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Crossing Over

J.R. Moehringer, 22 August 1999

GEE'S BEND, Ala. — CHAPTER 1 / Mary Lee's Vision

She hopes the ferry won't come, but if it does, she'll climb aboard. She'll tremble as she steps off the landing because she can't swim, and she can't forget the many times she's crossed this ugly brown river only to meet more ugliness on the other side.

But fear has never beaten Mary Lee Bendolph, and no river can stop her. She'll board that ferry, if it comes, because something tells her she must, and because all the people she loves most will board with her, and because if there's one thing she's learned in her difficult life, it's this:

When the time comes to cross your river, you don't ask questions. You cross.

It won't look all that dramatic, just a new ferry taking a 63-year-old great-grandmother and her cousins across a Coca-Cola-colored river. But in this damp cellar of the Deep South, where the river has separated blacks and whites for 180 years, where even the living and the dead are less divided than the black and white towns camped on opposite shores, a new ferry will be like the river itself: more than it looks.

Some say the ferry won't ever come, others say any minute now. Either way, Mary Lee has already seen herself crossing. A round woman with a giggle like one of the river songbirds and a speaking voice pitched between a lullaby and a prayer, she often sees the future in her dreams and trusts these visions as she does her cousins. They never lie. 'The first mind you have when you get up in the morning,' she says, 'that the right mind. Then another mind come and tell you something else, that the wrong mind.'

This morning, her right mind tells her something's coming, something big. Maybe a ferry. Maybe death. Maybe the end of her holy place on the river, the only home she's ever known. It all seems the same in Gee's Bend, Ala.

Gee's Bend is where the Civil War came and went, but the slaves stayed, and their children stayed, and their grandchildren stayed, and their great-grandchildren, and

so on, until today, Mary Lee and 700 of her kin cling to this bulb of bottom land that their ancestors were chained to. They bear the surnames of the last slaveholders to live here. They grow corn near the slaveholders' headstones. They come and go amid the ghosts and dust devils that dance on the site of the old Big House.

The South was once dotted with such places, where slaves lingered long after Lincoln freed them, most famously the sea islands off Georgia and South Carolina. But Gee's Bend is the only place anyone can think of where the slaves did more than linger. They conquered. They outlasted the masters, bought back the plantation and lived upon it in blissful isolation, not a collection of historical anomalies, but a vast family, sharing the same few names and the same handful of fables, like some hybrid of Alex Haley and Gabriel Garcia Marquez.

Some of their isolation owes to geography. The Alabama River all but encircles Gee's Bend, carving from the caramel soil a U-shaped peninsula 8 miles wide and 16 miles long, a virtual island set apart from the 20th century, as it was from the 19th. Some of their isolation owes to personality. 'Benders' have always held themselves aloof, a regal clan proud of their capacity for solitude. But most of their isolation owes to white folks across the river, who have done everything possible to make Gee's Bend lonelier than a leper colony, and who now--suddenly, oddly--want to bring Gee's Bend a brand new ferry.

White folks. Mary Lee wonders what they're up to now. Every few decades, they remember Gee's Bend, and so begins another spell of hard times.

White folks say a ferry would bring the modern world at last to this rural wilderness 60 miles southwest of Montgomery, where the heat-crazed insects sound like a million clocks ticking; where only two businesses exist, a post office the size of a phone booth and a general store with nothing on its shelves; where the night sky is unbroken by a single street lamp or stop light, and Orion feels close enough to gather in your fist, like a cluster of fireflies.

Mary Lee knows better. A ferry would also bring tourists and hunters and developers and criminals and snoops. In other words, the end of Gee's Bend, the last place on Earth still safe enough for children and dead folks to go walking after dark. 'When you can sit in a place,' she says, 'and everybody be lovely--no fussing, no killing. To me, this don't even seem like the USA.'

Then why not fight the ferry? She might. Except white folks never take no for an answer, and even some of her cousins are insisting, because a ferry, after all, would

settle old scores. 'It's a symbol of what we had,' she says, 'a symbol to what was taken from us.'

A ferry would close a 180-year-old circle, and Mary Lee is made of circles. Her body is round, her face is round, her river is round. In Mary Lee's world, everything is round, because it's not until the end of something--a century, a story, a sentence--that you really understand the beginning. Maybe it's all this ferry talk that's got her mind circling back. She's always had a gift for dreaming the future. Lately, she can't stop reliving the past.

Also, her mind is busy with something else, something more pressing than a ferry, though it feels connected. Mary Lee is sick, violently sick, and her sister recently foretold doom. 'Cancer,' her sister said, and Mary Lee could only agree.

She's spent her whole life in this timeless place. How did age manage to find her? She still has the flirty giggle, the smile that makes men trip over themselves in church. How can her hair be sprouting tufts of gray like summer dandelions? Walking down the dirt lane, swinging her arms and looking up at the clouds, she could be a sixth-grader coming home from school. And yet, Mary Lee's life has been a series of sorrows and betrayals, and some days every bit of it shows on her face, despite the faraway look she wears to keep people from her deepest thoughts.

'Some people have a good life,' she says. 'But I had a rough life. But I thank God that he helped me come through, and I ain't dead.'

While among the living, she plans to keep moving. Every day, she does a dozen chores, then makes rounds, seeing to the needs of her lovely people, which is how she describes those inside the circle of her heart. She has a mother to nurse, a brother to mind, grandchildren to raise, cousins to bury. Most of her life she picked cotton, now she tends people. If death or a ferry means to stop her, there's nothing to do but wait. Like dreaming the future, waiting is one of Mary Lee's special gifts.

Every Bender knows how to wait. Living here, you learn that fate is like a ferry. It comes when it comes.

And when it gets here, everyone must cross.

CHAPTER TWO / The Road to Freedom

There was a ferry once.

A flat-bottomed skiff, it wasn't much more than Huck Finn's raft. And when Mary Lee was born, its pilot was a cranky old-timer named Uncle Linzie, who would pole you across the 600-yard river like a Venetian gondolier--if he felt like it.

Benders would ride the ferry into Camden, the sun-bleached country town across the river, for groceries and medicine. Camden, the seat of Wilcox County, was the only source Benders had for basic needs, the ferry their only link.

Still, Benders knew to use the ferry sparingly, because Camden was nearly all white, and most of its 1,000 residents meant to keep it that way. 'You'd have to run through Camden,' says Lucy Mingo, 68, who lives up the road from Mary Lee, by the swamp. 'They was dirty people over there.'

