The Night the Bridge Cried

The truth gets ugly when it comes with a curse.

Janice Jones

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by Janice Jones

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Summary: In 1960, the people of Grunion Glade, Ohio are proud of their lineage from twin canal boat captains who left their boat to chase a lost football and found their brides. Their legacy lives on in the high school team, The Captains, undefeated state champions. Bob Skinner Junior, a fatherless farm boy, dreams of gridiron glory and marrying the girl he loves, but is tasked with protecting his cousin, William, a misfit dwarf with a dangerous hatred of football. William discovers a secret that not only shatters all Bob Junior's dreams but could destroy the legacy and rewrite history.

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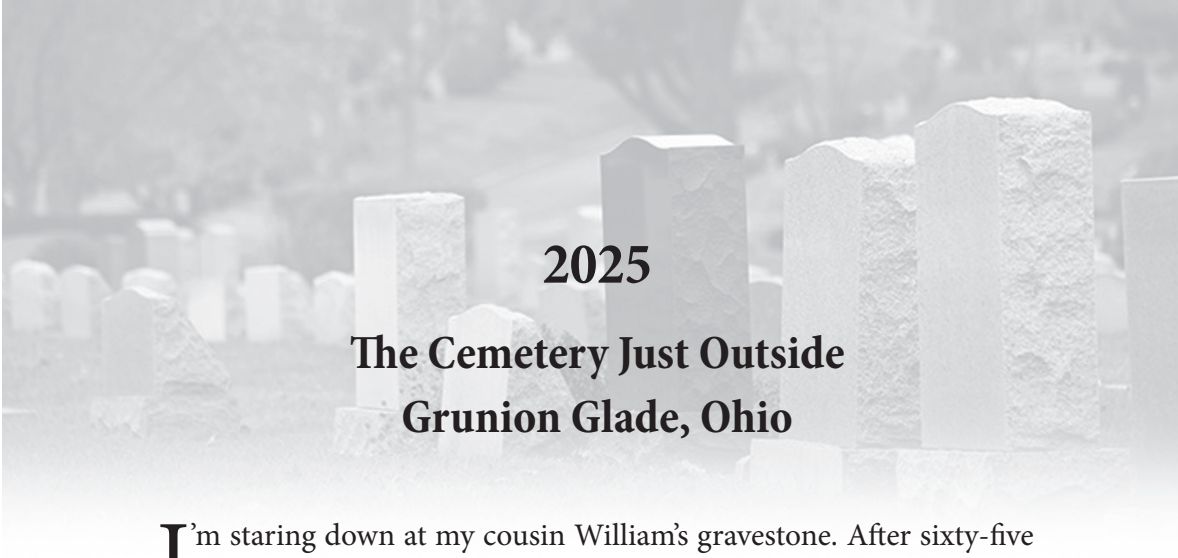

