

Jenna B. Morgan

## A Wide Place in the Road

Catherine isn't used to driving in the mountains, but the rhythm of it—struggling up the steep grades, then coasting down into the valleys—is getting stuck in her head like the chorus of an almost-forgotten song. She passes a yellow road sign: *7% grade, next 3 miles*, and she pushes the gas pedal further to the floor. The Jetta's engine makes a sound like too much ice in a dull-bladed blender. The speedometer needle, wavering at just above fifty miles per hour, refuses to climb any higher.

In her head, Catherine is practicing what she'll say to her mother, the first words after more than a year of silence:

*"Mom, when the hospital called, I thought something had happened..."*

*"Mom, when the hospital called it scared the shit out of me. It made me realize..."*

*"Mom, the hospital called so you came back to your dreaded hometown after all. Our hometown. Maybe now you can tell me why we could never come back. Maybe now you can tell me why I was always the only kid I ever knew without a family."*

Catherine can imagine her mother's reaction. Her face will tighten: brows drawing down over squinted eyes, lips squeezing together to form a small, hard line. She'll spit out something like: *"Don't wag your tongue about things you don't know, girl."*

Catherine shakes her head; they'll end up right back where they started.

The car finally reaches the crest of the steep hill. The view from the summit takes her so much by surprise—rounded mountain-tops rolling out to infinity, filling up the horizon, blanketed with trees stained the colors of autumn: tarnished gold and flaming blaze orange and blood-bright vermilion—that Catherine forgets to lift her foot off the gas pedal. For a moment, before she eases her foot onto the brake, she's flying fast down the mountain like a free fall.

After eight hours, three rest stops, and two meals out of vending machines, Catherine drives down 2nd Avenue. She passes half a dozen empty storefronts and pulls into the parking lot of the finest accommodation Williamson, West Virginia, has to offer: the Mountaineer Hotel. Inside, the desk clerk is a slightly plump woman with an out-of-date teased hairstyle. Her orange lipstick is one shade off from her too-tight coral sweater. Her nametag identifies her as *Tammy*.

## *Kestrel*

“You checkin’ in, honey?”

“Yes, I have a reservation under Catherine Webb.” All she wants is a room key, a shower, then bed.

“Where’re you from, honey? You look like you’ve been drivin’ all day.”

“Maryland.” The strap of Catherine’s laptop bag is digging into her right shoulder.

“And what is it that brings you all the way to Williamson?”

“I’m in town to attend a funeral, actually.”

Tammy nods. “I just knew you had to be one of Howie Webb’s people.”

Catherine sighs inwardly and lowers her bag to the carpeted floor. “I didn’t actually know him very well. I was only four years old when we moved away.” In fact, Catherine can only remember one thing about her great uncle, the kind of thing that a four-year-old mind would latch onto: he always smelled like hot dogs.

Tammy’s eyes widen. “I’ll be goddamned!” She shouts, simultaneously slapping her hand down on the counter. “You’re Charlene’s girl!”

Catherine winces.

“Little Katie Jo Webb, back home in Williamson after all these years. I can’t believe I didn’t know you!”

“I prefer Catherine now.”

“You look just like your mom—same blonde hair, same Webb nose.”

Catherine resists the urge to reach up and touch her own small, snub nose.

“And how is your mom these days? Is she comin’ to the funeral?”

Catherine’s face reddens. “I don’t know, actually.” Without meaning to or even thinking about it, Catherine confides: “We had a big fight last year. We haven’t spoken . . . in a long time.”

“Well isn’t that just a shame?” Tammy reaches across the counter, grabs one of Catherine’s hands and squeezes. Catherine doesn’t know if it’s just the exhaustion, but she almost bursts into tears.

Tammy doesn’t falter for even a second as Catherine struggles to maintain her composure. “Oh, honey, don’t you worry about it one little bit. Me and my sister had a falling out awhile back and we didn’t so much as speak one word to each other for three whole years. But don’t you just know it? We’re as close today as when we were kids. Family troubles have a way of workin’ themselves out sooner or later, you’ll see.”

