

Lucia Nevai

FAITH HEALER

There are things you will automatically do for an ex no matter how many years you've been divorced. Eppie had me figured to the penny. She had the amount down. She had the frequency. I enjoyed that aspect of giving her money. She knew me when no one else knew me. It gave me pleasure to listen to her ask in her familiar little voice for the right amount for the right thing. One year it was \$600 to have our German Shepherd put down and properly buried in a pet cemetery because her hips went (the dog's). Another year, it was \$2,000 for root canals. Things like that.

When I was still married to Jacquelyn, boy did that burn Jacquelyn up. *What does she want now? Are you going to give it to her? You treat your ex better than your spouse. Maybe you want two exes.* She stayed mad for two weeks when I gave Eppie money. It wasn't about money—money wasn't a problem for Jacquelyn and me. Not like it was when Eppie and I were married and sometimes didn't have the sixty bucks to pay the fuel bill or the thirty bucks for a new carburetor. It was the knowledge Eppie had about how to handle me, how much to ask for and when to ask. And the way I always said, *No problem.* After we divorced, Jacquelyn and I, she tried it, same trick, asking for money above and beyond what I'd agreed to, and I said no. Boy, was she surprised.

It was March—back to Eppie—when I took care of a legal fee, \$1,200 for a suit to stay in her apartment because they were trying to illegally evict her. So imagine my surprise when she called me in April from a pay phone at a rest stop on I-79, asking me to do her a favor. She usually spaced her requests.

"A favor," I said. "What kind of favor?"

She asked me to drive her to a faith healer in Pikeville.

"Pikeville. Where's Pikeville?" I said because I was afraid something was wrong with her and I didn't want to know what.

"In Tennessee," she said. We both live in Pittsburgh. I live outside Pittsburgh on a lake and she lives downtown.

"Tennessee," I said, cool as a cucumber. "When?"

"Now."

"Where are you?" I asked.

And she told me the name of the rest stop. I listened to the truck traffic for a moment, gathering my courage. "What's wrong?" I asked.

"I had a ride set up, but he turned out to be a psycho." Her voice was brave and matter-of-fact, so mine was too.

"That's what's wrong with the world," I said. "I want to know what's wrong with you."

She paused. I knew what she was going to say because that kind of cancer ran in her family. I said it for her. "It's the liver, isn't it."

We got our first taste of spring in Virginia. The dogwoods were out and the redbud trees were in bloom. There was a Civil War battlefield behind the gas station and a souvenir store next door where Eppie bought a good-sized painting of John Wayne, oil on velvet. I watched her bargain with the fellow. He started out wanting twelve dollars for John Wayne. She got him down to two. Standing there in that Virginia souvenir store, she looked like any woman, not necessarily a sick one. She was wearing a little blue cotton dress and a bulky white cardigan sweater with big machine-embroidered flowers on the two front pockets. On her feet, she wore her little yellow flip-flops. Her face was as round and blank and sweet as a sugar cookie with her two little no-color eyes not quite looking at you. Her hair was still that wispy pale brown color, falling about her shoulders every which way. She burped a lot. That was the only change I could see in her. And every time she burped, she said, "Excuse me all to pieces," as if it was the first and only time that day—that year even—that she'd burped.

There was a 7-11 next to the souvenir store where I wanted to have a quick cup of coffee before getting the 4x4 back on the interstate. "What *now*?" I called to Eppie because although I was hightailing it in the direction of the 7-11, she was standing stock still with John Wayne under her arm.

So much of our marriage had taken place at that distance—roughly 26 feet—me always half turned away as I charged off in a direction I assumed to be our mutual goal, though I hadn't put it into words, Eppie always standing stock still at home plate, the point where my assumptions and hers parted ways. And nine times out of ten, you-know-who went sulking back to home plate with his tail between his legs. For a sweet little blank-faced woman, Eppie always got her way.

"Let's have coffee where we can meet real Virginians," she said. God, I missed her. Jacquelyn was not one-tenth the fun. I followed Eppie past the

hardware store, past the church to a little luncheonette still serving breakfast. A ginger-colored cat was sleeping in the bay window next to a big African violet. It's funny. You hear the words *African violet* all your life without ever picturing the continent of Africa full of violets. We went inside and sat in a booth. A few regulars were lounging at the counter, drinking coffee. NO FOUL LANGUAGE read a stained sign over the coffee pot.

