

‘Hey, Dad. Need th’ crimper.’

Crimper, snipper, stapler, strainer...

He was scrub nurse to the fence doctor, who was repairing a section of Meadowgate’s high-tensile cattle fencing. Two of Dooley’s five heifers had broken out last night and wandered into a neighbor’s yard down the road. Not good.

‘Glad it happened with the heifers, so now we know. With Choo-Choo coming in a few weeks...’

‘Don’t want that big boy getting out,’ he said.

‘If he gets out we’re dead in the water. He’d head straight for Mink Hershell’s cows.’

‘Ah.’ He didn’t know much about those things.

‘Mink’s cows are small, he’s got Dexters—around six, seven hundred pounds. Choo-Choo is two years old and clocks in at fourteen hundred pounds. He makes big calves, which can be a serious problem with a small breed. Mink could lose cows if our guy gets in his pasture. Dystocia.’

Life was happening fast. Dooley’s graduation from vet school was coming up in a few weeks, then the bull delivery, then the practice turning over from Hal Owen, and on June fourteenth, the wedding...

‘So how’s Choo-Choo’s disposition?’

‘He’s got calves all over the county. He’s famous for gettin’ the job done.’

‘And you bought him because...?’

‘Not good timing, for sure, but the owner needed to let him go. It was me or somebody else. I could never top the price. Pliers.’

Tales about Choo-Choo were circulating at the co-op, at least one of them embellished with a direct warning.

‘It’ll be good to get out with your cattle in the evenings. Relaxing.’ He was repeating what the neighbors said about having ‘a few head’ on the place.

‘We’ll treat small animals at th’ clinic and I’ll have my large animal practice out here on th’ back forty. I really wanted a mixed practice but there’s a great vet just a few miles north. She does it all and does it well.’ Dooley wiped the sweat from his eyes. ‘Hal loved doing it all but he says he won’t miss it; he was on call twenty-four/seven. I’d like to give it everything I’ve got during the day, and have time in the evenings to spend with Lace—with, you know...’

‘Sure. With family. When you have children...’

He didn’t mean to say that, not at all, it had popped out from overlong suppression.

The look on Dooley’s face...

He had stepped in it, for sure. Craving grandkids was the vice of those wishing to assure mortality.

He let the air clear. ‘So. Scared?’

Dooley gave him an ironic look. ‘Were you scared?’

‘I was. Then the peace flowed in.’

‘Need th’ crimper again,’ said Dooley.

It was cool to know what this stuff was. He hauled the thing out of the workbox.

‘Thanks, but that’s the tamper.’

So this is what people called the simple life. He wiped his face with a bandana and went diving for the crimper.

Ever since they moved to Meadowgate a month ago, the entire household had gone hammer and tong making the old place ready for the Big Knot.

They had re-painted the interior of the vet clinic, re-finished the clinic floors and installed new exam tables. He declined to help Cynthia and Lace make curtains for the farmhouse kitchen and drove with Harley to Holding for a pickup load of furniture for the reception room. Somewhere in there, he had conducted a house blessing and a clinic blessing, replete with thurible. Then came repairs on the barn, some minor guttering work on the house, and before Dooley wheeled in yesterday for the weekend, he and Harley and Willie had weed-whacked the fence line and had a serious conversation with the county agent about liming.

‘It’s your broom straw,’ said the agent.

‘What about it?’

‘It tells you your place needs lime. Nature’s messenger.’

The agent had given him a wealth of material to read on the subject of lime.

For today’s nut to crack, they were awarded the high-tensile-fence-fix-off. He had prayed for a more challenging retirement and here it was in living color. On the other hand, it was the most fun he’d had in a coon’s age. Not everybody got to watch a young couple build a whole new life.

Lace Harper studied the canvas on the easel.

Being stuck happened a lot these days. Maybe she shouldn’t be painting to focus her mind or clear it or whatever she was hoping to do. Maybe she should be painting for passion’s sake or not at all.

But there was no passion in her—she was painting by a kind of rote. Every energy had lately been spent on this vast and overwhelming life they were entering, a life they had dreamed of for years and wanted with all their hearts—and now what had taken so long seemed so very sudden.