Catherine can only nod. Tammy hands over the room key, and Catherine heads for the elevator.

Upstairs in her room, Catherine flops down on the queen-sized bed. She knows she should get up, open her laptop. There are probably a couple dozen emails in her inbox that need answering, at the very least.

She brings her arm up to cover her eyes and block out the light.

Work had been one of the reasons they'd fought. Out of school, Catherine had two job offers. Without thinking twice, she took the lower-paying one closer to home. Her mom had been furious.

*"I work my whole life to give you opportunity! And this is what you do with it—you throw it away. Didn't I teach you any sense at all?"*

Thirty minutes from home. Fat lot of good it had done. They hadn't spoken since she'd moved out.

Catherine kicks off her shoes and hears them drop to the carpet. She pulls aside the comforter and climbs under the covers fully clothed.

As she enters the sanctuary, program in hand, Catherine scans the crowd. Most pews are already filled. Almost everyone is over sixty. From behind, it's a sea of gray hair and bald spots. Mom, still blonde, should be easy to pick out. But there's no sign of her. For the first time since she left her townhouse in Maryland, Catherine allows herself to seriously consider the possibility that her mother might not come.

They had always argued, even when Catherine was a child. They are cut from the same cloth, both stubborn beyond reason. Neither one ever had the sense to concede or apologize. Their fights would become sieges; the bitter silences would go on as long as they had to before circumstance or coincidence intervened. They had fought and not spoken for two weeks before Catherine's high school graduation. It was only her mother's desire to take pictures of Catherine in cap and gown that ended it.

This time the record-breaking silence has already stretched on for over a year, no end in sight. But then the hospital called about Howard, told Catherine which funeral home to call, told her that all the other next of kin listed by Howard, including her mother, had been contacted as well. Catherine had no idea how she'd ended up on that short contact list for a great uncle she barely remembered, but it was perfect. The funeral would have to be the end of this stand off. She and her mother would have to see each other, have to speak.

Catherine picks a pew. It's not only the congregants that are timeworn here; the hymnal covers are flocked and frayed around the edges. The cushions, once purple, are lumpy and faded to lavender. As she slides into her seat, several people smile at her, obviously curious. Before they can say hello or ask how she knew Howard, the preacher takes the pulpit, clears his throat, and begins. "We are here today not to

mourn the death, but rather to celebrate the life, of Howard Lee Webb. In that spirit, I would like to quote Howard's favorite saying, which seems particularly apt today: 'You can't swing a dead cat in this town without hittin' a Webb!'"

Everybody laughs.

"Most of you here today were family to Howard. He was your cousin, or your uncle, or your great uncle." The preacher nods toward particular members of the congregation as he makes these designations.

It dawns on Catherine that if those people were related to Howard, then they must also be related to her. As she scans the unfamiliar faces, Catherine begins to note similarities to her own face: the set of the eyes, the chin, and over and over again, the Webb nose.

"Howard may have survived both his wife, Mae, and his son, Robert, but he was always a family man." Just as the preacher pauses, the wooden sanctuary doors thump shut. Catherine whips around, certain that her mother is the latecomer.

It's Tammy. In a neon blue dress decorated with starbursts of sequins. She waves at Catherine and slides into a pew near the back.

The preacher doesn't miss a beat. "Howie always used to say he had more family, and deeper roots, than any one man had a right to."

Catherine stares at the closed sanctuary doors. Her mother isn't coming.

After the service, Catherine gets swept up in the crowd. She finds herself at a potluck reception in the church basement clutching a flimsy paper plate that sags under the weight of potato salad.

"You met JD, over there, right?" The man in front of her points. Catherine nods dumbly. Word of her presence had traveled fast. Already, dozens of people have introduced themselves to her, all of them apparently her cousins—second, third, once removed, sixteen times removed. And every single one has asked about her mother.

