gear shift with the other while trying to keep her feet on the clutch, gas, and brake pedals. The car jerked forward. They were through the intersection.

"Turn left, Aunt Ernestine," Clarissa shouted. "That's the street!"

Ernestine continued straight ahead. "I'm not shifting gears in the middle of that intersection."

"Aunt Ernestine, at least . . . try it!"

"Easy for you to talk." She glanced quickly at Clarissa before riveting her eyes back on the road. "I have to shift gears, steer the car . . . and you tell me to turn." She sighed in resignation. "How can I stick a hand out to signal when my hands are already occupied."

"We'll have some walking to do."

"I'm not going through downtown again!"

Clarissa scanned the streets for parking places. "Stop here," she shouted, pointing to a long, empty space beside the curb with a no parking, unloading zone sign. "They won't care," she explained to Ernestine who looked uncertain. "You don't want a spot you have to back into!"

"I'll stay with the car," Ernestine said as Clarissa mounted the sidewalk, waiting for Doris to disembark from the back seat. "You go with Doris."

"I'm not leaving my sister alone sitting out in the street with nothing but strangers 'bout."

"Now, Doris, be sensible. I'm not leaving this car. Somebody may steal it. All our money gone for nothing."

Doris straightened her shoulders and snorted. "The very idea! Mama and Papa would turn over in their graves if I did such a thing. Leaving my sister sitting here alone in this car in a big city." Shaking her head vigorously, she added, "This car'll be our undoing yet."

Ernestine got out and stood on the sidewalk. She pointed toward the intersection. "There's
an officer of the law. He’ll look after me.”

“Sis, I’m older then you. I know my way round better in this world.” She propped herself against the right front fender. “I’m not budging a step till you agree that Clarissa stays here.” Ernestine shook her had and nodded at Clarissa to get back in the car.

“I’ve been here before. I’ll find Dr. Gleason’s office myself,” Doris said with assurance. She fixed her gaze in the direction of the taller buildings, and clutching her handbag, aimed toward the downtown area and a raised metal roof of an open underground elevator in the sidewalk.

“She can’t see her hands before her face without her glasses,” Ernestine said in a plaintive voice. “You have to go with her.” She pointed toward the intersection where Doris was headed.

“Catch up with her there. When she tries to cross the street, she’ll be thanking her lucky stars you’re along.”

It was early afternoon when they reappeared at the parking spot. Clarissa was steering Doris, who had dilated eyes and an optician’s receipt for eye glasses that would be in the mail the following week. It was Clarissa who frowned first in puzzlement at seeing the empty spot where the Plymouth had been. “I would swear this was the place.”

“What do you mean?” Doris asked in alarm, unwilling to open her dilated eyes enough to survey the situation.

“Where’s the car? Aunt Ernestine?” She scanned the street, turning totally around as if a new perspective would make the Plymouth materialize.

“What’s wrong? What’s wrong?” Doris repeated in a rising crescendo, looking around uselessly through the cracks in her clenched eyelids.
“I don’t understand. She was to stay here.”

Doris began to wail. “Our car’s been stolen with her in it. I’ve lost everything.”

Clarissa pressed her fingers against Doris’ mouth. “Let me think!”

“We should never have bought that car. I knew it would come to this.”

“Aunt Doris, we’ll find a policeman,” Clarissa said in a firm voice. Hopefully, he would be nice looking with black hair, dark eyes, gleaming white teeth, and big square shoulders that exuded strength—she was drawn to big men.

“They threw her in the river. No telling where they took our car.”

“For goodness sakes, Aunt Doris, nothing has happened to Aunt Ernestine.” She searched for a plausible answer. “Maybe she got tired waiting. Wanted more practice driving downtown,” she said, her voice dwindling to an inaudible level when she heard herself offering such a stupid reason.