Suddenly their own kitchen with its amiable fireplace and big windows. Suddenly the old porches and creaking floors, the immense views, the enormous sky, the hundred acres, the doleful heifers with their bran breath—all theirs, and right next door, their own animal clinic. It seemed so grown-up to have a place like this.

A few years ago, Dooley and the trust people bought more land from Hal and Marge Owen. If cattle were to be in the picture, additional acreage would be needed and Hal made sure the price was right, as he'd done when Dooley bought out the practice. Everybody had walked away happy, with the Owens keeping the remaining thirty-five acres. So now Hal and Marge and Rebecca Jane lived in the house they built on the hill to the south, and Hal would work part-time during Dooley's first year in practice.

They were surrounded on every side by people older, wiser, and definitely more patient. This big, new life seemed truly perfect—and also truly scary. The money Dooley inherited from Miss Sadie had stretched through his college and vet school years and bought most of the Meadowgate enterprise, with something left over. But there would be no tapping into the remainder of Miss Sadie's amazing trust, not for a long time.

All that lay ahead would be totally up to them. They had declined any further help from parents and would be living by their wits and on income from the clinic. It was important that the rest of the journey be theirs.

Bummer. She had no idea how to proceed with this painting. Maybe it was the subject itself. She was concocting apples from a cell phone photo and blurred imagination instead of working plein air beneath a tree heavy with winesaps.

But she wasn't trying to paint apples as God made them, she was painting at a slant—slathering on color with a palette knife, trying to chase the way the light was moving. All she really wanted was an impression of apples, an impression of a basket, an impression of mountains in the background. Anyway, it wasn't a real painting, it was an exercise.

She stepped away and squinted at the work. Clearly, she was faking it. She could not afford the time required to fake a painting, exercise or not.

Somehow, she would make it work. Then maybe she could sell it. They needed money now, not just for the wedding, which would be really, really simple, but also for the upkeep of the property and payroll for Willie and Harley and the clinic employees. Only days ago she had sold an oil to Cynthia's friend, Irene McGraw, who was a fabulous painter. She hoped Irene hadn't bought the small picture because she knew 'the kids' were just starting out. Irene had asked the price but she asked Irene to price it instead.

'I can't do that,' Irene said in her quiet way.

She had blurted out the first thing that came to mind. 'Four hundred!' She didn't want to overestimate her work, not with Irene. At the same time, four hundred seemed overly modest. She felt awkward and gauche.

Irene smiled. 'You've forced me to set the price, after all. It's wonderful piece. Twelve hundred.'

She had the sensation that she might fall backward, and held on to the chair where she was standing. She had sold a lot of work before, but this was especially thrilling because Irene McGraw's paintings were masterful.

The blood had beat in her again for the work she loved, the gorgeous work with its resinous smells and silken brushes and the restless play of light.

She should stop now. Time was precious. The Big Knot, as Harley called it, was only weeks away and Dooley's graduation at NC State was practically here, with the bull arriving the day after and the new sign for the vet clinic going up and...

She turned away from the canvas.

...and maybe, hopefully, please, God—Jack Tyler.

She felt her heart thump, something like a book dropped to the floor.

She and Dooley were taking on too much, everyone said that except Father Tim and Cynthia. Father Tim and Cynthia gave them all the liberty they needed, expecting them to do their best. Harley was the biggest objector. 'Th' way y'all are goin', you gon' be gray-headed.'

'Put your teeth in and have a Snickers,' she said. 'It's a *pot-luck*, Harley. Everybody brings food. It's the least stressful thing in the world, a pot-luck wedding.'

'Then there's ol' Choo-Choo comin' in,' said Harley. 'He's got ever'body on th' place rattled.'

True, but why was their bull everybody's business? People should be concentrating on the wedding, on getting the post in the ground for the new sign to be hung. Every time she went to Farmer, people were telling stories about this really mean bull named Choo- Choo—at the post office, the co-op, Jake's.

The grand wedding and honeymoon that her parents, Hoppy and Olivia, had hoped to give them would have eclipsed everything, bull included. She and Dooley were truly grateful, but they had to say they didn't want that.

She hated, hated to disappoint Olivia and Hoppy who had been so eager to adopt her, Lace Turner, a total rebellious stray from the Creek who should be eager to please them and wear a gorgeous gown and have a wedding with all the frills at Lord's Chapel.