Camden was the kind of town where the newspaper got its start in the early 1800s, printing ads for slave-catchers. It was the kind of town where the manager of the Wilcox Hotel would tell a government worker in 1941, 'A nigras is a nigras. And if you go and try to fix 'em up, make somethin' out of 'em, put 'em to livin' like white folks and try to treat 'em decent, you don't do anything but make a mean nigger out of 'em that somebody eventually will have to kill.' It was the kind of town ruled for a third of this century by a pear-shaped sheriff named Lummie Jenkins, whose pastimes included hunting quail and tormenting Benders. His thick glasses, Mary Lee recalls, turned his black eyes into burnt corn kernels.

Then, Martin Luther King Jr. appeared.

In the early '60s, King's voting rights crusade took aim at Wilcox County, where no black had ever cast a ballot, though blacks outnumbered whites four to three. When King called for Benders to march on the Camden courthouse and demand their right to register, whites heard him crying, 'Revolt!' while Benders heard him saying, 'Cross that river for freedom.'

They heard, and they crossed. The ferry nearly capsized as Benders swarmed into Camden, clapping hands, singing. They didn't always stop at Camden, either. Often they stomped onward through Alabama, joining King in the most famous protests of the civil rights movement.

Some braved the nightsticks and bullwhips of Bloody Sunday, 1965, when marchers crossing the Alabama River at Selma were overrun by state troopers. It was one of the horrific moments of the era, a peaceful demonstration meeting a wall of brute force on the Edmund Pettus Bridge, and it turned America's stomach. Among the

thousands of river crossings, it was one that led to change. Five months later, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed into law the Voting Rights Act.

Trampled, beaten, teargassed, jailed, Benders never backed up. ('No white man gonna tell me not to march,' Lucy says, jutting her chin. 'Only make me march harder.') If they seemed fearless, reckless, the reason was the river. At night, they could slip back into its sheltering arms, where whites didn't dare, or bother, to follow.

'I loved to go over there,' Mary Lee says, giggling. 'Just so I could tell the white folks, and Mr. Lummie, 'You can't jail us all.' '

King heard about Gee's Bend and had to see it. He came one cold February night, three weeks before Bloody Sunday, weak from a virus, ignoring the warnings of his security staff, who feared for his safety in a county run by Sheriff Lummie. Through a sideways-blowing rain, his caravan of cars made slow progress along the mud roads of Gee's Bend, and by the time he reached Pleasant Grove Baptist Church, a sagging barn with planks for pews, the hour was past midnight.

A pot-bellied stove gave off scant heat. A bare lightbulb hanged from the ceiling. Cold rain blurred the windows, and Sheriff Lummie lurked against the back wall. Then King stepped through the front door, and Pleasant Grove became the warmest, brightest, safest place on Earth.

'They had a little prayer,' Mary Lee says. 'They sung a song. And then they turned it over to him.'

There was something about King that made Mary Lee's blood race, something she'd never seen in a black man before, a quality beyond her powers of description. 'It was just like, like' She searches for the word, shyly, the faraway look falling across her face. Then the look lifts. 'It was power.'

King had been losing his voice for days, but he still managed to shake the walls of Pleasant Grove with a sound like nothing Mary Lee had ever heard, or else like everything she'd ever heard blended into a song that gave her goose bumps. It was a thunderclap before a lightning storm. It was a steamboat horn conjuring far-off places. It was Gabriel's trumpet calling her home.

'He was a God-sent man,' Mary Lee says. 'He said he was gonna make it better for us colored people, and that everybody could have some of what they want to have.'

King delivered a message that amounted to Revelation for Mary Lee: He told her that she might not speak with perfect grammar, might not own more than one dress, might not be more than a dirt farmer descended from slaves, but she was every bit as good as those white folks across the river. Tears filled his eyes as he shouted, 'I come over here to Gee's Bend to tell you--you are somebody.'

No one had ever said that to Mary Lee before.

Another time, Mary Lee saw King in Camden and gave him a big hug. She met him again in Selma and watched in awe as he drank from a 'whites only' fountain.

'I never saw a black person do a thing like that!' she says. 'I was so glad. I said, 'I'm going to get me a taste my own self.' My sister tried to hold me back by the coat. I said, 'You're welcome to that coat. I'm getting me some of that water.' '

She savors the memory.

'You know,' she says, 'it was no more different than other water. But it was colder.'

Her heart drummed hardest when King described the future. Like Mary Lee, he saw the future in his dreams. I have a dream, he kept saying, I have a dream.

I have them too, Mary Lee thought.

It was around then that white folks got together and decided the ferry had to go. Maybe they couldn't stop King, or his movement, but they could sure as hell keep a bunch of troublesome Negroes on Gee's Bend.

There was no public meeting, no notice in the newspaper. Mary Lee and others just went down to the river one day and found their link to Camden cut. Though cars were rare, and the dirt roads of Gee's Bend were impassable much of the year, Benders now would be forced to drive around the river whenever they needed to buy a hoe or see a doctor.

'We didn't close the ferry because they were black,' Sheriff Lummie was rumored to have said. 'We closed it because they forgot they were black.'

CHAPTER THREE / A Change of Heart

On the surface, Mary Lee's river is just another plain brown river, skittering down the middle of the Deep South like a raindrop down a dirty window. But rivers have their faraway looks too.

Slow, timid, her river typically keeps to itself, hiding between steep banks the color of blushing cheeks. On hot summer days, it goes through the steaming fields at about the speed of a Model T, giving no sign of its quick temper, no hint of the Indians, settlers, slaves and steamships strewn along its floor, 40 feet down, all guarded by poisonous water moccasins and man-sized catfish and alligators that will bite a hound dog in half. 'No one,' a Camden minister wrote in the early '30s, 'plays in the Alabama River.'

It travels 315 miles, mostly in circles, and, like Mary Lee, it never leaves Alabama. The errant child of two capricious rivers--the Coosa and Tallapoosa, which twirl down from the Georgia mountains--it does what errant children do: whatever it wants. Above Gee's Bend, it becomes even more erratic, performing balletic loops and sluggish U-turns, staggering left and right before finally crashing into the Tombigbee, which takes it to the sea.

None of which describes Mary Lee's river.

Her river is a 'strong brown God,' as T.S. Eliot said of a different river, but also a way of thinking about God. Eternal. Silent. Life-giver and ruthless taker. It's the force that shaped Mary Lee's world, drew it like a hurried artist signing his name with a piece of charcoal in the lower right-hand corner of America. Some people spend their lives resisting what defines them. Mary Lee was baptized in the water that define her. She takes it as a given, and gives thanks.