"Give us two breakfast specials," I said to the waitress without asking Eppie. I knew what she wanted.

"Yes sir," the waitress said with a sweet little obedient twang. She looked to be about ten years old. She went into the kitchen and waved a wand over two plates, piling them up with sausage, cheese grits, hash browns and freshly fried eggs. Here I'd been going to Friendly's every morning, thinking THAT was breakfast, that frozen, re-heated, overly manufactured stuff they cook the same from New York to California.

"Faster next time," I said. She laughed.

"Y'all looked so hungry!" she said. "I said to myself, *They are hungry—I bet they've been on the road traveling*. I wouldn't have known how hungry you can get traveling except I just got back from driving my three kids to Florida and it was real hard."

"Three kids," I said. "How old are you?"

"Nineteen," she said. "See, I met my husband at fifteen and got pregnant right away. But I told him I didn't want to get married if he was already thinking about getting a divorce. I wouldn't put my kids through what I went through."

"What's that," I said.

"Well, my stepdad, he used to beat me like a dog," she said. She said it descriptively, no blame attached, like the way you'd say *my stepdad used to teach me arithmetic*. "But first I was raised by my father," she said, "because my mother was *unfit*." She said unfit as if it were a State word, part of some proclamation. "See, the strange thing is my dad and my stepdad used to be best friends and drink together. And my mom and my stepmom, they used to be friends. Because my stepmom used to be married to my stepdad!" Her voice was joyful as if she felt important to be part of such a coincidence.

"See, one night my stepdad said to my dad when they were out in a boat, fishing, *I'm tired of the fat lady*—'cause my stepmom, she's real fat. So he says, *I'm tired of the fat lady. Do you want to switch?* And my dad thinks and he says, *Yeah, let's switch*. Now my stepdad beats my mother like a dog. She doesn't

admit it, but he does. Like a dog. He beat all of us, me, my little brother and my little sister. My little brother, he got the worst of it. And now he's in the orphanage. But my stepmom—I love her to death. Bless her soul! She taught me everything I know. Ain't I lucky?"

We crossed the border into Tennessee. "Did you tell the goddamn kids?" I said. We had been driving in silence since Virginia after arguing briefly about where John Wayne was born. She said California. I knew damn well John Wayne was born in Winterset, Iowa, because my mother was born in Winterset, Iowa, and that's all they ever talked about there. It's not the kind of thing you get wrong.

I was mad at Eppie for not eating her breakfast. All she ate was one hashbrown and part of one egg. I had to eat the rest for her while that gal told us her life story. It made me feel terrible that Eppie was too damn sick to eat the things she used to enjoy so much.

Eppie went into her mute phase. She pressed her lips tightly together like a nun hearing a dirty joke and stared straight ahead as if I wasn't there.

Nothing I ever said about those kids was good enough for Eppie. For God's sake, they're children, she used to say to me ten times a day. I couldn't spank them. I couldn't even talk to them. It was because of them we got the divorce. And it hadn't helped them any. If anything, it hurt them. Charles, our son, still lived with Eppie. He was a sneaky, whiny little mama's boy. Deeana, our daughter, lived in Egypt. Deeana, she was a kid you could be proud of. But she liked blacks. Eppie and I were damn lucky she married an A-rab instead of a black. In high school, that's all she went out with, blacks, because we lived in a neighborhood where the blacks were taking over and the only good-looking, strong, healthy smart boys with a future in front of them were all black.

I kept looking at Eppie's profile out of the corner of my eye, applying the one thing I had learned in our marriage: if you ask a nasty question, ask it only once and then wait for a reply, don't repeat it over and over, saying each time, *I said blank, now answer me*. I waited and watched. Her little eyes drifted down to her lap. Her lips relaxed. She was about to speak. "No," she said.

I was floored. It was the closest she'd ever come to saying straight out, Clark, I was wrong all those years, keeping those selfish little brats away from the strong hand of their father.

As soon as I got the lump out of my throat, I said, "I never loved nobody but you all my life."

