

The River Keeper

Sarah Martin Byrd

Zechariah 1:8–11

8) *I saw by night, and behold a man riding upon a red horse, and he stood among the myrtle trees that were in the bottom, and behind him were there red horses, speckled, and white.*

9) *Then said I, O my lord, what are these? And the angel that talked with me said unto me, I will shew thee what these be.*

10) *And the man that stood among the myrtle trees answered and said, These are they whom the Lord hath sent to walk to and fro through the earth.*

11) *And they answered the angel of the Lord that stood among the myrtle trees, and said, We have walked to and fro through the earth, and, behold, all the earth sitteth still, and is at rest.*

Dedication

The dedication of a book is the hardest part. There are so many special people in my life that have helped me bring this work to print. However, dedicating this book was pretty easy.

First and foremost, I want to give credit to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. I hope through these words that hearts will open to the power of God's Word and that His name will be glorified. Thank you, Lord, for the ability to have penned another novel.

I also want to acknowledge Dr. Hal Stuart for introducing me to the legacy of Bob Pate. Hal, you have always been one of my strongest encouragers. Thank you, Dr. Stuart, for all your support through the years. I cherish the memories we share of my daddy, and your friend, Bill Martin.

The River Keeper is dedicated to the Pate family. Robert Lee Pate: December 5, 1928 – February 8, 1987. Though deceased, Bob Pate inspired more heart and soul in this story than I could ever have imagined.

Bob Pate was known as the "River Man." Pate was a conservationist and river and video specialist. In the early 1970s, the "River Man" joined efforts to prevent a large hydroelectric power dam on the New River near the North Carolina-Virginia border to be built. He is also known for his oral histories, *Listening to Our Past: North Carolina Folk Histories*. He made over 150 videotapes of elderly people and events in Wilkes, Surry, Yadkin, and Iredell counties in North Carolina, one of which was an interview with my great uncle Raymond Pruitt, who lived to be 101 years old.

In 1982 Bob Pate led a party of paddlers down the Yadkin-Pee Dee River from W. Kerr Scott Dam in Wilkesboro, North Carolina, to the ocean at Georgetown, South Carolina; it was the first time that the entire river had been navigated since early last century. The trip drew the attention of thousands to the river and won Bob Pate and his wife, Dot, the

Governor's Award in 1983 for protecting the environment. It also led to the formation of the Yadkin River Trail Association. Bob also traveled to the South American jungles for river expeditions.

A newspaper article from years past quoted Bob Pate as saying, "When you go out on the river, it is another world. It can take you on its back and ride you and show you some of the most beautiful things you have ever seen." When I read this quote, I knew the "River Man" and I were kindred spirits.

A special thank you to Bob's wife Dorothy, his daughter Patricia, and son Michael for sharing stories about their beloved husband and dad with me.

Acknowledgments

Since beginning this book in August 2011, I have probably done more research on this one story than I've done on all my others. Why? Because the New River is so rich in history and folklore. From haunting tales of the drop below Molly Shoals to Civil War gold being buried below Penitentiary Shoals at the big rock in the middle of the river, it seemed everyone I spoke with had a different story to tell. I never found out why Penitentiary Shoals, Penitentiary Hill, and Penitentiary River Ford were named that. There is no record of a prison being in that area. Some say a farm on top of Penitentiary Hill raised vegetables and sent them down South to the penitentiary. Who knows? That's the fun part of writing fiction. It gives our minds something to dream about.

So many people have helped make this novel a reality: my family for putting up with me while I hide away in front of my computer, and my personal editor, Jo Martin, who adds so much color to my work. Thank you from the depths of my being for helping me bring another one of my stories to life.

I would also like to thank my publisher, Ambassador International, for believing in my work. Who knows? This one may become the next best seller.

Preface

What a wild and wonderful journey *The River Keeper* has taken me on, navigating the stream of life through gentle ripples and sometimes-vengeful rapids, then plunging headfirst into the drop at Penitentiary Shoals. Paddling my way down river, I've met so many interesting people and learned so much from them along the way. I'd like to thank the people of the river, the ones who live on the rises above the bottomland in homes that have housed their families for generations. For almost forty years you have let me camp along the banks of the New, fish, swim, and paddle through miles of mystic river scenery, always finding a place of tranquility and peace for my soul. Dorothy from the *Wizard of Oz* thought there was no place like home. For me, there is no place I'd rather be than on New River.

