

Limestone County Almanac

Lynne Bevan DeMichele



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Franklyn Robert Bevan

Woodsman, Farmer, Father: 1914–2008

Virginia Barr Bevan

Artist, Farmer, Mother: 1917–1994

*“You especially have kept my imagination
alive and richly nourished by your wit
and the gentle depths of your wisdom.
There are no words of near value to the
gifts you have given me.”*

—Denton Kammeyer

Limestone County Almanac

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Acknowledgments

During the 1940s and 50s, I grew up on an Illinois farm—complete with chickens, cows, and barn cats—not unlike those around Mount Nebo, minus the hogs. (Dad didn't like hogs.) I remember the tantalizing front porch chatter among my parents, relatives, and neighbors on warm summer nights. Those memories are the seed bed for the characters and the *mise-en-scène* of fictional Limestone County. Years ago, I began writing a series of short stories inspired by those memories and indelible impressions of life in a small farm town. It's a way of life that has all but disappeared. The stories seemed to follow a time progression between the 1920s, through World War II, and up into the 1950s. Knit together, they became *Limestone County Almanac*.

My father's contribution to this book was foundational, with his lifetime of observations and humor. I'm indebted to him for his love, his keen eye and unique wit. My mother, Virginia Barr Bevan, was, everlastingly, my creative muse and booster. For certain historical resources I'm grateful to the Kankakee County Museum with its recreated one-room country schoolhouse; the very real farm town of Bonfield, Illinois; along with the war diaries and letters of many medics, nurses, and soldiers of both World Wars.

Not many writers are lucky enough to have a superb and tender editor at the ready even during the formative days of a writing project. I had such an editor. Mary Matz, an American writer/editor living in Prague, has been my idea bouncer, narrative wrangler, and personal "Maxwell Perkins" for the writing of this book. I continue to value her intelligence, counsel and friendship.

Others who have been particularly encouraging and helpful in the birthing process of *Limestone County Almanac* are Linda Burnett, Max Case, Beverly Coyle, Robert Dalton, Scott DeMichele, Mardy DeMichele, Dorothee Tjelle, Jim Dalton, Mary Shelley, and Victor Kapuscinski. It takes a village to birth a book. Thank you all.

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Prologue

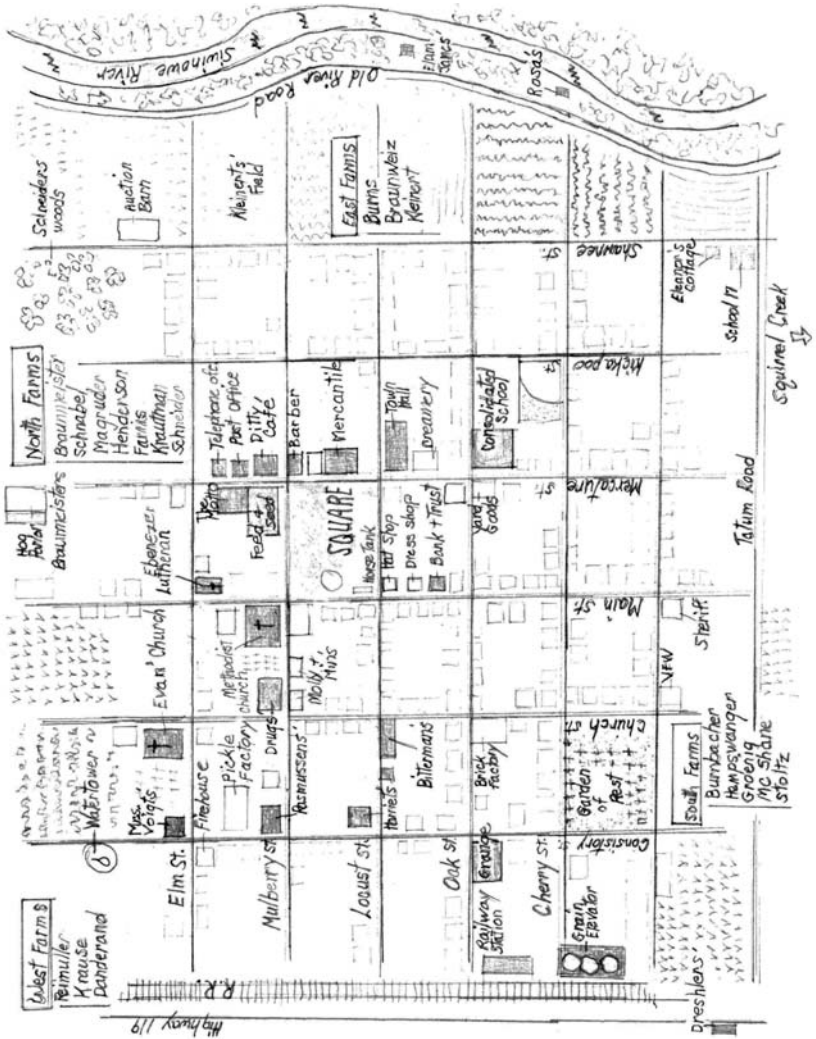
A band of color, like a smear of new rust, begins to widen just above the eastern horizon beyond the river. Little by little the leafless trees step out from the darkness of the fields behind them and soon are starkly silhouetted against the crimson burst of a Midwestern autumn daybreak. Still partially below the distant rise, a waking sun begins to illuminate the ground fog swimming through the weeds and brambles below the trees. One by one the curved tops of tombstones slowly emerge like pale specters arising from this small patch of earth.