Like God, the river is whatever those who love it or fear it say it is. Wild and calm, cruel and kind. For a black woman descended from slaves, its contradictions run deeper. It begs to be crossed and bars the way. There are reasons, spiritual and logical reasons, why rivers run through the epic poems and hymns of the African American tradition, whether the Congo or Ohio, the Gambia or Mississippi. 'I've known rivers,' wrote Langston Hughes. 'Whoever lifts himself,' wrote Jean Toomer, 'makes that great brown river smile.'

Mary Lee has known only one river, and she's never seen it smile. Maybe that's why she's always smiling, as if trying to compensate.

'I'm just a lovely person,' she says one morning in the midst of her chores. 'I'm not a person to be angry, I never was. When you be pleasant, your light shine better. Your

eyes feel better. Your body be more easy. I don't care how much confusionment it is, if I can't laugh and talk with you, and be friendly nice with you, I don't be around you no more.'

Half a lifetime ago, Mary Lee relied on the river to protect her from those who couldn't be friendly, particularly a white man she'd never even met, a man she'll meet soon enough, if a ferry ever comes.

His name is Hollis Curl. As owner of Camden's only newspaper, the Wilcox Progressive Era, he helped lead the fight against King's movement, and in the heat of battle published some regrettable things about Mary Lee's people. 'I was as racist as anyone else,' he says. 'Not to the point where I'd mistreat anyone, but I wanted to preserve our way of life.'

Now, steaming his 50-horsepower pontoon past Gee's Bend, past a flock of cattle egrets perched like white question marks in a bare tree, Curl swears those days are as well behind him as the creamy wake of his boat. Today, he's the 63-year-old chairman of the Alabama Press Assn., the genial, grandfatherly figure behind the move to restore the ferry. 'I've undergone a metamorphosis,' he says. 'I'm the best friend [Benders] have.'

Not long ago, he was their worst nightmare.

'There's a code of behavior between whites and niggers,' Curl said in 1970. 'Say a colored man comes into your place of business wearing a hat. And a white man comes in at the same time wearing a hat. The white man may leave his hat on, and you don't notice this. You probably wouldn't notice whether he had a hat on or not. But if the colored man doesn't take his hat off when he comes in, you're going to notice it. Nobody ever told me to be sure and watch and see if this nigger takes his hat off. He just does.'

Curl said and wrote what his readers believed, and enforced their beliefs as well. Besides owning the newspaper, he served as city court judge, jailing blacks whenever they marched through town without a parade permit. 'They sang 'We Shall Overcome' so many times,' he says, 'we started to memorize the words.'

One day, Curl jailed 410 men and women, a number he cites with pride, to show how much he's overcome.

Though he wasn't party to the decision, getting rid of the ferry seemed like a fine idea to Curl. If the law couldn't keep the races apart, why not let the river. Later,

when the Army Corps of Engineers dammed the river to make it more navigable, widening the gap between Camden and Gee's Bend to a full watery mile, fate seemed to be reinforcing the river's segregation.

Then, nine years ago, Curl suffered an acute attack of remorse. Out of nowhere, he says, a thought dawned: Maybe the river is wrong. Maybe his dead hunting buddy, Sheriff Lummie, was wrong. In a front-page column that caught Camden off guard and ultimately led to the coveted Sigma Delta Chi prize for journalism, Curl called for a new spirit of racial cooperation, and a new ferry as its symbol.

Some readers applauded. Others recoiled. Most paid Curl no mind. Wilcox County is one of the poorest in the nation, with barely enough money for tractors to resurface the dirt roads, let alone a ferry to reunite two historically alienated communities. So when Curl wrote a second ferry column, and a third, most folks figured he was wasting his time.

Years passed. Curl gave up. Then, three years ago, a few of his old ferry columns caught the eye of Mary Lee's new congressman, Earl F. Hilliard, the first black representative from Alabama since 1876. Hilliard knew Gee's Bend. He'd marched with Benders in the '60s. He remembered their poise under fire, their role in the movement. When he learned they were still without a ferry, he came and stood with Curl by the river.

After a short news conference, to announce that they would find a way to restore the ferry, the two men cast off in Curl's boat, hailing 'a new day in Wilcox County.' They made an unlikely pair, and everyone went down to the river to hear what they had to say.

Everyone except Mary Lee.

She had work to do.

CHAPTER FOUR / A Community of Survivors

Mary Lee rises with the river birds and changes her 87-year-old mother's diaper, then straightens the house, then feeds her three grandsons, then feeds her six cows, then drives her mother around the river for one of the frequent checkups Aola Bendolph requires now that Alzheimer's has left her frail and mute.

They start up County Road 29, the only road in and out of Gee's Bend. A two-lane blacktop, it forms a perfect circle at the bottom of the U, then winds north, past

dense woods and slow-moving creeks, through shade-drenched meadows and one unexpectedly beautiful valley.

At the top of the U, they turn left on Alabama Highway 5, headed south with the river, then cross a bridge below William 'Bill' Dannelly Reservoir, named after the judge who denied a request from Benders, heartsick after King's assassination, to rechristen their community King, Ala. Instead, Gee's Bend was renamed Boykin, after a senator Benders had never heard of. Regardless, Benders still say Gee's Bend, as do road signs. Mary Lee pronounces it in a prayerful mumble that sounds like 'Jesus been.'

Name or no name, Benders were able to honor King in their own way. The two farm mules that pulled King's casket through the streets of Atlanta came from Gee's Bend.

Across the river now, Mary Lee and her mother come to the Camden town square-- jail, bank, courthouse, Curl's newspaper. From Mary Lee's front door, it's a distance of only four miles as the red-tailed hawks fly, but it's an hour's drive around the river, which is why Mary Lee's Chevy Corsica has grown old before its time.

The trip leaves both women spent. In the doctor's examination room, Aola slumps forward in her wheelchair, muttering, laughing at nothing. Mary Lee leans against the wall, glasses slipping down her nose, a faraway look fixed tight on her face. She's thinking about scheduling a doctor's visit for herself, to find out why she's been 'heaving,' why she's been urinating blood.

The room is cold and bare, except for the walls, hung with black-and-white photographs of Gee's Bend in bygone days. Baptism in the river. Girl in a cotton patch. Ferry crossing to Camden. Mary Lee eyes each one.