Clarissa scanned the intersection for the direction that held the most promise of a police station. If worse came to worse, and they couldn’t find Ernestine, they could get directions to the bus station, perhaps riding there in a police car with a flashing light on top, and take the bus back to Livingwell. They set off in the direction of downtown with Doris clinging to Clarissa’s arm, sure she would be left behind in her partial blindness. At each pause at intersections, Doris began a new chronology of bad luck, starting with the disappearance of her glasses and extending backwards to the boll weevil plague that wiped out the family cotton crop when she was in second grade. Bad luck had followed her like a swarm of locusts.

Clarissa had heard this recital before. Doris was no different from the other old people she knew. Like the preacher’s gloom and doom—repent of sin or God will get his vengeance.” She...
was sure she was guilty of two kinds of sin: failing to keep the Sabbath holy and impure thoughts. But lightning hadn’t struck her down yet and she was looking forward to the best year of her life.

A Plymouth, leading a line of crawling cars, struggled across the intersection. A heavy-jawed man at the end of the line poked his head through a rolled down window and tried to locate the source of the traffic jam. He hung his arm out the door, slapping his palm against the side.

“It’s Ernestine,” Clarissa cried, simultaneously grabbing Doris’ arm and pointing to the Plymouth. “She was practicing her driving,” Clarissa exulted, amazed she had been correct.

“I don’t see anything.” Doris said, her eyes scanning the area where she thought a car should be.

“Run,” Clarissa yelled.

Doris stumbled along, clutching the straps of her purse while clinging to Clarissa’s arm. The idea that she might spill her personal belongings in the middle of an intersection in another state was highly embarrassing. She visualized small change, compact, Kleenex, pill bottles, and eyeglasses’ receipt smeared into the blacktop by the tires. She should have thrown out the used Kleenex days ago.

Clarissa ran straight through the intersection, crisscrossing through the snail-paced traffic under the light to the other side where the Plymouth was momentarily stopped. Clarissa snatched the door open and they both piled into the front seat seconds before the car lurched forward again. Ernestine, concentrating on both shifting and steering, barely looked at them.

Doris spoke first. “God in Heaven! Sure lucky we saw you.”

It was late afternoon before Ernestine agreed they were far enough out of Meridian to stop
for food. Stepping out of the car at a place called the Barbecue Pit, they noted the sun had paled behind a thin film of tattered clouds and a hazy mist was rising from the ponds. A small stream paralleling the back of the parking lot was half hidden by the swamp grass and weeds that choked off their view.

Inside the diner, Clarissa steered them into a booth opposite two boys wearing green and white jackets with school emblems. She made sure she sat on the aisle seat across from the boys who were now looking at her. The one nearest her had on a blue plaid shirt with the two top buttons unfastened, recklessly exposing a few curly black hairs that poked over the rim of his white tee shirt. The waitress, who had been leaning over the counter top and singing along with *You Are My Sunshine*, appeared with the menus, blocking the view of the boys across the aisle. She pulled a stubby pointed pencil from a wad of her newly permed hair and took their orders.

“You’d think that policeman would have something better to do than harass good citizens,” Ernestine said angrily, after the menus had been collected.

“Did you tell him you’re waiting for your niece and sister?”

“Course, I did. He even went so far as to say...” Her voice stopped momentarily as if the memory was so awful, she could not say it out loud. “He told me...”

“Yes, yes.” Clarissa said eagerly, her eyes intent on Ernestine’s face, hoping to hear a revealing confession. She could not imagine a man asking Ernestine to do anything other than cash a check or make a deposit.

“Sis, did he say something out of the way? Did he take liberties with you?”

Ernestine leaned forward and lowered her voice. “He said I had to move. Go through those intersections again with people honking at me. I declare people in this state have no manners,”
she said dramatically, nodding her head to emphasize every word. “He even went so far as to say he didn’t care if I were waiting for God himself.”

“He didn’t! Why that’s sacrilege--referring to God that way.”

“Soon as we get back, I’m writing a letter to the Meridian Gazette letting them know the way he ordered me about. Just ‘cause we’re from out of state they think they can treat us bad.”