"Well, I'm Charlie Webb, and I'm his first cousin, which makes me your second, no, third cousin once removed." Catherine tries to smile.

"And how's your mom? We all thought she was crazy when she up and left with you. We thought for sure she'd come back inside of six months."

Catherine presses her lips tight together. Crazy? What gave him the right? Maybe crazy would have been to stay here—a town full of darkened storefronts and AARP members.

Tammy appears at Catherine's elbow. "Charlie," she scolds the man, "are you talkin' this poor girl's ear off? I'm gonna have to steal her away from you."

“Aw, Aunt Tammy—” he protests, but Tammy has already swept Catherine away.

“Aunt Tammy?” Catherine asks. “Does that mean you’re related to me too?”

“No, no, honey.” Tammy pats her arm. “I’m Charlie’s aunt by marriage, and he’s your cousin by blood, so we’re—”

“Nothing,” Catherine interjects.

“Friends,” Tammy corrects gently.

“Friends,” Catherine repeats, smiling sheepishly. This woman has been nothing but nice to her, there’s no reason at all to be rude. It’s not Tammy’s fault that she feels out of place.

Tammy guides Catherine to a flight of stairs. At the top, she opens the sanctuary doors. “We’ll be able to get a little peace and quiet in here.” The sanctuary is empty, silent.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to snap before.”

“That’s alright, honey. You must be overwhelmed. It’s not every day you find out you’re related to half the county.”

The preacher enters from behind the pulpit and calls: “Ah, just the two girls I was looking for!” He walks over and sits next to Catherine. “I was glad to see you here today, Catherine. What a shame your mother couldn’t be with us. I can see this loss has affected you deeply.” Catherine can’t tell if he means Howard or her mother. His expression is so knowing, she suspects it might be both.

“Tammy, I was wondering if you could help me. The lawyer, of course, will handle the disbursement of most of Howard’s worldly goods, but Howard asked me to do him a specific favor before he passed. If she came into town, he wanted me to make sure that Katie Jo got some things he left for her. I’m not sure where it is exactly, but there should be a box with her name on it up at his place.”

“I can take her out to the house.”

“Wait, he left me something? But I barely remember him!”

“You were family,” the preacher responds.

Following Tammy’s lead, Catherine pulls her Jetta right up onto the front lawn. Howard’s house is a one-story box, and the white paint is faded and chipped in places. The front steps are clean-swept, but sagging. A screened-in porch hangs precariously off the back of the house.

“I kept telling Howie to sell that tank.” Tammy climbs out of her car and motions at the broken down Chevy, equal parts chrome and rust, on the other side of the yard. “He flat out refused. Never mind that he hadn’t driven the damn thing in a hundred years.” Tammy smiles and shakes her head. “Howie was just about as stubborn as they come. Same as,” she pauses, “same as all the Webbs.”

Tammy climbs up the front steps and Catherine follows. Inside, the smells that hang in the air—mildew and mothballs and stale bread—remind Catherine of old age.

“Now whatever Howie wanted you to have shouldn’t be hard to find. It’s just the family room here, the bedroom off to the left, and the kitchen through there in the back. And be careful on that screened-in porch, it looks liable to collapse any minute now.” Tammy touches Catherine’s arm. “I’ll leave you alone, but I’ll be right outside on the front stoop. Holler if you need me.”

As the screen door snaps shut behind her, Catherine wonders why Tammy is so familiar with the floor plan. Shrugging, she surveys the living room. There’s not much: a rag rug just inside the front door; a dusty fake plant in an orange macramé pot holder; a TV at least as old as Catherine; a squat, sturdy end table; and a worn velour couch the color of overcooked oatmeal.

The kitchen is small but functional. A table with only two chairs, bare countertops, out-dated but immaculate appliances. Out the window, Catherine can see the tiny patch of backyard. The grass is green but not lush. A small garden, wilting in the cooling fall air, was obviously well tended in its prime. A rusty cage still supports the brown remnants of a tomato plant. Next to the tomato plant are rows of green herbs; Catherine can’t tell them apart except to recognize the curly leaves of parsley and the weed-like invasion of mint.