Olivia had come from a wealthy family. The silver-framed family portraits in all the rooms at Olivia's house were a testament to her paternal line of coal money. But the day she and Dooley went to tell them the plan, both Hoppy and Olivia had laughed with a kind of childlike delight. Olivia thought a country wedding would be 'the best thing in the whole world' and the idea of a potluck was hilarious, but in a good way. 'It's not our wedding,' Olivia had said, giving them the best of hugs. 'It's yours.'

'I'll be your wedding photographer,' said Hoppy, who had a Nikon and loved to use it.

'I'll make the pies,' said Olivia, who had learned pie-baking from a former housekeeper and was proud to call it her specialty.

'Cherry!' Dooley had said, about to throw up from stress.

That had gone so much better than expected; she felt really grateful and later wrote them a long letter.

But she and Dooley still had to tell Father Tim. Everyone knew he hoped to marry them in the Lord's Chapel rose garden that he and Harley and Dooley's brother, Sammy, recovered from ruin. Everyone knew he had trained the Seven Sisters vines to climb in a really special way on the arch, just for this day.

Lord's Chapel was where she and Dooley were confirmed and baptized, and where Father Tim and Cynthia and Hoppy and Olivia were married. It was the family church.

She and Dooley had gone one evening to the yellow house. 'Give me a sign,' Dooley said, 'like when you think it's a good time.'

There is no good time for this, she thought.

Cynthia had made spaghetti and later, they all sat by the fire in the study. Dooley jiggled his leg a lot and was finally able to say it. 'We just want to get married at home, Dad. At Meadowgate. With family and a few friends.'

Father Tim had blinked and there was a long pause as if he were trying to absorb what he heard.

She looked at Dooley, who was miserable. They had tried so hard to do everything right. Like taking seriously the statistics of a high divorce rate in vet school and the rigor of the courses. They had gone through the awful hunger and frustration of being apart, and the endless road trips that connected the dots between Atlanta and Athens and Mitford and Chapel Hill and Farmer, and NC State where Dooley transferred after college. They had gone through four speeding tickets in as many years, two each, not to mention a huge stack of CDs. And now they both wanted to just be at home, please, God—at Meadowgate with family.

Father Tim had smiled then, and nodded. 'Good,' he said like he really, really meant it. 'Getting married at home is good.'

She had also written them a long letter.

So no Vera or Oscar or hair bound up in a chignon. She knew all about those beautiful, seductive things; she had spent years looking at dresses and hair styles and being a bridesmaid at glamorous weddings. Then for some reason she never expected, none of that mattered anymore.

She had done it in her head over and over—the shoes, the jewelry, the music; she had walked down the aisle a thousand times and saw heads turning and heard the little gasps of approval. She felt a new kind of joy in knowing that she and Dooley would have something more wonderful than the grand wedding, the awesome honeymoon, the lingerie as ephemeral as mist.

‘We could even have a barefoot wedding,’ she said to Dooley.

‘Wait’ll y’uns step on a bee,’ said Harley. ‘Or one of them black snakes. That’ll cure y’ of barefooted, I can tell y’ that.’

She and Dooley had dug deep to wait through the last years of college and vet school. How would she direct herself while he focused on academics? Her art instructors had been crazy about her portfolio; they said she could go anywhere and do anything and so she pursued jobs in publishing, in advertising, and then in design, but wherever she applied, it was ‘the economy.’ Here, there, everywhere, ‘the economy.’

While Dooley was on a totally defined path, she was constantly trying to figure things out in a wandering sort of way. She resisted, without really understanding why, Olivia’s generous offer to underwrite a graduate program in Art and Design at Pratt, which anybody in their right mind would go for if they could get accepted. She adored Hoppy and Olivia, who had given her everything including their name and their amazing love, but the answer was no and so there she went again, wandering like an Israelite.

What saved her in these final couple of years was teaching art to children at a non-profit in Chapel Hill, where she moved to be near Dooley. She had learned more from them than she could ever teach. It had been, in some ways, the time of her life, and she had loved each of them fiercely.

Perhaps she would teach again one day. But what she wanted now was to work with Dooley in the clinic. Though it was an established vet practice of thirty-five years, the changeover would be big and how they handled it would be important. She would be there for Dooley completely.

