

# **Letters From Mount Mitchell**

Senior Paper

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For a Degree Bachelor of Arts with  
A Major in Literature at  
The University of North Carolina at Asheville  
Fall 2013

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September 19th 1910

Dear Mamma,

Preacher Bo told me I was going to die. He just stood up there and said it plain as day, "you all is going to die someday." My heart fell down into my belly and I felt a fluttering inside, like a million butterflies being let loose from tiny cages. And my hands they got slick and left a perfect ring of damp on my new white dress. Now I don't know much about death but I do know that I'm probably not going to have to experience it. I remember reading that God is gentle and lowly in heart. Me and you, we thought hard on them words, rolled them over and over in our minds, sitting on that dirty old blanket you patched together last winter. Those words is a part of me now and I just know that Jesus would never kill His people. Everything would be a waste if He did. Preacher Bo said I was His people. I can't die Mamma because I don't understand death and nobody is going to do something they don't understand. I hope you don't understand death either, if you died I just might too.

Love, Klessa

September 25th 1910

Dear Mamma,

I watched the birds today. I remember Jesus telling His disciples to watch the fowls of the air, to understand how they get by, simply, not worrying at all, just resting on a branch or a bundle of grass waiting on God. I wish I could be like a bird. I wish I could wait on something without running to town to tell Aunt Laura my business. I know you hated when I'd tell her your secrets. Since she died it seems like I ain't got anybody to talk to. I guess you like it that way. Keeps you safe. I do wish I was one of them birds,

just like the one I saw today. You should have seen him, deep blue with a stripe of coal black racing down his breast. I wanted to scoop him up and bring him home with me but that would have just ruined his life, ruined everything Jesus said.

Love Klessa

October 2nd 1910

Dear Mamma,

A flood of birds came out from under the porch when I opened the door, you should have heard them. I imagine it was like an ocean wave, a roaring sound, so loud it seemed gentle. Overcome, that's what Daddy calls it. He says that word when tears fall from his eyes or after a long day's work.

"I am overcome too Daddy," I say to him. He laughs, brushes my cheek with his thumb and goes off to the back bedroom tending to you. I stand there still overcome, thinking about them birds, roaring. I want to see what they're doing under the porch but I'm too afraid to look. I wish you would go with me, we would look together, fearless. Maybe we would find a billion nests dotted with bright blue eggs. I'd reach out to steal one and you would stop me by slapping my arm. I would step away but I'd still want one to take home and keep warm in my sock drawer, wait for it to crack open so I could see the life inside.

I know you would like to come with me but if I asked you'd still say "No." I know you'd have tears in your eyes. So I sit here on my favorite rocker and think about all them birds, how they're like shadows, swallowing everything in black for a moment then flying up to the sky. People are like shadows, they cover and swallow me then they're gone.

Love Klessa

October 10<sup>th</sup> 1910

Dear Mamma,

I don't really remember Ray like you do. I only seen him for a second then he was gone. Daddy had him wrapped in a brown cloth, he looked so small in Daddy's arms. I remember Daddy leaning down to let me see him. His nose pointed out like mine and his skin looked dry and flaky. Past all that he was blue. I knew he was dead. I inhaled deeply then backed away from Daddy.

"I don't want you to worry about this Klessa. Ray's already in heaven with Jesus and that's the best place to be ain't it?"

I just looked up at Daddy and nodded. He took Ray back to the bedroom where you were and ya'll two stayed in there until supertime.

I didn't understand how Ray could be dead already. It didn't seem fair to me. It didn't seem like God would do something like that. Maybe Preacher Bo was right. He was always telling me I was going to die. I hated him even more every time he said that. I was sure God didn't like him either but maybe I was wrong.

I knew you loved Ray Mamma. I remember you telling me I was going to have a brother or sister. Ray or Rebecca. Them was the names you decided on. You didn't really care what me and Daddy thought, this was your baby. You told everyone in town about the baby. When you told them you pulled your hands up to your belly and cupped that little bump where Ray was tucked away, warm inside you. I wish I could remember being close to you like that. Knowing you was alive at every moment of everyday, living by your heart beat.

Something changed in you after Ray died. Daddy buried his little body out in the woods, away from the house, Daddy said that was the best place. I don't think you ever went to visit Ray, you just held onto him in your mind. His soft kicks inside you, his hands pushing across the lining of your belly. All your plans for him you played out over and over in your mind.

I didn't see you too much after the burial. You didn't go down to town. You didn't tend to your garden. You didn't come out of your room. You didn't look at me. That's when I started to hate Ray. I couldn't believe what he'd done to you.

I often imagined going out in the forest, to that little hump in the ground where he rested. I saw my hand brush over the hard cracked dirt then I seen my hands go down into the ground. I felt him there, his tiny body wrapped in the soft cloth. Then I pulled him up. He came up out of the ground, his face was caked with red dirt. I remember Daddy didn't even bother to put him in a box. I think he just wanted him out of the house, out of our lives. I think he knew what was going to happen to you. I brushed the dirt of Ray's face and pulled his face to my chest. I squeezed him and I wept. I seen myself there holdin' my dead baby brother. I held him there, cryin'. I didn't cry because I wanted him back. I cried because he died, I cried because he hurt you. I cried because he made you love him.

Klessa

October 5th 1910

Dear Mamma,

Remember when you tried to kill yourself? I know you don't like that memory. If

I brought it up you would act confused like that could never happen in this house. I feel that way too, there's lots of things I couldn't believe would happen in this house but they did anyhow. Now I've made my mind up to just keep on loving, loving as hard and long as I can, maybe my love will make this house better, mend all that brokenness.

That night I heard yelling coming from you and Daddy's room. I woke from a dead sleep, afraid. I came and cracked open your door, you was standing up, tears falling from your eyes, screaming at Daddy, saying you'd die under him, you used the word hate, saying Daddy didn't care at all about Ray. In your hand was Daddy's gun, your arm hung low by the weight of it. I could tell you was drunk, how you shook back and forth, how your words they fumbled together into nothing. Daddy looked past you to me and said everything was fine and to go back to bed. Daddy was just lying there on the bed, arms tucked under his head, just like how he naps on Sunday afternoons. I don't think he believed you had the nerve. You had the purple flowered quilt laid out over the bed. Anyone who lay on that felt like they was lying in a field of flowers. I swear I could smell those purple buds through all them tears. It's a sweet smell, tangy tasting if your tongue moves it around just right. Them flowers were taming Daddy, them petals was sticking to him, holding him down and for the first time ever, letting you yell.

I stood there frozen for the longest time. I couldn't walk away because I knew when I did everything would start all over again. With my feet planted here it was like you and Daddy loved each other and Ray never died. If I stayed here I could keep anything bad from happening. I knew you couldn't stand me there, seeing you this way so you slammed the door in my face. I walked back to my room and slipped under the cool covers, they smelled like the air outside, musky and clean, and I waited. I gave

myself about three minutes before the pads of my feet hit the rough wooden floor and I was out the back door. I ran into the darkness up the hill to my favorite pine. It was quiet, only a little wisp of wind rustled the tree tops. Up past the trees the moon pushed its ivory light down onto me. Tonight he was almost whole. Behind the moon there were millions of twinkling stars, there was so many of them I figured they was holding the moon up. I found the brightest one; its sides glittered out into the black. I tried to keep my eyes just on him. I named him Theodore. And I sat there with Theodore and waited for you to notice I was gone and call me on home. You'd tell me everything was fine and to come out of the chill. Finally Daddy stumbled up to me, hiding my face from the moons light.

"Come on home Klessa," Daddy said. "Everything is fine now. We're fine."

I didn't want to go with Daddy but I didn't see where I had any other choice. So I pretended to believe that everything was fine and stood up and followed Daddy home, through the dark, down the rocky lumps I'd climbed to get away. All the way home I was praying.

*Lord heal me now. Heal this wounded place. It's been hurt, chipped away at by the tears, the fists, the amber liquid. Whiskey, it takes Mamma away from me. I feel like I've saved them so many times, now it's your turn.*

*You told me that you hurt the things that must go. You said you was hurting me in a good way, teaching me discipline. I wonder why would you hurt mamma and daddy this way? I don't want them to go. I just want them healed. I think my love may save them. I know it's really your love inside me Lord. My love, well it couldn't care for anything. With you I love hard and long, I love for life. That's what mamma told me when I said I was going to marry Thommy Riley on my very first day down there in that little school*

house. I must have been six years old. He caught my heart from across the room. He was humming a tune under his breath; tapping his foot to them mouth beats. I took to the sound and tapped along too, he seen me and smiled. He had the bluest eyes I've ever seen, they looked like the sky right after a good rain, the kind of rain that washes the sky clean. I knew right then that I loved him, that I couldn't go one more day without them eyes. So as usual I ran right home and told Mamma about Thommy and that's when she told me about my kind of love. She said I get it from her Mamma.