A single coffee mug sits lonely in the white kitchen sink. A ring of dried coffee stains the bottom. She considers it for a moment, then turns on the hot water, picks up the store-brand dish soap, and takes the ragged sponge from the mouth of a decorative ceramic frog. Gently, she lifts the mug and washes it. She places it upside down to dry in the empty dish rack and shuts off the water.

Catherine stops at the door of the screened-in porch, remembering Tammy’s warning. She can’t help but smile: the entire screened-in porch is carpeted with green Astroturf. A hoe and a tiller lean against the far wall; their long handles are stained-dark with use, but the metal ends are spotless.

In the bedroom, the bed is neatly made with a worn blue and white quilt. A black bible with gold-edged pages sits on the bedside table. Catherine doesn’t pick it up, but runs a finger lightly down the spine. The leather is soft like a favorite pair of shoes.

In the closet, there are a dozen articles of clothing on hangers, and on the top shelf, a red shoebox. Catherine pulls it down. *Katie Jo Webb* is written on the lid in swirling cursive script.

She removes the lid and sets it on the bed. Inside are a profusion of papers: black and white photographs worn around the edges, age-yellowed envelopes bursting with letters, shiny snapshots, post

cards, curling newspaper clippings.

One bright, technicolor polaroid sticks out above the rest. In it, a young woman wearing cut-offs and big, plastic-framed sunglasses holds a toddler on her hip. The little girl, no more than three, brandishes a licked-clean Popsicle stick. Her face and hands are covered in sticky red juice. The same cursive script runs across the bottom: *Charlene and Katie Jo. 1980.*

Still holding the photograph, Catherine sinks to the floor. She doesn't remember being the little girl in the photo. And the woman holding her, her own mother, has become a stranger.

Catherine is sitting cross-legged on the floor of her hotel room. The red shoebox is empty and its contents are fanned out on the carpet: newspaper clippings and photographs and postcards and letters and funeral announcements. Tintypes and obituaries and hand-written deeds to houses that are no longer standing. Catherine picks up a curled piece of newsprint and flattens it to the carpet with her fingertips. She reads: *Glennister E. Webb.*

*WILLIAMSON, W.Va. – Glennister E. Webb, 71, beloved father and husband, passed away on Tuesday, March 10. He was a devoted member of the East Williamson Baptist Church, where he taught Sunday school for many years.*

*He is survived by his wife, Armenda Mullins Webb; his seven children, Howard Webb, Ludema Webb March, Rosa Belle Webb Runyon, Wilson Webb, Hettie Webb Lester, Cora Webb Blackburn, and Cecil Webb; 41 grandchildren; 32 great-grandchildren; and 17 great-great-grandchildren.*

The litany of Glennister Webb's progeny echoes in Catherine's head: seven children, then forty-one of their children, then thirty-two of their children, then seventeen of their children. So much family.

She sets the clipping aside, and reaches for something new. She picks up a three-by-five card and reads:

*Harmon's Parsley Salad (Tabooley)*

<i>½ cup cracked wheat (medium or fine), more if desired</i>	
<i>2 bunches parsley, cut fine</i>	<i>juice of 2 lemons</i>
<i>½ cup mint</i>	<i>¼ cup oil</i>
<i>1 bunch green onions</i>	<i>salt and pepper</i>
<i>3 or 4 tomatoes</i>	

*Wash and soak wheat for ten minutes. Clean vegetables and cut. Squeeze water from wheat. Add vegetables, lemon juice, oil, salt & pepper.*

## *Kestrel*

“Tabooley?” Catherine says the word aloud. It sounds made-up, nonsensical. But there is something familiar in the syllables, something she can’t quite identify.