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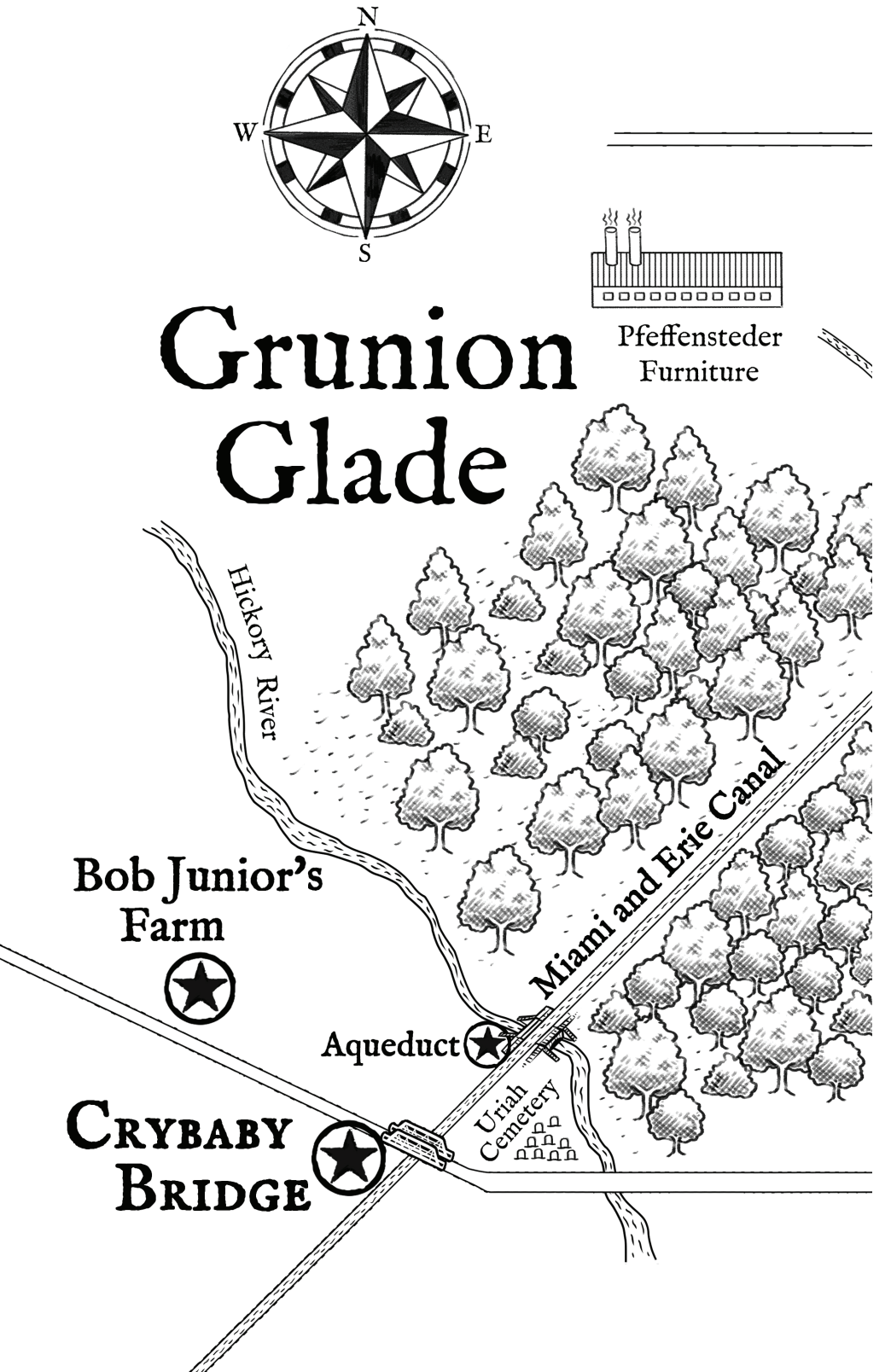
The Cemetery Just Outside Grunion Glade, Ohio

I'm staring down at my cousin William's gravestone. After sixty-five years, it should have earned a crown of lichen growing over its curved top. But this replacement is only a decade old and still has its polish. Ten years ago, the last remaining William-haters of Grunion Glade had once again ripped it out of the ground and thrown it into the weeds by the canal after spray-painting it with obscenities and mentions of that godforsaken curse. But this—the fifth new monument I've installed—stands untouched by that hate. I take in a deep breath and slowly let it out. It's over. At the age of seventy-nine, my job of looking after him is finally finished.