"Me too," she said.

We drove for awhile. "How'd you find this place we're going?" I said.

Eppie reached into her purse and pulled out a crumpled piece of newspaper. She laid it on her thigh and set about flattening it, smoothing it with her palm over and over. I had not thought about her thighs for a long time. After blocking it out of my mind for many years, I could now remember exactly how we used to go about making love. She was the kind of gal who started out all stiff and unsure, but once you got her going, she didn't want to stop. I wondered if the good Lord was going to let me fuck her again.

"Faith Healer," she read from the classified section of *The Pittsburgh Telegraph*. "Willie Mae Dupray. One mile south of Jo-Jo's BBQ near Pikeville. I am waiting for your call. 315. 555 1772." She felt guilty. She wouldn't look at me.

"Jesus Christ, one mile south of a barbecue place?" I said. I put my foot on the brake and pulled the 4x4 onto the shoulder. I saw something on *60 Minutes* about bogus healers who prey on innocent victims and take their life savings. In this case, *my* life savings. "How much does this Willie person charge?" I noticed my voice was condescending. I learned that from Jacquelyn, that I'm condescending. Once Jacquelyn pointed it out to me, instead of me giving it up and speaking to her respectfully, I began to do it more often and enjoy it even more. It's kind of fun. It's as if you have rights and powers and can see the obvious when others can't. It's not true, of course and that's what makes it fun.

"There's no charge," Eppie said.

"How does she pay for that advertisement?" I touched the ad on her thigh.

"She said people make donations. She said one lady from Dallas gave her a million dollars when she cured her son of leukemia."

"Well, all right then," I said. I took the truck back up to the limit. "What," I said because she was looking at her lap in that way she had when she couldn't accept the hard part of life. "What, hon," I said, a little bit softer and more gentle.

"I wanted her to cure me over the phone."

"Jesus Christ," I said. "These people can't cure over the phone. Christ himself couldn't cure over the phone. Did she say she could?"

"She said to come in person. She said to call you."

I straightened up. I looked at myself in the rear view mirror. "Did she call me by name?"

"She said a man who lived on the water still loved me and would do anything for me."

I almost drove off the road. I had only lived on the lake for three months. Score one for Willie Mae Dupray. "How'd you end up with the psycho, then?" I asked.

"I didn't believe her."

At the Knoxville rest stop, Eppie put a quarter into a vending machine where you fish for toys with a mechanical set of claws designed to drop anything of value before you win it. Somehow she held on tight and beat the machine, winning a little stuffed yellow duck worth at least fifty cents. "What the hell are we going to do with a duck," I said.

"Put him next to the Duke," she said. God, I loved her.

"Is there anything but Baptists here?" she said at ten p.m. when we finally found a motel. In our search for something fairly clean with the AAA seal of approval sign on display, we had passed maybe 800 churches and all were Baptist.

"Guess not," I said. "You first." I indicated the bathroom. We each had a double bed to ourself. I sat on mine and listened to the rhythm of the water running in the sink as she gave herself her nightly sponge bath the same way she had for years. Left side of her face, right side. Neck, left and right. Shoulders, arms, breasts. *Why*, I wondered. *Why did we divorce? Why did we marry? Why were we born?*

What in the hell she did all night long I do not know, but it was not sleep. Six times she woke me up with her rustling around, pawing through her damn suitcase, trips to the bathroom, water running, more trips to the bathroom, sitting up to read, belching and burping. I got two winks, no more, and she got none.

"How'd you sleep?" she asked in the morning as we headed west on I-40.

"Fine," I said. "You?"

"Fine."

We had breakfast at the Kingston rest stop. I spread out the map of Tennessee and studied it over my third cup of coffee, looking for the fastest way

to Pikeville. The restaurant was empty except for one other table, a family of sorts. The old man saw my map and came over. "Are you lost?" he asked, hoping we were.

I didn't feel like talking to this old man, so I just said, "No." And I pointedly looked back at my map.

"Have you been to Gatlinburg? If not, you should go," this old man said. "You'll love it." While he was talking about how great Gatlinburg was and how when he went there someone he hadn't seen since high school recognized him, his middle-aged daughter came over and stood by his side, talking up the Blue Ridge Parkway. They had a way of alternating sentences, of looking at me, then at each other just as they were about to pass the baton.