Catherine flips open her laptop for the first time since arriving in Williamson. The first Google hit is a recipe titled *Lebanese Tabbouleh Salad (also spelled tabouli or tabooley)*. It is almost identical to the recipe from the shoebox. Catherine is surprised. Lebanese food in Williamson, West Virginia?

Maybe that’s where her family is originally from. Maybe that’s who she is: the descendant of Lebanese immigrants.

The phone on the bedside table rings. Catherine rises and answers it. “Hello?”

“Hey, honey, it’s Tammy. I’m just callin’ to check on you.”

“Thank you, I’m fine.”

“I noticed you never came down for dinner. You’ll think I’m terrible being so nosy, but the kitchen says you never ordered room service either.”

“Oh, I’m fine. I just wasn’t hungry.”

“Well, my shift is over in a few minutes, and I’m grabbin’ myself some dinner out of the kitchen before I go home, what can I bring up to you?”

“You really don’t have to—” Catherine starts to protest.

Tammy arrives fifteen minutes later with two chicken salad sandwiches and a pitcher of sweet tea.

“It’s my family.” Catherine waves her arm at the piles of papers on the floor. “I don’t know any of them.”

Tammy hands Catherine a sandwich and sits down next to her on the carpet.

“Why wouldn’t he leave it for someone who knew these people?”

“Maybe he thought you needed it.”

Tammy picks up two black and white photos. In one, a young man sits up against a tall haystack. He wears a dress shirt and tie and has a crisp black fedora hooked on his right knee. His thick eyebrows are knit together over deep-set eyes; he stares into the middle distance. In the other photograph, a young woman looks directly at the camera, but bites her lower lip apprehensively. The background is so dark that her black hair and black skirt almost disappear against it. She wears a black and white checked coat, and the white squares stand out as if spotlighted. The backs read: *Dad, 1911, age 23. Mom, 1908, age 15.*

“These are Howie’s parents, your great-grandparents, Glennister and Armenda.” Tammy picks up the piece of newspaper Catherine had set aside. “This is Glennister’s obituary, which makes you one of thirty-two great-grandchildren.”



Catherine considers this.

Tammy picks up a yellowed envelope. “Now what’s this?” It bears a two-cent stamp and a postmark from Justice, W.Va. Tammy tilts the envelope sideways and the pages of the letter slide out. It is written in peacock blue ink, and the script is even more flowing than Howard’s. It looks like it belongs in a storybook of fairytales.

*Mrs. Armenda Webb,  
Williamson, W.Va.*

*My Dear Sister:*

*I hope this finds you and yours all well. I will ask you to pardon me for not writing you sooner. I think it has been nearly 2 years since I last wrote you. I have been very busy. It has not been a very good year, but thank the good Lord we are all still living. George has been laid up for a long time with some kind of rhuematis. It looked like he was going to lose the use of his hands but got some better. With my oldest boy’s help we have got most of our potatoes dug. We still go to Sunday school most every Sunday and church when there is any. I have the old family Bible still with the piece of poetry in it that our father sent home while he was in the war.*

*Your sister,  
Orpha*

“Two years?” Catherine asks, incredulous.

“Travel was harder then. Two years wasn’t so long, really. In any case, it didn’t make them any less family.”

“Do you know what this is?” Catherine asks, holding out the tabooley recipe.

Tammy smiles as she reads through the list of ingredients.

“This was Howie’s specialty. I’m sure you don’t remember, but he used to run a hot dog stand for the miners, and he’d make tabooley all summer long, right out of his own garden.”

“I remember he smelled like hot dogs.”

Tammy laughs. “He did, didn’t he?”

“But the recipe is Lebanese. How did it get here?”

“My stars, foreign food all the way out here in poor, backwards West Virginia.” Tammy shakes her head as she speaks. This is the first time Catherine has heard Tammy use sarcasm.

“I didn’t mean . . . I just was wondering if maybe I was part Lebanese? If that’s where my family comes from.”

“Howie used to tell stories about how he got that recipe. He had dozens of tales, all contradictory. He would twist them into new shapes as it suited him, adding to them, exaggerating. The truth is, he didn’t know. The recipe had passed down through his family for so

long, its origin was a mystery.”

