

I was born Elizabeth Marie McClure, in a frame house on Bear Creek in Davis County, West Virginia. My momma's name was Mattie Lee Cooper, and she was eighteen when she gave birth to me. I had a brother five years older than me. She had my brother soon after she married my daddy because Momma got married at thirteen.

My daddy's name was Allen Earl McClure, and my big brother was named after him but we called him Al. Al was the best brother in the world to me.

My daddy? I don't have many memories, but here's the one most clear: He set me up on a horse once, and we rode all the way into Laurel, the only place in Davis County that had stores then. He got a file for his horse's feet, and he bought me a bag of soft peppermints. The old man behind the counter put them in a brown poke, and I sat in front of him all the way home and ate every piece. The only thing I remember my dad ever gave me, I puked up as soon as I got off the horse.

That's all I know of him because the day we rode into Laurel was the only day of pretty weather we had that spring. In 1923, the rains came and they didn't stop until the Guyandotte River crested and every place got flooded, not just along our road but over the whole county.

My daddy got sick in his lungs and coughed and coughed and had to lie down on the sofa with good springs because he said he had a hitch in his side, which felt like someone was poking him with the end of a whittled stick for pure meanness. Momma went down to the cellar and brought up an onion string and made poultice after poultice and it did some good. We thought Daddy was going to get well, but then she ran out of onions and sent Al, little as he was, to my daddy's sister's house, Aunt Dortha, and told him to tell Dortha that my daddy was sick in his lungs and to send all the onions she could spare.

Al was gone three days, and when he came back, my daddy was too tired to cough, he was just making a rattling sound, and if Momma hadn't slept next to him on the floor wrapped in a pair of quilts, he'd have had blood all over his mouth. She stayed awake and patted his mouth dry with every clean cloth in the house.

Al could have been back sooner because Momma let him take the horse, and Al was smart. If there'd been a dry ridge, he would have found it, but what happens when he gets to Aunt Dortha's and tells her my daddy is sick? She wouldn't do nothing but come herself with her three fat girls. The wagon kept getting stuck in the mud and Al, little as he was, had to get down and pull the harness.

They had a fine horse, a better horse than the best Momma let Al use, but Uncle O'Dell said they couldn't take it because his horse might break a leg without new shoes, and Allen Earl was always bellyaching about something. They came with the mules and a bunch of onions that was mostly wet, but it didn't make any difference because my dad was half in and half out, rattling deep in his chest. Momma said, "If that was a snake, I'd cut it in half." Was there a snake in our house? I looked everywhere, but I couldn't find one. Then she said to me, "Lizzie, your daddy is passing in and out. I want you to stay in the kitchen and be a good girl."

That's where I stayed, so I was the first to see them coming because I was looking through the screen door, and all of a sudden, there was a wagon in our yard and inside were Aunt Dortha and her three fat girls. They wouldn't let Al stop at the bottom of the hill because they'd worn their good clothes and didn't want mud on their hems. They knew my daddy was going to die and wanted to look good for the company rolling in.

Al looked half-dead himself. He brought in the sack of onions and they were all soft and smelled bad because of the burlap and had green sprouts everywhere, but Momma was so glad to see Aunt Dortha she cried and said she didn't know what she'd do without her. Then, Dortha and her little elephants tromped into the room where my daddy lay on the sofa, and they cried, but they didn't offer to help Momma with the poultice.

The rains let up and more people came, who seemed to stay forever, but Momma said that was all right because they were Daddy's kin and wanted to be with him when he passed. Someone brought whiskey with rock candy in it for Daddy to sip. We had Aunt Dortha and her three, and then Uncle O'Dell came on his fine horse. After that, it was Merle Jean and her husband, Warren, but the real trouble didn't start until Uncle Sid came from another part of the county. I'd never seen Uncle Sid before, and that was because he'd married a woman who said his family was trash. They still lived in Davis but right next to the Callope County line. Sid wouldn't leave Davis because he didn't want to pay high property taxes, but when he came he didn't act like he'd *ever* lived in Davis or was even kin.

