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CHANGE IN WEATHER

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Clarissa had been lucky this fall. She quit going to church without God striking her dead with a bolt of lightning and her cousin, Leroy, twice removed, taught her how to drive his two-toned Oldsmobile with an automatic shift. Now she had her first chance to go somewhere, a day trip across the Alabama state line to Meridian, Mississippi with her mother's two older sisters, Doris and Ernestine, who had a car but no driver's license. People said luck happened three times in a row, but being sixteen, Clarissa was sure the rules did not apply to her, that ripples of good luck would unfold indefinitely as far as the eye could see. Sixteen was a wonderful age: it raised her status with Leroy who was taking her to a square-dance the first Saturday night in January, and equally important, she was old enough to be a licensed driver.

Her aunts lived on the outskirts of town, a fifteen minute walk from her own house, close enough to visit after school with the retired aunt, Doris, who spent her afternoons in the porch swing watching the school children walk by. When Clarissa was younger, she had spent many

nights at the aunts' house listening to stories of their childhood. Now her time was soaked up by her friends who were more fun–they liked to talk about boys. Last night, for the first time in several months, she had stayed at their house so they could get an early start on the trip. They had risen at the first rasping sound of the alarm clock to a fog that shrouded the house.

"Can you drive in this?" Doris asked, dividing her attention between her eggs and the kitchen window that overlooked a field of dead corn stalks. Years of washing and drying dishes had stamped the view from the window into her memory.

Ernestine poured herself another cup of coffee before studying the fog. "It's better than a heavy frost," she said, referring to the lack of a heater in the car. They had pooled their savings and bought a two-door Plymouth at a rock bottom price. Heaters were a luxury.

"Perhaps we should wait."

"Clarissa's already here," Ernestine said. She was driving with only a learner's permit and anxious to get in and out of Meridian before the traffic got heavy. Even though Clarissa with her coveted driver's license would sit beside her in the front seat, she only provided legal protection–no expertise of the kind that counted. Clarissa had never driven a gear-shift car and was useless with a clutch. Necessity propelled this trip: Doris' eyeglasses had disappeared two nights earlier off the night table where she had placed them for twenty years. Ernestine maintained privately--God forbid she openly hint at impending mental frailness in her older sister–that Doris was moving slowly and inexorably into chronic, ever-expanding searches for lost items. Doris, as baffled by these disappearances as if she had waked up and found the front part of their house gone, reiterated constantly, "It's God's will."

"I could take the 10:15 bus," Doris said.

"Fog will lift soon," Enestine said, studying the window again. "Why buy a car if we're not gonna use it. I didn't put up good money to have a car sit idle in the yard."

"I don't know 'bout going."

"Let Clarissa decide. She has her driver's license."

Clarissa perused her plate of grits and eggs. All her friends knew she was going on her first out-of-state trip. "Of course, we should go! Aunt Doris, it's you we're thinking of."

Clarissa sat in the front seat of the car as required by law with her driver's license displayed in the plastic window of her billfold along with a picture of Leroy. Ernestine, struggling with a stubborn gearshift that refused to move smoothly into reverse, gave Clarissa a wry smile as they backed onto the street.

"She never wants to do anything," Ernestine said in a low voice, nodding in the direction of Doris who had wrapped herself in a quilt in the back seat. "Not much life in her anymore."

"How far we gone?" Doris asked as soon as they reach Livingwell city limits sign, two miles from their doorstep. She was noisily shivering in the back seat. "We should have waited till the sun came up . . . taken the chill off thing."

"Aunt Doris, it'll be fine," Clarissa said. "We'll be there and back 'fore supper."

"Young lady, we'd be back for supper if we turned 'round right this minute."

"Ignore her," Ernestine said under her breath. "She wanted this car too." She sighed and looked intently at the road ahead of them. "Now she doesn't wanta ride in it."

"Which road you say we're on?"

"The main one to Meridian . . . one the bus takes. You've been on it before."

"You sure? Used to be more houses along this road," Doris said, unable to see beyond the sides of the highway.

Clarissa, watching the headlights cut through the pool of receding darkness around them, sat cross-legged on the seat. She liked this time of day. Most of the houses were still asleep in a collective diurnal hibernation. It felt good to be one of the first ones awake, to have a head start on the day. It gave her more hours to plan her future--what she would wear to the monthly square-dance, now only 10 days away. It would be her first dance with a real date. She had taken control of her life. No other girl in Conecuh County High School had quit going to church.

Not that she had actually said, "I will not go." It happened gradually. First, she lay in bed most of Saturday afternoon, pushed her vegetables and cornbread around on her supper plate, and then returned to bed as if gripped by an unknown malady. When she heard footsteps approaching her door, she hid the *True Confessions* under the pillow and pretended to be asleep. Sunday mornings became a cinch: her parents expected her to be sick. They stood in her room with concerned looks on their faces, inquiring how she felt. She waited until the front door shut, until she saw them striding across the street with bibles in hand, before reaching under her mattress for another magazine. When all the throbbing romances had been repeatedly absorbed--she knew the page numbers when the heroine surrendered to her smoldering passion–she turned to daydreaming about her cousin. She had heard of French kissing. She knew a girl should close her eyes and open her mouth while sinking back against the couch, back seat, or pine straw, whatever horizontal convenience was available. Clarissa spent hours beneath her bed covers, eyes closed, a soft smile on her face while she imagined the delights that lay ahead with Leroy. It was more fun than sitting on a hard bench in church trying to look interested in the preacher's words.