"You're right up *in* the mountains . . ." she said. "You can see for miles. . . . You'll think you are in heaven. . . . You can feel the presence of God everywhere."

Next the old guy's wife came over with her address book, going through it page by page with big slobbery licks of her thumb, until she found the name of a cheap motel to stay at outside Gatlinburg. It was an Irish name.

Finally the granddaughter came over. She was a cross-eyed little thing about eight-years-old. She elbowed her way in between her mother and her grandmother and proceeded to jump up and down and run her fingers over my spread-out map in itsy-bitsy spider fashion.

These people were literally surrounding us, all talking at once, giving us instructions, seeming to agree yet constantly gently correcting each other.

Eppie, God bless her, vomited a little tiny bit right on the yolk of her fried egg and they left.

"Look at that goddamn thing," I said when we passed the Tennessee River dam they had made such a big stink about years back. They were right not to want it. It looked inhuman. "What a monstrosity," I said. "What an outrage. A dam doesn't have to look like that goddamn thing. A dam can be a work of art." And in the process of explaining it to her, I missed the turn to the bridge.

"Goddammit," I said. I hate to backtrack so we kept going. "There's got to be another goddamn bridge." I said it every mile.

Eppie turned on the radio to drown out my cursing. Every station either had a Bible-thumping Baptist promising you you'd go to hell or a fast-talking furniture salesman selling you suites of all sorts, bedroom, living room, dining

room, on the installment plan. Furniture for who? All we saw was tarpaper shacks with rusted out trucks parked in front.

I went up to one of these shacks to ask where the next bridge was across the Tennessee River. The screen door was wide open. The television was on. No one was home or if they were home, they were hiding. *Recipe No. 387*, read the television screen. *One navel orange. One bunch cilantro.*

We were a stone's throw from Georgia by the time we got over. I was following the backroads toward Pikeville when we came to a little wooden State Park sign with yellow letters. *Fall Creek Falls*, it read, *2 mi.* "Clark," Eppie said. "I want to see that waterfall."

We turned at the entrance. Do you think I could find that goddamn waterfall? By the time we parked and found the trail and I got Eppie up there, I was ready to kill. She hardly made it. I had to carry her the last hundred yards. She put her feet in the pool at the base of the falls and watched it non-stop for an hour. Then I carried her back. And do you think I could find my way out of there?

When I finally saw a ranger rolling toward us in his Jeep, I parked the 4x4 in the middle of the road and walked up to give him a piece of my mind.

Well, it was a her. That threw me off. That smoke-glass driver's side window went gliding down with its brand new hum and there is a gal with bright red spiky hair and that kind of orange lipstick that makes a man want to bite a woman's lips to see if they are real or artificial. She's got her little wrist resting on the steering wheel and here, she's wearing a big new diamond engagement ring. Her whole fuckin' life's in front of her.

"What's up?" she said—in a goddamn New York accent. No way was I asking *her* directions.

"Your signs are very misleading," I said. "You'd be well advised to correct them. You've caused two people a lot of hardship today. And that's not a good advertisement for Tennessee if you catch my drift."

"Which signs are those?" she asked.

"Your signs to the falls. Beginning out on the route there." And of course I pointed in the wrong direction because the road into the parking lot winds like a bastard, this way and that way.

"There's no sign there."

"Well, wherever the signs are, they are wrong," I said. And I explained it. While I laid it out for her piece by piece, she was looking over my shoulder

at the traffic piling up behind my truck. "Nobody else has complained," she said.

"You goddamn little bitch," I said, "My wife almost died getting to your fucking falls."

"Don't you curse at me, sir," she said and she whipped out the walkie talkie. "I'll write you up in a second." She clicked her monitor on and said, "Zero two niner, this is forty-six." I let her have it. I said some things I shouldn't have. I knew it at the time, but I couldn't stop myself. "White male, late fifties," she said into the CB, "six feet four, two hundred and thirty pounds, sandy gray hair, glasses, driving a Dodge 4x4, dark green, female passenger. Pennsylvania license plate NZ442D."