'We have people ask about those pictures all the time,' the nurse says. 'But they were taken so long ago, no one knows anything about them.'

'I know,' Mary Lee protests. 'These my people.'

'What?' the nurse asks.

'This Roman,' Mary Lee says. 'That Rissa, that Cassie, this Perkin'

The nurse watches, mouth agape, as Mary Lee goes around the room, identifying the long dead.

White folks have always felt compelled to record Gee's Bend. Writers, students, storytellers, anthropologists, photographers, reporters, all sorts of strangers have come shambling down the one road in and out of Gee's Bend, especially since the road got paved in 1967, fulfilling a promise King made the night he came.

These photographs in the examination room are blurry and unremarkable, but others of Gee's Bend hang in museums, including one of Artelia Bendolph, first cousin to Mary Lee's husband. She was 10 years old when Arthur Rothstein made his way to her loblolly pine cabin, beneath a massive chinaberry tree. At the depths of the Great Depression, the federal government hired Rothstein to find and photograph the poorest of America's poor. He found them in Gee's Bend. In Artelia, he met their queen.

Among the many images Rothstein made--the ghostly Big House, its elegant cornices and fanlights still intact; the sad slave cabins, dung and newspaper stuffed in their cracks; the womenfolk teaching girls to piece artful quilts with rags, 'the onliest way we had to keep warm,' says neighbor Lucy--none achieved the power of Artelia. Hair in cornrows, face in gentle repose, she stood at the glassless window of her cabin, a faraway look on her face.

Artelia never got far from that cabin, but her face went around the world. Novelist William Saroyan wrote a poem to her beauty: 'Behold ... a young queen, not on a barge on the Nile a thousand years ago, but right where she is and right now.' Something about that face, that look, spoke to Saroyan of rivers, and royalty.

Today, Mary Lee lives on the very spot where Artelia was photographed. The cabin's gone, and Mary Lee chopped down the chinaberry herself. In their place stands Mary Lee's green-shuttered house, second of the Bend's 'Roosevelt houses,' so called because President Franklin D. Roosevelt rebuilt Gee's Bend and saved its people from starvation.

In the early '30s, Roosevelt learned that hundreds of slave descendants were dying on a U-shaped peninsula in Alabama. After the stock market crashed, cotton had swooned to a nickel per pound, and Benders couldn't grow enough to pay for seeds and supplies. A Camden merchant had been advancing them what they needed, warehousing their cotton until prices rose again. But when the merchant died, he left no records--and one ruthless widow.

It was a cool day in autumn. Armed with pistols, the widow's henchmen came by the ferry and went from cabin to cabin, closing out debts, settling accounts, robbing

Benders blind. They took everything--tools, wagons, plows, furniture, eggs, hogs, mules--then wended like a funeral procession back to the river.

Mary Lee's father, Wisdom, sat in the dirt and wept. He might have given up, might have gone under, but for Mary Lee's mother. "She told him, 'Don't cry,' " Mary Lee says. 'She told him, 'Everything be all right, everything be all right.' "

They survived that winter on wild plums and blackberries. They killed squirrels with slingshots and fished some. The Red Cross sent meal and meat, but life didn't get better until Roosevelt came to the rescue. He granted 100 families in Gee's Bend low-interest loans to buy modest farms and build new houses, with real glass windows and hardwood floors, the first some Benders ever set foot on.

Today, aside from a smattering of trailers, every Bender lives in a Roosevelt house, and much of Gee's Bend looks as it did in Roosevelt's day. Cows still have the right of way. Buzzards still circle overhead. And 100 homesteads still sit along red dirt lanes, in slightly uneven rows, like Monopoly houses.

Mary Lee's memories of those days--wearing a fertilizer sack for a dress, picking cotton alongside her mother, sleeping 12 to a bed on a mattress stuffed with cornhusks--remain clearer than any Rothstein photograph. So clear, she can hardly believe Wisdom's in the ground 22 years now and Aola sits in her own permanent posture of defeat.

'Ready for your shot?' the nurse asks Aola.

'She don't talk,' Mary Lee says. 'Sickness took everything but the laughter.'

The nurse swabs Aola's arm with cotton. Then, the needle. Aola jerks forward, laughing. Mary Lee puts a hand on her shoulder.

'Everything be all right,' Mary Lee says. 'Everything be all right.'

CHAPTER FIVE / Confronting the Future

The seventh child of Wisdom harbors a heavy shame about her lack of education.

'I loved-ed school,' Mary Lee says, 'but I loved-ed mens more.'

She left school in sixth grade, pregnant. She didn't even know what pregnant was when she found herself on hands and knees behind the cabin, throwing up the

dewberries and dumplings she'd eaten for breakfast. Then she looked up and saw Aola's troubled face at the window.

School days are over for you, Aola said, explaining that a person was inside Mary Lee's stomach.

'Oooh!' Mary Lee says. 'That struck me! I cried all day long, telling the Lord to take it away. But the Lord wouldn't move that. Some things the Lord don't move.'

A sixth-grader brimming with prayers and fears: How Mary Lee sounded is preserved on reel-to-reel tapes in the Library of Congress. After the Roosevelt program was launched, government workers recorded hours and hours of everyday life at Gee's Bend, including sixth-graders singing a hymn to which Mary Lee still knows every word by heart:

It may be trouble at the ferry,

I'm gonna stand there anyhow.

Dear Lord! Dear Lord! Dear Lord!

Because she was 14 when she became a mother, childhood and motherhood are all jumbled up in Mary Lee's mind.

She's reliving both this morning, driving around the river to attend an important assembly at her grandsons' high school.

Mary Lee's three grandsons--17, 16 and 12--stay with her because their parents live in Mobile and can't handle them. There were nasty scenes, she says, loud arguments, and she had no choice but to take in the boys. 'It's a terrible thing to be afraid of your own child,' she says vaguely.

Mary Lee has spent her life among swarms of children. She had 16 siblings growing up. She had eight children of her own, who have given her 30 grandchildren and six great-grandchildren so far. There should have been more. She once saw herself having 15 children. Then came a hysterectomy, and seven of her unborn children were stranded, no way to cross over into this world.

With them is her baby, who died in his sleep. Mary Lee never knew why. 'Pretty baby,' she says. 'Smiling all the time.'

She can see him. He always was a late sleeper, and one morning she let him sleep awhile longer. When she finished her chores and got the other children off to school, she went to wake him. 'He had a real pretty smile on his face. And I said, 'Boy, you better wake up!' Then I said, 'Boy, you better straighten out. What you so stiff for?' Then I busted out crying.'