Though most of *The River Keeper* is fiction, I want to share a few truths with you. The New River is one of the oldest rivers in the world, second only to the Nile River. It also flows from south to north and was probably in existence before the Appalachian Mountains were formed. On March 11, 1963, the Federal Power Commission (FPC) granted Appalachian Power Company, a subsidiary of American Electric Power Company—the nation's largest private electric utility—a permit to carry out a two-year study to look into the feasibility of generating hydroelectric power on the upper New River, stomping ground of the Cherokee and Daniel Boone. As a result of this study, on February 27, 1965, Appalachian Power filed an application with the FPC for permission to build a two-dam hydroelectric and pumped-storage facility, which they named the Blue Ridge Project. This project would have flooded over forty thousand acres of rich bottomland in Ashe, Alleghany, and Grayson counties, driving as many as three thousand people from their homeplaces and destroying 893 private dwellings, 41 summer cabins, post offices, 15 churches, 12 cemeteries, and centuries of hidden Indian artifacts. The New River Valley is one of the most important archeological areas in the eastern United States. How could the people of the mountain let all of this disappear? And so, the thirteen-year battle to save the New River Valley began.

An account of this conflict can be found in Thomas J. Schoenbaum's book titled *The New River Controversy*. In this book you will read about a lot of political power giants who helped with the fight, but *The River Keeper* will tell you about common people like Callie Mae McCauley, Bob and Dorothy Pate, Edmund Adams, Mary Osborne Young, and many other mountain folk who fought the fight to save a river that couldn't help itself from destroying the land. The very existence of these people and their way of life was in danger of being lost forever.

Based on actual events, *The River Keeper*, written in native mountain dialect with serial narrators, is the story of a family like hundreds of others who lived a rich life along the banks of the New River. Most of these people would rather have died than give up their land. They were all mostly poor, but they didn't know it. They had plenty to sustain themselves, growing what they ate and dipping water out of a spring. On a lonesome afternoon when the breeze is calm, one can still hear the battle cry of the people: "The New River Like It Is."

On a bright sunny morning on September 11, 1976, President Gerald Ford signed a bill declaring 26.5 miles of the 236-mile New River to become a scenic river, stating that no dam could ever be built on this span of river. President Ford on that day was quoted as saying, "This majestic and beautiful river and the land surrounding it have been preserved for future generations. I hope the New River will flow free and clear for another 100 million years." In 1998 President Bill Clinton traveled to Ashe County and declared the New River one of fourteen American Heritage Rivers.

To learn more about the New River, visit: www.ncnro.org

The River Keeper

How do I see with no eyes
Or hear without the drums of ears?
Do I know when the sun glows
And the moon changes phases?

Some think I have traveled the same path for millions of years
Little do they know I change by the second
A little to the left, a bit to the right
An inch deeper into the earth's crust

Over rocks, silt, and sludge
I move north over the mountains before flowing south into the ocean
Can anyone or anything stop what so long ago began?
Who would want to, I ask?

What, that someone or something could dam me up?
Making me consume all I touch?
The trees, the homes, the land ... the flesh
Why not leave me to my own way?

I'm sorry, for when the rains come I swell
The frozen ice edges me up on the bank
No one can stop the power, the push of me
I overflow and I kill

I weep, I groan, I cry out
I feel the wrath of myself
You can't stop me nor can I stop myself
Only one can save us ... the River Keeper

Callie Mae McCauley

Thursday, March 7, 1940

Mouth of Wilson

Nahum 2:6

The gates of the rivers shall be opened, and the palace shall be dissolved.

I was born at Mouth of Wilson, Virginia, on a piece of land right past where the north and south branches of the New River join up. My years on that stretch of land are numbered almost eight. The spring flood of 1940 was the highest flood on record; it changed everything, especially who I was. It even changed who I am to become.

The rain started yesterday 'bout the time Ma set dinner on the table. Not just a shower. It's like God might be dumping out the wash water. This morning it's a-pounding down even harder on this tin above my head. Sounds like somebody is a-peppering it with buckshot.

I throw back the patchwork quilt that Aunt Pearlle gave to Ma on her wedding day. That quilt has laid over me all the nights of my memory. It's made out of every color piece of cloth—plaid, paisley, and solid—that Aunt Pearlle ever owned.

Ma is nigh on twenty years younger than Aunt Pearlle. Ma is what everybody calls a late-in-life baby, one what weren't supposed to be. Ma always says Aunt Pearlle is more like a mama than a sister to her.