"Boy your Mamaw loved hard, so hard it was lonely."

"Mamma," I said, "Love ain't lonely."

That's when mamma smiled at me.

We got home and you was asleep in Daddy's rocker. Daddy leaned over you and kissed your head. I looked away and went on back to my room. As I curled up under the covers I felt something hard under my head. I reached under my pillow and found Daddy's gun. It was cold in my hand, heavy like lead. I flipped open the chamber, just like Daddy had taught me. The gun was loaded. I turned the gun toward my palm and let the bullets fall into my hand. Quickly I slid the gun under my bed. The bullets I shoved under the mattress. I stayed awake all night, listening, waiting for you to come looking for that gun. I wait for you to kill yourself, to kill my Daddy.

Klessa

October 14th 1910

Dear Mamma,

Daddy cried last night. Cried away in that hard wooden chair he's so proud of. I don't see why, the sides lean lopsided and the bottom seat is so flat and so hard it leaves



tinglings in your behind. I don't think Daddy cared about the tingles. I don't think he even cared about the tears. I didn't like the sight of it. When Daddy cries I feel shame, like my backbone's falling away, like I'm losing something. That's just because it's Daddy crying, anyone else I'd just sneak away, not knowing how to comfort them. But with Daddy I walked right up to him, stood in front of that chair and watched the tears. He looked up at me, face stained wet, eyes swelled up and red like a robins breast and he started crying harder. I wanted to run outside, hide in that huckleberry bush or run to you Mamma but I didn't. I was brave. I sat there in front of Daddy, looking up at him from the floor and let him cry. My hand lifted up to his dirty knee cap then his hand, the size of it swallowed mine. It was right then I knew I could comfort somebody.

Your Klessa

November 20th 1910

Dear Mamma,

Daddy told me how big I've gotten today. He used the words "young lady." He came up behind me and pulled my brown hair back off my shoulders, ran it through his fingers, it fell out gentle from his rough hands and landed soft all the way down my back. I like it when he compliments me, lets me know he's proud, like he sees something in me, something I don't see. This happens too when he squeezes my arm, that pinch lets me know he's giggling away on the inside. It's just between us, special, me and Daddy laughing from our insides. I got the best squeeze when we saw Thommy Riley trip and bust his behind coming out of the hardware store. We was just sitting across the street in Ms. Diana's new red rocking chairs and here he comes with a big brown bag of candy and about twenty gumballs stuffed in his mouth. He looked like an ole chipmunk, stocking up

for winter. He must have tripped on a rock or clump of dirt or knowing him the air under his feet and plop! He fell right down on his bottom. I swear he swallowed all them gumballs in this mouth. He got up, not even looking to see who saw, brushed clean his cotton shorts and made his way toward home, he even left all his new candy on the street. Daddy gave my arm the tightest squeeze and I knew this one meant we was going to steal that candy. When we couldn't see Thommy no more we raced over to the littered street corner. You should have seen all them colors, like a rainbow explosion. There was green and blue and that deep amber color, like a fall leaf right when the cold stains it. That's the caramel kind, my favorite; I like how they get stuck in my teeth. Well, me and Daddy cupped up all the candies, every color, and stuffed them into our pockets and down our shirts. With lumpy bellies we made toward home.

Every evening, right after the mountains pulled the sun down I headed out to my pine and ate one piece of candy. I was celebrating me and Daddy. I was remembering how much he loved me. I was savoring them squeezes.

Klessa

November 24th 1910

Dear Daddy,

I seen death today. I woke up and looked out my window and seen a spider hanging right outside. He was sitting real gentle on his web, hovering over something, looked to be a hornet. His legs, they was wrapped around the hornet, holding him. I watched the spider pull the hornet closer and closer and work his legs around him. His legs were red and black, the most even stripes. And his middle, a perfect oval, I

remember you telling me that's where all the webbing is, how a spider could make a home anywhere because it was already inside of him.

I sat there and just watched that hornet die. I felt something for him. I seen him in my head, buzzing along and then finding himself trapped in them sticky strings. Helpless now, he was finally sure of something, that he was going to die and he waited, resting. Then the spider came, all long legged and beautiful and began his work, his killing. I wonder if that hornet will go to heaven. Does God even care about things that small? I think He does. Even something as small as that hornet, God's ready to take in his lowly body and make it glorious, give him back everything that spider took away. I see God taking us Daddy, giving us back everything the world has taken. He's ready now to make us glorious. To save us. To let us rest. To hold us in his sticky strings.

I said a prayer for the hornet and wished the spider well. I seen death today and wasn't afraid.

Your young lady, Klessa

November 30th 1910

Dear Mamma,

Daddy carved the most beautiful bird today. I sat there all morning watching him work, as he peeled the wood back then dabbed that smoothness with his fingertips. He used a short, sharp piece of metal to do his whittling. I was proud of him, how he stood back every few minutes, admiring his work, how he rubbed the sweat off his forehead with the back of his hand. I think what Daddy carved was a crow. He'd never tell anybody what he was making until it was done, until you could understand for yourself. It was big with the longest legs and neck and dark scary eyes just like all the crows I've

ever seen. I swear they could all look right through you. When he was finished I waited for the crow to open his wings and fly away. I waited for him to send cracks down his body, I waited for all that smoothness to be splintered, I waited for him to escape and ruin everything Daddy had done.

Instead that wooden bird sat there and watched me.

“It’s mighty pretty isn’t it?” Daddy looked over at me; tiny slices of wood were caught in his black hair. Just as black as his Daddy’s hair, in the light all that black came off blue. I was pleased with Daddy, being the only girl in school who had a father with blue hair.

I nodded and turned back to the crow. Daddy and I watched him for a while. I think we both wanted him to come alive.

“He’s the finest crow I’ve ever seen,” I said to Daddy.

He leaned down and kissed the top of my head. “Let’s take him down to the store.”

We took Buckeye down into town today; I swear that’s the smartest donkey I ever met. Daddy don’t even have to tug on the straps no more, Buckeye just pulls the wagon down, having memorized his way. I see him up there, snout pressed to the ground, sniffing out what he’s smelled before, his grey ears perking and falling. Daddy says that’s him knowing by heart.

The mountains is so pretty coming down. When I look out Daddy says I’m looking out into forever. I see folds and folds of black and blue, all them mountains falling into each other. Some’s tall and others have rounded tops, they swell up and then sweep down, I see God breathing down in the valleys, pushing His cool breath out and up

to the mountain tops, I see His breath like fog smothering our house, protecting us. We're up so high that you could reach and snatch up a cloud, you could pull down the sky if you wanted to. You could touch God, if you were brave enough. I'm smart enough to know that when you're close enough to God you stretch out and take Him. You pull Him in and you beg Him to tell you everything He knows. You ask Him to lay His hands on you. And when He does you're not afraid anymore, that's because He takes everything from you, anything that ever meant anything, He takes it away and in that ripping hurt you finally come to know God.

Daddy only keeps his eyes straight ahead. He always points out the rhododendrons and them pin cherries. Those are my favorite, they're the brightest red I ever saw and they hang loose from thin stems, they long for somebody to come along and pluck them off. If Daddy spots some of them, which he always does, he'll pull a big bunch off and we'll eat them all the way down the mountain. They're real hard at first but if you push them back to your big teeth they'll burst and send sweet juice swirling all around your mouth.

All the way down the gaps of time are filled with our long talking spells about anything we can think of. Me and Daddy are talkers, you said that's the one thing I got from him, the rest of me is purely you. You weren't trying to hurt Daddy by telling me that, I think you was just trying to take as much of me as you could, you were trying to love me and make me love you. Now I can't stand the idea of being like you, all them things about you I wanted to be, those things I longed for, your laughter, them patterns of thinking, them ways of loving people, they's all ruined now, succumbed to heavy tears, evil thinking and ways of hurting people. Now I find myself purely Daddy's. I see myself

in the creases of his hands, in his blue eyes, in his heart, heavy and hurt.

