Lake, she was with Tom. It was a stroke of luck they had been able to go. A farmer in the
congregation loaned the young adults’ bible study group two horses and a wagon for a picnic
after morning church services. Tom took charge of driving the horses with her sitting proudly on
the seat beside him while the other six couples arranged themselves around the picnic supplies in
the flat bed of the wagon. Summer’s heat, though muted by late September, still clung to the air
and some couples had borrowed cardboard fans from the church pews. The hottest part of the
day had passed by the time they reached the wooden platform where the boats were tied. Tom
tethered the horses to the biggest sycamore tree so horses and picnic fixings would remain cool
under the leafy shade.

They paired off for the boats with the men assuming control of the oars; their arm muscles
bulged under their shirts as the boats glided through the water. She dipped her handkerchief into
the wet coolness and dabbed at the drops of sweat clinging to Tom’s forehead. They docked
under the dappled shade of a sweet gum tree with overhanging limbs and discussed the future as
their boat rocked gently in the wake from the other boats. After the war, Tom would try the
hardware business and if things went well they might someday own their own house with a yard
for children. At the mention of children, Doris looked demurely at the water, wondering if it were
proper to speak of such things with a man, even though he was her intended.

The couples stayed til the cool of the evening when the shadows were growing along the
ground and the sunset was mottling the ruffle of clouds resting on the horizon. At twilight, a
cacophonous chorus of frogs began croaking, noisily advertising their presence. Like crows, they
seemed to be warning one another of danger.

“Ernestine, I sure appreciate this,” Doris said after she had crawled under her quilt in the
back seat. “When we get back to Livingwell, I’m gonna get Tom’s letters from my trunk. Last one written two days before he was killed.” Her voice quavered. “Never thought I’d see Thompson’s Lake again in this lifetime.”

As they pulled out of the Barbecue Pit, Clarissa took one last look, trying to see the two boys through the settling fog that encased the parking lot, blurring the cars and building. The loud speakers mounted on the sides of the building burst into You Are My Sunshine, words that Clarissa was sure were meant for her.

Clarissa focused on the road ahead, trying to see the road signs swallowed by the thick fog. Ernestine was driving so slowly that a kid on a bicycle could have passed them. She dimmed the car lights, creating a small circle of light on the blacktop. A light stain of red clay, tracked in by cars turning onto the other side of the highway from an unpaved road, grew thicker and then abruptly stopped.

“Stop,” Clarissa yelled. “Back-up! That’s it, where the car tracks come onto the highway.”

Ernestine, stripping the gears as she shifted into reverse, frowned as she turned onto the reddish-clay road. “Doris, I don’t know how you’ll see that lake. I can’t see anything,” she said in a loud voice. Without taking her eyes off the road, she whispered to Clarissa. “She wouldn’t know if we were about to fall in that lake.”

“I head that! You watch your driving. I’ll know when we go by.”

“Should we try to find a turn-around spot?” Ernestine asked in a low voice.

“You think it will get worse?”

“This isn’t bad enough?”
“Do we have to go back to the Barbecue Pit? They’ll think we are chicken.”

“Can’t you forget boys for a minute? I don’t wanna end up in a ditch! As soon as we see a good spot, I’m turning around.”

“It’s just fog, Aunt Ernestine.”

“What if we meet another car? There’s not room to pass! We’d have to back up for miles.”

“Our picture would be in the Meridian Gazette. Car backs into Meridian from Alabama.”

“Clarissa, we’re going back,” Ernestine said firmly. “You look out for a turn-around spot.”

“Thompson’s Lake should be somewhere close by,” Clarissa said loudly, looking around at Doris, hoping she would add her voice to the argument. Doris’ head was tilted back against the seat, a whisper of a snore rhythmically escaping from her open mouth. “I don’t see why we have to go back. Both ways are foggy.”

“At least, we know how far back we have to go. Better than not knowing what’s ahead.”

Maybe turning around wasn’t so bad. They would probably stop at the Barbecue Pit and she could tell the boys how dangerous the road had been. Hint she would have felt safer with them. Boys liked that kind of thing.

“Don’t worry, Aunt Ernestine, I’ll get us out of this!” Clarissa sat forward on her seat, resting her chin on the dashboard and staring intently ahead. Trying to make out the road was like trying to see through a piece of cloth. “I can’t see the front of the car in this mess.” A clearing emerged on the left. “There,” she said, pointing toward the open space. “Try that spot.”

“Clarissa,” Ernestine yelled after they had gone another fifty feet. “That’s slag on the ground. See those train tracks... there in the headlights!”

“Slag better than a slippery road for turning around. Scoot up on the tracks. Then back out
on the slag to the road.”

“People turn around on railroad tracks?”

What would Leroy say when she told him they drove on a railroad track. “Of course, many times. Everybody does it.”

“You sure now?”

“Aunt Ernestine, I do have my driver’s license, you know.” She sat back in her seat, pleased with herself. Everything would turn out okay. No spring storms until at least March. She would tell Leroy she rode in a convertible with the boys at the Barbecue Pit.

Ernestine slowed and shifted into first as she turned onto the tracks. The car shook as the tires bumped along the cross-ties and the engine began emitting death rattles. “Gawd almighty! It’s like driving a plow across a field of rocks!” The engine shuddered and died as she tried to shift into reverse.

Ernestine was the first to see the light, a broad beam seeping through the viscous fog. She frantically pushed both feet against the floor board.

“Shift into reverse, Clarissa screamed.

“Are we there,” Doris asked, waking in the commotion. “Hush now, so we can hear the frogs.”