I can't wait to get outside and stomp around in them rain puddles. My toes is a-itching to be in the mud. At the door I reach up and pull down Pa's old slicker.

"Where do you think you're a-going, young lady? You ain't et your breakfast yet."

"I'll be back in a little while, Ma. I just want to see how high the river's a-running."

"Well, put your boots on. You'll catch a death cold a-tromping around in the wet. And hurry on back, you hear?" Ma says.

With Pa's slicker whooping all around me like the wash a-dancing in the wind, I step into my boots and head out the door with Ma still a-squawking. I hear her a-mumbling, "Can't do a thang with that child. Acts like she was born out back in the chicken coop."

Ma's words make me grin. She's always a-trying to teach me to cook and help in the house, and I'm getting right good at ironing a shirt, but housework ain't for me. I got to be outside.

I climb up the hill where I can see up and down the river real far. Finally I'm standing on the rise 'bout two hundred yards from our place looking at our house and a half-mile up and downriver. Pa built our place way up from the bottomland, but now I'm a-wondering if anywhere is high enough. While we slept, all up and down as far as I can see, the New has spread to its full girth and then some, taking on a wide path across the bottoms and soaking halfway up the birch tree not a hundred yards from our barn.

I look down at the only house I've ever known. Pa bought the land it sits on before him and Ma hitched up. It weren't but one big room to start out with. Over the

years Pa kept adding on and fixing it up. He put in a side addition for him and Ma's bedroom and boarded up the rafters in the attic, so it would look like a real room for any young'uns what might come along. He even leaned the roof to make a fine front porch so Ma could set and watch the river pass by.

It still don't look much, but at least Pa keeps them outside weatherboards whitewashed. Yes, that old house down there is right cozy. Don't much rain leak through the tin roof, and the wood stove what sets in the kitchen keeps us all toasty warm until the wood burns up during the night. Them floors is mighty cold on bare feet in the mornings.

I pull Pa's slicker a little tighter around me to ward off the chill of the morning. Reckon Ma is right. Without these boots my toes would be stone blue-cold right now. I'll turn eight in April and, in all my years of watching this river, I've never seen nothing like it is now. I've heard stories all my life 'bout it flooding up toward the New River Gorge, but never anything like this around here. The sight of it is a-making me feel right skittish.

Perched here on this hill, I watch as Pa walks out on the porch. He tucks one hand up under his arm and scratches his day-old beard with the other hand. Pondering is what he's a-doing. He told Ma while they was eating oatmeal a few minutes ago that we might all better pack up a few things and head up to higher ground, maybe go the two miles upriver to Aunt Pearlie's.

Ma said, "Don't talk foolish. Pearlie's closer to the river than we are. She might already have left her place. Anyways, I won't be toting my babies out in this weather. No sir-ree. I ain't a-leaving my house because of a little rain coming down."

A commotion upriver brings my thinking back to the here and now. It's getting louder and louder. Sounds like a wheat thrashing machine a-starting up. And what's that

smell? The scent of pinesap clings to my nose hairs, just like when Pa cuts down a pine for firewood.

Lord, have mercy! I ain't believing what I'm a-seeing. There comes a wall of water pushing downriver, and it's a-popping trees in two like they is twigs. Sounds like limbs a-cracking during an ice storm. 'Cept there ain't no ice on the trees. All that ice is in the river, big thousand-pound chunks a-speeding right for me.

I look down, and I can tell Pa is hearing it too. He's a-looking upriver just like I am. But he's on lower ground and can't see up as far as I can.

That roar is earsplitting, a-pounding louder and thunderous in my head. As every second ticks by, it gets fiercer. I'm hearing the sound of water pushing down trees, splitting them like an ax hitting a wedge in a big round lap of poplar. Then I see the heavy swell.

Pa must've heard the river splitting wood by now too. He takes off back inside the house quick-like. You'd think the river is a-nippin' at his tail. Then he's back with Ma by his side. She's a-toting little Coy on her hip, but Nell and Bertie is still inside.

I want to shout out a warning, "Run, quick, get up here with me!" I don't know what getting ready to die feels like, but I'm thinking I'm fixing to find out. I guess if a girl's ever going to say her prayers, it ought to be long 'bout now.

Froze to the spot, I reach in front of me and grab hold of a willow sapling. What use is that? Then I find my tongue and start in to screaming. As far downhill as Pa and Ma is, there ain't no way they can see what I'm a-looking at. No way for us to know that in a matter of minutes what once was will be swept away, never to be seen, heard, or touched again.