The journey down is long and dangerous. I think that's why you never wanted to come along. Daddy didn't make it any easier talking of the bobcats and black bears, how they lurked all around the mountain looking for food and on account of Buckeye we had to be real careful. I don't know what I'd do if something happened to Buckeye, I don't think I'd want to go on, I'd want to die right there with him, riding him into heaven. I would never tell Daddy that, he'd just laugh at me and call me plum crazy.

"Buckeye's just a Donkey Klessa, his job is to serve us," I heard Daddy telling me.

I wouldn't care what Daddy said, I'd keep on loving Buckeye and if he got eaten I'd go with him to heaven, I swear I would, that would teach Daddy a lesson.

After a bumpy ride down our wagon pulls up in front of the shop. I like getting to the bottom, the air is easier to breathe and Daddy says the air's thinner up at our house on account of it being so high on the mountain. The shop looks much better now that Daddy pulled off those rotted out panels and replaced them with real light pieces of wood, now the outside almost looked white. It gleamed right there on Cherry Street, asking people to come on in and hear one of Daddy's stories.

People came from all over to buy Daddy's work. People from over the mountain come to town asking for my Daddy. They come into the shop all gussied up and start pointing at things, asking Daddy how much? Or how long did it take you to do this one here? Daddy grins, picks up the piece they're eyeing and tells its story. Whenever Daddy starts speaking people start smiling. They nod when his story is finished, the tales about how far he had to walk to get this particular piece of wood or how many days he labored

in his workshop, how many nights he left his family craving for his attention. The people are impressed by Daddy; they want to take a piece of him back home with them. They understand his whittling as something they've always wanted for themselves, a chunk of peace, a moment to work their own two hands, to make something out of what God gave. Daddy wraps the piece up in old newspaper and off they go. I always wonder where those wooden carvings will end up. Alone on the bottom of a dusty bookcase or propped up proud right in the center of a fireplace mantle.

Once my feet landed on the gravel outside Daddy's shop I always wondered how we made it all that way, through all them trees, through all that time. My favorite part of the trip is right before we get to the shop. I always know when we were getting close, Daddy stops talking and in the quiet my mind starts wandering back and front, back to old memories, ahead to plans I've made for myself. The same feeling came over me when Daddy would bring me down to school every morning. We'd leave in the middle of the night to get to the schoolhouse on time. Daddy would yawn the whole way down and I would sleep, bundled up under his right arm. But that venture got tiresome and hard and Daddy said I didn't need no schooling anyway. He said I'd find my own way. Mostly now when I thought about my own way I made pictures in my head about heading to college, writing stories for people to be changed by or living off on my own on our mountain. I'd painted such handsome pictures in my head; Daddy would say they was just "fantasies," things that were better kept inside my mind. Daddy couldn't believe in anything but what was right in front of him, what he was told, what he decided was right and wrong. Once he made that decision, it was no use in trying to change his mind, trying to get him to understand something else. I think he had pictures of my life planned in his

head too. He saw me living on the mountain with the two of you, he saw me working with my hands, pulling a harvest out of the land or digging a jagged tool into a piece of Burch wood. Daddy wouldn't be able to understand my pictures so I didn't bother telling him. These is the times I miss you, you'd always understand my pictures, you'd call them the truth of who I am, say it was God preparing me for something, painting His own picture for me to give me a *future and a hope*.

“Well lets get to unloading these carvings girl,” Daddy called to me from the back of the wagon. I raced over to him as he was lifting up the big canvass flap that kept the carvings safe on our way down. He flipped back the fabric and underneath laid dozens of carvings. The most I'd seen in one load. I think Daddy has been whittling more lately on account of you. I see him afraid to go near you, I see him terrified that you'll disappoint him, that he'll smell whiskey on your breath or see a glossy frosting over your eyes and everything that he thought had changed would simply be the same and he'd be disappointed, mad at you, start screaming and yelling or even worse he wouldn't say anything at all. I think them times when he'd given up; he'd take to town for a few days, sleep on the floor of the shop, whittle and smile at people, play like nothing was wrong.

Daddy loved to play, to pretend things were better than they really were, to trick himself into believing in something that wasn't even there to begin with. His playing is why he didn't bother to help you; it was easier for Daddy to pretend you were fine, to pretend that you were still you, to pretend that you didn't spend all day on the porch, half naked sipping amber liquid that he'd brought home in a paper bag. Daddy told me that was you just having a bad day, that he was just trying to help you. I knew better and then



I remembered better. As the days went on, and you drifted farther and farther away from me, memories swarmed into my mind like bees escaping their hive. I seen in my head the long mornings when I would wait for you to wake up. I'd always wait for the sun to reach the top of the sky before I came into your room. I'd tap gentle on the wooden door and you'd tell me I could come in. I was relieved. I knew if I was there with you, somehow you'd be better; you'd want to be better, be better for me. When I came to you though nothing that I thought was there, you were already gone, lifted up by those feather pillows Daddy stuffed, hands by your side, numb, and eyes, glossed up, and mouth, curled at the ends, pretending for me. I could never stand to be around you for too long before a fire started in me, before my cheeks flushed up and my hands got wet. I'd get mad at you but I didn't know why I was mad. Something was different and I didn't know why, I didn't know who to blame. Today you still play with me, you pretend, you fumble and wreck and I move along with you, I guess in this way I'm like Daddy, pretending to make myself feel better. I pray for wisdom, I pray for moments that I don't have to pretend, I pray for moments that aren't wrapped in lies, for moments of truth, for moments when I can be pure in something. I wanted to help you Mamma. I didn't want to pretend like Daddy. I wanted to understand and save you but ain't nobody gonna rise against Daddy, ain't nobody gonna tell Daddy how to do anything, tell him how he made a mistake, tell him how to be better, he was already better. Now I think I should have said something, I shouldn't have been afraid but I was and all I could do was just wait and watch. Wait for you to come back to life, watch you ruin what God gave you, ruin what he wanted to be glorious, your life.

After we was done unloading mountain lions, bears and chipmunks Daddy locked up the shop and we walked around town. Dusk was just settling in, bringing with it orange and pink to hover about the mountain ridges, for a moment everything froze in light color. I didn't want to take my eyes off the sky, I wanted to understand what it meant and all that beauty and change had to mean something. Maybe that was God reaching out to His people after a long day's work, He was trying to tell them that He was still here, He was waiting for them, He hadn't left them for a second all day.

I'm fond of this place, this small town, the sounds it makes, the shuffling of shoes on the dirt road, horse hooves clunking along, clop clop clop. The smells, they'll knock you right off your feet, the sweet smell of a fresh lit cigarette, Mrs. Cooper's buttermilk biscuits, rising up in the oven. And people is always mingling outside shops or on the street corners, the benches is always filled with tired farmers with dirty hands, discussing the last heavy patch of rain that washed out their corn crop or that pesky black bear that ate all their huckleberries. Daddy's favorite place to sit is right outside the fire station on South Daugherty Street. I sit with him and listen as he talks to the men about town. Daddy talks about the six baby pigs that was just born at our house. He's proud of them, he plans to fatten them up and sell at least four of them, I can't bear to think about getting rid of them pigs. I've already tried to stay away from the pin because I know me and if I spot just one of them little pink balls I'll fall head over heels. It's easier to let them pigs go if I don't love them.

Listening to Daddy and his friends, hearing the people, see the life in this place I find myself missing coming down here to town for my schooling. I miss the children and my teacher Ms. Cox. She used to play with my hair when she was giving a lecture. Come

right up behind me and pull my hair off my neck and shoulders. That about put me to sleep every time. She also used to call me “bright,” did I ever tell you? I don’t know when I’ll ever get to go back to school. You was teaching me for a while, remember that? But the more whiskey you poured the harder it was for you to teach me. It went along alright for a while. Every morning you’d come into my room, brush the hair out of my face and kiss my check.

“Time for school,” you’d whisper in my ear.

I rolled over, ignoring you but that never worked. You’d rip off the covers and then I’d know you meant business. Out in the living room, right by the old wood stove you’d have loose papers and books laid out on that big round table Daddy made for you when you two got married. You both loved that table, used to rattle on and on about it. How Daddy spent six weeks making it perfectly round, Daddy said he must have went through four trees to make it just right for you. We’d sit cross legged around the table and you’d read to me, you said that was the best kind of schooling, reading and then understanding the things you read. I loved that you could read, in those moments where your voice became hollow and a part of the page I believed I had the smartest Mamma in the world. It was like those books were written so you could read them. I reckon you should have been a storyteller, I just know people would pay money to hear your voice, hear them big words you were saying so effortlessly.