It's likely just the wind winding through the markers or perhaps the first sounds of the birds stirring on their branches that seem like distant voices. Not far from the rows of headstones stands an angel, her head bowed. She is swathed in Grecian dress with a fist upraised as though in pride or perhaps defiance. From close up her fist appears to be missing its forefinger, one that no doubt had once been pointing heavenward. The stone folds of her gown glow faintly red at the edges now as they catch the morning's rays. As the phantom voices subside, names on the gravestones arrayed around the statue come into focus. They are mostly German: Stoltz, Voigt, Schneider, Groenig, Huffman, among many others. There are a few Irish surnames as well, like Murphy and McShane. The stones have simple inscriptions like "In loving memory," "Mother," "Father." Close beside some of the older markers are smaller ones with dates revealing pitifully brief lives, some only a few years or months long. The stone inscriptions have faded a bit over time and are accented now with moss and black mold; in fact the small cemetery looks to be rather forgotten.

A single grave off by itself under the branches of a great black oak tree is a simple stone inscribed "Beloved Friend" below the name of a young man who had died in his early twenties during World War I. Further off, out at the far edge of the graveyard and close to the end rows of a recently harvested corn field, lays a new grave, startling in its freshness. The black earth covering it glistens with dew in the new

light. On top of the rectangular mound among a few wilting bouquets rests a limp bicycle cap of faded plaid, well worn and with a tattered red cockade pinned to its side. The newly placed granite marker reads: “Denton Kamermeyer, May 21, 1896–Oct. 15, 1990, Beloved Postman.”

While new sunlight begins to banish the fog and fully inhabit the stone garden, the small figure of a woman turns from that newest grave and wraps the oversized old grey sweater she wears tightly about her body, then she tucks her fingers under the warmth of her arms in the chill air. She walks quickly but with a distinct awkwardness, taking care to place her feet securely with each step. One leg is lame but it's clearly an old impairment, as she walks with a familiar accommodation of it. A few surly calls from the crows crackle around the graveyard as she leaves. The broad fields beyond remain silent and sleeping, ready for the winter that is coming.



Map of Mount Nebo

Part I—Spring

Mount Nebo

Approximately four years earlier—May 1, 1986

Thinking she'd go in to work early today, a middle aged woman drives slowly east along Elm Street steering with one hand and holding a coffee cup with the other when she spots the old man up ahead silhouetted against the sky, now beginning to lighten beyond the river. He's standing at the edge of town where the fields begin; his tall, slightly stooped frame and his faded plaid cap readily identify him. He's pretty old, she thinks, to be walking about alone in the early morning dark. And what's he doing out there with his back to the street, looking out toward the river? She stops the car a few yards behind the old guy.

"Are you alright, Mr. Kamermey'r?" she calls out the window. He starts at the sound of the voice in the stillness and fiddles hurriedly with the front of his trousers before turning around to acknowledge the woman in the car.

"Perfectly fine! Just taking the morning air," he answers, grinning sheepishly and raising his palm in greeting.

"Good," the driver says, "How about my giving you a lift home, now?"

"Oh, no. Thanks, Neighbor, that's good of you, but I'm going to be meeting someone shortly over in the square early this morning. I've not actually met her yet, but she's come all the way from Cleveland just to visit our town and maybe write something about it. I'm going to show her around."