The louder I scream, the less noise I make. The hiss and moan of the flood is a-swallowing up my voice, drowning me out on dry ground. Ma and Pa never hear my warning, much less the sound of Callie Mae McCauley ever again.

Since I am downriver on the rise I have a perfect view of the front porch and of Ma's face just before that wall of water comes crashing down on her. Her head twists back and forth, her eyes a-searching for somewhere to hide, to run to, to escape. But there's no time. I never have seen Ma with scared on her face, but I'm a-seeing it right now. Dead, cold fear, that's what it is. I bet my face looks the same way. I lift my hands and put them over my eyes. Peeking out between my fingers, I watch that wall of water hit my folks with the power of a locomotive. Flattens them and swallows them up.

Time is over, washed away.

The force of the water reaches in and snatches baby Coy right out of Ma's arms. Pops him straight up in the air like Pa is a-tossing him around when they's a-playing. I stand as still as the statue that's perched in the courthouse yard at Independence, Virginia. Froze in the moment, I'm trying something fierce to spot my only little brother and Ma and Pa.

I catch a glimpse of Coy floating like baby Moses down at the garden spot, 'cept Coy ain't in no basket like that Bible boy, and instead of sporting vegetables, our garden's a lake full of churning, red, muddy water full of trees, house boards, shingles, chickens, clothes, quilts, and people.

Little Coy's a-bobbing up and down. I watch his little towhead as it disappears under a rusty barrel what's being pushed downriver by an uprooted tree. I want to get to

my little brother, to take him up and hold him high above the wet. But he is already gone, and there ain't nothing God or the devil or me or anybody else can do to rescue him.

I can't breathe. I'm smothering from all the water that's rushing down Coy's throat into his lungs, weighing him down to the bottom of this fierce lake. This river's done gobbled up my family and buried them alive. I try to get a deep breath, but I can't get enough air in me. I can't move my legs neither. They're too shaky and weak. My knees are a-clanging together. I drop down on them to steady myself.

I guess Ma and Pa got sucked under quick-like 'cause I study this ugly, frightful lake till my eyes is a-burning like they are full of the fever. I'm afraid to blink for fear of missing them. My throat's on fire with a red-hot lump of sorrow wedged in deep.

"Ma, Pa. I'm here. I'm right up here on this rise. Come and get me, Ma. I'm skeered. Ma, where are you?" The water roars so loud I can't hear myself speak.

I don't get no answer from Ma or Pa 'cause they've sunk down with my sisters and brother like pirate treasure. They are all stole away.

I pull myself up, a-grabbing on to this pitiful sapling and watch the river gently pick up the cowshed Pa built. It sort of pops straight up off its foundation like a jack-in-the-box I once seen at the Sears and Roebuck store. It just floats away down the river, riding the current, tottering up and down to the rhythm of the rocky-river bed.

Them gallons of water and Lord only knows what else flowing with it has no gentleness about it. There is no mercy in the weight of it as the force splinters our weather-boarded house into a hundred million pieces with my little sisters still inside. All I ever see again of Nell and Bertie is the rag doll that they share. It's caught up in the

chicken wire fence that stood back behind the house. That is all there is left—a chicken fence a-holding a homemade rag doll.

Sweeping my eyes back and forth over the murky waters, I search for my family, longing for the sight of them. But down deep inside I know I ain't got no family no more.

As the noise of the river calms, I can't stop the roar in my head. I don't rightly know what's come over me. I can't quit trembling. I don't know how long I stand here on this rise a-seeing nothing and knowing everything I've ever known is gone.

Finally, I fix my eyes back on to the chicken wire fence. Again I spot Nell and Bertie's rag doll. I've got to get to it. I want that doll. I need it. My legs move me down the hill closer to that toy baby, closer to the only thing left of my sisters. I wade into the knee-high water, and it don't even feel cold. That mud is a-trying to suck the boots off my feet. Right when my fingers start to curl around the doll's yarn pigtail, the river current flips the fence and the last piece of my sisters vanishes under the weight of the water right before my very own eyes. This here river's done sucked that doll down into the pit of its belly. Guess Nell and Bertie wanted their plaything back. Makes me feel a little better knowing they got it. Better for them but sorrier than ever for me.

One last time I stick my hand down in the muddy water and sweep toward the bottom, trying to set my hand on the doll. Knowing I ain't never going to touch it again, I give up and struggle to get myself out of the water. Everything is gone, every last thing. I can't help myself. I set into bawling. I can't stop. Reckon I won't ever stop.