Dooley stopped and wiped the perspiration pearling on his forehead. 'You've been workin' really hard. You and Cynthia both. Thanks for everything. I want you to know we appreciate it.'

'Thank you,' he said, 'for the chance to do it. 'We're having a good time.'

Herding Dooley's new cattle into the pasture a couple of weeks ago had been the hoot of the month. They were a start-up herd of five heifers with the self-determination of a vestry. It had taken a village to get them off the truck and through the open cattle gate. The hauler had left more room than needed between the trailer doors and the gate and so there went Willie and Harley, racing to head one off from the barn, and there was Lily brandishing her apron like a matador as another trotted toward the corn crib. He had stood by the trailer like a bump on a log, waiting for directions from Dooley.

'I was no help,' he said later of receiving no directions.

'I didn't want you running around like that.'

'Because I'm old?'

'Not *old*. But well, you know...'

He did know. He'd be into the double-sevens at the end of June. Knees stiff, harder to keep the weight down, the occasional diabetic flare-up. Worse, he hadn't run seriously for nearly a year, something he hadn't confided to his doctor who ran twenty miles, three days a week.

They worked for a time, silent. The buzzing of flies, a vagrant bee, the scent of grasses they were trampling.

Nobody was talking about the honeymoon. All he and Cynthia knew was that Hoppy and Olivia had offered something exotic, Hawaii or the Caymans, he couldn't remember, and according to Cynthia, the offer had been 'gently declined.'

'So. Any honeymoon plans yet?'

'See that house in the grove? That window over the front porch? That's it.'

'Aha. If you change your mind, you know we'll do anything we can. We'll help sit the farm, give a hand to Willie and Harley.' He and Cynthia had 'sat' the farm for the Owens a few years back and managed pretty well.

'What would you do if Choo Choo and th' girls got out?'

'I'd do whatever Willie and Harley were doing.'

Dooley laughed. Things were okay. What he'd said earlier about children had been forgotten.

'Hammer an' staples,' said the fence doctor.

Ha! Something he could absolutely recognize.

'Sammy's pumped about coming to the wedding,' said Dooley. 'He texted me last night.'

Sammy. Almost twenty-two, now, with a manager and a hot name on the pro pool circuit. He had hoped to adopt Dooley's brother a few years back, but Sammy Barlowe didn't want to be adopted. 'My daddy made Barlowe a bad name,' Sammy said. 'I'm goin' to make Barlowe a good name.'

He had loved Sammy as well as he knew how. But it was Father Brad, the then-new hire at Lord's Chapel, who had stepped up to the plate and worked wonders. Thank God for Father Brad's Boot Camp. He would take the camp himself if he weren't so...along in years? Aged out? What was the language to be learned for being old?

Dooley worked for a time, silent, squinting, then stood back and viewed the repair.

'Done. That's it. We can pack up and go in.'

He was more than proud of his son's vet school credentials and his wedding coming up and his bull coming in. Youth wasn't entirely wasted on the young. But he was sobered, too—by the big responsibilities that lay ahead. It was no dream anymore, it was the real deal.

'I'm in over my head, Dad. I look at you—always so patient. I can never be patient like you.'

'I don't know that I'm so patient. Ambrose Bierce called patience a minor form of despair, disguised as a virtue.' He had always liked that.

'You goin' to cry at my wedding?'

'I'm not planning to cry. I'll leave that to the women.'

Dooley grinned, wiped his hands on a rag. 'I cried at your wedding.'

'You did?' What a wonderful thing to know. 'So, okay. I'll cry at yours.'

They had a laugh. He put his arm around his boy; slapped him on the back.

'I love you,' he said.

She sat on the side of her bed and stared at the painting without seeing it.

It was easy now to forget the fights and the tears, but still hard to forget the devastating disappointment that came nearly a year ago and the grieving that followed. She had wondered if

they could survive that, but they did, because there was love they didn't even know they had til then. A raw, new strength was born from that grief and for the first time they both understood that no matter what, they could do this.