The woman behind the wheel smiles and waves from her open car window, then steps on the gas, hurrying out toward the river road that will take her to nearby Maple Grove and her busy real estate office

there. Denton Kammeyer shrugs and smiles ruefully to himself as he fetches a pipe and some matches from a droopy pocket in the old, grey sweater he wears. He pokes the stem between his teeth, turns away from the town again, and proceeds to unzip his pants once more so he can finish taking a peaceful leak out there standing in end rows of a field of emergent corn just in time to watch the sun peek up from the far horizon beyond the river. As he stands there he thinks about something he'd seen earlier on his morning walk just as the sky began to lighten. He'd passed a young mother grimly jogging along the still-dark street behind a three-wheeled stroller. He shakes his head and thinks to himself, *Even the damn baby buggies are in a hurry, these days*. After enjoying a few more minutes of reverie at the edge of the field, he checks his watch, girds up his loins again, and turns to walk back into town for his planned tête-à-tête with the lady from Ohio. He's really looking forward to it.

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Yes, well then, Mrs. Nesbit, hello! It's good to meet you at last. Somehow I expected you to be a little older with all your publishing experience. I remember a few years ago reading your article on the old one-room country school days in the *Saturday Evening Post*. Such a lovely piece; and it so reminded me of our mutual friend Eleanor Barkley. She and I are longtime friends, as she must have mentioned. The two of us have shared a lot of literature together over the years. In fact it was she who made sure I read your various stories and articles as they were published over the years. Eleanor told me you'd once been a pupil in her school quite some time ago. She is extremely proud of you, of course... Yes, I've lived here in Mount Nebo a very long time, indeed. Ha. Especially by today's standards. I've been a fixture around here for the better part of my 90 years, now. It's given me something to believe in... Oh my, yes, it's true I am the keeper of its secrets! But here it is 1975 already and most of the people I used to know in Limestone County are gone now—either lying beneath the sod there south of town, or else moved off to an old folks home of some sort. Heaven knows the younger ones don't hang around once they're on their own. There's not much to keep them here any more. I'm pleased you've sought me out, though, Mrs. Nesbit. And, yes, I suppose the old town would forgive me if I did share a few of its stories while I can. That is, while I can still see people's faces through the fog of my geriatric memory!

Isn't this a superlative morning, Mrs....? OK, yes—I'll call you Loretta. I'll certainly be pleased to tell you a bit about earlier times here, but I'm afraid it will all seem quite homely and unsophisticated compared to life in a big city like Cleveland. I know my town's quite humble by comparison, especially now. Even so, I am happy you've come all the way out here to chat with me about farm town life as it used to be. Few are left any more who remember how it was. Give me a minute to fix myself a smoke and let me think where to begin. Nothing quite like a good, sweet pipe to help one's ruminations... Let me know if the smoke bothers you.

I can tell you a story or two about this old town square later on. You may even remember some of the celebrations we used to have here years ago when you were a little girl. Let's just begin our walking tour here along Locust Street. Now the sun's up the air will warm up soon. These streets still look much as they did when the town was still alive. Just quieter. When she called to tell me you were visiting and she wanted me to meet you, Eleanor mentioned you'd once lived on a farm near here years ago as a small girl... Of course, yes, it's all greatly changed since you left those many years ago. Surprisingly, I should say. The town's businesses—you might still recall some of them—are mostly shuttered or re-purposed now. Except for the grain elevator, of course. The railway station near it over on the west side of town was boarded up back in the 1950s after the trains stopped coming through. Soon after that the shops closed too, one by one—the bank, the dress and hat shops, drug store, and even the mercantile... Be careful where you walk there. The sidewalks are crumbling in places, as you can see, although it doesn't matter much now. Nobody goes out for evening strolls any more; people are too busy jogging. What used to be really vital and...pertinent is now merely quaint, I regret to say. These old houses are inhabited by commuters and retirees now who still find the old town agreeable. Plus a few artists and oddballs like me. They reside here but their lives are no longer interconnected as they once were in this town. Did you know that only half a century back, most everybody lived on farms or in little bergs like this one? Their stories are fading fast, ebbing back into time...