Preacher Byrd tells us that God can make good come out of most anything. Well, I shore don't see no good coming from this day.

When the tears have all run out of me, all I know to do is hit the road and follow it down to Grady Billings's place a mile away. He's our nearest neighbor. What I'll do when I get there, Lord only knows.

I look out over the water one more time a-looking for my folks and that rag doll. What good am I? I can't even save a sorry doll. I pull Pa's slicker tight around me. Makes me feel like maybe Pa himself is a-hugging me up. Seems like he's trying to help me. I open my mouth to holler him up, but the sound has done gone out of me, right along with every bit of feeling. My head's a-shouting, "Pa, come and get me. I don't know what to do. Are you out there, Pa? Where are you?" Ain't no Pa here. Ain't nothing here but ghosts now. I can't stand to look another second at what ain't here no more. I'm plum spooked. All I can see is water. It's done washed out the road down yonder leading to the house, so I start out walking this ridge I'm a-standing on.

When I'm 'bout halfway to the Billings place, I look over to where the river curves toward the road, and there it is, Pa's shiny '38 Ford a-floating down this old river just as purdy as you please. Don't hardly seem any different than watching Pa drive off in it down the road, 'cept Pa ain't sitting behind the wheel. Nobody is.

The first Sunday in every month Pa loads us up in his Ford. He is so proud of that car. Took him selling a half herd of cows to buy it, but he said it was worth every one of them animals.

We head down to Twin Oaks, pick up Granny Jane, Pa's ma, and then go over to Independence to the once-a-month prayer meeting at the Baptist church. Preacher Byrd travels to four different churches a month and preaches the Word of God. First Sunday is Independence. Second he goes on over in Virginia to Galax, then back down in North

Carolina to Laurel Springs on the third Sunday, then up to Glendale Springs on the fourth. I reckon he rests his self on what fifth Sundays that rolls around 'cause he don't preach nowhere them days.

I always look forward to the first Sunday every month. After preaching ends, most of the time the preacher comes with us back to Granny Jane's to eat dinner. Phoebe Jane McCauley is known to be the best cook in the Blue Ridge Mountains. Some Sundays, Granny Jane fries chicken. Others, she makes dumplings or a chicken pie. Either way, we eat chicken every first Sunday of the month. I try not to think 'bout her chopping them chickens' heads off with a hatchet. I just think 'bout how good them birds taste in my mouth. And we always have apple pie. Granny Jane cans and dries enough of them Winesap apples from her orchard in the summer to last all winter. She rolls out enough dough to cut strips to crisscross over the top. Then she sprinkles down the dough with sugar and dots it with butter. The inside tastes like brown sugar and cinnamon.

All the neighbors call her Aunt Phoebe. She ain't no kin to them, but I reckon she is just so friendly to everybody, she makes them feel like family. Come to think of it, me, Nell, and Bertie are the only ones who call her Granny Jane. Baby Coy's too little to call her anything. To everyone else she is plain old Aunt Phoebe, or Ma Phoebe as Pa calls her.

How can a person think of food at such a time as this? The rain ain't let up one bit. It's a-coming down full force with no holes in it. It's blowing sideways right into my face. I squint and hold my hand in front of my eyes. This spitting rain feels like stinging bees as it pricks my skin. Least I can feel on the outside. Shore can't on the inside. My heart might still be a-pumping, but it's wounded bad.

Walking down this muddy ditch, I can't help but wonder what will become of me. I know Granny Jane will take me in, but what will she think of having a full-time grand-young'un around all the time? I love my Granny Jane, but I don't know if I love her enough to live with her full time.

I will my legs to walk faster, to get as far away from all that's gone as quick as I can, but them stubs just won't do like I tell them. Seems I'm stumbling more like a little girl who's just learning to walk. Reckon with learning to walk, you got to learn how to pick yourself back up when you fall.

Granny Jane

Thursday, March 7, 1940

Twin Oaks, North Carolina

Isaiah 63:9

In all their affliction he was afflicted, and the angel of his presence saved them: in his love and in his pity he redeemed them.

This has been one of the longest, coldest, and wettest winters in the history of Grayson County. The banks of the New River have been running full for three days now.

While the snow piled up in the crevices of the mountain slopes, the woodpiles melted into the soggy ground. The warm spring sun is hot on the mounds of snow and is bringing on a-melting. Snow is thawing like throwing a chunk of ice into a pot of boiling water. There's too much water and nowhere for it to go.