There were four or five cars lined up behind us. The drivers were all frowning and scowling at me. One guy called me an asshole. Here he was dressed in Eddie Bauer from head to toe, driving a metallic gold Lexus version of a jeep. I walked over and opened his car door. "You got a problem, pal?" I said. At least I got the satisfaction of seeing that shit-in-the-pants look on his face before we both heard the siren and saw the flashing red light.

Jo-Jo's BBQ was right where that girl ranger's superior said it would be. He told me not to pay any mind to her. She's a New Yorker, he said. He said she's a good egg but she's a little sensitive about the guff she gets from men in this state. He offered me a chew from his little tin of Red Dog and pointed me in the right direction. He weighed three hundred pounds if he weighed an ounce. His name was Randy Bright. If he had not given me flawless directions, I would have passed right by Jo-Jo's. I would never have dreamed that this tiny little unpainted roadside lean-to had the best barbecued pork and Southern fried chicken in Tennessee.

"Two of those," I said to the gal, pointing to the sign over the door: *Southern Fried Chicken. Fried to your order. Please allow 45 minutes.*

"Now it does take the full 45 minutes, sir," she said, all apologies.

"We were told to order it by Randy Bright," I said.

Her face turned all smiles and sunshine. "Do y'all know Randy? Ain't he fun?" she said.

This gal brought us our ice tea, then she took the slip of paper with our order on it and walked up the hill to a ranch house. Out came Jo-Jo himself, a happy, fat, red-faced man wearing a clean white t-shirt, and madras bermuda shorts and carrying a cast iron skillet as big as an automobile tire.

"You watch," I said to Eppie. She looked a little vague. Her eyes were glazed over and she was bone tired. I realized later instead of getting mad like I did with the lady ranger and showing off like I was doing now with Jo-Jo, I probably should have just shut up and got Eppie to the faith healer. But I didn't see that then. It was still all about me and what I needed to prove.

Jo-Jo went to town. He cut up a whole chicken and fried it for us and while he fried he talked. "Bless you Yankees," he says to us. "I cannot get my own next door neighbor to wait 45 minutes for my chicken. Everybody has got the Kentucky Fried mentality. They want everything right now. Well, they don't know what they're missing."

"Did you learn this recipe from your mama?" I asked.

"No sir," he said. "They made me a cook in the Army. Then when I got out, I worked my way up through Restaurant Associates. My first big hotel restaurant was in Chattanooga. I ran that restaurant for nine years. I had a black woman there who was the best restaurant manager I'd ever had. She did the work of three people. And she never forgot anything. That woman was smart.

"One day I noticed she was kind of down. And this woman always had a smile on her face. So I said to her, what's wrong. She said she'd been down to the furniture store to buy some furniture on the installment plan and even though she'd had a steady job with me for nine years, they wouldn't sell her a stick of furniture.

"I'll be a goddamn son of a bitch, I said. So I went down there with her and I co-signed the papers and she got the furniture and she never missed a payment.

"Now listen to this. A few years later when my sister was in the hospital with some problems and she needed a big operation, the doctors told me to have all my friends come to the hospital and give blood—because they had to have lots of blood on hand in case she needed a big transfusion. I made about five calls and I told my friends how important this was to me. Well a few days went by and the doctor called and said to me, Jo-Jo, we've got to do better than this. We've only got five pints of blood.

"Five pints of blood. I thought I had friends. So I was kind of down about that and here this black lady noticed this and she said to me, what's wrong. And I told her. And wouldn't you know, by that afternoon, a hundred black people were lined up at that hospital to give blood for my sister. And she needed it too. She needed a lot of blood. And do you know what? That

Negro blood improved her. She was nasty before the operation and much better afterwards."

"What a story," I said to Eppie. She just stared straight ahead. I didn't know then how bad she was feeling.

"I had nigger friends all over Chattanooga," Jo-Jo said. "They'd come to the back door of the restaurant and I'd give them free food. I could never get them to come to the front door. Even though I invited them to. Many a night, I'd play cards with them. See that trophy?" Jo-Jo pointed to a Rook championship trophy on a little wall shelf over my head. I'd forgotten about Rook. "Many a night I'd play cards with them down on Nigger Street. They used to call it Nigger Street. Now they call it Martin Luther King Street. Well, there you are, folks. Taste that and tell me if you ever ate a better piece of fried chicken."