I'm sorry Eleanor's head cold kept her from coming with you this morning, Loretta. How well I remember the year she came to Mount Nebo as a very young woman. She really took the school board by storm! She came here about 20 years after I arrived, myself. I'll tell you all about it later. As Eleanor might have mentioned, I do still

drive a portion of my old rural mail route around here every day—much like an old mill horse going around the same circle day after day. Gives me a reason to get up each morning, keeps the blood circulating... Oh yes, I do indeed still have the old notebooks... *Hm, Elly told you about those?* They're still stashed away somewhere in my rooms back that way near the Square. I stopped writing notes in them years ago when arthritis in my hands made it too hard to do any more. I've kept some newspaper clippings over the years too, you know. Yellowed and brittle at this point but, I'd be happy to show them to you, if you'd like; they'll give you quite a unique perspective on this place. *In Harriet Murphy's own, eccentric newspaper style!*

Here, let's walk along Mercature Street, the "main drag" as the young people used to call it. *When we still had young people here.* Up ahead there's a small yoga and dance studio now where a spot called Darleen's Ditty Café once stood—for years it was the most popular place in town six days out of every week. My second home. There on the opposite corner, you can see an empty lot where Maynard Krautheimer's old Barber Shop used to be. Your father probably got his hair cut there, along with most of the other fellas around here. *I can still smell the place!* On the other side of Mercature there used to be a feed and seed store and a little newspaper office—"The Mount Nebo Motto," may it rest in peace. The office is now a small exercise gym for women, of all things.

This part of town was the center of the universe once. For me at least, it still is. I'm going to enjoy talking about those old times with you, Loretta. Haven't thought about them in quite a while. I suspect few others have any interest in old sleepy farm towns like this, but I'll tell you what I can remember about its heyday. Perhaps you'd like to hear a few tales about its people, too. The note taking was a hobby of mine... I suppose I really ought not to have used people's actual names in them, but I hadn't expected to ever share them. It makes little difference anyway now they're all gone.

Let's turn here onto Mulberry now, and we'll walk out to the end of the sidewalk. I want to show you the fields.

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Ah! Look out there beyond us now. It is those fields that haven't changed, you know—even after two world wars and many, many seasons of growing and living...*and plenty of dying.* That piece of ground right there used to belong to the Klienert family... Ah, you remember the name!... No, the Klienerts are gone now. Their fields

and all the rest of the land around here is farmed by just a few big operations now days. At one time there were around six *million* little farms across the country, and all of them worked by families like the Klienerts. For them, “going to town” meant coming here to my own Mount Nebo, or someplace like it. In its finer days, this was the beating heart of Limestone County. Now it’s just a relic...ha...like me, I guess. And...uff, I cannot bend like I used to. Here now, look what I have sifting through my fingers, Loretta. Look what fine stuff it is, just a gray powder when it’s dry like today; but after a rain it actually shines black and it gives off a sweet earthy scent. *Ambrosia!* The smell of new life! Of course you couldn’t notice such a thing in the city, but every season of the year brings a transmutation of the soil and all that lives on it and in it. Like the crops out there, towns and people—everything—grows, changes, and finally dies. But the land...the land stays forever—always the same yet born afresh each spring. An eternal canvas which the generations spread their lives across. *The land stays ever young while the people on it just get old!*

If you could look down on this same patch of earth some bygone spring morning—a day like today, say—from up in the sky somewhere, you’d see the same rolling landscape marked by a nice grid of county roads and dirt lanes. They define the fields—the ever-fecund fields—of Paradise... Ha! No, no. Unlike you, I’m no writer—just a dreamer, an old tale teller. Look there: yet today, perfect row crops lie shining in all directions, and the world is righteous and in order. This land here still lies a good distance from the cities. Back in 1919 when I first set foot in Illinois—*Ha. Can I be that damned old?*—cities all stank of coal smoke. Acrid stuff. It permeated everything and left fine layers of coal dust, even inside closets and cupboards. But out here in the country...ah, the air’s fresh as spring water yet today. And if the rains have come like they’re supposed to, new green corn’ll be stretching up tiptoe-like reaching for sun, just like it’s doing now right before us there. *My own prairie Oz.* Great fields in shades of green with stripes of black Illinois dirt—stark and straight between the rows—at least until June when the rows start to fill in. Now, Loretta, let your gaze follow along the Siwinowe River, curving to the east over there and meandering on through the countryside. The water’s still brown now with spring runoff, but in summertime it’s almost green as the corn...like the crops had stained the rain before it ran off to the river. All along those ancient banks the ghosts of the Shawnee and Chickasaw drift through the old cottonwoods, *still keening for the loss of the deer and beaver.*

