

3.

Smyrna, with her skinny legs and her work shirt and pants brought so much talk, so many questions. How long were Vernita and Doris going to tend to this woman? How did they know she wasn't on the lam? What if someone came and said they had kidnapped her and she wouldn't say otherwise?

She didn't have it in her to answer.

The aunties called her Quiet. She ate small portions of what they put before her, she wore the clothing, cleaned and mended, they kept at the foot of the bed. She washed at the basin on the back porch. When other people stopped by Doris found things for Quiet to do away from the house.

Quiet was on the porch when a flatbed, bulging with rounds of wood, slogged up the road and grunted to a stop. A young man climbed out of the cab, came up the porch and spoke to no one directly. "Got the wood Gramma said to bring. Where do you want it?"

Vernita covered the laundry she had been folding. "John Audie. What makes you so gruff?"

He glanced once toward Quiet and focused on the floor.

"You can stack it, not too high along that side." Doris jerked her thumb behind herself. "Remember we're old ladies and split it small."

John Audie nodded and went out.

Doris interrupted Quiet's gape. "Go bring him some water."

Quiet took the drinking bucket from the counter and went to the

well. Five pumps to prime and the bucket overflowed. Without wasting another drop she hauled it to the side of the house and stood nearby.

John Audie set one round of wood on the ground, another upon it, and heaved the maul, cleaving it in one blow. He kicked one chunk upright and split that, then took a drink of water. "You don't belong here."

The thunk and heave of his splitting followed Quiet all the way to the garden.

When the truck was empty and the wood stacked John Audie went inside. "Gramma said to be sure to tell you she asked Seymour. He didn't hear nothing about a missing woman."

"Tell them both thank you." Doris pulled out a chair. "Sit for a minute and have some of what Vernita made."

John Audie perched on the edge of his chair as he devoured the stew and cookies she put in front of him. "Why are you taking care of her? She didn't even come with groceries."

"You came at lunchtime yourself" said Doris.

He wiped his mouth with his bandana and went outside.

"You ran him off." Vernita had been looking forward to some compliments on her cooking.

He returned, cradling a bundle, and put it on the table.

Vernita stood close as Doris unwound canvas. "That's some nice elk."

John Audie nodded.

Doris took a knife to the haunch. "Perfect time for a steak."

"I need to get going."

Doris pointed her knife at John Audie. "Young man like you needs every meal he can get."

For once he smiled. "You fed me once already. I'll ask for steak next time."

That made Vernita smile.

His truck was a puff of dust on the rutted lane when Smyrna pulled over to let him pass, following her sixth sense about food. She ignored Quiet, who sat in a nest of tall weeds and scattered sun.