Daddy was passing in and out, the rattle stuck in his throat, and when he saw Sid, he started saying a lot of things, or trying to, and I heard him say, "Mattie, don't sign." I told Momma, and she didn't believe my daddy said that. Uncle Sid told her I had a big imagination, that Allen Earl was past sense, and the best thing for me to do was go wait on the side porch. He made me do it because Momma couldn't, and as I was going out the door, he gave me a swat and that's how I knew I'd told the truth.

Sure enough, all the papers that Momma wasn't supposed to sign, Uncle Sid got her to sign them. When my daddy died, I told Al what he'd said to Momma, and Al believed me.

Momma didn't. She just cried and cried and went to bed when his sisters told her to get some rest. But the sisters weren't trying to do good. Did they want my daddy to die? No, but they knew he would, and with every spoonful of honeyed whiskey they poured down his throat and every poultice that was too weak to drive out the rattle, they were thinking what they could get after he passed.

Momma wasn't a smart woman. She wasn't dumb like people who can't learn, but she trusted everyone. She was young and had been on Bear Creek all of her life, except for once when she went to Laurel for a fair. She told me about the fair—it was the first time she'd ever eaten gingerbread—and that my daddy had told her when we got old enough, we'd go every year. None of that happened, and I used to imagine us sitting in the wagon and singing as Daddy drove to town, but I replayed that fancy in my mind so much it got stale.

When Daddy died, there was no one to close his eyes. Momma tried to do it, but they kept popping open and that scared her. The only kindness Uncle Sid did for Daddy was stand up and say, "Mattie, watch out," and Momma moved to the side. Then, he took two silver dollars from his pocket, and put one on each lid. Momma offered to get pennies, but Uncle Sid told her that pennies would turn his skin green. Yes, Uncle Sid did that kindness, then he turned around and cheated his brother's family.

Everything changed fast after that, like someone was spinning our house around. We had a house, we had furniture in it, and we had land. My daddy worked as a farrier, and we had a good barn, another barn for tobacco because he had permission from the state government to raise tobacco, and Vandalia Gas Company had bought our oil and natural gas rights. They

sent us a check every month, but wouldn't you know that after Daddy died, everything was gone but for our house and land?

Our land was hilly except for the tobacco and garden spots, and even if all of it could have been farmed, Al was too young to do it, so Momma planted a garden in the yard so we wouldn't have to walk to the garden plot on the hill. Daddy was buried there. Momma said when the check came from Vandalia, she'd get him a headstone, but that check never came.

We had a pump organ so old that when my daddy pumped the pedals, they wheezed. It had belonged to his momma and daddy, and they gave it to him when they passed. Dortha cried over that organ, said none of us could play it, and now it would leave the family because my mother, being so young and all, would marry as soon as she found another man. She kept carrying on until Momma gave her the organ.

Then, Merle Jean started in. There had been four children in my daddy's family, Sid, Dortha, Merle Jean, and my daddy, Allen Earl, the youngest and best. After Dortha got the organ, Merle Jean said she wanted Momma to do her a favor and Momma asked her what kind of favor did she have in mind and Merle Jean said her husband, Warren, wanted to clear out the barn where Daddy had kept his tools for the horses' hooves. She said that, as pretty as Momma was, the next time she got a husband, she'd get one with an automobile and Momma said, "An automobile, why, Merle Jean, no automobile can get up here!"

Merle Jean winked and said, "You never can tell," and Momma laughed. Daddy had just died and she got excited about an automobile!

Uncle Warren made Al help him load up all the tools that should have gone to him, and Warren took everything to Laurel and sold it to the farrier there. I recognized my daddy's tools

when I got older and did some ironing in Laurel. I asked the farrier where he got them, and the farrier told me who'd sold the tools to him.

The farrier had bought them outright because he was an honest man, so I didn't blame him, but I blamed Merle Jean and Warren and never called them aunt and uncle again. They knew why, too, and I didn't have to tell them. When I was ironing in town and helping Momma take care of old Mrs. Sullivan, I saw them in the street, and Merle Jean made to hug me, but I picked up an old horseshoe lying on the ground. I held it in front of my face, stuck two fingers through, and made a snake sound. She started crying and told Warren that I'd hexed her. Warren said, "Girl, get away from here."