See, over there now, between the river and where we're standing, you can trace the lines of what's left of some old limestone fences. Over the years city people have carried away most of the stones. For patios, I guess. Back before the town was even built, settlers lifted those flat chunks of limestone that pushed up through the soil and stacked them all along the edges of each field as they cleared it. Stubborn men, sturdy women... Try to imagine the old farmsteads out there still with their great barns and corn cribs, red in the early sunlight. Now look out through the ranks of fence-row trees—lots of buckthorns and mulberries—stepping off to the horizon there. See how their shadows stretch across the new rows. Here and there you can still see a stone silo standing like a feudal keep below this great sweep of sky. The silos dwarfed the cows below...bobbing their heads slowly up and down as they walked from morning milking—single-file—along their narrow paths...out into the pastures to graze. Now listen and try to hear windmills squeaking and wobbling as they twirl in the wind, drawing up water for the stock tanks in the prairie wind.

All along the ditch banks that bracket every county road out there, redwing blackbirds still perch on the tops of milkweeds, calling to each other and watching for bugs creeping from their winter hideaways. Except for that old winding road along the river, most other byways used to be made of dirt. Always deeply rutted and especially troublesome in the spring. I've lost count of how many times along my route I had to ask a farmer to bring his horses or a tractor to tow me out of the cussed mud—*especially over out by the old Schneider place where the lane still dips low*. All the same, you can see how the roads make precise, right angles with one another; they frame square-mile sections. The rectitude of prairie farmland allows for little ambiguity, you see... My little joke.

Presiding over all of it is the Cahokia Grain Elevator over that way at the west edge of town; you can see the top of it from here. It's still the tallest structure in Limestone County. Its shadow reminds me of a great sundial marking the sun's trajectory. Almost mythic, don't you think? This old town beside it, Mount Nebo, was named for the place Moses found his final rest, of course. The name puzzles people when they first hear of it. Ha, a so-called "mountain" here in the middle of the prairie! *Pretty droll for those old farts*.

I think it's a wonderful idea, your writing about this nearly vanished way of life, Loretta. Once upon a time I could never have imagined how my own life would be so...transformed here in this place. Yes, it's quiet as a fox's burrow now but it wasn't always. Not

at all. Back when you were a little girl, it was a point of real consequence, a center of commerce. It was, in fact, the social vortex for all the farms clustered around it, like chicks around a brood hen. *Ha. For a former city boy, even my similes have gone rustic.*

Let's continue our little tour up there in the sky above us. Just look up, now. Those clouds pile up so high every spring you have to really crane your neck to see the whole of them. And right now, see way off toward the north there, they're drawing up veils moisture from the earth like a reverse rain shower. SShwupp... This is one of the few places you can actually *see* transpiration in this breathless world. You couldn't see it in a place like Cleveland.

Golly, I'm talking your ear off. That's what happens I guess when one lives alone. Once I get started I'm like a greased flywheel... Yes, those farm houses you drove by on the way here this morning probably do look a lot nicer than they did when you were a girl and not everyone could afford paint—or landscaping! Today the people who live in the old farm houses are post-urban people who just wanted a quaint house to fix up and a few acres to put them at a distance from the city. Mount Nebo's no longer linked in any essential way to the countryside any more...sadly. There are no more chicken houses or hog pens—certainly no more outhouses! There are hardly even any barns left any more. A barn used to be a greater source of family pride than the house beside it. Unfortunately they've all fallen out of use and the few left just decay now in...picturesque ways.

Our once tee-totaling town now even has a tavern. I confess I do avail myself of its refreshments from time to time. Convenient, as I live in an apartment just above it. It's called the Elbow Room. Clever, yes? Years ago the fearsome Women's Christian Temperance Society once made sure such...contaminations did not appear in our fair town. The Elbow Room used to be the old town hall. I suppose it's better for the tavern to replace a town hall than, say, one of our old churches. Such has been the fate of lots of old country chapels, you know. Liquor or antiques. People think it's cute. My, my. This whole metamorphosis has happened in the span of little more than a half century, just 50 years. *The blink of an eye. A tip of the cap. A sneeze.*

So it goes in this accelerating life. A once unblemished boy of 23 when I first arrived here now stands beside you a little bent, and grizzled as that old cherry tree there...hmpf. I may be skinnier than ever and my eyes are bad, but I still have all my own teeth! And—I'm pleased to observe—still ambulatory for all my years...and most grateful for such a blessing. My hair was once my pride, very dark

and wavy—so thick I had to stuff it into my bicycle cap to keep it under control. Ha. Now I just wear this old plaid cap to keep my head warm as I make my rounds... No, the mail route hasn't changed much over the years, only the people and the way they rush around now.