“You should have sat right there. Informed him that God doesn’t take lightly those who don’t honor His name.”

“He might have asked to see my driver’s license! Then we’d been in a pretty fix.”

“He’ll get his comeuppance,” Doris replied. She tapped her fingers impatiently against the chrome table and said in a loud voice, “Now where’s our food? We don’t have all day!” Seeing the waitress arrive with their barbecue, she added in a booming voice, “We’re from Alabama. Right ‘cross the state line.”

“Well, I’ll be!” the waitress said with an amused smile.

Clarissa writhed in embarrassment. The boys would think she was some kind of hick. Two older men, several booths away, who were smoking cigarettes with their coffee turned to look at them. In the corner booth a family, trying to stop their small child from beating a fork on the adjoining partition, momentarily diverted their attention to Doris before seizing the weapon from their son’s hands.

Doris, eager to clarify their position, chimed in. “We drove over in our new car with our niece here.” She scanned the diner with a bright smile. “Any of you folks know ‘bout that road with the lake ‘side it?”

Ernestine interrupted before anyone could answer. “You’re not sending me on a wild goose
chase back through Meridian looking for a road we don’t know the name of.” She wiped her mouth with the napkin. “And that’s final.”

“We’ve been heading east,” Doris said. “Just keep going. That should do it.”

Ernestine glanced out the window. “It’ll be dark soon . . . now it’s winter. I don’t wanna be on a dirt road in that . . . not after dark.”

Doris sighed. “It’s been a good fifty years since I saw that lake. Lord a-mighty! I can’t wait another fifty years.”

“In this dark and fog . . . no glasses . . . you won’t even know we’re there.”

Doris perked up. “We’ll hear the frogs,” she said with enthusiasm. “A railway track passes nearby. Tom and I head that whistle many a time sitting there courting.” She raised her voice, speaking in the direction of the other customers. “Don’t nobody here know the name of that lake ‘across the state line . . . railroad tracks nearby?’

The two men who were walking toward the cashier stopped at their booth. “Lady, you talking ‘bout Thompson’s Lake?” one of them asked.

“That’s it! That’s it!” Doris said, clapping her hands excitedly. “Now if you’ll be so kind as to direct us how to get there?”

“Sorry . . . my missus and me ain’t been in years. You’ll need to ask some young fellow.”

“You all looking for Thompson’s Lake?” the boy with the tiny swirls of hair creeping over the top of his unbuttoned shirt asked.

“You know how to get there from here,” Doris said, beaming in anticipation.

“Sure do! We had our class party there.”

“See there, sis! Folks from out of state come over it’s so purty.”
"You gonna drive in this fog?" the boy asked.

"I'm not driving through Meridian again. I don't care what that lake looks like."

"Shucks, ma'am," the other boy chimed in. "You don't have to go back through Meridian."

Borrowing the pencil from the waitress' hair, he drew directions on the back of a napkin and handed it to Doris.

Ernestine snatched it. "My sister can't read without her glasses," she said, scanning the smudged diagram before handing it to Clarissa.

"Clarissa, you decide! You have your driver's license."

"I want to see that lake again before I die. That's not much to ask for," Doris lamented.

Clarissa looked outside at the thickening fog that was swallowing up the trees and the end of the highway. It would be difficult to see the county sign marking the turn-off for the road. Probably end up on a road leading nowhere and have to turn around in some yard with a small shack and flea-bitten watchdog sitting on the front porch who was eager to demonstrate his usefulness. It made more sense for her aunts to come back another time in broad daylight, maybe in the spring when the honeysuckle was blooming.

"Takes nerve to drive in this soup," the boy said.

"Aunt Ernestine, I see real good at night... even in fog," Clarissa said, raising her voice so the two boys could hear her.

"Are you sure, Clarissa?" Ernestine asked in an uneasy voice.

"Of course, I'm sure."

Doris chirped happily as they crossed the parking lot. The last time she saw Thompson's