I felt like we read for hours every morning and right then before the sun peeked up over the mountains we was finished. I carried with me all day the things that you read, I rolled the sentences over in my head, flushed them out, trying to understand what they meant. They was hard to know, on account of them words being for adults, not children.

You said you didn't believe in reading me silly children's books.

"You're smarter than that Klessa," you said. So you'd go on reading to me and I'd fumble through the words and meanings, trying to understand for you. There are streams of words I can still remember like, *my passions have made me live, and my passions have killed me*. I remember the day you read that, afterwards you closed the book and just looked at me. I'd like to think we was sitting there thinking about our own passions. First I had to get a handle on what a passion actually was, I remember Daddy using that word when he was talking about his whittling or you. So I knew passion had something to do with what you love, what makes you tick, what makes you get outta bed despite the fog outside your window smothering all the sunlight. A lot of the times I did understand and for an instant I could live in them words, live like they was telling me to but then once you was done reading I lost that magic and that's how come all day I tried to feel again what I'd felt the first time. But I didn't want to think too hard about my own passions because I figured they'd end up killing me.

Now we don't do much schooling. Sometimes you'll come into my room real early and kiss my cheek, I can always feel you looking at me, it heats me up and I want to pull you down under the covers with me but I don't. I play like a possum and wait for you to leave so I can breathe. And you always leave. Other times you wake me up and just like before you say it's time for schooling. I mosey out to the round table and wait for you to read to me. But it's never the same, for a moment I always think it will be but you come to life and everything is different. I want to leave and go back to sleep but I can't, I don't want to leave you there, reading and gulping alone at the round table, dying there by your passions. I play your games with you, I act like I believe but you know better.

You told me you was sorry once with tears in your eyes and I forgave you right then. You're like those pigs to me; it's harder to let something go when you already love it so much.

After Daddy talked and lounged with his friends it was time to head back home. I looked forward to my own bed. But before that I longed for Daddy's arm wrapped around my shoulders, I longed to sleep near him, that way I could keep track of the thumps of his heart and know when something was wrong. I think Daddy's heartbeat easier when I was near him, when we was near each other. I imagined our hearts beating out the same pattern, slowed and strong, like thunder in our chests. We was soul mates in that way, Daddy and I, the way our hearts beat together.

The way up was the hardest. I felt bad for Buckeye because I knew he was tired so I prayed for him each journey up, praying that he'd make it, that God would move his hooves without Buckeye knowing it, like magic, that's how God always worked. You'll feel something you won't be able to explain, you won't know where it came from but you'll know it was something different than anything else around. I know that those feelings is God. I know He moves Buckeye up the mountain every time, if He didn't Buckeye wouldn't be able to make it, he wasn't strong enough, wasn't as strong as God inside of him. I slept all the way under Daddy's arm. When the wagon slowed Daddy pulled his arm up and kissed the top of my head. I knew we was home. Morning looked to be coming soon. I waited while Daddy tied up Buckeye in the barn. He came back and picked me up in his arms and we went on inside. The fire was going and you was laying out on the floor. I heard Daddy's heart pick up speed, my own thumps soon followed. Daddy took me straight to my room; I bounced on his shoulder all the way down the hall

and watched you. I thought you were dead.

After Daddy tucked me in he left me there in the cold dark and I started coming up with all the ways that I didn't need you. I started thinking up reasons why you're not important to me, reasons why I could go on just fine without a Mamma. Barbara Begley don't have a Mamma and she seems fine. Remember her Mamma died the awfulest death I'd ever heard of, at first she was just feeling sick all on account of her back. Barbara said she had to rub her Mamma's back all the time to make her feel better, she'd tell me that when she came into Daddy's store and I'd happen to be there. She couldn't go to school anymore either and that made me feel better, she was caring for her Mamma, like I was caring for you. Then I stopped seeing Barbara and then heard that her Mamma had died, something in her back creeped up into all of her, made her weak and took her life away.

Weeks later I seen Barbara again, skipping down the street with one of Mr. Bailey's ice cream cones, she was skipping after her Mamma had died, she was perfectly fine and if you was dead out there on the floor then I'd be fine too. Maybe I didn't need you like I thought I did. I only needed you because you were around all the time, if you wasn't I'd have done the same things without you. I'd just grown used to you, like a habit and I know I could break an old habit. So I sat there in the darkness holding my breath, hoping to hear something but I never did, it was like Daddy shut my door then disappeared into the air. I don't even think I heard him walk back down the hall. I grew tired and couldn't listen anymore and by morning it was like nothing had happened. Everything was as it should be. You was up making breakfast, coffee was percolating, Daddy was sitting in his rocker. I came up to you, grabbed you from behind and you pulled my arms tighter against your belly. I longed for you in the mornings, before you

got swept up in that nasty stuff, that was the time you were still my Mamma, the times that made me forget, the times that helped me to play like nothing was wrong. I hated the mornings too because it was in that wet dew that hung in the air, in those yellow belts of light that shuttered down into the kitchen that I knew I needed you, more than that I knew I wanted you, I wanted you for every moment of my life.

I love you, your daughter Klessa

## Part II

December 1st 1910

Dear Chet,

Seems like it's been forever since I've laid eyes on you. I know it's just been a few months since you moved over the mountain but missing you makes it seem like years. I'm lonesome for you early in the mornings when we used to sip our coffee out on that splintered porch you called your "baby," and when I'm in town minglin' with the boys. I miss your eyes rollin' back at Randy's dumb jokes or you stompin' on my foot real hard when ya wanna laugh but you just can't, you didn't wanna embarrass anybody, that pride of yours. Today in town I needed ya bad. I heard some more talk about the mountain and that kinda talk makes my eyes water and my lips itch, makes me swell up on the inside. Them kinda feelings bring out Pop in me, he always got so blazin' mad, storming through the house, throwin' anything that wouldn't break and set Mamma to yellin' too, you know he was damn scared of her. If he'd heard these rumors I'm hearin' he wouldn't stand for it, I'll tell ya that. Trouble is I don't know how to stand up to em', I don't see how I could win and I sure as hell don't want to go around acting like Pop, that's how he got shot in the first place, running that mouth of his.

In town today I heard the boys shouting all the way up at the store as Klessa and I were locking up. Did I tell ya she comes to the store with me now? Claims she's interested in my whittling, truth is I think she just wants to get away from her Mamma. The sun was just deciding to make its way down the mountain when we headed up Cherry Street to the firehouse. The boys was all huddled in a circle, like some kinda secret meetin', yellin', throwin' their hands up, pausin' only to let loose an old wad of chewing tobacco lodged in their gums. I know Mamma never liked us doing that stuff, she said it stained our teeth and got us addicted and there ain't anything worse than an addiction. But when I'm around these boys, I'll tell ya, it puts me in the mind to have a pinch. It ain't gonna hurt nothing anyhow because Mamma's been dead a long time. I don't think a little tobacco's enough reason for her to be risin' from the dead. Well, the closer I got to the boys the more I knew they'd gotten a hold of some real good gossip. I swear sometimes they're worse than women.

Robert was breathing real heavy when we came to them, he was pointing up toward the mountain. "They said they'd be laying the track soon, that's the last I heard." I had Klessa's little hand in mine, I had to ball my hand almost completely shut to feel she was there. I feel like her hands haven't changed at all since she was a little one, she's still small enough for me to lose or maybe that's just my mind working in them twisted ways. I guess I'll always think of her as my little lady, even though she is fourteen now. I can't recollect what fourteen was like for me, I know I was here in this place with you, we was fondling our way through these mountains. I guess that's when I started being amazed, when the mountains started doing a work in me, etching themselves within my soul, getting ahold of me, trappin' me. You know I don't mind still being here, it's a good



trappin' in my eyes. I can't imagine a life away from these mountains, they's my place, I know em' all like the back of my hand. Remember when we was young and you led me through the forest, all the way up to Toe Gap, we wandered for days, through thickets and brush patches, through long poles of trees that looked to reach heaven. Every night we lay out on the cold Earth and tried to make shapes with the stars. I seen a lion opening its mouth to swallow a baby turtle. You said you seen Mamma, mad as hell that we hadn't come home yet. We both burst out laughing and rolled into each other, we liked when we could get one over on Mamma, that's because she was always bossin' us, now we's gonna boss her a little. We knew she'd be mad when we trailed back home, covered in dried dirt and flaky slabs of mica but she'd forget she was mad the minute she saw us, pulling us up into her big arms, like loaves of bread, saying, it's a miracle from God I got my boys back.