I did, but not before I hexed him, too.

The check that used to come from Vandalia Land Company never came to our door again. Momma was so young. Uncle Sid said he would keep watch on us, and if she'd sign the papers, he'd pick up her mail. But Momma hadn't been signing a permission slip for the post office at all. She'd been signing over the oil and natural gas rights to Uncle Sid. We never saw a check again.

The three of us were stuck in the middle of no place with nothing, and if Momma hadn't worked in the garden and known how to can, I tell you the truth, that winter we would have starved. We ate the potatoes first before they could go bad, and then after that it was canned vegetables from the garden and biscuits covered with poor man's gravy. It was called poor man's gravy because Momma had to use water instead of milk. Our cow was old and her production was iffy, and after my daddy passed, Momma just let her roam the hill pastures until she died.

The church people came and brought things from time to time. They were from Mount of Decision Baptist Church, where Momma used to sing when Daddy was alive, and they sent chickens with their necks snapped so Momma wouldn't have to do that, butter, and one sent pepper which Momma used with the poor man's gravy so it didn't taste so bad.

Oh, the tobacco patch. Al was so young and Momma was so naïve that she leased the allotment to them Adkins that lived one creek over, the bunch that had all the red-headed, wall-eyed kids. There's Adkins all over Davis County. Every Adkins I ever knew was mean, and that's because they came from the same seed, then doubled it.

They grew tobacco on Daddy's allotment and gave us money for using the land, but they acted like the money was a favor and told Momma that Al and I had to do our share, which meant we had to pick off tobacco worms. I was so little the plants were over my head, and I could only pick those nasty things from the bottom. They spit juice. The first time one ever spit on me, I cried, and Al came running down the row because he thought I'd been snake bit. I couldn't stop crying, and then Al was crying, too.

My brother loved me, and I'll never forgive Charlie LeMasters for running him off because, when he did that, Al went to Detroit to build cars and I never saw him again. But that day, Al told me not to cry, that he would do all the work, but I couldn't let Al do all the work. I had to help and I got used to the worms spitting juice on me. Those Adkins were supposed to be working for us but we were working for them.

What was Momma doing? Why, she was doing everything! There wasn't no man going to come up Bear Creek in an automobile, and she knew it. I don't even think she believed it when Merle Jean said it, but when she was young, it was easy for Momma to laugh. She took us

to church every Sunday where she sang. Both my parents had musical talent. When Daddy was alive, he pumped that organ while Momma sang. After I started taking Carmen to lessons, I learned what kind of voice Momma had: a mezzo soprano, and really, it was a beautiful sound. She sang all by herself, which I later learned was acapella, and she was always on key though there wasn't any instruments in our church except a tambourine.

Momma sang at Mount of Decision Baptist every Sunday and though those people were only one step richer than we were, they gave us what they could. Momma always believed in Jesus. She said Jesus was the only thing Daddy's kin had left. I guess that's where I got my religious streak. Momma held onto Jesus and was grateful for the slabs of bacon people would send, bags of flour more precious than gold, and clothes their children had outgrown.

Al got a bike from someone, and he got himself two jobs in Laurel: one with the farrier who bought my daddy's tools, and the other with Eugene Simmons, owners of Simmons' General Store. Al would ride home on the weekends, and he brought what he could, mostly food, but one weekend, he brought something special for me.

It was a kewpie doll, about ten inches long and stark naked. She had a stick out belly, hands shaped like stars, and her hair was yellow with a pink bow painted across her topknot. Only her head moved, and Al said it was bisque and I had to be careful not to break it, and I said I'd never break the biscuit, and Momma and Al looked over my head and laughed.

Momma said she'd find something to cut up for doll clothes, and I said, "Doll clothes! Just what I've always wanted!" and Momma and Al laughed again.

Momma found two things to cut up: a blue pillowcase and a Sunbonnet Sue flour sack, pink with sprigs of white flowers. Momma didn't waste a scrap. She made dresses, bonnets, and little booties that tied with a string.