That boy, he'd have grown up to be sweet-tempered like his mama. Not like her grandsons, she says with a snort. Since she's been sick, unable to crawl out of bed some days, the boys have been running wild, giving her sass. Mostly, they just ignore Mary Lee. They clod sulkily through her house, speaking only to ask for pocket money. Even when she saved enough from her \$382 monthly Social Security checks to buy them a computer, their mood didn't improve.

If they seem angry, sometimes they have cause: They spend half their day on a slow-moving bus. The 12-year-old goes to school at the top of the U, but the older two attend high school in Camden, and circumnavigating the river consumes their youth.

The children, Curl and Hilliard are quick to note, would benefit most from a new ferry. Ten minutes to Camden, 10 minutes back. For the first time in 35 years, the children of Gee's Bend wouldn't be slaves to the bus. They would be able to take part in after-school plays, sports and teacher-student tutorials. To those on both sides of the river who fear the change a ferry would bring, Curl and Hilliard insist: A ferry wouldn't be for you. It would be for the children, heirs to the civil rights movement's bravest warriors, and such special children deserve a change.

Mary Lee doesn't disagree. She'd just rather see Curl and Hilliard build the children a new school in Gee's Bend. Or a community center. Or a store. Something to keep the children here, and Gee's Bend alive.

Now, after the long drive around the river, Mary Lee settles into a chair in the high school auditorium, fidgeting, nervous to be in a school again. One of the first speakers puts her at ease. 'Where I'm from,' he says, 'we take away the big words, like 'statement of purpose.' Instead, we say, 'How come us here?'

Mary Lee giggles.

Parents are here, he says, to learn about stiffer state requirements for a high school diploma. Students are here because their parents made a mighty sacrifice.

'You here,' he tells the students, 'because somebody sweated for you! Somebody dragged a long sack of cotton through the dirt!'

'Mm hmm,' Mary Lee moans, as though in church.

For an hour, speaker after speaker explains the new diploma requirements, with pie charts and graphs. Mary Lee doesn't understand much of what they say, until one speaker waxes about the value of education, wounding her deeply in the process.

'If you don't graduate from high school,' he bellows, 'you spit in the face of Martin Luther King!'

CHAPTER SIX / 'I Ain't Ready to Die'

The funeral procession wends slowly past Mary Lee's house and up the hill to Pleasant Grove, past Tinnie Dell Pettway's store, which Tinnie opens whenever she damn well feels like, past the post office, where Mary Lee's best friend, Betty Bendolph, sorts the trickle of mail that comes to Gee's Bend, past the pines, where Benders visit with God.

Most Benders have a special 'praying place' in the pines, a spot to meet God and talk with him. Mary Lee fears the woods, however. Too dark. Too filled with frogs and snakes. She prefers to meet God in her barn. When you see Mary Lee headed for her barn, she's either going to do a little chore or have a big chat.

Should God need to find Mary Lee, she's in church every Sunday morning, and Thursday nights, and whenever there's a choir practice or a town meeting about the proposed ferry. She also attends every funeral, of which there seem to be more and more these days. Today, another one. Another brother going home, the deacons say. Another cousin crossing the river, that's how Mary Lee puts it.

Swaying side to side, Mary Lee aims each note of 'Amazing Grace' at the windows, which are painted pink and green and blue to look like real stained glass. Her voice rises above the funeral choir, and despite the farway look, her thoughts are audible too. Her worst fears have been realized. When the vomiting and pain became too much, she took herself to the doctor, and sure enough, a growth.

Your kidney will have to be removed, he said.

No, thank you, she said.

The doctor didn't understand. With Mary Lee in the hospital, how would her lovely people survive? Her mother and grandsons, her daughter and brother? Her cows? She couldn't leave them to fend for themselves.

Then, days after the diagnosis, God visited her in a dream and told her to do what the doctor said. She obeyed. She endured the surgery. Dreams are law with Mary Lee. Dreams never lie.

And yet, dreams don't keep her from worrying. She fears the operation was a failure because her stomach feels tender, especially when she giggles. She tries not to giggle, but she might as well try not to breathe. Next time everyone gathers in Pleasant Grove, it will be Mary Lee who crossed over, she feels sure.

Betty doesn't help.

'T-nanny,' Betty says, using a nickname Mary Lee has had her whole life, 'I'm afraid to love you how much I love you because everyone I love ups and dies.'

'Then get on away from me, girl,' Mary Lee says, giggling, wincing. 'I ain't ready to die.'

As the funeral ends, people drift outside to the graveyard, set on a hill circled by scrub pines that sway in the wind like Mary Lee when she sings. Here lies her husband, Rubin, who died seven years ago, though being dead didn't stop him from visiting Mary Lee when she was in the hospital having her kidney out. He stood over her bed and they had a sweet visit, because he couldn't beat her anymore.

Mary Lee misses Rubin but not those beatings. Once, during a lull in the violence, Mary Lee dreamed that Rubin would apologize for every time he slapped her, every time he punched her, even the time he chased her with a shotgun, a scene that brought Sheriff Lummie to the house. He would even apologize for the time he hurled a butcher knife at her. 'If I hadn't got behind the tree, I'd got it,' she says. 'The knife stuck right in that tree.'

In the morning, when Rubin refused to apologize as he did in the dream, Mary Lee took \$35 of Pleasant Grove money ('I placed it back later') and bought a bus ticket to New York City, the farthest she ever got from Gee's Bend.

Standing outside the Manhattan bus depot--threadbare coat, innocent smile--she was easy prey. Men fluttered around her like moths. At last, a cabdriver spotted her

and pulled over. She gave him the address of a brother in the Bronx, then leaned forward, her face in the front seat.

'Sit back,' the driver said, angry. 'Relax!'

'I don't know how to relax,' she said.

New York was magic. She got a job, made friends, went to a Harlem dance club and pretended to be drunk, so as not to stand out. But the Hudson wasn't Alabama, and after a month she missed Gee's Bend in her bones. When Wisdom wrote that it was time to come home, she agreed.

And when she did, Rubin apologized.

Just as she dreamed he would.

Right after he died, Rubin visited Mary Lee, and he was mighty sore. He came to her in the middle of the night and ordered her not to sleep in their bed anymore, out of respect. Then he lay down beside her, draped a heavy arm over her hip, and they slept together one last time in the bed they'd shared for 36 years.