In them woods with you I could be anything I wanted to be. Nothing else mattered except what the mountains was telling me. They's speaking truth to me, the only truth. You been readin' your Bible like you used to? I've picked mine back up as of late, considering all these rumors I'd figured it was high time. The Word says that when somebody believes in God that they can move mountains. I don't think anyone can really wrap their heads around that promise when they come face to face with one of these mountains. With all that God I got inside of me I wouldn't be able to get the damn thing to budge. Now I pray that God would grow bigger in me and help me not to move the mountain but to protect em', help em' to stay put and out of greedy hands and hungry hearts, I pray that God will show me a way.

Anyhow the boys was still yammering on, "What track?" I asked, interrupting

em’.

“The railroad track you fool” Robert said, “Ain’t ya heard of that Russ, they’s gonna be laying it all the way up to your place. A few of em’ was up walking around up there, trying decide the best place for the track. Didn’t ya see em? They was up there for three days.”

Of course I’d heard these rumors before, from people talking in the store, jabbing their jaws about some company coming in. People wandering up on the mountain in their brand new mountain boots, countin’ the cost of ripping up the ground, tearing down the trees.

“That’s just a rumor boys and I ain’t gonna believe any of until I seen it.”

“Well it’s the truth,” Robert piped up, “You just wait and see, they’ll be making a ruckus up there I guarantee it. Guess you’ll finally have to move down here and live with the rest of us.”

Now you know that’s something I’d never do, move off my mountain. It’s the last piece of family I have, the last piece of myself. I looked down at Klessa and she was just staring up into the sky, plum ignoring us. I always wonder what she’s thinking about when she gazes off like that, maybe she is listening, maybe she’s understanding something I ain’t. Boy she’s smart. I known that since she started sneaking off to that twisted up old pine, out behind the barn. I followed her out there one time. She wandered off after dinner and I made like I was going to bed but really I snuck out the back and followed her. She made through the dirt yard quick with that old leather journal of hers, I’ve never seen her without that thing. I kept track of her by the moonlight, that white dress she was wearing caught the light up so pretty. I came up over the hill and there she

was sitting, back rested up against the rough bark, probably prickling up that dress of hers. She looked up into the sky and what a sky it was. I remember it with big hunks of stars, sprawled out over the blackness; some hunks gathered together, mingling, making friends and others perched alone, looking out over the mountains. In the silence she was like Doty, looking at her I seen the silhouette of my wife's face. I seen her as she was before, as I loved her for the first time, before our love changed. It changed under burdens, under death, under a child, it changed under life. I ain't saying its weak, I'm saying we worked hard in this love, we've broken it and mended it time and time again.

After a long spell Klessa flipped open that leather and started writing. She wrote with an old piece of coal she'd mashed down to a point. I waited for her to finish but she kept on going, writing and looking up at the sky. She was thinkin' hard, I could tell that. I grew tired of hunching in the ground, my pants was soaking up the Earth so I trailed on home. I knew she didn't need me there; this was something she'd wanted to do alone.

I smiled down at Klessa then shifted my eyes to the boys, "Ain't no way in hell I'd ever do something as crazy as move off my mountain." Then like a coward I changed the subject.

"Speaking of my place, ya'll should come on up and see these new of mine pigs, liable to be real fat ones come winter." I hope they was just rumors Chet, if they ain't I'd hate to think what that would do to me.

Your brother, Russell

December 20th 1911

Dear Chet,

Five days till Christmas. I hope you get this letter by then. I ain't sure how fast

Boris can move my letters off this mountain when the snow is this deep. For most people the snow is a hassle but I'm in love with it, the burdens it creates. It stops people dead in their tracks, holds em' up, keeps them from living their lives the way they want to. Brings out the truth in people. I find that most folks can't handle things like that, life's hiccups but not us, we's born to handle anything. I think that tough skin of ours comes from living on this mountain, making it through hard winters and blooming springs, whether its white or green, something is always taking over up here. Also I think we learned from Mamma and Pop, learned their ways, found em' broken then came up with our own. These days I seen my own ways broken, people's breakin' em' for me, the railroad, Doty. Turns out that railroad ain't any laughing matter, something I can brush off. The company started building the train station down in town eight days ago. Of course you know me, I trudged all the way down there in this snow to see what was going on. I took Klessa with me, I was scared to bring her along, didn't want her freezing to death or us getting tripped up on some slick sheet of ice, you know how the ice builds up on these slopes but I brought her along anyway, to tell ya the truth I was more afraid of leavin' her with Doty. I'm scared of what Klessa's seein' at home, what she's thinkin' about it. I know I don't bring up Doty's drinking much and it ain't nothing to fuss over, everyone in the family loves their whiskey, it's just gotten a little outta hand lately, couple instances, her being passed out in the middle of the day. She shakes awful when I don't bring anything home for her. I stopped bringing the whiskey home for a while but she stopped talking to me, said she was gonna kill herself. So I brought it home again, I know I shouldn't have but what else was I to do. I couldn't bear the thought of something happening to my girl but then again maybe I could, the way she's changed lately, maybe

I'd want her gone. No what am I saying? Crazy talkin', God I sound like Pop don't I? It's just that Doty's supposed to be the one in charge of me, the strong one, that's why I married her, she was the smartest gal I'd ever met and I knew she'd be able to take care of me. Coming from up North she knew all them fancy ways, always readin' outta big ole books and using words I couldn't even dream of sayin' right and I think when she met me she was just plum entertained by me. She taught me to read and write, made me smart just like her. Then I took her through the mountains, showed her what I knew. We'd disappear into the woods for days, just like you and I used to do, she was tough in them woods, didn't mind em' at all, I was sure she'd start huffin' and puffin' about the dirt and the cold but she didn't say a word, I knew she was gettin' trapped here. I seen that the moment she rubbed her hand on some lime green moss clingin' to an old stump and said to me I never want to leave here. Right then I knew she was the gal for me, three days later I married her and we moved up into the old cabin. Brings tears to my eyes thinkin' about all that, diggin' up lost memories. Now I'm the one who's supposed to take care of her and I just don't know how, ain't that the saddest thing you ever heard a man say, that he doesn't know how to take care of his wife. Instead of helpin' her I keep sneakin' away, down into town or off into the woods. There I can know her through my memories, that way I can keep on lovin' her instead of being disappointed and sick to my stomach.

You can see why Klessa is happy to go with me. She loved the snow too, told me she liked how it made everything quiet and harder. She could bear great things like her Daddy. I was proud of her for that. Gettin' down to town was hellish, it took twice as long and I swear we just about slid the whole way down. Boy is it pretty though, how the ice clings to the tree branches, suffocates em' in the glossiest sheath. Klessa didn't take

her eyes off em' the whole way down.

“Ain't that the prettiest thing you ever saw Daddy?”

“Yeah Honey it is.”

She went on lookin' up, “It's like that ice is protecting the trees from everything outside, it's locking them in place, making them heavy, full up of something. That ice is sealing the trees up for Spring, cuddling the green blooms waiting to poke out from the inside. I can't wait for that.” She smiled up at the trees or God, I don't know which and we kept on toward town. Boy that girl can see something in anything. All that thinkin' would be the death of me. The one good thing Pop taught us was to stick to reality, it's all one human being can bare, thinking past what ya see, now that's just a waste of time.

We rode up to the front of the store, poor Buckeye was just wobbling all over, legs was bendin' and his teeth was chattering. My heart softened a bit and I let him in the store, started a fire for him then Klessa and I headed down to the heart of town, where the train station was being built. People was everywhere, this construction was enough to bring them outta their homes and into the cold. Right there wide as hell, was wooden planks standing up tall then reaching over to meet at a squat peak, the Black Mountain Railroad Depot. This was just the skeleton of it but in this flimsy outline it stood strong, made its presence known and told everybody what was comin'. Klessa and I watched for a while but I grew tired of lookin', hearin' people talk about how good this would be for the town, how it would bring in new faces, new jobs, a new time. I tried to hold my tongue but you know how that goes over. Ellenor was goin' on and on behind me about how she hopes her son would get a job workin' on the line, how she'd be so proud of him. I swung around real quick.