Looking across the canal, I can see Crybaby Bridge. The sight of that haunted monstrosity brings back my memories of how William unearthed the secret that cursed our town and destroyed all my chances at the life I thought I wanted. At last, it's time to tell the whole story.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W
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Grunion Glade
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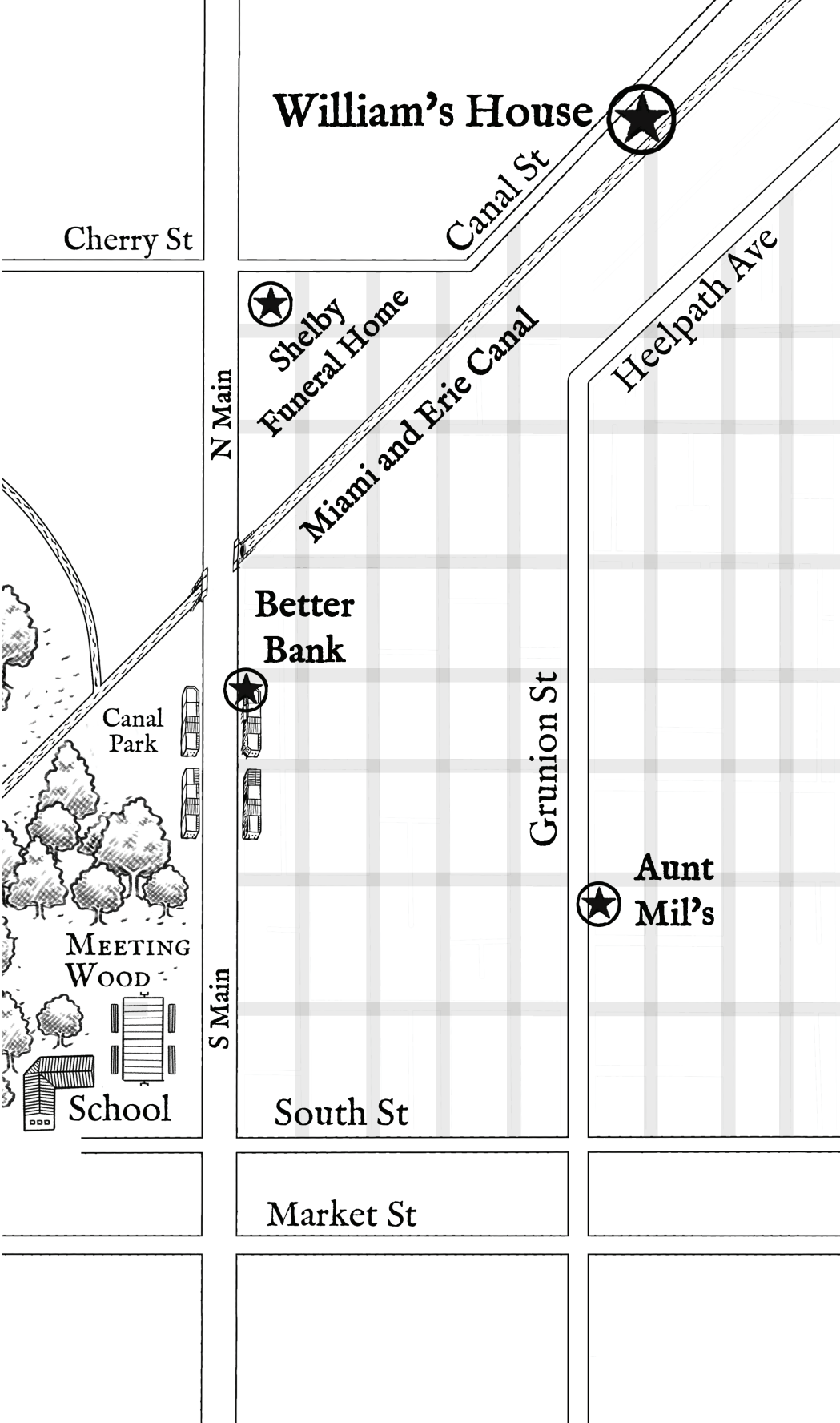
Hickory River
Miami and Erie Canal
Bob Junior's Farm
Aqueduct
Uriah Cemetery
CRYBABY BRIDGE


William's House
Canal St
Cherry St
Shelby Funeral Home
N Main
Miami and Erie Canal
Heelpath Ave
Better Bank
Canal Park
Grunion St
Aunt Mil's
Meeting Wood
S Main
School
South St
Market St

1

A Bad Case of Heartburn

William was a troublemaker from the get-go. He was famous in our family for ruining a brand-new Pfeffensteder davenport while being born. He went on to became more famous for lots of other reasons, none of them good. I was only five months old when William was born, but I heard Mother, Doc, and Uncle Fred tell the story so many times, I can tell it as if I had been there.

It was May 21, 1946, when my mother, Etta Mae Skinner, wanted to go to town to see her younger sister, Mary, who was pregnant. Mother got a neighbor to watch me and my big sister Ellen, who was three. Mother had been widowed the past August when my daddy, Bob Skinner, was killed on our farm in an accident with the corn picker. I was named after him, so I've always been known as Bob Junior. I've always wondered if my life would have turned out differently if I'd had a father.