When the sun rose, he stood and walked out the door, dissolving into the white light. 'And I ain't never had no more trouble from him again,' Mary Lee says.

Every night since, she's slept in her spare bedroom, honoring a difficult husband's last request. Rubin was a hard man to love, but she 'loved him harder than anybody.' Besides, he wasn't the only man who beat Mary Lee. Every man in her life raised a hand to her in anger. Wisdom didn't hesitate when she disobeyed. Wisdom's uncle, Isom, whipped her soundly when she was young, for being willful. A blind former slave, Isom didn't understand that a girl born beside a willful river can't help but be willful now and then.

People always ask Mary Lee about the U-shaped scar on her hairline, which bears a striking resemblance to a map of the river bend. 'When Rubin did this to me,' she says, fingering her forehead, 'that was the worst day of my life, because my face stayed swollen, and I ain't had no money to go to the doctor. I just put some home remedy thing on my face. Used to keep my hair combed to that side.'

As she got braver about showing the scar, people got bolder about staring. Every time they'd ask, she'd give them the faraway look and mumble, 'Long story.'

It's been Mary Lee's experience that, even more than death, people are terrified at the prospect of a long story.

CHAPTER SEVEN / Sometimes You Can't Cross Back

The headstones tilt this way and that, like the Earth's rotted teeth. Mary Lee eyes them as she did the photographs in the doctor's office. The cousins beneath these stones are the same ones in the photographs, born in the 1800s and early 1900s, when Benders went from slaves to sharecroppers, and barely noticed a difference.

It wasn't until the close of the 19th century that the slaveholders who'd owned Gee's Bend since before the Civil War finally relinquished the land. On the third day of the 20th century, Gee's Bend became the property of Adrian Van de Graff, a Yale-educated racist who believed himself destined to remake the South as a whites-only enclave. Heavy debts plagued him, however, and he died before doing the harm he intended. Gee's Bend fell to his son, who sold it to the Roosevelt administration, which parsed all 10,000 acres back to the former slaves and their descendants.

At last, with the stroke of a pen, the owners of Gee's Bend became its owners. A giant plantation with a sordid past became a quilt of small farms, a patchwork of independent families. Those were days of hope and glory, when competition from mechanized farms was beyond imagining.

Now, the labor that defined Gee's Bend and bound Benders to one another has fallen away. Everyone keeps animals and tends a garden, but only a hardy few still reap and sow. Only a handful of fields still sprout corn, the wind rustling their stalks like a grown-up tousling a child's hair. When the Civil War freed them, Benders stayed put; when the civil rights movement freed them a second time, they fled, and farming went with them.

King told them to cross the river, and they crossed. That was the moment Mary Lee learned why every crossing is so fearful. Sometimes you can't cross back. There were 1,500 people in Gee's Bend the night King came. Half as many live here today, most Mary Lee's age and older, too old to farm. They get by on savings and Social Security. Their children work office jobs in Camden, or Selma, 45 miles northeast. Their grandchildren go to school or kill time on the bleachers across from the post office, awaiting their chance to go.

As farming has faded, so has quilting. Nothing shows the ebb of life more than the abandoned-looking Freedom Quilting Bee, up County Road 29. Mary Lee worked

there. Lucy worked there. Every woman in Gee's Bend took a turn at the Quilting Bee, which briefly put Gee's Bend on the map.

It was founded in 1966, after a civil rights worker came marching through Wilcox County and happened upon an astonishing sight: three brilliant quilts fluttering from a clothesline outside a rude cabin, like battle flags of some rebel nation. The patterns were unique, the craftsmanship exquisite. No American quilts could quite compare, because these quilts weren't quite American.

Within weeks, great batches of Gee's Bend quilts were being shipped north, to fine museums and fancy department stores. A priest helped the women go into business for themselves, and a national hunger developed for all that their work-gnarled fingers could produce. Each day, the women of Gee's Bend formed their sewing circle, breathless at the possibility: For generations, their secret art--created in slavery, perfected in solitude--had kept them warm. Now it promised to set them free.

Then, overnight, white folks forgot about Gee's Bend again. At the same time, things began to vanish--the ferry, the farms, the farmers--business at the Quilting Bee ground to a halt. Only one of the original women joins the circle anymore. The rest have retired, left or died.

Some days, Mary Lee can feel it, all that Gee's Bend energy grown fainter, like Aola's pulse. Gee's Bend was never perfect, God knows, but it always had its busy women piecing quilts, its men walking tall behind their plows. If an isolated peninsula where three of every four people live below the poverty line can be called Paradise, then Gee's Bend was, because it was a family. Somehow, the family idyll that Gee's Bend represented has become fallow as the dirt.

And yet, the place remains holy to Mary Lee, and the dirt will forever be fertile with her forebears, who were sometimes buried where they fell, or swallowed by the river, to be deposited in the fields with the next spring freshet. While making her rounds, or strolling with Betty, or searching for one of her stray cows, Mary Lee is as likely to come across a forgotten slave grave as an abandoned well.

Her 26 acres of Gee's Bend came down to her from Rubin, who inherited them from his granddaddy, Patrick Bendolph, a mighty red oak of a man, and one of the patriarchs in Gee's Bend when Mary Lee was born. Pa-Petty, as Mary Lee called him, wore a pajama top for a shirt and sported a head of white hair straight as a stick, which unaccountably turned curly the day he died. His land, now deeded to Mary

Lee's children, may be no more than pasture for her cows, but Mary Lee treasures every acre; it connects her to all the dead who tilled it and now lie mixed up in it.

Mary Lee stands to one side, watching the gravediggers do their work, the only plowing that gets done in Gee's Bend these days. Gee's Bend is going from a quilt of farms to a quilt of graveyards, and she'd just as soon be someplace other than a graveyard when she's feeling so fretful about her own health and the health of her holy place. Before her living cousins lower her dead cousin into the ground, she says a prayer, what she calls 'a sincereness of the heart.'

This isn't her praying place. But surrounded by all these lovely people, living and dead, she just knows God must be nearby.

CHAPTER EIGHT / Coming Too Late for Raymond

They visit in the living room, Mary Lee on the couch under a portrait of King, Raymond across the room in a straight-backed chair. For long stretches, they say nothing, Raymond staring at his big sister, Mary Lee staring at her feet.

He lives by himself in this tiny brick house--the floor canting like the deck of a ship, the sink full of dirty dishes--counting the minutes until Mary Lee comes.