“You’d be proud of him would ya? Proud of your boy for tearing apart your own home with his bare hands. Is that what makes ya proud Ellenor? Is that it? Cuz that’s what this station is aiming to do, tear up our mountains and change our whole way of life. You know the people that’s gonna be comin’ up in here, them rich folks, thinkin’ they can change us, make us better by stealin’ from us. But if that’s what makes ya proud go right on ahead!”

After my long wind I stormed off, draggin’ Klessa with me, I’m guessin’ I wasn’t settin’ the best example but damnit I was fired up, still am. Can you believe these people? All excited about their own deaths, that’s how I see it. I wish you was here to calm me down, reason with me but I have a feelin’ you’d be just as mad as I am or at least I hope you would be.

Russ

January 3rd 1911

Dear Mamma,

When I was twelve years old, all but two years ago, you read to me that *the world is too much with us* and I didn’t understand. I only knew that the world was made for us, made for our pleasure by God, the world is our place to dwell, the space where we worship our Lord and carry out our lives down in the valley the way He tells us. It seems so simple doesn’t it, just living the way God tells you, heading along on the better path, heading heart first, living better by the Spirit inside you. All people believe being a disciple is easy but it’s the hardest job I’ve ever had. Loving God is hard, right from that moment He tugs on your heart you’ve gotta be ready, you’ve gotta take Him up on His invitation, you gotta let it all go, die to everything that ever met anything to you and walk

with Him, bear His cross. You taught me that it was hard, the hardest thing I'd ever do but that it would be worth it.

Right now I'm dying for Jesus, He's taking things from me, He's taking you, taking my home and in that taking He wants to prove to me that He's all I need. *If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.* I'm afraid Mamma, I'm afraid to be alone with Jesus, I'm afraid of having nothing but Him, I'm afraid to hate, what if He isn't enough? Maybe I need you, your arms wrapped from my back to my belly, your wet kisses on my nose tip, your smell, like the juices of a ripped up leaf. And my mountains, like you they keep me, hold me in a place I never wanna leave. My days wouldn't make sense without a deep gulp of heavy fog, without seeing blue peaks, rolling together like velvet. I only seen velvet once but I'll never forget it, how heavy it looked, how it clung and sucked up the life all around it. Doris wore velvet in church one Sunday, that was when we was still going to church, like clockwork every week, no buts or God would be mad at us You put an end to that soon after you started your drinking. I don't think you stopped believing, you just didn't want the people, didn't want them prying into your business, noticing. You didn't want help, you still don't. Doris walked ahead of us into the little chipped white and sun blistered building covered neck to toe in purple velvet. She looked hot. Uncomfortable and regretful of her decision to wear such a thing, I bet she thought everyone would think something of her, think about something other than what they usually think. At all the front porch get togethers I could hear the people talking, I'd heard this string of words many a time, standing down by Daddy's hip.



“You didn’t invite Doris did ya?”

“Well yeah I reckon I did.”

“What the hell were you thinking? No one here wants to hear her mouth!”

“Maybe she won’t show up.”

“There she is.”

Doris walked so proud that day; she walked aiming to tell the people something about herself. She wanted them to believe she was better than them. I seen something in Doris, seen something under all that thick fabric, I seen her sweat dripping from her head, I seen her hands laced together, blue veins popping through her olive skin. I seen Doris as a sad person, caught up in something she doesn’t want to be, suffocating under the thick velvet, suffocating under the glaring, the whispering, the pointing. I seen Doris suffocate under the people. Doris left church that Sunday without anyone speaking to her. She came out of the church expecting people to compliment her but nobody did, they didn’t on purpose. She wandered around the backs of all the people then headed home alone to an empty house. I wanted to chase her down the street and tell her she looked pretty. You wouldn’t have liked that. I didn’t understand why since you thought everyone else was Jesus, why couldn’t Doris be? Why couldn’t we go out of our way and help her? Why did you get to decide who Jesus was in anyhow? Maybe you just let Jesus walk off in that velvet, grieved and now he was disappointed in you. I wanted you to think that so badly. Suddenly find yourself nervous talking to Fran and Betty in that long red dress that you loved so much. You looked so beautiful in it that every man in town had their eye on you. I think Daddy liked men looking at you, made him feel proud, like he’d gotten a hold of the best prize there ever was. That’s how everyone looked at you, they horded around

you after church, just the way Doris wanted people to come to her. People look right at you, couldn't take their eyes off your long brown hair and silky skin. You was everything Doris wanted to be.

What's wrong with needing things? What's wrong with me loving you so much that even when God's disappointed in you I love you? What's wrong with needing mountains to stay alive and wearing velvet to say something about yourself? What's wrong with having passions and being led by them. I'm overwhelmed by my darlings, they overwhelm me and being overwhelmed, being taken back, consumed in something, well I wouldn't be alive without them feelings. What would be the point?

Jesus is taking things; He's asking me to die for Him. He's asking me to die to this world, to live in this place but to not be a part of it. He doesn't want me to believe what it's telling me, He doesn't want me to succumb to it, to its people. Right now it's easy to hate the people, looking at what they're doing to the world. They're ripping it up, ripping holes in what God made, ripping holes right through His heart. The world is too much with us. People taint the world, ruin its point and it becomes too much, too hard. I'm seeing it now, this hardness right here in our mountains. You should have seen the rails Mamma, you would've died right there, I know you would. They're long and slick, like evil serpents, slithering up, cutting their way through with thin blades, clunking hearts and rattling tails. They'll be laying them soon, people are saying it'll start in March, right when the buds start cracking up out of the soft wood, pushing up life in all that gray death. Them rails just sit there now in enormous dirty trucks, rusting up, waiting to ruin us. I'm surprised Daddy hasn't hitched a plan to go down there and steal them. That's something he'd do. He's already got the boys down there every Sunday, hollering

about this and that, mainly it's just him causing a fuss and everyone looking at him with sad eyes. They're thinking he's crazy, wild, lost his mind, a few cherries short of a pie. The railroad's a good thing, that's what they're thinking, thinking only of themselves in this world, making the world too much, making it harder than it should be. The world is too much with us. Us. We ruin it, we force it into something it ain't, we pound and press expecting miracles, expecting something only the world can give. I don't want what the world can give me. It ain't enough for me. I'm selfish in that way, Daddy says that's me wantin' more than I got. I am too much with the world.

Klessa

January 12th 1911

Dear Chet,

Christmas has come and gone and I ain't heard from you yet. I hope you're doing well. I hope Suzan ain't givin' ya much trouble these days. They'll be laying the track here soon, I heard March bein' thrown around. Two months. I been causin' a bit of trouble down by the train station. I got some of the boys together to do a little lashin' out but nothing came of it. No one can stop this company, even the mountains is powerless against em'. I'm worried about the store. I hope I don't have to sell the place but you know me, I'm thinkin' the worst and preparing for it. I wonder what I would do without the place, it's been my life for ten years. And lately we been doing real good, hitting record sales, I think people is just trying to savor this place before it's taken away from em'. It's nice to know that my whittling can comfort these people, make em' feel like they're home. It's my home, all my carvings, it's how I make everything else in my life make sense and I can't imagine not doing it. I'll be damned if I go work for that

company, whoever they are, they ain't got no business coming up in here, disturbing our lives, making a mess of things. And what's the worst is that people here is believing that this will be a good thing for our town, our mountains. But they'll learn, once they start tearing into the rock and ripping down the trees, they'll learn the truth and they'll be ashamed that they ever thought this was good. I hope I hear from you soon.

Brother Russ

February 2nd 1912

Dear Mamma,

Today is my birthday. I am sixteen years old. I know you forgot and I wouldn't dare mention your mistake to you. You couldn't handle it, another mistake when you thought you were doing so good. You stopped drinking for a while and I was proud of you, mostly I was relieved, finally I could close my eyes without being afraid of the shouting and loud thuds and always the faint thought that came in like a whisper that told me you'd be dead when I woke up. I don't know what came over Daddy when he brought home that whiskey, maybe he wanted to test you, see how strong you were. I knew you were weak, totally defeated, shaky and scattered. Just like he hoped you wouldn't you took a sip and the deadly spiral started all over again. I didn't care. I couldn't care. The pride I had the hope, all washed away and left me raw and unfeeling. That's when I learned not to expect anything from you, when I learned I didn't need you to make me anything. I'm learning a lot these days, making lessons out of these short moments of my life. Maybe I'm lucky for this. I slip up sometimes and remember you're my Mamma, I remember that I care, that I love you so deeply that I couldn't imagine existing in a world where you didn't. But I bring myself back, to the unfeeling, knowing you only as a dying

animal, heaving alone, skinned and consumed. I rather think of you this way. It's easier to hate than forgive.