Mother didn't have a car—she always made Gus, our farmhand, drive her in his old truck. That day, Gus dropped her off in town on Canal Street at Aunt Mary and Uncle Fred Feely's house. When Aunt Mary answered the door of her Canal Street home, she complained to Mother that it was hot, the fan was broken, and she had a bad case of heartburn. Aunt Mary was home alone. Uncle Fred was on the day shift at the Pfeffensteder Furniture Factory where he worked as a sander.

Mother and Aunt Mary sat in the living room on the Feely's brand-new, maroon davenport that stood under the living-room picture window. "I see you've bought new curtains to go with the couch,"

Mother said. She was a bit envious of Aunt Mary, because we never got any new furniture for our farmhouse. Aunt Mary and Uncle Fred had been married a little over a year. They had spent their wedding present money and then some on the genuine Pfeffensteder davenport. It was the pride of their rented, two-bedroom bungalow.

Aunt Mary was holding up the sweater and bootie set she was crocheting for the baby when she grabbed Mother's hand and cried out, "The heartburn!"

Mother felt fear in her sister's fingers and said, "I think the baby's coming."

Clutching her yarn, Aunt Mary squealed, "I'm not due until July!"

It was just like William to show up when he wasn't expected.

Mother said, "We've got to get you to the hospital over in Celina. Thank goodness for the phone!"

We didn't get a phone on the farm until I was a senior in high school.

Mother called the Pfeffensteder Furniture Factory and told the plant operator, "Find Fred Feely and send him home right now!" By the time she hung up, Aunt Mary's water had broken. She lay sprawled on the wet sofa, one foot hooked over the back of the couch, the other resting on the coffee table. Mother took one look at her sister's calf eyes and bloodless face and knew there wasn't time to wait for Fred to get home and drive them the ten miles to Celina. She called Doc Winters's office and asked him to come. Then she got a clean sheet and placed it under her sister.

A few minutes later, Doc pulled up in his Cadillac, followed by the Grunion Glade pumper truck with its siren blasting. The truck was chased by a gang of screaming, wet, and muddy children hoping to see a house on fire.

Doc hopped out of his car and called out in the direction of the pumper truck, "George! There's no fire! It's a baby coming!"

George Uriah had, just that week, taken charge of Grunion Glade's aged pumper truck along with the job of fire chief. He was always using his position to stick his nose into everybody's business.

George hollered back, "Well, Doc, ya never knows, I always says. When I sees you comes peeling round that corner, I thinks to myself I'd better follows you, to be sure."

From the Feely front porch, Doc yelled at the kids, "Get on back to wading in the canal or wherever you came from!"

Inside the living room, Aunt Mary grabbed the lacy antimacassar from the back of the davenport and waved it, wildly, her eyes darting back and forth like those of a cornered muskrat. Doc lifted Aunt Mary's dress and tugged down her panties. There was a loud "oooooo" from the open window above the couch. Doc looked up to see the gang of kids staring at Aunt Mary's privates. He grabbed the curtains and whipped them shut. To Mother and Aunt Mary, he said, "This baby's coming right now."

When William wanted to do something, there was no holding him back.

Aunt Mary waved the antimacassar with one hand and grabbed Doc by the hair with the other. She twisted her head back and forth, the textured fabric of the davenport pulling several golden strands loose from her bun. "It's too early . . . it's too early . . . it's too early. It's . . . TOO EARLY!"

Doc pried his patient's fingers loose from his hair, then listened for the baby's heartbeat with his stethoscope. "Etta Mae! Get a rubber glove out of my bag, fill it with warm water, and tie it tight around the top."

Mother was about to ask what for, when a big contraction hit Aunt Mary, who screeched like a fighting tomcat. She reached again for Doc's hair, but he ducked in time. Mother found a glove and rushed to the kitchen.

Doc was glad things were moving so quickly because the baby's heartbeat sounded "thready."