So the waiting had been a good thing, like a huge investment sufficient to pay out over a lifetime. Most important, the waiting had been worth it because she had lost the fear of surrendering her heart. For years, she had believed her strong will could be enough to make their relationship work. At one point, she decided her courage could be enough. And during one of her crazier phases she tried to believe that just being pretty, as some said she was, could be enough.

But none of that was enough for the great journey they would be taking. She came to know this during his second year at vet school, after a long week of prayer and loneliness and weeping. She had surrendered her heart once before, when she was a kid, when Preacher Greer brought revival to the Creek. She had jumped down from the tree limb and Preacher Greer had prayed for her and she was warm for the first time in her life. To think that she must again surrender the core of her being was too much. Surely it was more than was needed to get by.

He had come home to Mitford that last weekend of October—documented in her Dooley book for three long pages—and with an ease unlike any she might imagine, she had at last opened her heart to him completely.

It was every prayer answered, every benediction composed into one.

She remembered his weekend smell of a burger on the highway and his shampoo and his favorite jacket with the top button missing, all that, and his hands cold from the October wind. She had held him, unguarded and certain, and he looked at her and she knew that he understood. Dooley really got stuff that didn't come with words.

Words! For days she had wanted to write a special word in the Dooley book, but things had been so crazy. She cleaned her brushes and went to the shelf and took down the once-blank book and let it fall open of its own accord. Some days, it fell open to the really good times. Now it fell open to the other times.

Oct 19~ He called last night and said he was sorry. We are always sorry about something with each other then we have to go back to school before we finish working things out. This is incredibly hard. Sometimes I don't want to do this anymore and he says he doesn't either. But we can't stop. I can't stop loving him.

Oct 22~ I painted all day yesterday. Drove to the country and had no idea where I was going. Found a farm and climbed over the fence and set up my easel in the field. D doesn't understand how solitude is the only way to get my work done—he is always 'up and doing with a heart for any fate,' according to Fr Tim. But people say we are so much alike—both of us with scary childhoods, both adopted by people who gave us everything, both working hard in school to prove whatever. But we aren't alike at all. It was our experiences that were alike. I am quick flame~ he is slow-burning ember. Or maybe it's the other way around. Our counselor who has a wood stove says any good fire is both.

October 25~D almost never tells me what he's thinking. It's like when we're together I'm jumping into a river with no idea which way the current is moving.

The counselor Olivia gives us lives near the grounds at school. But unless D comes here we have to do the sessions on the phone like a conference call. D definitely does not like to do this, but we know it is helping. I can't really think about anything right now without crying, I didn't cry for years because I couldn't. Olivia says crying is good for nearly everything and she

should know since she had a heart transplant before she and Hoppy were married. She says if it hadn't been for Hoppy diagnosing the issue and getting her to Boston, she would not be here to cry ever again.

Nov 6~It was this date ten years ago when I was legally adopted by Olivia and Hoppy and since I never had a middle name the attorneys said if I wanted one this would be a good time so I took Harper. That will be your last name, they said, do you also want it for a middle name? And I said yes.

I could not imagine O and H would keep me forever and if anything happened I would always have this special name. I thought they pitied me~a poor Creek kid in a mashed-up hat with stringy hair and dirty clothes.

They kept loving me but I had a terrible fear of loving them back. I did everything I could to keep from loving them back.

It was totally exhausting for all of us. I could see it in Hoppy's face where I also saw patients dying and his heart condition that he wouldn't confront and the years of lost sleep and Olivia's drained look when we tried to talk. All of it probably caused by regret that they had taken me in. All I knew is that I did not deserve to be loved~ it was their own fault for trying to do the impossible. I wanted them to just leave me alone because they didn't deserve to suffer because I couldn't love them back.

And then the year I studied in France and painted and they came to see me and somehow~I honestly think it was the way the light moved over the lavender fields and my heart was very full for them and grateful and I was able to say to the concierge, These are my parents!

I felt a stone lift off my heart~after that I said it to everyone~my parents, my parents!

Thank you God for helping us through hard times. They are my mom and dad forever.

Maybe the 20th~D and I talk a lot about living at Meadowgate. It has felt like home to us for years. If we ever marry~it is scary to write that word!~I want to stay at home. But I never tell anyone I would like to stay home. What's so wrong with that anyway? Beth dreams of a big job at Goldman-Sachs and Laurel wants to design cars. Cars! And she doesn't want children. She says no way.