I suppose other men might have been disappointed with the life I've led here these three score years and more—*God knows, my father first among them...rest his calcified soul!* But once I planted myself here as a young man, I quickly found that my feet no longer itched to travel anywhere at all again beyond these pretty fields.

§ § § § § §

Ahh. The warm sun feels good on my old bones. Oh, so does this bench. I've been lobbying the new town manager to install some more comfortable seats here in the square, but it's not very likely... Well, yes, surely. I'm pleased you're even interested in an old man's life, Loretta. I guess my own story's as good as any to begin with.

Let's see... The summer of 1919 when I first got here, was one of the hottest in the record books. I arrived quite the worse for wear after a long, dusty train ride across the Alleghenies from Virginia... Yes, I'm a long-displaced easterner. Mount Nebo was just a small enough dot on the map, I'd thought, to be the kind of pastoral hideaway I needed. When I was a soldier during the First World War I'd been captivated by the beauty, the great peace of the French countryside...until the Jerries started blasting it with their cannon and mortars, of course. When I mustered out after the war, I couldn't wait to leave Roanoke—the city where I grew up—and find a quiet countryside like this one to hide myself a while and clear out my brain and poisoned lungs... Yes, mustard gas. Thousands of us doughboys suffered from it. Most every one of us was damaged in some vile way when they shipped us home from Europe, many still badly shell shocked. Just sitting silently with the “thousand-yard stare,” as they used to say. That unspeakable conflict is known as the “Great War!” Hmph. *What a pathetic piece of fiction that is.* A lot of soldiers just couldn't face regular life again afterwards, so they stayed on the trains. People called them hoboes, and they kept on the move riding the rails and living in rough little camps along the tracks, leaving their families back in Macon or Erie or Pine Bluff to worry about what had become of them.

Oh, I wanted to leave everything behind, too...*including so many other bitter memories.* Ah, but enough of that. Suffice it to say I retreated to the great Midwestern Plains to ride the roads of

Limestone County instead of the trains, and without bothering anyone with my coughing—or *my peculiarities*. Yes, this place has been my escape, my personal hobo camp, but with the luxury of my own upstairs rooms at Mrs. Voigt's fine rooming house in those early years. Funny—I used to believe it was only temporary.

There is a history in all men's lives, as the old Bard wisely observed. To be sure, we all do have a story—even me. When the First World War broke out I was just a callow lad studying for the law—at my father's insistence—at William and Mary. In 1915 the Kaiser's gunboats sank a civilian ship and everyone this side of the Atlantic clamored to get into the fight. That was much before your time, Dear Lady, but you likely studied it in grammar school. The war headlines flashed around the country and there was a great urgency shivering in the air everywhere. My friends and I were all keen to enlist. Full of piss and vinegar...sorry, an old expression. We were in such a hurry to get to Europe and into the action—God forgive us. Claude, my best buddy, and I signed up together thinking we'd follow Black Jack Pershing to some great glory on the battlefields of the Western Front. *Pfff. What saps we were.* I naively believed enlisting would help unshackle me from the future laid out for me. I longed to live in some shabby little Paris loft writing out all the pungent prose fermenting in my young brain at the time. Of course we all thought the war would end right away once we Americans got on the scene, and I thought I'd soon be living among the Bohemians on the Rive Gauche, soaking in the new art and literature...*desperate to figure things out and to be part of that great Gallic rush into the new century!*

It was a boy's dream, though. By the time the war finally ended I had lost the boy and couldn't even remember the dream... Come, Loretta, why don't we go up to my apartment where the furniture is softer on my bony derriere. I'll fix us a nice pot of tea and try to answer those questions of yours. You can bring the tape recorder and set it on the table while we talk. I think I may even have some pie for us...