Eventually, Clarissa became bolder and began shrinking the number of hours she pretended to be sick. Although she did not say she would not attend church again, the temporary deviation from church attendance on Sunday morning became the normal expectation. After the first few weeks, her parents no longer asked if she were well enough to attend services. Still, Clarissa felt uncomfortable venturing out of the house on Sunday afternoon–a public declaration that she had defied God. He might retaliate if she left the safety of indoors, especially if there were storm-heads building in the west. Thank goodness, it was three months before thunderstorm and tornado season, and by then, He might not care what she did.

They were half-way to Meridian before the first streaks of dawn reflected in the rear view mirror and the edges of trees emerged from the thinning darkness. Rectangular blobs of light from kitchen windows dotted the landscape.

"Might as well drive the back roads," Doris said. "Nothing to see this way."

Clarissa turned around. "This way is faster. You can't make fifty on unpaved roads."

"No need to break our necks getting there."

"You're saying I'm driving too fast?" Ernestine said in an annoyed voice.

"I'm not saying nothing," Doris said and paused for a second. "I'm not used to these high speeds." She sighed. "We should have took that county road to the state line. Young folks from the church used to party on a lake there . . . what's it's name?"

"You mean the place where you used to go rowing with that fellow you were courting?"

"Aunt Doris, you went dating?"

"It was quite proper, mind you! Tom and I were always chaperoned."

"Was he cute?"

"Clarissa," Ernestine said, "Over 40 years ago! She won't remember that."

"Well, I'll have you know I do. Black hair. Sweet smile that crinkled his eyes . . . greenish they were. And when Tom came to the house he sat and chatted with Mama and Poppa like a true gentleman was supposed to do. Brought me honeysuckle and violets in the spring." She took a deep breath and retreated into silence for a few minutes. "I don't see why we can't go by that lake."

Ernestine gestured impatiently. "What good would that do? You can't see anything on the road we're on now."

Doris sniffed. "I'll be fit as a fiddle soon as I get my glasses and giving you directions 'bout a thing or two."

"Only a thing or two?" Ernestine asked in mock surprise.

"See here! You'd been in a heap of trouble if I'd told Mama and Poppa you're meeting that fellow after church. He didn't come calling for you like he's supposed to. I saw him, holding your hand big as you please as you sashayed down the street."

Clarissa smiled at Ernestine who was concentrating intently on the road. "Aunt Ernestine," she scolded, "You held your boy friend's hand? In public? Goodness me!"

"Sure as shooting she did," Doris said. "You should have seen them together!"

"Aunt Doris, everybody holds hands."

"More than holding hands. Took 'um a long time to get to the house with all that stopping in the shadows," she said, finishing off with a laugh. "Now ain't that true, sis?"

"I don't know why we're talking about this . . .over and done with years ago."

"Aunt Ernestine, were you really in love with him?"

"You got a fellow yet?" Ernestine asked.

"Clarissa smiled. "I'm going to the square-dance with Leroy."

"Leroy Jenkins? Ain't he kin to us?" Doris asked.

"Just through marriage," Ernestine answered. "No blood kin."

"Kin or not." Doris said in a loud voice. "You watch your step with him. I don't mean just on the dance floor either."

Clarissa stared out the side window to keep Ernestine from seeing the flush spreading over her face. How embarrassing to have everyone know what she was thinking!

"I've always wanted to hear those frogs croaking again on that lake. They sure put up a fuss, especially near nightfall when they get excited 'bout courting. Bet you never heard anything like it anywhere."

"Aunt Doris, I can hear the frogs croaking down at the creek if I stand on my front porch."

"Not like these croaked last day we were there . . . fore our men had to go overseas. Fight on foreign soil. You know, after that emperor was assassinated. Thought Tom and I would be taking our own children on church picnics there some day." She lapsed into silence. "Now here I am . . .ain't seen that lake since government took him. Gave up long ago, I would ever see it again . . . hear those frogs." Her voice became louder. "I put money in this car so I say we take that lake road back. Ain't no longer than this one."

Ernestine moaned. 'She won't keep still if we don't take that other road back."

"That's the truth," Clarissa replied, anticipating hours on lonely, back roads without seeing any boys.

"Mama went bad in her memory too . . . losing things, getting confused," Ernestine confided in a low voice. "Doris quit her job early in the dry goods store to take care of her." She paused before continuing. "Doris did my part too so I could keep my job at the bank."

"Is she like Grandmother?"

"I heard that," Doris said, "I'll have you know I still have my wits about me."

On the outskirts of Meridian, they pulled up behind a long line of vehicles stopped at the railroad crossing barriers. A huge freight train trailing a mile-long chain of storage cars lumbered by, wheels clacking against the metal rails. Clarissa felt as if the thundering mass was pulling their Plymouth forward under its wheels. She closed her eyes and pretended Leroy was holding her. Would he kiss her on their first date? She shouldn't appear too eager. He would have to promise not to tell anybody they parked in lover's lane. The barriers lowered and the cars began creeping across the tracks. Leroy told her once about some boy who was showing off, trying to beat the train, and got stuck on the crossing, penned between the barriers. The radio was still playing *Scatterbrain* when he was disentangled from the wreckage. Clarissa shuddered and looked both ways as they bumped across the tracks.

Ernestine was adamant that she would not parallel park so they circled the general location of the doctor's office, keeping several blocks from the heaviest stream of traffic. At the second red light, the Plymouth trembled as the engine died when she moved her foot from the brake to the gas pedal. Behind them, car horns blared as the light turned red again. Ernestine stared intently at the light, refusing to look at the other cars. The light turned green, and the horns instantly resumed their piercing protest. Ernestine gripped the wheel with one hand and groped for the