I ate straight through mine and Eppie's. I thanked him. I promised him we'd see him again. And then when I went to pay—he wouldn't let me. He said, "This is on the house. I enjoyed talking to you two so much, it wouldn't be right to ask you to pay."

I hugged that man. He was so fat, he was hard to hug—but I did my best. And when we got back in the car, I was so happy I thought I was drunk. "Wasn't that funny," I said to Eppie, "the way he said nigger so freely? Nigger this, nigger that. How long has it been since we could say nigger? Over twenty years, I believe."

"This is it," Eppie said. And I hooked a left into a little mud driveway next to a purple rural route mailbox. And out of this purple trailer comes the biggest, fattest old black woman either of us have ever seen.

"Hold on here," I said. "Did you know she was black?"

"Yes," she said.

"Hold on," I said. "Did you just make me drive you 1,200 miles to a black woman's house?"

"Clark," she said. "I just want to live."

I felt sick to my stomach. "I'm waiting here," I said. "This is as far as I go."

The black woman was stepping down off her stoop and waddling out to the truck. She was wearing a big old black and white polka dot dress with a big clean white collar and three big black shiny buttons down the chest, the kind of dress I haven't seen on a woman since I was seven years old.

"Roll your goddamn window down," I said to Eppie after a few minutes because Eppie was staring at her lap while the black woman looked through the window at her. Eppie rolled it down.

"Are you Eppie?" she asked.

"Yes I am."

"Then you must be Clark."

I wouldn't answer.

"Well, I am Willie Mae," she said. "Won't you please come inside!"

Inside. The way she said the word hit me like a ray of light shining through the bars of a man serving a life sentence. I got out of the truck and opened Eppie's door for her like a gentleman. We went inside. Everything in the livingroom was purple. Somehow that made it easier.

"Would y'all like a cool drink?" Willie Mae said. She clasped her hands before her big chest.

Eppie said, "Yes, please."

Willie Mae brought us both a long, cool glass of ice tea with a purple crocheted sock ring around it so you can hold your cold drink without your damn fingers going numb. I took mine and put it on the purple rug.

"Look, miss," I said to Willie Mae. "I would not have driven all this way if I knew you was black—nothing against blacks."

Willie Mae smiled at me. Not a smile with the lips but a smile with the whole face. She smiled so long I reached down and drank some of her ice tea just to break the tension.

She bowed her great big head and clasped her hands delicately together in front of her big white collar and she closed her eyes. "Let us pray."

I don't pray. I never have prayed and I didn't intend to start. So while she and Eppie prayed, I sipped my drink and looked at the white undersides of Willie Mae's heels spilling out over the backs of her shoes as if with all the scrubbing and washing, the black color was starting to rub off her skin.

Her voice went up. Her voice went down. I don't know what all she said, but when she said, "A-men," Eppie was crying a little. "She needs you to comfort her when she cries," Willie Mae said to me. I don't much like anyone telling me what to do, let alone a woman. I'm a bastard of the first water who never did anything he was told to do except in Korea. And I wished I hadn't done it there. I wished I'd had the balls to say the hell with you and let them just court martial me.

I looked at Eppie, sniffing and sighing and something came over me. I did what Willie Mae said. I put my arms around her and she leaned into me and cried a little more. Not the big wailing stuff, because she didn't have enough life left in her for that. *Son-of-a-bitch*, I thought to myself, because it felt so

good to have her all soft and sweet in my arms like that, *you could have been doing this when she cried for the last thirty years!*

"Where are your children?" Willie Mae asked me.

"Ask *her*," I said as if it was Eppie's fault.

"I will," Willie Mae said. "But first I'm asking you."

"Deeana, she's in the foreign service in Cairo, Egypt. And Charles, he lives with Eppie."

"Do they know their mama is not well?" Willie Mae asked Eppie.

"No, ma'am," she said.

"Well, *why the hell not?*" Willie Mae said it with one of those great earthy gospely growls that makes you feel the presence of the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. I was starting to like this woman.