Word spreads fast through the hills and hollers about the ice dam break. This is the biggest disaster me or anybody else in Grayson County has ever seen. And here I am a-standing right smack dab in the middle of it. Ten miles upriver, all that ice that formed on the edges of the New this winter broke loose and floated to the bend in between Piney and Grassy Creeks. All that ice wedged up and formed what we call an ice dam. That dike was a-holding back a wall of water packing enough force to change what has been this land for hundreds, maybe even thousands of years. Ain't never seen nothing like it. Can't help but shiver to think how much worse it is up toward Caleb's house.

Lord, let my baby boy be all right. Sweep him and his young'uns up in your ever-loving arms and keep them safe.

I saddle up Belle, the only mule I got left, pack up a few supplies, and set out for my boy Caleb's house at Mouth of Wilson. Not knowing what I'll find, I try to prepare myself for the worst while I keep a-praying for the best.

It's slow going over this here rain-rutted dirt road. It takes me six hours to ride the fourteen miles between my house and Caleb's. People is all along the road. They's a-searching for their folk just like I am mine. I get off old Belle one time to lead her around a pile of washed-up house. I'm about halfway to Mouth of Wilson when I hear the most God-awful screaming and carrying on I've ever heard in my life. The racket is a-coming from a little gal about twenty years old. She's squalling for her baby. Reckon there won't be no finding it in all this water and rubble. I close my eyes for a minute and try to shut out that girl's hurting.

It's near on five in the afternoon before I get close to Caleb's place. Darkness is settling in all around. The shadows are swooping down through the valleys like vultures eating what is left of the light. I'm cold as a chunk of that ice a-floating down the river. I set into shivering, so I button up my leather coat way up to my neck. Don't know what good this here coat's a-doing. It's wet, soaked plum through, heavy, and a-weighing me down. At least the rain has finally let up.

I'm trying not to worry. Knowing my boy Caleb built his house above the bottomland, surely everything is all right. There ain't no way the river can reach Caleb and his family.

There's three houses on this mile-and-a-half Coon Holler Road where Caleb lives. First house is Tom Pruitt's, then Grady Billings's, then Caleb's. Passing by, I see the Pruitt and Billings places still standing upright, unscathed by the water. But the river rose to within a few yards of both front porches, and I know Caleb's sits a bit closer to the river's edge.

A deep-down soul-consuming foreboding crawls over me. Where's my boy? Where's them grandchildren of mine? Why, baby Coy ain't much bigger than a puppy. I remember Caleb at that age, all plump and happy. Caleb, my little sunshine boy, was always a-smiling.

I look over at the river. In all my fifty-five years of living on the New, I've never seen Her this raging mad! They ain't no good in Her right now. I start to swallow real fast, pushing down the dread of what I know is a-coming.

When I get within sight of Caleb's place, my breathing rattles and a heavy ache forms in my chest. Everything's gone. No house, no chicken pen. This river's even done carried off the outhouse. I jump down off Belle and sit right down in the middle of the muddy road. What's a mama to do? Are they all gone?

Lord, did you take every single one of them?

I know there ain't no use of throwing a fit or a-arguing with the Lord, so I just sit a-looking up the road at what used to be, what my life was before today.

I sit until I feel the wet ground soak through my britches. I finally pick myself up and climb back on Belle. I look over every inch of riverbank, pining for some sign of my young'un, grand-young'uns, and Hattie. I never have much liked Hattie, but I still don't want no bad to come to my daughter-in-law.

Straining my eyes in the dim evening light, I peer at the area for some sign of life. I take down the kerosene lantern hooked on Belle's saddle horn and strike the flint to the wick. Then I commence to kicking at whatever the water has left behind, hoping to turn over some sign of my family.

But nobody's here. Surely Caleb took his clan to higher ground. I grab Belle's bridle and steer her back to the road toward the Billings place, praying I'll find them all there and out of harm's way.

Misery settles over me just like the arthritis a-eating away at my old bones. These here bones talk to me. With every move of Belle, my bones grind out a sorrow song. Such a calamity as this my eyes ain't never beheld. But I won't give up hope, not till I see my folks either alive or dead. No use fretting over what you don't even know. The Lord will take pity and redeem us.

Callie Mae

Thursday, March 7, 1940

Grady Billings's Place

Psalm 68:5–6

5) A Father of the fatherless, and a judge of the widows, is God in his holy habitation.