By the time Mother returned with the warm-water glove and a stack of towels, Aunt Mary's face was red and sweating, and her bun was completely unwound. Whenever Mother recounted this part of the story, she whimpered to imitate Aunt Mary, sounding like a lost puppy holed up under somebody's porch.

"Blam!" (Mother always smacked her hands together at this point in the story.) The front screen door flew open and hit the wall. Uncle Fred arrived just as the baby's head was delivered. He scanned his normally neat and prim wife, whose eyes were as big as tractor tires, her teeth clamped down on an antimacassar. And there, between her legs, was a bloody, human head sticking out.

"I'm not supposed to see this." He went straight to the kitchen, grabbed a bottle of Jack Daniels, and fled out the big, oak door that led to the backyard. For a former football hero, Uncle Fred was a bit squeamish. His escape route took him across the tiny backyard and through the hedge to the twenty-foot strip of land that was the canal right-of-way. He sat down on the towpath under a buckeye tree.

When Uncle Fred bolted, Aunt Mary spit out the antimacassar and screamed, "Come back here, Fred! This is all your fault!"

Doc said, "Time to finish the job, Mrs. Feely. Now push!"

Aunt Mary's face screwed itself up into a tight wad and her mouth opened wide, but no noise came out. The baby slid into the world and into Doc's hands. He rubbed the newborn with a towel but got no response, so he gave the tiny butt a light smack. The baby gave a feeble cry.

Aunt Mary found her voice. "Is it a boy or a girl?"

Doc didn't answer. He was too busy worrying over the baby's thready heartbeat, ragged breathing, and small size. Babies that tiny usually didn't make it. Later at the hospital, William weighed only two pounds and twelve ounces. Doc would often reminisce, "Most of my

OB patients were farm women who gave birth to babies that looked strong enough to be out feeding the chickens by the end of the week. But when William came into the world, he was as delicate as a soap bubble on a windy day."

Mother looked down at her teeny-weeny nephew and thought his eyes were the size of a heifer's.

Aunt Mary asked again, "Is it a boy or a girl?"

Ignoring Aunt Mary's question, Doc handed the baby to Mother and said, "Get that glove against his body, Etta Mae, and wrap him in a towel."

"It's a boy?" There was joy in Aunt Mary's voice.

"It's a boy," Doc confirmed.

"It's already a warm day," Mother pointed out as she rolled the baby and the glove into a neat bundle with a flap on top.

"This is a premature baby. He needs to stay wrapped." Then Doc lowered his voice to a whisper and nodded at Mother. "Keep an eye on his breathing. It's ragged."

"Fred will be so pleased," Aunt Mary said in a dreamy tone. "He wanted a son to play football for the Captains someday."

Uncle Fred's wish for William to play football always reminded me of one of Mother's favorite sayings: "If wishes were horses, then beggars would ride."

Then Aunt Mary said, "Hold the baby by me, Etta Mae, so I can see him."

Holding the bundle just out of Aunt Mary's reach, Mother pulled back a flap of the towel to give her sister a glimpse of her baby, which caused Aunt Mary to say, "Awwwww. He's so cute and sweet, and has everything he's supposed to, but he's so tiny! And his eyes are too big."

Doc said, "Premature babies haven't filled out their cheeks, making their eyes look big. He'll grow into them."

William's googly eyes would stay with him as he grew. I was always a victim of them. They could capture you and hold you mesmerized while he talked you into believing that his crazy ideas made perfect sense.

Aunt Mary stroked the baby's downy head. "Oh, look! His hair is going to be blond, like mine. I'm going to name him 'William' because he's tiny and sweet, just like the sweet William flowers that grow by the canal."

I always did wonder what "Sweet William" might have been like if Aunt Mary had named him "Spike" or "Biff."

Aunt Mary prayed aloud for her baby's life while Doc delivered the afterbirth. Then he told Mother, "It's just as well that we never got the dress off her. I'll just pull it back down and she's ready for the ride to the hospital."

When Aunt Mary, with Doc's support, stood up from the davenport, she moved the bloody sheet to look at the cushions. "It's going to stain. I just know it." Turning to Mother, who still held sweet William, she said, "Etta Mae, there's some white vinegar in the pantry." Aunt Mary took the relationship between cleanliness and godliness very seriously.