I named her Catherine after the nice lady at church who'd given Al a coat so he wouldn't freeze on his way back and forth to Laurel, and had seen that I had socks and shoes that fit.

Momma smiled every time she saw me rocking my baby. She said I had her so spoiled, one of these days, that doll would squall when I laid it down. And it's true, I was a good little mother. I didn't treat her like my three fat cousins treated their babies.

The year my daddy died, Aunt Dortha had ordered each of her girls a doll apiece from the Sears Catalog. Those Effanbee dolls were something to see. They came in fancy boxes dressed in satin and lace; one had a velvet hat and the other had a big bow that hung down in a veil. They had eyes that opened and closed with long eyelashes and curls of real human hair, but my cousins treated them like they were ragamuffins. They swung them around until their sockets popped, and they cut off their hair. It used to hurt me to see them treat their babies that way, but after I got Catherine, I didn't care.

I loved those days, especially when Al came home. He said a new flour sack had come in with ballerinas on it, and everybody was buying it like crazy, but he'd rip a bag if he had to and bring one home to me. Momma said that when he did, she'd make me and Catherine mother and daughter dresses.

But what did happen?

Aunt Dortha and her three fat girls came for a visit, sitting on our porch like boarders while Momma brought them pitcher after pitcher of cold water from the deep well. Momma

was so dumb! She told them all the things we'd had to do to keep things together, but instead of giving us sympathy, they listened to our troubles and laughed inside. Every time I looked up, I caught the youngest one's eyes on me, smirking.

Those girls had on fine clothes that no one else had worn, but do you think Aunt Dortha ever sent anything? Momma could have done a lot with those clothes because the one thing she did have was a sewing machine. It was an old Singer, and she'd pump and sing while she sewed. That's what she did for people, sewed their clothes and ironed them up afterwards. That was the money she brought in. And wouldn't you know, that Dortha was trying to talk her out of her sewing machine? She said it had been her momma's and she needed it.

Even when I was little, I had spunk, and I said, "No, you can't have Momma's sewing machine. You got the organ. Now, go home."

Aunt Dortha looked fit to pop.

Momma said, "She's just a child, Dortha, she don't mean it. She's had a hard time since Allen's gone. Them Adkins made her and Al pick tobacco worms all summer long."

Why did Momma have to tell my uppity cousins I'd had to pick off filthy bugs? They swelled out so much, I thought their seams would burst, and Aunt Dortha quit fuming because Momma had given her something to think on. They enjoyed our misery down to their bones.

I couldn't stand no more. I ran upstairs, grabbed my doll, and slammed out the back door. I ran up the hill and into the woods until I found the sunning rock.

The sunning rock was just below the tree line that started Devil's Backbone proper. When the weather was pretty I'd take Catherine up in the crook of my arm and we'd watch the

clouds and I'd give her all the love Momma was too busy to give me. Her head was empty, but I filled it full of my dreams.

That day, I told her everything I'd seen in the Sears catalog before Al hauled it off to the privy. Doll buggies, doll beds, high chairs, and a little pink bowl shaped like a bathtub—but as soon as I said that, I promised not to get her head wet—more dresses, and a doll suitcase to tote them in. I was rattling off every picture I'd seen because I knew when I came down, our sewing machine would be gone. We wouldn't be getting mother-daughter dresses.

And while I was running my mouth, trying to ease my fears, my cousins sneaked on me. They shouldn't have found me because I'd gone way high, but I'd been in a hurry and left a broken trail.

Those three girls were named Myrtle, Ruby, and Dorrance Anne. My uncle's name was Dorrance, and he'd wanted a boy but got a girl again, so they'd named her after him but called her Annie.

Different names but they looked alike; pig bodies with squinty eyes. Myrtle went behind a tree and squatted, while Ruby picked sticky pods off her sleeves. It was Annie who started in. Annie who thought she was better than her sisters because she was named after their daddy, and lots better than me because I didn't have one.

I covered Catherine with my hand. There was ugliness coming.

"What's you got there, Tobaccorella?" asked Annie.

"What did you call me?" I stood up, hands on my hips.

