by the cheap cotton curtains. Last week Doo had led her down to the copse of red oak by the river bottom and bent her over. She’d braced herself against a tree, the April wind lashing her bare buttocks, and studied the one-story white clapboard house in which her future waited. She hadn’t realized until then how small it was in the shadow of the mountain, and that there was nothing visible for miles but land and sky.

Heat, not cold, seemed to swell from the window, and Imogene felt the cake about to come up. She managed “excuse me” and forced herself to walk, not run, into the narrow hall. She slipped into the bathroom and turned on the faucet to cover the sound of her retching. She didn’t know if it was the baby or the nerves or the goddamn cake, dry as dust, stuck in her craw. She washed her hands and threw water on her face, thinking of all the times she’d torn off strips of brown butcher paper to wipe between her legs in the freezing cement room not a hundred yards from here. When she walked back into the parlor, the Memaw was sitting on the edge of the piano bench, tinkling at the keys. She looked Imogene up and down slowly.

“I got to play Imogene my last song,” she said.

“We can’t keep her here all night when it might get bad,” Doo said. Imogene wasn’t looking too fresh. “She’s got to get back into town, and so does Tessie.”

“It’s not even dark yet. The rain’s just made it *look* late.” The Memaw turned down her mouth and swung her cane back and forth. “Give an old lady five minutes. I’ve been practicing all week. Isn’t that right, Tessie?”

“Yes, ma’am,” said Tessie, but she was confused. The only other song the Memaw had tried was “Frère Jacques,” and she’d said she’d never play that, it was too stupid—what kind of monkey’s uncle would write a song about two boys sleeping?

“I’d love to hear it, Mrs. Odom,” Imogene said. She nodded at Doo. It would be okay.

“All right, Mama, but remember, it’s not *The Lawrence Welk Show*,” Doo said.

The Memaw arranged herself with a great flourish. “This one I think everybody knows, so join in.” She started on “Frère Jacques,” but nobody

sang along. "Come on now," the Memaw said. "*Dormez-vous, dormez-vous?* Morning bells are ringing, morning bells are—"

They all heard it at the same time, a low, sorrowful roar. The Memaw stopped playing, her hands suspended over the keys, her mouth open. Tessie ran to the window, and Doo to the door.

"What is it?" Imogene asked, afraid to look. Doo came back in and closed the door, and Imogene ran to him, stopped just short of touching him. "You said it wouldn't flood."

"The river didn't flood," he said. "The creek's broke. It's come down the mountain and it's filling up the road. It's gonna join the river any minute."

"How could something happen that fast?" Tessie asked.

"Flash flood," said the Memaw. "Go try the phone, try your daddy." Tessie ran into the kitchen.

"The creek never come down before," Sheba said. "It's an original thing."

The girl stood in the doorway. "The phone's not working," she said, and started to cry.

"Come here, honey." The Memaw took Tessie in her arms. "It's gonna be okay. We got two cars."

"No," said Doo. "The bridge'll be out before we can get to it. And the engines would stall, anyway. I figure we've got a couple of hours before we'll have to get on the roof."

"We can't stay here!" The Memaw was yelling, and that scared Tessie more. "What are you gonna do? Drag Baby up there, and me with my bum leg clambering around, while we're waiting for *who* to come with *what* out here in the middle of nowhere? Think, Doo—how would anybody out town even know? We got that little flatbottom fishing boat."

"But it's meant to hold four."

"We got two children and us four. I, for one, am not waiting here for the mountain to fall on me. We only got to follow the river a mile or two to where it bends up to high ground at Miller's Holler. Shame on you, son! You pray for courage, Doolittle Odom, and you fix us in that boat. *God gave us a boat.*"

Doo stood in the middle of the room, his eyes almost closed. Imogene thought he really might be praying. She should, too. She didn't want to die in this house.

The Memaw banged down hard on the piano keys with both fists, and Baby Polly squealed and flapped her hands. “What are you waiting for—Jehovah to cast down a ladder?”

Doo looked at her. “No,” he said, and then finally: “I’ll get the boat. It’s still warm out, but the rain’ll get cold, so wrap everybody good.” He turned at the door. “Get up, Sheba,” he said.

With a grunt, Sheba pushed herself out of the chair and smiled at all of them.

The Memaw shook her head. “She *smiles*.”

Imogene tried to step out into the yard after Doo, but he pushed her back. He saw the deep half-moons of sweat staining her yellow dress and wanted nothing more than to stop the whole world then and there, tell the flood and God and family all to go to hell, just so he could hold her down and lick the salt from her armpits.

Imogene thought she’d vomit again if she stayed in that house one more minute, so she waited on the edge of the porch. She looked out, astonished at the way the world had changed in an instant and caught them unawares: the sky was both light and dark as the rain poured from it in seemingly solid sheets, and jagged streaks of sunlight shone on the glossy, rolling surface of what had been the road, thirty yards from the house. The patch between here and the shop made her think of the beach when high tide came in. She watched Doo trying to run through the water as it sucked at his calves, and it hit her with a sharp pain that there was no room in their garage for her car, her spiffy year-old little Dodge hardtop, not a mark on it. Who knows how tomorrow might find it. She’d rather think about the car than the baby; she couldn’t start on that. But worst of all, she might never see Paris. All the lies she’d told had rung the ladder she’d intended to climb, and here it was splintering before her eyes in God’s punishing deluge.