D and I agree that four would be perfect. He helped raise his four sibs when he was little. He was ten years old and feeding them out of cans and then they all got scattered to the wind and all but Pooh were lost for years. We will never let scattering happen.

Nov 28~Dooley wants to feel safe with me but he can't. And I don't really feel safe with him because I don't know where this is going. Beth says that knowing where a relationship is going doesn't solve everything.

She let the journal lie open in her lap. She shouldn't be reading these entries when there were so many happy ones. But the old stuff was good, too—it was a reminder.

She was aware of another reminder—the pain which was so familiar she sometimes forgot it. She reached for the pills which she kept in a box on a shelf with the old Brittanicas, and swallowed one with a glass of water from their well.

It was her night to make supper happen and she'd hardly given it a thought. Meadowgate was a total commune right now. When the Owens moved out a month ago, she and Father Tim and Cynthia and Harley piled their belongings into three vehicles and moved into this rambling old house where everybody immediately went to work making things ready for June fourteenth, for the beginning of another life.

Father Tim and Cynthia would move home to Mitford the night of the wedding, but Harley would stay on, helping with farm chores and general improvements and living in Rebecca Jane's old room with the princess canopy bed. Harley had been her true family when she lived at the Creek; he had been the best place to run when she needed to hide from her father. Not only had Harley protected her when he could, he had encouraged her passion for books and learning. Harley was the best, and now she would take care of him, which was great with Dooley since he also considered Harley 'blood.'

She loved having family around, including Willie, who had his own little house on the place. He had been the main hand at Meadowgate for years and was always in and out with his weather predictions. Sometimes Blake Eddistoe, Hal's vet tech who would stay on in the practice, stuck around for supper, and sometimes Rebecca Jane Owen, almost sixteen and still crazy about Dooley, would come over with her mom and dad, and there was Lily Flower who cleaned two days a week and was such a fun nut case and worked harder than anybody and sometimes had supper with them and washed up after.

Okay. Boiled red potatoes with chives and butter. A salad. And roast chicken with rosemary from the garden. Not two chickens, but three. Enough to make great sandwiches for tomorrow's lunch and soup after.

She paged forward to a blank sheet in the Dooley book, took a deep breath and wrote the word.

Cherish

She did not date the entry.

She returned the book to the shelf and hurried to the north-facing windows of the attic studio. In the far corner of the fence line, she saw them. Dooley and Father Tim were specks as they climbed into the truck.

‘Dooley!’ Her breath formed a small vapor on the glass.

She lifted her hand and waved, though she knew he couldn’t see her.

‘I’ve been meaning to ask,’ he told Cynthia as he changed clothes for supper. ‘What do you wear to a potluck wedding?’ He couldn’t just float around all day with his vestments flapping in the breeze.

‘Very casual.’

‘A knit shirt?’

‘I don’t know about a knit shirt,’ she said. ‘Maybe too much of a golfer look.’

‘So, a white dress shirt maybe? Without the starch?’

‘How about your blue stripe or your blue check? And khakis, I think.’

Khakis. This would be a first. Back in the day, seersucker suits had been *de rigueur* for Mississippi summer weddings.

‘And socks with your loafers,’ she said. ‘Loafers without socks is sort of a good old boy look, someone said.’

He ran a comb through what was left of his hair. ‘I’m a pretty good old boy.’

‘The chickens will be done in twenty minutes,’ said Lace. ‘If you could please take them out?’

‘Will do.’ Cynthia was putting potatoes on to boil.

'I just need to run up to Heaven. Back in a flash.'

'I know the feeling. Take your time.'

She did run. All the way to the top of the house to the room Cynthia had called Heaven and claimed as her art studio while living at Meadowgate years ago.

Right there! On just this apple at just this spot, this one simple thing. She brushed in a rough semblance of the *Coccinella septempunctata* and stood back. *Yes*. Cecil Kennedy would be crazy about it if he weren't dead as anything. She wished she could work on it right now, but no way; maybe tomorrow. This painting would rock.

Dooley had come in; she could hear his voice all the way from the kitchen.

She cleaned her brush and inhaling the aromas rising from the oven, ran down the stairs.

Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes...

She was starved and he would be too.