“Tobaccorella,” she said, and her sisters laughed. They wore blouses of the finest white cotton, but when they laughed, I could see their belly fat shake. “Like Cinderella. Your dead daddy didn’t tell you about her?”

Of course, my daddy had told me about Cinderella. He was a great one for stories.

“What’s that thing?” Ruby chimed in, pointing at Catherine where she lay exposed on the rock. She still had on her slip of a nightgown made from the pillowcase, and I’d forgotten her blanket. I squatted on my heels and covered her again.

“Tobaccorella has a doll,” said Myrtle, the fattest. I had the least to fear from her. She was lazy, the kind content to watch grass grow. If it had just been her, she’d have stayed on the porch and listened to the women, but she was there and had a mouth. “That’s the doll that stayed on the shelf at Simmons’ General Store. She was put in with the ladies’ unmentionables.” Her face flushed and she tugged at her waistband. Myrtle had breasts and soft down on her upper lip. I’d heard Aunt Dortha tell Momma she’d already fallen off the roof, but she looked fine to me. Her skirt was blue, and the other two wore pink and yellow. Three different bolts. “Momma looked at it, but Mr. Simmons told her not to buy it. He said he’d never order from that company again because he’d paid good money for trash. Every one of those dolls came in broken.”

“Except that one,” said Annie

Annie’s foot shot out and came down on my hand. I fell forward, my weight crushing Catherine’s head. There was dead silence except for the pieces of bisque that flew out and filtered through the pine needles. Then, they started laughing.

I felt something inside me I'd never felt before, and I let out a scream that climbed Devil's Backbone then dropped to the hollers where it stilled the deer. It felt like someone had taken out my heart, torn it in half, and put it back in. In all my born days, I never screamed like that again.

My cheeks felt hot as pokers, but I didn't think it showed until I lifted my head, and they got a good look at me. They weren't laughing anymore. Ruby's eyes bugged out. Myrtle got quiet and started tugging at her waistband. Annie was the one who mouthed off—or tried to.

"What's wrong with her cheeks?" Annie tried to sound excited, but I heard fear.
"Tobacco worms bit her!"

She was the first one I whipped. Laid her out flat and tore her clothes. Slapped her face until she was a blubbering like a baby and punched her in the mouth. Did her sisters help? Not one bit. I think they liked it because she'd always lorded over them—until they saw I was going to light into them. Me, a skinny kid, whipped all them down the hill. I did it, and while I did it, I knew Catherine could see me from the air.

I took the fat under Myrtle's chin and twisted it, then stretched it out until she made choking sounds. I pulled Ruby down and kicked her fat ass until she got up and took off, wobbling as fast as she would ever go, sliding on shale and tearing her new clothes. She finally fell on her knees and bled.

Then, I whipped them down the hill.

I jumped Annie again, pulling out handfuls of her hair. She finally lost me by dropping to the ground and rolling; after she got a second wind, she made it to the house first. She didn't have to go round to the front porch, either, because Momma and Aunt Dortha had heard

screaming, and they were standing where the yard ended, and when Aunt Dortha saw her three girls coming down the hill looking like the devil, she nearly fainted.

She got over it quick enough, yelling at the top of her lungs for me to come down, and if I didn't come now, she'd send for Dorrance and he'd bring the razor strop.

Momma didn't say a word. Al was working in town. Catherine was dead. I walked down the hill.

Aunt Dortha took every bit of anger she had inside her out on my hide and then some. She used a willow switch. I think Annie ran to cut it because she made me bend and I couldn't see. Blood was pounding in my ears. Momma watched and said nothing.

When they left, they left with the sewing machine. I had welts all over me, some of them bled, and I was still sleeping on my stomach when Al came home for the weekend.

Momma told him what I'd done to my cousins. He listened to her and then he listened to me. I told him everything because I knew he'd believe me. He said he'd fix them, and later he did, but it didn't matter much when he said it because Catherine had been killed.

Al told me all the things he'd learned in town. We'd been cheated by Daddy's kin, and he was going to gather evidence and go see the sheriff, but now that this had happened, there were things he had to fix first because without a sewing machine, Momma had no income. In the meantime, we had to leave our house and move to Laurel.