6) God setteth the solitary in families: he bringeth out those which are bound with chains: but the rebellious dwell in a dry land.

When I get near Grady Billings's place, I am as wore out as I've ever been. I must look like that soggy, old rag doll back there on the fence, all wet, muddy, and limp.

Grady Billings is a-standing on his front porch looking out at all this water a-flowing down his bottomland. He lives by his self since his wife Mary Etta passed on last year. His young'uns is grown and have all moved down the mountain to find work since most of the coal and saltpeter mines shut down here on the mountain.

I'm up on him before he knows I'm here. I stumble over a washed-up catfish and fall down on one knee. That fish is a-staring me right in the eye. I know it's the biggest catfish I've ever seen. Never witnessed nothing like it caught out of the New. His whiskers is half a foot long.

The sound of me hitting the ground catches Grady Billings's attention, and he looks toward me. I try to ask him for help, but my tongue won't work. I can open up my mouth, but there won't even a squeak come out. I reckon this river has washed my tongue right out of my body.

“Lord have mercy, child. Is that you, Callie Mae? What’s done happened to you? Where’s the rest of your family?”

He just keeps on shooting questions at me, and I just keep on kneeling and a-wishing that catfish could do my talking. Grady Billings finally steps down off the porch and real hurried-like walks over to me. Taking hold of my mud-crusty hand, he pulls me to my feet and leads me into the house.

So here I am a-standing in Grady Billings’s kitchen. Water is a-running off Pa’s slicker, making a puddle around my feet. I don’t know what to do, and I reckon Old Man Billings don’t know what to do either.

“Come here, girl. Sit down.” He leads me by the arm to the kitchen table. Pulling out one of the chairs, he gentle-like eases me down in it.

I don’t know what’s wrong with me. It’s like somebody else is in my skin, somebody I don’t know, somebody who’s cold, lost, and afraid. Yes, that’s what I feel like. It’s like my innards have been scooped out and somebody else’s has been spooned in. I ain’t me no more. I don’t reckon I’m anybody since I don’t belong to nobody. There ain’t nobody left to belong to.

Old Man Billings reaches into his icebox and pulls out a quart jar of milk. He pours a sampling of it into a pot. Then he moves the pot aside, lifts the cast iron burner with the lid hook, and strikes a match to the kindling he’s already laid. In just a few minutes, I hear the popping of dried wood being set to fire. It sounds good. Makes my hollow self feel a little fuller. Closing my eyes, I pretend I’m back in Ma’s kitchen and she’s the one heating me up a drink.

I can't pretend no more when Old Man Billings sits a mug of warm milk in front of me. He don't look nothing like Ma, but I take that cup of milk anyway, and somehow my shaking hands bring the rim to my mouth. I drink like a starving calf latching onto its mama's teat, spilling more than goes down my throat. I guess I'm a-starving for something to fill me up since everything inside me has been stoled. I need something to put back into these places of my heart that washed down the river with my family.

Why can't this be just a normal day with me here a-visiting Grady Billings and sharing a cup with him? Reckon God's done put the solitary in this family, and I reckon it's me.

Granny Jane

Thursday, March 7, 1940

Grady Billings's Place

Proverbs 15:29

The Lord is far from the wicked: but he heareth the prayer of the righteous.

It's pitch dark when I spot Grady Billings's house in the glow of my lantern. I'm glad I can't see no more of what I know is all around me: people's clothes, their furniture, dead chickens, and them. I pull the reins up on Belle. Whoa, girl.

I can't make myself get off her at first. With every pore and fiber in me, I'm a-praying to the Lord God Almighty to please let my boy and his family be in Grady's house. Lord, I'll give you anything. I'll do anything. I won't never ask for nothing else in my whole life if you'll just let them be here. Please, Lord, please.

I swallow the cry in my throat and nudge Belle forward, closer to the house. Grady Billings must hear Belle a-clopping, throwing up mud with every step, and hurries out on his front porch.

“Who is it? Is that you, Caleb? Where's the rest of your family?”

Grady Billings can't see 'cause my lantern light is a-blinding him. I gather my senses, clear my throat, and shout out to Grady, “No, this ain't Caleb. It's his ma, Phoebe Jane McCauley. Ain't my boy in there? He's got to be somewhere.”

“Why, Aunt Phoebe, get down off that mule and come on in the house. This day ain’t been fit for nothing or nobody. Your boy ain’t here, but little Callie Mae showed up a while ago. She’s in a fix, can’t seem to talk or nothing.”