“So why did he bother to make up stories? Why didn’t he just admit he didn’t know?”

“Making up stories entertained him. And telling them entertained everybody else. What mattered in the end was the taste.”

“What does it taste like?”

“It’s mostly parsley, so it tastes . . . clean. But it’s also sour and sweet. It tastes like . . . well, to me, it tastes like summer in William-son.”

Catherine can’t imagine it, and says so.

“I have an idea.”

The kitchen of the Mountaineer Hotel is well stocked. Tammy and Catherine find every ingredient they need in the industrial-sized refrigerator, except the mint, which Tammy gets from the hotel bar. They lay it all out on the stainless steel countertop.

“Wash and soak wheat,” Tammy reads aloud. “I’ll do that, you start chopping.”

Catherine grabs a tomato and starts slicing. The yellow seeds spill out all over the cutting board.

“I hope you like it better now than you did when you were little,” Tammy says as she fills a bowl with water.

Catherine is caught off guard. “When I was little?”

“You tried it first when you were about two. Howie was so disappointed when you spit it out.”

“How do you know that?”

Tammy doesn’t answer right away. The silence stretches; the only sound is Catherine’s knife chocking against the cutting board.

“I suppose I should’ve told you this right when we first met,” Tammy says.

“Should’ve told me what?”

“I knew your mother in high school.”

“You did?”

“Hell, your mother and I were best friends from the time we could walk until the day she drove out of town with you. I was the first one she told she was knocked up. I borrowed my brother’s car when her parents threw her out and helped her move into Howie’s place. I changed your diapers.”

Catherine is stunned, on total information overload. Her grandparents kicked Mom out? They lived with Howard? She puts the knife down flat on the cutting board and turns around to face Tammy.

“I never have really forgiven her for leaving. I always thought she was bluffing. I thought she’d come home.”

“Bluffing?”

“She said she’d never come back here. That nobody would

ever let her forget that she got pregnant at sixteen. And that nobody would ever let you forget it either. She left for you.” Tammy dumps a scoop of brown wheat kernels into the bowl. “It broke Howie’s heart.”

“She would never tell me why we left.”

“Doesn’t surprise me one bit. She didn’t talk much about things after she’d made up her mind about them. Stubborn as a mule.” Tammy plucks mint leaves one by one from their stems and then chops them.

Catherine grabs the other bunch of parsley and picks up her knife. It is impossible to cut the springy leaves with the same neat, orderly mincing technique she used on the tomatoes. She hacks at the bunch of greenery haphazardly.

“Why did we move in with Howard?”

“Howie was ashamed of his brother, kicking your mother out the way he did. He took Charlene in like she was his own. Howie lost his son Robert when he was real young, and having a family in the house again . . . It damn near killed him when your mother took you away.”

Catherine picks up the green onions and begins chopping them—lopping off the wilted ends and the white bulbs, then slicing the crunchy stalks into rings. Her eyes begin to sting and she tells herself it’s the onions. Both women are silent.

Tammy gathers all the chopped ingredients into a mixing bowl. She adds the oil, the lemon juice, the salt, and the pepper. She stirs it with a long-handled spoon until the colors—shades of green and red and flecks of brown—are evenly distributed. As she stirs, the scents grow stronger—the minty sweetness and the onion sharpness, the parsley cleanness and the tomato mellowness. Tammy gathers a little of every ingredient onto the spoon and hands it to Catherine.

“Try.”

The tabooley is chewy and sweet and clean and sour and tart and intensely familiar. Even so, no matter how hard she tries, Catherine can’t make this taste call up a concrete memory.

“I thought it would make me remember.”

“Of course you can’t remember, you were only a baby. It’s not magic, it’s just tabooley.”

Catherine is silent.

“Howie would say it’s not the memory, not the story, that matters, but the taste of it, here, now.”