"Charles, he's a basket case," Eppie said. "And Deeana, she has a job as a school teacher over there in the American school. They have finals about now."

"Thank the *Lord Above* for ex-husbands," Willie Mae said. I sat up straight. I wished to hell we'd have come here when we started having trouble. I would have comforted Eppie whenever she cried and she would have learned she was a damn pushover and a doormat with these kids.

"Let's invite these children into the room with us," Willie Mae said. She sat back in her big purple chair, rested her arms on the arm rests with her white palms facing up, and let her head fall back a little. Her eyelids fluttered and I could see the whites of her eyes. I got a chill in my spine.

"Come in, Charles," she said, just as if a real person had knocked on the front door. I could feel a little wispy curl of hate in my gut. I never liked my son once he turned five.

"Come in, Deeana," Willie Mae said. I couldn't feel Deeana come in, but Eppie could. Eppie started to twitch a little. Her daughter could lie straight to her face and Eppie never knew.

"Children," Willie Mae said with a little bit of a reprimand. "Your mama is dying."

A noise filled the room. It sounded like a wolf who'd been shot in the side and was running around in circles, dragging its back half by the guts. It took a moment for me to realize the noise was coming out of me.

"Children," Willie Mae said, taking Eppie's hands in hers. "God is calling your mama home. Can you let your mama go home to God?" More wailing. "She *needs* you to release her. Her body is *wracked* with disease." She put that

gospely growl in for emphasis. “She is sick from her *throat* to her *knees*. And she needs to shed this little body that’s tying her to this earth and *join* the Lord as a beautiful spirit. Are you with me children?”

The wailing stopped. Eppie’s eyes were closed, her face as still and calm as if she were asleep. The two of them were holding all four hands. Eppie started to glow. I mean glow. I loved that woman. I loved her more than life itself.

Willie Mae asked the children, first one, then the other, to give their mama a special message filled with details that were new to me, things that made me realize they’d had a whole life together, Eppie and the kids, that I had never been a part of and didn’t know anything about. And I forgave her for letting them take advantage of her. You love your kids to death and they need to push you to the limit and you think it’s love to give in.

I must have fallen asleep. All I know is when I woke up, I was alone in the living room. I snooped around the trailer, wondering how that woman found everything in purple, purple toilet seat cover, purple toilet brush, purple soap, purple mini-blinds, purple bedroom slippers, a purple Bible.

I walked out back. Eppie was in the hammock with a little quilt over her and Willie Mae was sitting in a metal lawn chair at her side, rocking her gently to and fro.

I killed her. That’s what it comes down to. I got Eppie the morphine she asked me to. And I gave her the overdose she asked me to. You wouldn’t think a thing like that would bring a man and a woman closer, but it *made* my life, having her whisper personal things right into my ear when her voice didn’t have any noise left. She told me it was the most beautiful experience in her entire life, having me pick her up and carry her up to the lovely flat stone lookout over the waterfall. “Because of that,” she whispered into my ear, “my life is complete.” And hearing her say that, I knew mine wasn’t and never would be.

And then she couldn’t even whisper. All she could do was answer questions by squeezing my hand twice for yes and once for no. My last question was, *Now?* Meaning the overdose. She squeezed twice.

I killed her there in Tennessee and I buried her there. And the kids flew in and they got into a big fight and wouldn’t speak to each other and they blamed me for not letting them help decide the details of her treatment. I just smiled at them with my whole face like Willie Mae had smiled at me and I forgave the little shits for everything.

I tried to go home. I really did. I gassed up the truck, set the alarm for 4:30 a.m. and took off. I got as far as the Tennessee border, but I couldn't bear to leave the state. The name itself, Tennessee, had a hold on me. It was only ten a.m., but here I was, looking for a motel where I could spend the night. I found one, The Shamrock.

Shamrock, Shamrock, it sounded familiar. As I sat in the little aluminum lawn chair in front of my room, number 39, looking at the blackbirds swirling through the sky with the door wide open behind me and the television on inside so I wouldn't feel too lonely, I remembered. This was the motel *outside* Gatlinburg the old woman in the rest stop told me to stay in. Life was becoming pure magic now. Imagine that, magic coming to an old bastard like me.