"We can't worry about that now," Doc said impatiently. He grabbed a handful of towels in his free hand and led Aunt Mary out to the Caddy, where he settled her on the towels in the middle of the back seat. Doc's plan was to drive like a squirrel with a dog on its tail for the hospital in Celina, where there was an incubator with oxygen.

Putting the car in drive, he added in a whisper to Mother, who sat up front, holding the baby, "Keep an eye on his breathing. It's too ragged. If it gets worse, I'll have to stop and work on him." Getting the baby on oxygen was William's only chance to survive—if Doc managed to get him there while he was still hanging onto life.

One block down Canal Street, George Uriah was lying in wait in the pumper truck. Seeing the Cadillac coming, he pulled out in front of Doc, turned on the siren, and stepped on the gas.

"The fool is trying to give us an escort!" Doc shouted over the open windows to Mother.

The fool part is coming, just wait.

George roared down a couple blocks of bungalows and flew past our church, St. John's Evangelical and Reformed, before taking the hard right onto Cherry Street. The wail of the siren was joined by the squeal of the truck's tires as George drove over the curb. As Doc slid the Caddy smoothly around the corner, he said, "Did you see that, Etta Mae? George almost got the phone booth."

George sped down Cherry Street to the intersection at North Main, where he slowed before turning south. Doc saw a chance to get around the pumper truck by cutting through the corner parking lot of Shelby's Funeral Home. It would have worked, too, if Doc hadn't had to break for Mr. Shelby, who'd run outside to see where the fire was—I have a hard time imagining potbellied Mr. Shelby running anywhere.

Tailed by the Caddy, the pumper truck barreled past the stately old houses of North Main and raced by St. Luke's Evangelical and Reformed Church. There were two separate evangelical and reformed churches in Grunion Glade because my great-grandfather and my great-uncle couldn't agree on their interpretations of scripture.

George, with Doc riding the back bumper of the pumper truck, crossed the Main Street Bridge, zoomed through the downtown business district, and ran the four-way stop while turning onto Market Street.

Doc planned to pass George just as soon as they got safely out of town at the sign that said "Leaving Grunion Glade," which pointed out the two things our town was famous for: the Captains and Pfeffensteder Furniture. At that point, the brick paving of Market Street narrowed

into the gravel of the Celina-Grunion Glade Road. Doc pulled into the oncoming lane, but George put the pedal all the way to the floor and the pumper truck began to sway all over the place. There was no room for the Caddy to pass.

William began to gasp. Mother rolled up her window to keep the gravel dust off the baby. Doc laid on the horn and cussed a blue streak; he had to get William some oxygen! But first he had to pass George before they came to the sharp curve where the road narrowed to one lane just before Crybaby Bridge. Aunt Mary, bobby pins dangling, leaned forward in the back seat and gripped Mother's shoulders.

Doc needn't have worried about passing the pumper truck. About an eighth of a mile before the turn, George ran smack into the back of a combine that was creeping down the road, pulled by a tractor. The pumper truck went into the ditch, dragging the combine and tractor with it. "Sonofabitch!" Doc stopped just short of the bridge, then hightailed it back to the accident scene.

The tractor and combine were jackknifed in the ditch. The pumper truck was lying on its side—the cab resting on top of the combine. George's head and one arm were hanging out the window of the pumper truck, a stream of blood running down the door. Thirty feet away, the farmer was draped over a barbed wire fence.

Doc jumped out of the Caddy, pulled George out of the truck, and put a tourniquet on his arm. Mother handed her gasping bundle to her sister, then went to help Doc untangle the farmer from the barbed wire. As they were hauling the unconscious man to the car, they heard Aunt Mary scream from the back seat, "He's not breathing!"

Doc, leaving Mother with the farmer, raced back to the car and took William from his mother. He tapped the baby on the legs, then rubbed his back. William's gasping began again.

After Doc and Mother got the two new patients loaded in the Caddy, Doc set out again for Celina. In the back seat, slumped against one door, the unconscious farmer was unaware of the blood flowing freely from his nose and dripping on the floor. Aunt Mary squirmed off her towels to distance herself from the farmer and was making a bloody puddle on the middle of the seat. On her other side sat George, whose arm was leaking all over the parcel shelf where Doc had told him to put it in order to keep it elevated. I heard tell that Doc ordered a new Lincoln the next week. The bloodstains wouldn't come out of the Caddy.