I'm still mad at Daddy for tempting you in that way. I'm disappointed in both of you because you've given rise to hate in me and all that hate makes me feel alone. Daddy made a big fuss about my birthday.

This morning he woke me up early, "We's goin' to town girl, get dressed." He winked at me and closed the door behind him. I was surprised and happy to be out of this house. It's starting to smell like death, a bitter smell, like stale morning breath that takes over a whole room until you open the door. Even though I was mad at Daddy I wanted to leave this house so I played along with him.

It was cold coming down the mountain and rain fell on us like a mist. Daddy was just jabbering away but I didn't pay him any mind. I couldn't. I offered a few short words here and there and each time I felt like I was going to vomit. I've never felt this way toward Daddy before and I wish I didn't. It's strange feeling this way toward you both. It's strange being alone like this, being mad and not budging to forgive. I wish I could forgive but not today, not this minute, not on this mountain, not after what you've all done to me.

"I think we're going to be seeing the rails soon," Daddy's voice came out, sounded like he was about to cry. I didn't care.

I seen the rails first. They was lifted up by big trenches, beside the rails the ground dropped off. Inside them trenches there were men, dirty men digging away at the Earth, tearing it apart. Daddy moved Buckeye closer to them.

"You boys sure are workin' hard ain't ya," Daddy shouted down inside the deep

holes. No one looked up. It was like they was told not to speak to nobody.

“I said you boys are workin’ damn hard, ya hear me?” Daddy repeated.

One of the men looked up, his face and hair streaked with dirt. “Yeah we heard you, you old hick, now get on out of here, ya ain’t supposed to be here.”

Daddy’s eyes bugged right out of his head, his hands bore down harder on Buckeye’s strap. “Like hell I ain’t. This is my mountain, yuns the one’s that need to get outta here boy!”

The man looked up at us and smiled, “It ain’t your mountain no more.”

Daddy kicked Buckeye with his heel and we wandered off into the woods away from the men. It seemed the farther we traveled the louder the mens tinkering got. Bangin’ and diggin’. I could hear their sweat beads falling to the ground, watering the Earth. I could hear their hands cracking open from struggling with their shovels.

By the time we got to town Daddy was steamed up. I knew he was headed straight for the store. I think he understood what was coming. When we got to the store there was a piece of paper nailed to the door.

#### NOTICE

10 Days to SHUT DOWN

Dickey and Campbell

“Shut down! What the hell is this? They can’t shut me down. I’ve had this store for ten years. Who do they think they are?” Daddy ripped the paper off the door and balled it up in his fist like he was trying to make it disappear. He stood there with his head down, that little ball of paper suffocating in his palm. I couldn’t do anything but look at him. I didn’t want to reach out and touch him, afraid of what he would do. A

stream of tears started to fall from his face.

“Goddamnit,” he whispered to the ground. That was a word Daddy never used; he said it was the Devils word. The only word that made God disappointed in you. Then

Daddy stormed off down the street. He didn’t even look back at me. I didn’t feel like chasing him so I sat outside the store on that old rocker and waited for Daddy to come back. Then my jaw started to tighten, my mind began whirling. What was losing this shop gonna do to Daddy? That’s all he had. Maybe he would slip away too, like you. Then I wouldn’t have anybody. Maybe the rumors were true and the mountains were going to be pillaged and ruined. I didn’t believe before because Daddy didn’t but now with that little slip of paper, he did believe. I saw it in his tears, in this balled up fist, I seen him succumb to what everyone else already seen coming. I seen Daddy as weak. Right then in all that racing and whirling I forgave Daddy. I seen his life crumbling all around him, like the trenches that fell around those rails and I decided to love Daddy again.

Klessa

March 29th, 1912

Russ,

We heard about the company coming in over your way. I hate hearing that because I know how much it’s hurting you. Lately the sawmill ain’t doing good, they’re planning on closing us down in less than a month. Right when I found this out I sat right down with my good friend Landon and set him to writing you this letter for me. We plan on coming up to your place to work for the company. I know that ain’t what you would have wanted for me Russ but times is hard and I need the money. I hope to leave in a

month or two.

Chet

June 21st 1912

Dear Chet,

I am happy to hear that you are headed my way brother but you know I ain't happy about you coming to work for the company. I hope this letter gets to ya before ya make the trip. There's a couple things that's been happenin' around here that I think you oughta know about. I hope they change your mind about working for these bastards. First of all they closed my shop down. Ain't that the dumbest thang you ever heard? My shop ain't hurting anybody, hell I barely made a sell till summer came anyhow. Well now that it is summer I got no money to show for it. Doty's asking me about money and this and that and I just don't know what to tell her. Now that I ain't got the shop I gotta stay home and you know thats drivin' me plum crazy. I been doing more carvins now since I got the time and I have half a mind to go down to town and sell em' to people right there on the street. That would teach that ole company. They said they'd hire me on and I told them that there ain't no way in hell I'd betray myself like that. The company goes by Dickey and Campbell, real big shots, I seen one of em' the other day walking around the depot, long beard, curled up on the ends, spiffy suit, gray with them little long white stripes. He thought he was something alright. So I approached the man, told him my name and he said his name was Dickey.

“Well how do you do sir, pleasure to meet you,” I said to him, acting all sweet.

“Nice to know you sir,” he said back to me.

“Pretty nice depot you got here.”



“Yes we are proud of it,” he looks up at it, like it’s some kinda shrine or somethin’. “Are you one of our boy’s sir?”

I lied a little and told him “Yes sir I am.”

“Well wonderful, I bet you’re pretty impressed, the ten gauge and the switch backs, it’s all new technology my boy.”

“Yes very impressed. You know us mountain folk, ain’t used to all this.” He smiled at me like he already knew that. “What are yalls plans for all that fancy technology?”

“We’re planning to take all the way up the mountain, to the summit.”

“You’re takin’ the rails all the way to the summit.”

“Oh yes, some good land up there. Good money.”

I’ll tell ya what it was right then that I swear I felt my heart jump up to my throat. He stopped me before I could say anything else.

“I’m going to have to be going. Good talking with you my boy.”

A conversation like that is liable to set me off for a good couple months. Cutting down the trees all the way up to my home. I was sure they wouldn’t make it up that high, it’s too damn dangerous, didn’t they know that? How in the hell do they expect to run a train up there with all them steep drop offs. I know you said you were coming to work with these fellas and you know I ain’t happy about it brother but I know you need the work. Maybe once you see what they’re doing you’ll change your mind about working for them. I can’t wait to lay eyes on ya, I’ve been lonesome for you for too long.

Russ

July 1st 1912

Dear Mamma,

Daddy hasn't been home in two days. I'm worried about him. He's never stayed this long from home without telling me. I just pray he ain't hurt or done something stupid. I've got half a mind to go down to town looking for him but I know he wouldn't like that, he still thinks it's too dangerous for me to travel down alone. I can tell Daddy has been stirred up lately, mainly about his store closing down. It was horrible Mamma. We had to pack up everything and load it into the wagon. All them carvings piled in around each other made them look worthless, like they meant nothing. The more black bears and baby rabbits we loaded into the wagon the more Daddy cried. Long streaks of wet ran down his face and puddled up at his jaw, he didn't even bother to wipe his face dry. I think he wanted people to know he was tore up, he wanted them to fight for him but they couldn't. They was all packing up their lives too. Everyone in town was loading up their shops into their wagons. The company has taken over and they said that even the money we got ain't good enough. To buy anything from now on you gotta use company money. Daddy says that's how they keep a handle on us, how they invade and control us. I bet Daddy is down in town, causing a scene outside his store, hollering for what he calls justice. He's been up to something; he's acting all strange, sneaking out late at night, tinkering all day in his workshop. I didn't want to ask him because I know he wouldn't tell me, he'd smile at me and tell me I was too young to understand. I'm still his little girl; I don't think he'll ever see me any different. I wonder how you see me Mamma. Am I still your little girl? Do you see me at all?