“But I need to know. Maybe I could find out something about where I come from. Maybe I have Lebanese ancestors.”

“Well, I just happen to know where you might solve that particular mystery.”

Catherine follows the directions Tammy gave until she finds

## *Kestrel*

the narrow dirt track that runs up the hill. Her car won't fit, so Catherine parks on the shoulder of the main paved road. She hikes the path, a quarter-mile straight up. At the top, tall trees block most of the sunlight. Except for the wind in the leaves and the calls of birds, the silence is total, like a held breath. There are over a hundred headstones in the isolated cemetery and every single one bears her name: *Webb*.

Catherine walks up and down the rows, reading. She finds some names that she recognizes instantly: *Glennister E. Webb*, *Armenda Mullins Webb*. Other names repeat over and over until Catherine can almost trace them through the generations. *Grant* and *Ludema* and *Howard*. She even finds the parts of her own name: *Catherine* and *Josephine*. At the end of a row, she finds all of her names together, *Catherine Josephine Webb*, carved into a marker above the dates 1803-1824. She wonders how she died and why so young. She wonders if she was intentionally named after this stranger-ancestor, or if the two family names had simply converged again by chance.

She reads every grave marker twice, three times. She finds *Harmon Webb*, from the recipe title, next to his wife *Arbuta*. She also finds *Harve* and *Dovall* and *Minerva Elizabeth*. She finds *Dixie* and *Evelyn* and *Tasconia*. She finds *Mike George* and *Buford* and *Verna* and *Eugene*. Not one name sounds even remotely Lebanese. There is nothing to tell her the origin of the recipe, nothing here to prove or contradict any of Howard's made-up stories. Anything that stretches further back than this mountaintop cemetery is beyond memory. Even so, Catherine has never felt less alone than she does right now, standing in the graveyard of her own name.

The entire state map is unfolded across the dashboard. Somehow, going from the cemetery back into Williamson, Catherine has gotten totally and helplessly lost.

First she traces her finger down all the main roads that brought her from Maryland—64 to 119 to 52—and locates Williamson. Next, she tries to find any remotely familiar road or place name that might match her current location.

The town names printed on her map are unhelpful, but beautiful. *Lenore*, *Cinderella*, *Myrtle*. They sound made-up, imaginary. She finds names like *Shegon*, *Belo*, and *Alkol* that seem like bastardized spellings of mournful country-song lyrics. She finds nonsense words like *Scalf*, *Smilax*, *Woolum*, and *Roark*. She finds *Spurlockville* and *Pinsonfork*. *Dante* and *Milton*. *Bolt*, *Hurricane*, and *Cyclone*. *Van Lear*, *Flatgap*, *Stopover*, and *Freeburn*. She finds *Rowdy* and *Dice*. *Lost Creek*. *Thousandsticks*. *Castlewood*. *Twilight*.

The names sound like they've fallen straight out of storybooks. And she wants to know them, all of them: the stories of the names of

these places. She wants the stories of the names in the very same way that she wants the memory of the taste—parsley and tomatoes and mint and lemon and onion and cracked wheat all together in one mouthful. She knows that some of the stories, like her own memory of the taste of tabooley, have been lost in time, and are beyond memory or telling. But that doesn't make them any less compelling or dear.

Catherine folds up the map and drives aimlessly. Soon, she comes to a gas station. An old man leans up against the single pump. She pulls in and rolls down her window.

"Can you tell me how to get back to Williamson?"

"Williamson. I can remember it back in its heyday, the whole place was goin' great guns. Million-dollar paydays at the mines. Trains stoppin' at the station three times a day. Now it's not much more than a wide place in the road."

Catherine thinks of all the closed-up stores downtown. She thinks of how few people she's seen checking in and out at the hotel, how few young people there were at the church. She thinks of her own mother's flight and refusal to return.

"I used to have people over in Williamson; my sister and her kids. All moved away," he says.

"My people are from Williamson, too."

The old man directs her to the interstate, going over all the turns twice.