My heart falls down into my boots when I hear what he says. Caleb ain’t here. I must be *of the wicked* because the Lord didn’t hear my prayer.

Hearing my oldest granddaughter is alive though, a spark of hope fires up inside me like a gas-soaked torch. If Callie is alive, then surely the rest of them is too. I jump off Belle like I’m fifteen instead of fifty-five. I’m up the steps and in Grady’s kitchen wrapping my arms around that young’un before I know my feet have hit the ground.

“Lord, have mercy. You did hear my prayer. Thank You, Lord, for this child a-sitting here.”

I pull Callie into my wet coat and rub her poor, puny, little head. I stand for a few minutes just a-rocking her back and forth, then kneel down and look Callie in the eye.

“Where’s your ma and pa? Nell, Bertie, and baby Coy? Callie, where are they? Did they go on down to Tom Pruitt’s place? Callie, answer me.”

Callie just sits with her eyes a-staring at nothing. I soon realize that there ain’t no answers in Callie. She’s trembling. Her eyes are as blank as an empty sheet of writing paper. She must be going into shock. I’ve got to get her warm and dry.

“Grady, I need to get her out of these wet clothes. Do you have anything I can put on her?”

“Well, I reckon some of Mary Etta’s nightclothes are still over there in that drawer. I’ll fetch them.”

Grady brings me a flannel nightgown big enough to fit both Callie and myself all at the same time. But I'm thankful for it.

"Grady, will you stoke up the fire? And can I put Callie in your bed under the covers? She's scared plum to death, and all I know to do is get her warm."

"Why, sure. I'll go fetch some more wood for the heater right now."

I pull Callie to her feet and lead her into the closed-off bedroom.

I start to strip off Caleb's slicker, but Callie grabs the front of it and pulls it tight around herself. I don't rightly know what she's a-doing, but I sure am glad she's a-showing some sign of life.

"Callie, let go. I've got to get these wet clothes off you and put you to bed. Then I'll set out for Tom Pruitt's and fetch your folks."

Callie lets go of the slicker then starts a-shaking her head, no. Over and over she twists her head to the side, left to right, right to left.

"What is it? You don't want me to leave you? Come on, honey, tell me. Do you know where your family is?"

Callie stops shaking her head from side to side and starts bobbing it up and down.

"Where then, Callie? Where are they?"

Callie lifts her dark hazel eyes up toward the ceiling and points her finger up there too. I don't want to understand but I do. I know what she's a-telling me. Callie knows where her family is, and she knows like I do that I'll not find them at Tom Pruitt's place.

I kneel so I'm face to face with Callie. Dear homeless child. Big, round, wet tears are a-falling from her cheeks. Them tears slide off my boy's drenched slicker and land on the wooden floorboards.

I don't want to, but I have to ask. "Are they drowned, Callie? Are they all drowned?"

Callie looks at me with them eyes that are as hollow as a gutted deer and nods her head up and down. That means yes. My worst fears have come to life. My boy is gone.

I latch onto Callie and squeeze her till much of the water from the wet slicker is soaked up on my clothes. I don't want to let this girl loose. She is the only part of Caleb I have left.

Caleb, my baby boy, the one son that is ... or was ... most like his Pa. Where are you, Caleb? Are you with your pa now? Lord, I can't stand this. My heart's going to explode. It's pounding so fast and hard I can hear it inside my head.

I can't help myself. I grab Callie's shoulders and shake her a bit. She can't be right. My boy's got to be out there somewhere.

"Callie. Are you sure about your pa and ma? Are you positive, girl?"

Callie lifts her head and gazes up toward the ceiling. She's haunted. She's done seen the truth for herself.

Gently I touch her cheek. We have both lost much this day. "Come on, honey. I've got to get you out of these clothes. The slicker has to come off first."

This time Callie doesn't struggle as I slip the slicker off and gently lay it over a chair beside Grady's bed. First the coat comes off, then her shirt, pants, socks, and boot. She wears just one boot. Her other foot is bare and cold. Today she's lost a boot, a pa, a ma, two sisters, and a brother. I don't know if I'll ever be able to put the smile back on little Callie's face again, but I'm a-vowing to try with everything I got in me. Which ain't

much right now, but it's got to be enough. I'm a-going to try to bring some joy back to my boy's little girl.

The Lord has spared Callie Mae McCauley. That can only mean He will be using her in a mighty way some day.