You're back in the bedroom now and I'm out here on the porch. I been sitting out here day and night waiting for Daddy to come up over the hill with Buckeye. This

morning you told me I looked pretty, your eyes were glossy and you looked confused. I wonder if you even knew it was me. Maybe I was someone from your past you was seeing again. Maybe you was remembering me the way you last loved me. I remember that day so clear; it was the last time that I knew you as my mother. We woke up early and went for one of our long walks. We talked for hours and lingered among the oaks and Frasier Furs. You talked to me like I was a grown up, like I was your friend. You told me about how you loved your parents and you missed them, you longed to go visit them but Daddy wouldn't let you. Daddy kept you, you told me, he kept you from the rest of the world and he kept you with his love. That love was the biggest love you'd ever felt and in all that big greatness you couldn't move no more. You said you was unhappy. I didn't know what to say to you I just knew I wanted you to be better, be happy again. Now I understood what you said when you told me love was lonely. That day we walked home, shuffling dead leaves under our bare feet and I prayed for you. I begged God to make an exception to His rules and bring you happiness. I knew His idea of happiness came through struggle and pain but that didn't seem fair looking at you. I prayed for a miracle, an exception. Now sitting here outside I'm still waiting on my miracle, I'm waiting for you to get happy again, I'm waiting for God to bring you back to life, I'm waiting for him to save us again, to make us better, I'm waiting on Him to bring Daddy home.

Your little girl, Klessa

July 10th 1912

Dear Mamma,

Samuel Barker came all the way up to our house today to tell us that Daddy has been in jail for four days. I seen him coming up over the hill this afternoon. I wish he had

come up this morning when you were normal. You was up piddling around earlier. I made sure I was up that early so I could talk with you. Usually on mornings like this I would pretend that I'd dreamed everything bad, that all this drinking was just something I've thought of in my own head, that it wasn't real but by late afternoon I'd remember the nightmare that was our reality. You'd lock yourself up for a few hours; take with you everything Daddy had brought up the day before. Every time he comes back from town he brings a few bottles with him. I know Daddy is trying to pretend that you're fine, that you're the same woman you always were. It's easy for him to do that when he's never around; it's easy to pretend when you don't have to see anything. By the time you come out of your hole I can barely recognize you, you are no longer my mother, just a lifeless being that mingles in the same air that I breathe, you become nothing to me by the afternoon and I grieve for you, every day I weep for what I've lost.

Now I'm getting like Daddy, racing out to my old pine to spend my days. I sit and write. I wander through the forest, pulling up sticky green moss and touching furry caterpillars with my fingertips. I want to squash them because they're so much smaller than me but I wouldn't dare. I know that would set me to crying all the way home.

Mr. Barker looked tired when he came up, his face was all red and his eyes was almost closed. I ran outside to meet him so he wouldn't have to lay eyes on you.

"Boy it's a long way up here," he said to me, huffin and puffin.

I smiled at him trying not to laugh. "Where's your horse?" I asked.

"Hell he tuckered out bout a mile ago. Oh I'm sorry Klessa, excuse my language."

"It's fine Mr. Barker."

"Well I reckon it's all right on account of who your Daddy is, boy does he have a

mouth on him, I'm sure you've heard worse."

The mention of Daddy forced me to raise my voice. "What's my Daddy done now?" I asked.

"Well...is your Mamma here?"

"No," I lied. "I think she went out picking berries, planning on making a pie."

"Oh shucks I wish she was here, I'd rather tell her this." He paused for a while.

"Klessa your Daddy's in jail right now. He was caught by the company selling his carvings."

My hands slicked up and I shoved my ring finger in my mouth to rip the white off my fingernail.

"What do I do?" I stuttered. What do I do? Right then I knew I was the one in charge. I was the one who has to scoop everybody and save them. I couldn't wait on my miracle anymore.

"Well your Daddy asked me to come up here and get you. Said your Mamma don't like traveling much down the mountain, makes her pretty sick." His eyes wandered over my head and back to the little oak boards that held together my home.

"I was wondering why I hadn't been seeing her around town. No ones really seen her since that baby died." His neck reached out even further and then he made a step toward me like he was headed for the house. I couldn't believe he had the nerve to mention Ray. He was acting like he cared about Ray, cared that he died, cared about you. All Mr. Barker wanted was something to run and tell his wife, something he could yammer on about after church next Sunday.

"My wife's been anxious to have her back in them bridge games the ladies have

once a week,” he continued.

“She’s just too scared,” I snapped, taking a step toward Mr. Barker, putting him back in his place.

“If she understands how serious this is I’m sure she wouldn’t have a problem coming down.”

“She won’t do it. Now either I’m coming down with you or my Daddy can just stay in jail. What’s it gonna be Mr. Barker?”

“I didn’t mean to upset you; this just seems like the kind of thing your Mamma ought to handle. I was surprised your Daddy even asked me to bring you down there.”

“Well he did ask for me. Mamma gets too scared. He probably doesn’t want to worry her. Now am I going or not?”

“All right Klessa come on then.”

Mr. Barker turned and headed down the mountain toward his wagon. I followed slow after him. Finally we came up on a glossy square box. The wood looked new and was held together by gold trim. Daddy would have fell in love. He would have done that wagon proud, not like Mr. Barker.

Mr. Barker and I took off toward town. He had no idea how to make his way down the mountain. Right then I knew how smart my Daddy was and how much he knew about these mountains made me proud of him.

“Yall live pretty high up don’t ya? I don’t know how your Daddy does it.” The wagon wobbled and squeaked.

“Just used to it I guess,” I said.

“You’re worried ain’t ya? There’s no need to get upset, you’re Daddy’s gonna be

fine, they're just gonna make him pay some money then they'll let him go."

"I'm not worried about him," I lied.

"What's going on with your Mamma Klessa?"

"What do you mean?" I turned away from him and stared off at the rusted wagon wheel.

"Something's going on ain't there? Do you need help? I know your father and he's too proud to admit anything but if you need help Darlene and I can help y'all."

"She's fine. And Daddy says it's our business anyhow. Nobody really wants to help when they offer it; they just want to sound nice."

"Why would he tell you anything as crazy as that? People do want to help. Hell I'm offering ya help right now and I mean it Klessa. All you gotta do is tell me."

I couldn't bring myself to say anything. We rode along in silence until we pulled up in front of the jail house. The whole way down I wanted to tell Mr. Barker about you. I wanted him to turn the wagon around and head back toward home. I wanted him to find you there sprawled out on the hard dirt floor. I wanted him to be disgusted and to weep for your life. I wanted us to lay our hand on you and ask God to heal you. More than anything I wanted him to know. I wanted him to see you, see the death you carried around with you in your sunken yellow eyes and bloated cheeks. I wanted him to feel sorry for me and ask me to move off the mountain. I wanted him to make me quit loving you. Instead I kept quiet, kept to my own business even though I knew someday it would kill me.

Daddy was sitting way back on the rock made benches when I came up to the bars. He seen me and ran over. He reached for my face with his dirty hand and cupped

my chin in his palm.

“I’m sorry Klessa,” he whispered to me.

“It’s fine Daddy. Let’s just get you home.” I kept the tears back the best I could.

Daddy paid his fine, every dime he had left in his worn out pockets.

“Where did you get that money?” I asked him as we were leaving the old stone jailhouse.

“Got it by selling my carvings,” he winked at me. “Guess it did me no good since I ended up giving all my earnings back to the bastards anyhow.”

I pushed my side against Daddy as we walked. My hip came up to his upper thigh. I wanted to feel him beside me. I knew he was safe now; he was where I could see him.

Before we headed up to the house Daddy said he wanted to show me something. We rode Buckeye out about a mile past the train depot and a huge building came into view. It went high up by deep red bricks. Thin pipes reach from the roof all the way up to the clouds.

“This is the new sawmill. They’s planning on running our trees through them machines in there. That’s what this company is about Klessa, ruining our home.” I looked out over the cleared out land and saw the clunky machines. Everything was quiet like they was alive and preparing for something. Preparing for the logs, waiting patiently with their slicked up tops and smooth loading tubes. They was waiting to ruin me and Daddy. They was waiting to rip our home apart, to prove to us that we was wrong and they was right all along. Daddy wrapped his hand around my waist and pulled me close to him. We just stood there till dusk, looking out, trying not to believe.