It's Raymond but it's not Raymond, she says, because he hasn't been right since the accident 20 years ago. She's not sure what happened, and Raymond can't say. She only knows that, while driving around Gee's Bend, he skidded off the road and flew from the car, then writhed in a ditch until someone saw him and ran to get Mary Lee.

Everything be all right, Mary Lee told him, sobbing, peering down the road for the ambulance, everything be all right.

With no ferry, the ambulance had to come around the river, as it must each time a Bender has a seizure, a heart attack, an accident. The paramedics took two hours to reach Raymond that day, and while waiting, he suffered a stroke.

If a ferry comes, Mary Lee says, it will be too late for Raymond. Too late by 20 years.

Outsiders often ask why Benders like Mary Lee don't just leave, and one reason has always been true: Most have Raymonds. While Mary Lee was in the hospital, her sister checked on Raymond, cooked his meals and washed his clothes. But what would happen to Raymond if Mary Lee left, or died?

What would happen to him if a ferry came, carrying people less patient, less kind than his fellow Benders. She studies Raymond, his eager expression the opposite of her faraway look. Always right here, right now, he's always more vulnerable to strangers than she.

While Mary Lee studies him, Raymond studies the portrait of King.

'I have a dream,' Mary Lee says, reading his mind.

Raymond smiles.

'He had one, too,' Mary Lee assures him.

As a boy, Raymond was a history buff. 'He'd write everything down,' Mary Lee says. 'All the history of Gee's Bend. Since the accident, he can't catch up with everything like he used to.'

She tries to catch up for him. The trouble is, Gee's Bend history has more remote bends than the river. Almost nothing is known, for instance, about the decades after the Civil War, when Benders kept the river wrapped around themselves like one of their quilts, remaining so isolated from the outer world that other Alabama blacks called them 'The Africans.' When Pa-Petty was born in 1866, Benders still spoke a hodgepodge of backwoods English and African dialect, and held fast to ancient superstitions. If you sit on a log, you'll soon be disappointed. If you travel at night with whiskey in your pocket, the dead will follow on your heels.

This much Mary Lee knows: Half her neighbors and cousins and girlfriends are named Pettway because a white man named Mark Pettway left his North Carolina plantation in 1847 and came here with 100 slaves in tow. He formed a caravan of covered wagons, to keep his family and furniture dry, and marched his human possessions alongside, a 700-mile trek through December rain and cold. Only one slave was allowed to ride--the cook. Pettway wanted her fresh to prepare the meals.

Before Pettway, Gee's Bend was owned by a shadowy 57-year-old bachelor named Joseph Gee, the first white man to stake his claim here. In 1820, Gee and his slaves tamed the swamp and cleared the land, which would forever bear his name and their progeny. When Pettway arrived, he threw his slaves among Gee's slaves and named them all Pettway. Today, nearly every Bender is connected to the merger of those two slave clans. Though Mary Lee's last name is Bendolph, her grandmother was a Pettway, her daughter married a Pettway, Pa-Petty married a Pettway, and so on.

In Pettway's day, Mary Lee's river was crowded with ships. They passed Gee's Bend day and night, ferrying planters and miners, gamblers and dandies, stevedores and cotton kings. Many emitted a ghostly calliope music, the music of merry-go-rounds and other things that go in circles.

One of the grandest of all, the Orline St. John, caught fire and sank off Gee's Bend in 1850. A slave named Abram swam out and saved nine men, who were carried with other survivors to the Big House, a makeshift hospital that day. Scores drowned, however. At least one was laid to rest in Camden.

Surely Master Pettway attended the funerals. And if he did, he went the long way, taking the same road his caravan took into Gee's Bend, the same road Martin Luther King's caravan took, because it would be another 20 years before his son would build the first ferry ever at Gee's Bend.

Pettway knows. Better than anyone, he could tell Mary Lee the history she longs to hear. She passes him every day too, but unlike most of the dead, he keeps silent, as mute as Raymond and Aola. He just lies there, in a snake-infested copse of trees not far from Raymond's front door.

CHAPTER NINE / No Rest for the Weary

Mary Lee lifts her blouse and lets the doctor probe her stomach. He asks how she's been feeling since the surgery.

Can't laugh like I used to, she says. Also, 'I ain't been sleeping.'

In the middle of the night, her mind goes roaming like one of her cows after busting through a fence. Some nights, she gets out of bed and kneels down and begs God to bring it back. 'My mind be sometime just a-wandering,' she says. 'Sometime it don't let me finish thinking about this; it'll catch me before I finish and put me over to something else.'

Mostly, her mind explores the realm of possibility. Choices she might have made, places she might have gone. 'I just be thinking what I could did,' she says, 'instead of what I did when I did it.'

Did she do right marrying Rubin? Did she do right leaving him? Did she meet her fate, or did fate have trouble finding her here in this cobwebbed corner of creation? 'I'm thinking,' she says, 'about the friend I never had.'

Along with the past, the present weighs on her mind. Can her Chevy survive the summer? Can she survive her grandsons? Can she pay off her \$15,900 surgery bill by sending the hospital \$20 a month?

When she nods off, dreams are more exhausting than a full day's chores. Not long ago, she found herself on the banks of the Jordan River.

'It was a whole bunch of trash going down the river,' she says. 'And Willie Quill, he was standing down beside me, and there was some more people on the other side, and a man told Quill to tell me to go back.'

Willie Quill Pettway, first cousin to Mary Lee's mother, is a 71-year-old living landmark in Gee's Bend. His house sits near the old ferry launch, and when folks come around asking questions, Benders point in that direction and say, 'Go ask Quill.'

Dark as a waterlogged cedar tree, named after a 19th century riverboat, Quill is the best storyteller around. Seated beneath his prized portrait of King, he puts visitors in a trance by piecing together scraps of memory and facts and folklore into one tight narrative quilt.

It made sense to Mary Lee that Quill was directing traffic on the Jordan.

In her dream, she told Quill that she'd already crossed the Jordan once before, in an earlier dream, and the river was full of obstacles then too.

'It was so tangled up,' she says, 'and I was crawling, I was swimming, trying to get across. When I got midway, the water got calm, and it was just clear, you could see all the way to the bottom.'

I been across this river, she told Quill, and I know it gets calm in the middle, so I ain't afraid to cross now.

Just the same, Quill said, it ain't your time yet, T-nanny, you go on back.

With that, Mary Lee woke up, thanking God for sparing her. But wondering, who were all those people on the other side?