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Let's see, it was October I think when our division landed in France in 1915. Unfortunately my feet were too flat for the infantry and I was much too tall for the air squadron—*what a shame, I would have liked that a lot*—so they trained me for the medical corps. Better than being stuck at the butt end of a rifle in a putrid trench

somewhere, I suppose. But after tending an endless line of dripping stretchers with the incessant noise of hell all around... *My God, three long years watching those fields soak up the red life of mutilated 16- and 17-year-old boys...* I just wanted to find a little peace again and a lungful of clean air to breathe. I didn't want to stay in Virginia, *and Father never forgave me—for that or other transgressions.*

Well...enough of an old, forgotten war. More tea, Loretta?... I'll try to tell you a little more now about this place when I first came here. Ha. I had just a single cardboard suitcase and some books. It was a nice day like today, only hotter. Oppressively hot, in fact, and humid as an equatorial jungle. Hottest day on record at that time, I learned. It was only late May yet the air hung about like a damp blanket. Even so, as I walked these drowsy streets so different from those back East, I started to feel some of the raw war scars and...the constant dread begin to fade. For the first time in three years I no longer heard cannon fire at night when I tried to sleep. *Or the screams of the soldiers in the ward.* I stopped ducking for cover at the sound of backfiring cars on the street. The sounds I heard here were just the afternoon cicadas and the faraway growl of a tractor in the fields outside of town.

On the corner of Church and Elm Streets, just a few blocks from my apartment here, stood a big clapboard house with a blue-star banner hanging in the front window. A parlor flag like that one marked the house as having lost a son in the war. There was also a home-made sign in the front yard, "Room & Board—reasonable." The house has been remodeled since then and has had other owners over time; but in 1919 it belonged to Viola Voigt, proprietress of a respectable rooming house. She was a widow lady and reluctant to accept a single man as a tenant, but once she found out I was newly back from the war she embraced me like a lost son.

My room on the second floor of her house was generous; it had a nice iron bedstead, an easy chair and a small desk with a good floor lamp beside it. Another, smaller chamber next to it served as my reading room and library of sorts, and it overlooked the Evangelical church across the street and its mossy little graveyard. I still remember the butter color of the room's wainscoting, the odd geometry of the ceiling overhead, and the little window just over the side porch roof where my cat used to meow to be let in mornings. (Of course I hadn't met my cat yet. Sancho was his name; he came a few years later.) That first afternoon, Mrs. Voigt brought up a tray for me with some iced tea and fresh mint from her garden, along with a plate

of sweet biscuits she'd made. The old dear made a fuss about my meager appetite, always urging a little more roasted pork or sauerbraten, and a little more cobbler and fresh cream every time we sat down to eat. Her cobbler was sublime.

Those first, untroubled weeks living at Mrs. Voigt's I slept like the dead—really slept for the first time in years. Even my own coughing didn't much disturb my rest. You know, during the war I was always on call, so when I finally got back to the U.S. I had a considerable rest deficit. Next day I heard a little tap on my door sometime during the afternoon with Mrs. Voigt wondering if I might not be ill since I had missed both breakfast and lunch downstairs. *And every morning I awoke thinking of either Claude or Jean Marie and holding my gut for the pain of their absence. I'd play that crappy old parlor piano of hers downstairs for hours just to keep from thinking...*

Sorry Loretta, did I lapse for a moment? I must have been day dreaming. Anyway, after a time I could feel the quiet of this town and the delicious, verdant countryside all around it soothe my spirit. It wasn't long before the country air began to clear my lungs; day by day they got better. In no time at all—and for the first time in a long time—I felt safe. I felt I was...hmm...home, I guess.

That distant day I finally got up the courage to leave Roanoke once and for all, to find a new life free from Father's anger and accusations...free from the damned nightmares—dreaming I had no mouth, couldn't speak or make myself understood by anyone. I was despised in Virginia, and thought if I went far enough away, left behind all I'd seen and lived, that perhaps I could get on with some sort of future. Some sort of life again...

Oh, ah, anyway... What was I talking about? Oh yes, after I got off the train at Union Station in Chicago, I used what was left in my college account to buy a used Overland with no heater or windshield wipers, and I simply drove it south to look for that little dot on the map with the incongruous name. When I finally found Mount Nebo with its sweet air and good people, it seemed just the place to pause a while, a place where I'd conceive a new destiny for myself far away from the city—*far away from...f*cking war and other torments...* Yes, and because I had the automobile I readily found a job here driving the local mail run. The route paid enough to keep me occupied and fed, and it required nothing more than the dependable delivery of letters. It left me more or less alone with my books and music, and my scribbling...*and the still-fresh blood of memory.*

All that I knew of the world before Mount Nebo eventually became a distant, sorrowful preamble to the life that is now, at last, what I know is good and trustworthy. What endures.