In the front seat, Mother held the gasping baby. After making the turn at Crybaby Bridge, Doc kicked the Caddy into overdrive, worried that each gasp from William might be his last. Farm after farm whipped by, including our own, where Gus, who had gone back to the farm after taking Mother to town, happened to be plowing near the road. He looked up and waved.

Thanks to Doc and the Caddy, everyone made it to Celina alive. Once in the incubator on oxygen, William began doing some better, but even Doc couldn't put the pumper truck back together again. Hickory County had to float a bond issue to buy a new one, which was really a used one bought from the town of Spencerville.

As for Uncle Fred, Mother told me that she found him the following morning, laid out on the bank of the canal, his feet submerged in the shallow, green water, his muddied head cradled in a muskrat hole.

Uncle Fred always said that it was two days before he felt up to talking about it. "I leaned against the trunk of the buckeye tree," he told Mother and Doc, "and took a few swigs of whiskey. I started digging black, rotting buckeyes out of the ground with my fingernails and throwing them in the canal. I never noticed before just how pretty that old, overgrown ditch can be. The sun was shining through the leaves of the tree, and the dandelions were blooming. The buckeyes hit the water with a plopping sound, making perfect circles that spread out, and out, and out . . . then the whiskey took hold, and blammo!"

Uncle Fred always got a bit poetic when he drank.

Five days after William was born, Doc signed Aunt Mary's release papers from the hospital. It was still touch and go with William. He was suffering from respiratory distress, jaundice, and anemia. Aunt Mary had glued herself to the side of his incubator. When Doc told her she could go home, she started screaming and grabbed him by the throat. When he managed to break her chokehold, she threw herself at the wall and began wildly banging her head and screaming, "Can't leave him . . . can't . . . won't . . . you can't make me . . ."

Doc explained that she should go home and get some rest, and she could come back to the hospital every day to visit William.

"I CAN'T LEAVE HIM!" she screamed, then dropped to the floor and lay as if dead.

Doc feared for her mental health, and so he said she could stay.

Aunt Mary never did learn to step back to give William room. Even after we started school, it was as if Doc had forgotten to cut the umbilical cord.

So Aunt Mary stayed in the hospital and Doc had a psychiatrist in to see her. Our pastor from St. John's, Reverend Werms, visited the hospital every day to sit alongside Aunt Mary and pray for her and little William.

It was two months before William was strong enough to go home. Uncle Fred told Mother that those two months were the longest two months of his life. "Every day I come home from work to an empty house and no supper. After I throw together a sandwich, I drive over to Celina to see if my boy is dead or alive, and my wife, sane or crazy. Mary should be home, taking care of me. Instead, she's using that hospital like a hotel with room service. Doc says she can't be budged without bringing on a nervous breakdown. Hell! George Uriah was worse off from the accident than Mary was from giving birth, and he was back on duty in a week's time, although God only knows what George can do about a fire until we can take delivery on the new pumper truck! And the farmer who damn near died, hanging on that barbed wire fence with his guts falling out? He had his spleen removed and went back to work in his fields yesterday!"

Eight weeks to the day after William was born, Uncle Fred finally found himself driving to Celina to bring his family home. It was a stinking hot July day in 1946, and as he drove along the Celina-Grunion Glade Road, his mood was ugly. He was thinking about how he was only

twenty-five years old but felt at least fifty, and it had been so long since his wife had paid him any attention that he he'd forgotten all the things he loved about her. Like how she'd waited for him when he was off fighting in the big war, how she rubbed his back after a long day on the sander, and how she cooked chicken soup with dumplings every Friday night. Aunt Mary was an excellent cook, and William would become an even better one.

Uncle Fred was also mad at Doc, who didn't have any straight answers to his questions about William. Would he always be small? And, of the greatest importance: Would he grow strong enough to play football?