Doo wrangled the boat sideways out of the shop and then lifted it over his head, trying to balance himself in the middle. He buckled under the weight, and she wondered why he didn’t just float it across the yard. Here he came, the aluminum prow pointed straight at her, and she stepped out to help him, whether he wanted it or not. The brute force of the surge almost knocked her off her feet, but she was surprised that it wasn’t really that cold; it was closer to room temperature. She reached under the hull with both hands, and together they lifted it off his shoulders.

The Memaw and Sheba stood at the door, Baby Polly still in her chair, wrapped in blankets.

“I guess there’s no point in bringing cigarettes, is there?” Sheba said.

“Let’s load this thing,” said the Memaw. Imogene braced the boat against the porch as Doo helped his mother in, then Sheba beside her on the back seat. The boat swayed with Sheba’s weight. Doo struggled to get Polly into his mother’s arms, but she jerked and writhed, her limbs rigid. They wouldn’t be able to hold her, but he managed to wedge her safely into the space between the seats. “Tessie, you squeeze between Baby’s legs. I got the meat van tarp to put over you.”

Tessie wasn’t that frightened any more, but she hated getting sopped. Miss McGee looked pitiful, shivering with her dress stuck to her, wet hair corkscrewing crazily from under her beret. Tessie gave her the flannel blanket, amazed that she was in a position to comfort her teacher. “Uncle Doo’s really good in a boat,” she said into her ear. “I’ve been fishing with him up Bart Camp a hundred times.” Miss McGee patted Tessie on the arm.

“Imogene, front,” Doo said. “The outboard’s just for trolling fish, so we’re taking the oars. I’m going to have to lean over you to row.”

“I can row.”

“You don’t know the river.” The cross currents of the Clinch and the low rushing wall that had been Burns Creek formed a T, and the greatest danger lay in the spot where they met. Doo planned to steer their entry about half-way down the base of the T—the creek—hoping to hit the river smoothly enough to ride it up to the holler. He started the motor, which he knew wouldn’t last long, guided the boat down the yard as far as he could, and then jumped in. They watched clods of dirt and mountain mud swirl through the torrent. Tree limbs, and then a whole tree, a sapling birch, floated by.

“Where’s the bridge?” Tessie shouted, but no one answered. They shrank beneath the stinking meat tarp, inhaling the metallic tang of blood. The branches of the red oaks on the bank appeared to be waving: *Hello. Good-bye. Hello. Good-bye.*

For maybe fifteen minutes—who can tell time in moments like these?—Doo rowed them toward safety, but when they struck the roiling crossbar of the T, the boat pitched and sank so low with its extra weight that small waves lapped over the sides. Doo and Imogene gathered the ends of the tarp to scoop water from the bottom of the boat, but between the lashing down-pour and the floodwater they were taking on, they were losing.

Sheba and the Memaw cradled Baby Polly between them, half on the floor, half on the seat. The Memaw pushed the soaked blankets away from the girl's face. She bucked, and Tessie caught her legs. Sheba cupped her hands around Baby Polly's nose and mouth to help her breathe.

The old woman watched her daughter-in-law. "You'll sink us," she said.

Sheba stared into the Memaw's eyes, and a moment of complete understanding, their first, passed between them. It was probably true. It was true. Maybe it had always been true. Her fingers left her daughter's face, and she rose slowly, carefully, her long, blue-black hair unrolling over her shoulders. Her violet eyes were clear and calm, and Doo, looking up at her, thought only, *how beautiful*. And then she went over.

Water rushed in. The boat tilted crazily in her wake, then righted. They were screaming, clawing at each other, trying to hold onto the children. Doo steadied himself, his hands on the edge of the hull. The Memaw shook her head—*No!*—and reached for her son, but without a word, he dove in after his wife.

"Doo!" the Memaw screamed. "Doo!"

112 "Keep her down!" Imogene shouted to Tessie, and the girl covered her grandmother and Baby Polly with her body. Imogene clutched the oar Doo had thrown into her lap. He hadn't even looked at her. She started to row.

Tessie punched her shoulder and pointed—was that Sheba or a birds' nest?—but the eddy twirled them in the opposite direction. Twenty yards downstream, they saw Doo reach Sheba, his arms thrashing, but she floated away from him, folding herself into the current, the shiny turquoise of her dress gleaming against the black water.

"Goddamn you, Doo," the Memaw cried, rocking back and forth. "Lord Jesus, have mercy!"

Tessie crouched at the stern, scanning the river in the last light, but when the boat rounded the next bend, she couldn't see Doo or Sheba. Maybe it was too dark. Maybe they'd find them up ahead, on the high ground at Miller's Holler. Imogene lay down the oars and hoisted Baby Polly into the front seat, pressing the child against her shoulder. Baby Polly waved her fists at the sky and laughed without stopping.