Something else strange about her dream: The Jordan looked a lot like the Alabama.

Is that why there was no ferry?

She smiles. Such a foolish question.

On the Jordan, she says, 'Jesus is the ferry.'

She works at her Jordan River dream, trying to 'interpretate.' Like the shore, the meaning lies just beyond her reach. She's about to make a crossing, yes. But what kind? And when? And who will cross with her? Aola? Quill? Martha Jane Pettway, the oldest Bender of all?

Born in 1898 just after white Pettways left Gee's Bend, Martha Jane was a little girl when Theodore Roosevelt became president, a grandmother by the time that other Roosevelt saved Gee's Bend. She was older than Mary Lee when the ferry disappeared, and each time she turns another year older, word goes out to Benders across the nation:

Come home, family, come home.

They hear, and they come. Hundreds gather in Martha Jane's yard to wish her well and kiss her cheek, rough and cool like the bark of an oak. Mary Lee goes next-door too, with a sweet potato pie and a heavy heart, because she wishes they would stay.

Especially the men. She hates that a drift as sure as the river's current has carried away every potential Pa-Petty, rendering Gee's Bend a matriarchy, with Martha Jane and Lucy and Betty and Mary Lee its queens. Being queen of Gee's Bend is a lonely business.

'You look like you have something you want to ask me,' the doctor says, snapping shut Mary Lee's chart.

'I want to know,' she asks, blinking, 'will I be all right?'

'You keep asking me that,' he says, annoyed.

He explains that the growth on her kidney wasn't cancer but a benign tumor. He says she can live a normal life with one kidney, so long as she cuts out the meat, salt and fat.

She slumps forward, disappointed.

The doctor didn't understand her question.

She just wanted him to tell her that everything would be all right.

CHAPTER TEN / A New Journey Begins

This is how death will be, she just knows.

Like the end of another long day, when she can finally sit on her screened-in porch, body at ease, mind at peace.

'Yeah,' she says, smiling. 'I'm going home to rest. I sure would like to go there, 'cause I've had enough of hard times here.'

Then she changes her mind. 'No, no, no. I'm not ready to go now. I want to stay here a little longer.'

Torn between the only home she's ever known and the one she sees in her dreams, Mary Lee knew just how her mother felt not long ago. After the doctors diagnosed Alzheimer's, Aola was seized by a need to see where she was born and raised. Without a word to anyone, she set off across the fields in search of her old cabin.

Hours later, Mary Lee noticed her mother missing and got up a search party. They fanned out across Gee's Bend, and, as the sun was setting, they found Aola in a meadow, sitting against a tree, fast asleep.

Never did find my home, Aola said, dejected.

Mary Lee knew what her mother meant.

Things used to end differently in Gee's Bend. Times were hard, but death was soft. People would reach ripe old ages and die in bed, encircled by five generations of loving kin, tucked under quilts older than their mortal coils. They die younger these days, Mary Lee notices. And lonelier.

Of course, a person dies many times in the course of a life, and every death is an illusion. Maybe the same is true of places. If a ferry comes and kills Gee's Bend, it will only kill it again. Gee's Bend died when the widow's henchmen cleaned it out. It died when its mules carried King to the grave.

Something tells Mary Lee, though, this death would be different.

Curl says a ferry won't kill Gee's Bend but revive it. He talks about a ferry as if it were a vessel of salvation, like Noah's Ark, or the basket that carried baby Moses. A ferry will revive Gee's Bend, he says, with new people.

If so, they won't be Mary Lee's people. They'll wave their money under the nose of her poor cousins and buy up all the prime land. What's left, that is. White folks already have the best riverfront. Already they're talking about a golf course along the banks of Gee's Bend.

No matter what Mary Lee thinks, no matter how hard she prays, it's done. The ferry is coming. While she was taking sick, Curl and Hilliard raised the \$1 million needed. While she was lying in the hospital, a shipyard near Montgomery won the contract. While she was recuperating, the blueprints were drawn. While she was tending her mother and Raymond and her grandsons, the boat got built.

After a few runs to make sure it's seaworthy, the ferry will begin its momentous journey downriver. September, Curl says. October at the latest. And though he's been saying the same thing for years, Mary Lee suddenly believes him.

She's not sad. Some days, she's not even sure she has the strength to care. She regards the ferry as she does her death: fears and welcomes it at the same time.

It will look about how Mary Lee pictured it. Big. Roughly 100 feet long, and 200 tons, with room for 149 passengers, or two full school buses, or one 18-wheeler loaded with pine trees bound for the Camden paper mill. The county will run it from sunup to sundown, seven days a week, and some say the county plans to call it The Pettway, launching that surname into the next century.

When it finally comes, Curl will be more than the cause. He'll be the pilot. A Coast Guard-certified riverboat captain, Curl will steer the ferry into the latticework of shadows cast across Mary Lee's river by hickory and poplar, sweet gum and persimmon.

Seeing him there at the helm, Mary Lee will have a choice. She can believe he's bringing back the ferry because it will attract new business and boost the value of riverfront property, including his own 60 acres on the Camden side. Or she can believe that a white man exactly her age has done a complete U-turn, in a place where only her river has been known to do that.

It's not impossible for a 63-year-old to do a U-turn. Recently, she thought about doing one herself. When an old widower returned from the North, looking for a new

wife, Mary Lee let him phone her, let him woo her, even toyed with the idea of letting him carry her off.

Then an impulse overcame her. She told the widower her long story. In one great rush she blurted out that she was on the mend from kidney surgery, that she was caring for an elderly mother, a troubled brother, three devilish grandsons and six cows with wanderlust.

'He said a prayer for me,' she recalls, giggling, 'and then hung up, and I ain't never heard from him again.'

The sun is eye-level now, making every field a vivid shade of copper, red and orange, a quilt of different colors, but each a distant cousin to the river's syrupy brown.

Another day ends, and the dirt releases its warmth like an exhausted sigh.

Mary Lee sighs too, worn out by the story of Mary Lee.

Long story.

She smiles, apologetic.

At such a peaceful moment, she's not sure the story's ended. Maybe she'll live to be Martha Jane's age, reign another 40 years as queen of Gee's Bend. She smiles. She giggles.

She gets the faraway look.

Farther than ever.

Something coming. Something big. Maybe a ferry, maybe death, maybe the end of the only home she's ever known.

It's hard to tell the difference when the dying sun floods the fields with such a pretty white light.