If he didn't already have enough on his mind, as Uncle Fred was driving through the country, the Plymouth started making a knocking noise. It was a 1938 model that he'd bought used when he came home from the war. Something was always going wrong with it. If it needed work now, how would he pay for it? His medical insurance had a 10 percent deductible. He strongly suspected the deductible would eat up most of the twenty-dollar bill in his pocket—*all* his and Aunt Mary's savings.

I never knew Uncle Fred to have *any* savings.

When Uncle Fred was handed a bill at the hospital for $169.00, he did a quick calculation and figured the 10 percent deductible at $16.90. Wahoo! Maybe on the way home he'd take Mary out to eat at the Coffee Shoppe and buy William a bonnet.

When the clerk explained that the $169.00 *was* the deductible, Uncle Fred kicked the nearby water cooler and broke his middle toe. After it was x-rayed and taped to its neighbor, another buck was added to the deductible.

My uncle handed over the $20. Then he agreed to give the hospital $12.50 a month for twelve months, even though he didn't know where it would come from. "I make a dollar an hour working as a sander and my rent is forty dollars a month," he told the administrator. Seems like

nothing now, but back then that was the average wage for a factory worker, if you can believe it.

On the way to the car, Aunt Mary noticed Uncle Fred's limp. "What happened to your foot, Fred?"

Uncle Fred ignored the question.

Aunt Mary's attention turned to getting herself and William settled in the front passenger seat. As Uncle Fred pulled out of the parking lot, carefully using his right heel to depress the accelerator pedal, his thoughts locked on how he might squeeze $3.12 out of each weekly paycheck. Uncle Fred always said his finances were just fine until William was born, and after that the debt never let up.

They were well out in the country on their way home when Aunt Mary said with great enthusiasm, "Tomorrow I'll come up to the factory when your shift gets off, and we'll order a new davenport."

The car swerved wildly. Uncle Fred corrected it before it landed in the ditch. He spoke in cool, even tones, "There's not going to be a new couch." Then he changed the subject. "It's the middle of July and it's damn hot. Why don't you unwrap the boy a bit? Doc says he's healthy now."

Having been raised on a farm, Uncle Fred was an outdoors man. He had not only played football for the Captains in high school but he had fought in the trenches during World War II. He gave credit for his survival there to the lessons he'd learned from his football days at Grunion Glade High. "Dodging German bullets," he always said, "is like avoiding getting tackled."

Aunt Mary checked that William's swaddle was on tight and told her husband to mind his own business. Aunt Mary, it seemed, was still upset over the accounts of his drunken stupor by the canal.

Uncle Fred reached one hand across the seat and tried to unwind William's cocoon, but Aunt Mary slapped it back and said, "He'll catch cold."

By this time, Uncle Fred had passed our farm and was nearing Crybaby Bridge. At the time, that goddamnable bridge was the only way in and out of the village and it was believed to be haunted. Way back in 1858, two years before Grunion Glade was founded, young Winnie Uriah had been murdered on the bridge by a jilted lover and her body thrown into the canal. Winnie was pregnant at the time, and folks around Grunion Glade claimed that on moonlight nights the cries of Winnie's unborn babe could be heard from the deck of the bridge. I had to cross the abominable thing every day to and from school. I always held my breath and sprinted to the other side.

"Slow down," Aunt Mary said. "You almost put us in the ditch once already."

Uncle Fred, sick of having little control in his life, stopped in the middle of the bridge. He knew Aunt Mary was afraid of Crybaby Bridge, so he stopped there to distract her. He slid across the seat and snatched William from Aunt Mary's arms, then unwound the layers of blankets swaddling William. "There's no need to coddle the boy." He looked at William and said, "Nobody in my family has eyes like that."

"William's eyes look just like your mother's, God rest her soul," Aunt Mary shot back, reaching out for the baby. She then added, "Doc says he'll grow into his eyes."

Uncle Fred handed William back to Aunt Mary, who started to rewrap him. Uncle Fred threw her a look that would stop a rabid dog in mid-charge. Aunt Mary pretended to give up, but in the end she would have her way and Uncle Fred knew it.

William had become a source of friction between his parents. In the days to come, that friction would spark a feud. That feud would affect how William felt about football for the rest of his life—and the way the whole town felt about William.

I took a long time to decide which side I was on.