I see it's getting late now, Loretta. Perhaps you'd like to meet again before you leave to go back to Cleveland... Oh, yes, tomorrow would be fine, fine! I'd really be delighted to meet you the day after, too, if you like. There's so much to tell... Yes, I'll be happy to give you some of my notes and clippings to look at this evening. Keep them as long as you wish.

Hello, Loretta! Good to see you, my dear. Come in, come in, and welcome to my modest abode once more. I trust you slept well at Eleanor's cottage last night? I've fixed a nice pot of coffee this morning and bought some sandwiches for our lunch later on. I'm glad you wanted to come for more stories. My mind's been spinning since we talked yesterday. So many old memories have bubbled up in my brain again. Things I hadn't thought about in so many years...

Did you enjoy browsing through my notebooks last night?...Oh, yes, there are plenty more of them there in the box, yet. Please feel free to look at as many of them as you like. And I insist you call me Denton now. You know, most everyone on Rural Route #2 called me "Dent!" They abbreviated it, no doubt, to make room for my surname, Kamermeyerer, making the whole thing a bit more manageable. I appreciate your unflinching pronunciation of it, Loretta. Saying my last name was a problem for people here at first because once they got started they couldn't find a place to quit and would end up sounding like an old engine trying to start on a cold morning—Kamer-meyer-er-er. Other branches of the family tree shortened the name to Kamer or Kamermeyer, lopping off the final "er" before they left Ellis Island—but not my forbears who hung on to every syllable. This was fine with me. I've always been particular about things. My mother used to call me a fussbudget as a boy, but even then I found that being organized, habitual helped me get a grip on things. And once I came to Mount Nebo my route was an orderly, predictable path for me to follow—soothing in a way. But I digress... Yes, of course, do turn on your recorder.

I kept track of all the people on my route in a little notebook at first, just to help me get to know names and remember everyone. At first, I confess, I saw them as...curiosities. They were all so different from the starchy easterners I'd grown up knowing. I came here feeling like an intruder and moved about pretending to be invisible at first. Hmph, fancied myself in hiding among the rustics, as though I

were a character in some Shakespearian play. Rustic they may have been but these country people were hardly benighted as I soon came to realize. My note-making became an ongoing diversion as I started jotting down observations along with names—nearly every day at first—between my mail deliveries. I'd stop by the roadside and record a few details and curiosities...*keeping the wheels of my imagination lubricated for when I began my real vocation, creating the great American novel. Ha!* Regardless, with my own life in hiatus—or so I believed—I began to live again through the narratives I imagined about the people of Limestone County as I came to know them. Details, bits of conversation, phrases overheard, even certain confidences. All fertilizer for my imagination.

Of course I wish I'd changed all the names now that you're going to be reading some of my notebooks, Loretta. Ah well... People surely wouldn't mind at this late date. Most are dead now and no doubt you wouldn't know most of them, anyhow.

As a newcomer, I seemed pretty strange to them at first. Even so I must say the people on my route were kind to me—each one of them solid and dependable with no subtext. They said what they meant, which seemed a really novel and refreshing thing to me. After a little time they ignored my eastern accent (which I hadn't been much aware of before) and came to treat me like any other daily occurrence, a predictable part of the landscape. *And I sometimes heard things, saw things not even Faulkner could have imagined!*

When I first came here, the people of Limestone County were as foreign to me as aboriginals in some New Zealand rain forest. I discovered that, unlike my Eastern friends, these stalwart Midwesterners were mostly unperturbed about world affairs and Washington politics. (Local politics was another matter, of course.) And they were little interested in the rarefied air of philosophy or theology, let alone such fripperies as style or art or literature. Except, of course, for my devoted friend Eleanor. *Thank God for sweet Elly.* "Nonsense" or "Nothing much" is what others called such preoccupations—unnecessary to a difficult way of life rooted in the soil and strictly governed by the seasons. What the people of Limestone County endlessly cared about and talked about was farming, each other—and the weather! I quickly learned that weather is sovereign here; and everything, *everyone* under the sky lived in unavoidable concession to it. It was either gracious or ruinous or some point in between, all fodder for daily conversation. It formed

the ongoing, familiar pattern for their lives. And eventually, as it turned out, for my own life as well.

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Well...I guess if you're ready, Loretta, I'll pour us both another cup of coffee and just keep on talking. Interrupt me whenever you want to. I think I'll start with my friend Harriet. You'll likely be reading some of her columns as you browse through my papers.