



Esther's Story

LISA GRALEY

TO START WITH, THERE ARE FIVE. ALL BLACK and white. Various sizes. One centering, one floating, the rest anchored at the bottom—a full newspaper page. All taken May 22, 1992. In my journal, the night before I wrote, “Tomorrow I’m going fishing with Esther. I bought a license (\$15). Forecast calling for beautiful weather.”

1

Picture her in the dominant photo. She wears a straw hat, but it’s tipped back so far we can see only the bottom of the rim that catches light from the river and frames her head like a wide halo. Her body faces the river, but she’s looking over her left shoulder at the camera—at me really. She’s sitting on a big cushion atop a metal milk crate. You can make out her eyes behind the reflection of her glasses; she’s squinting, her eyes

unshielded by a hat so far pulled back. Behind her is the wooded forest of southern West Virginia. It’s spring, and the sunlight shimmers off young leaves. In front of her, the still river stretches out. Above her hat, far from vivid in the background—for I’ve narrowed the shutter for depth of field—you can see the gray-white shoals. Were we there today, we would hear them.

In Esther’s right hand is a fishing pole. Her left arm—the one closest to the camera—is outstretched, and in her hand she holds a line from which a little fish dangles. A sucker, she calls it. The fish, glistening with light, hangs against the dark backdrop of smooth water. It would have been easy, I see now, to lose the fish in the light glinting from the leaves. I like to think I planned for that, that I asked Esther to lift the fish high enough to bring it in relief against the



dark water. The caption reads: “Not Moby Dick, or even a relative. Esther Lovejoy holds the only fish caught Friday in the river beside her old homeplace on Left Hand Fork.”

The fish, she tosses back. In my memory, she caught it on her first try. But in my journal, I’ve written it was the last cast of the day. At the time, I had not read *Moby Dick*, but I guess I wanted people to think I had.

And that’s it. Period. If you’re reading to find out what happens, this is the end of the story. Esther caught a fish. That’s the climactic moment. The highlight. Then she turned it loose. This, the resolution, the unwinding of the knot. The unwinding of a knot, in fact, that never becomes very knotted.

As with wilderness pants you can unsnap at various lengths, this story is segmented for your convenience. You may stop reading at any time, or you may read further. The story, more or less, stays the same. But what you get by continuing is more of Esther.

2

Floating just above the large center photo is a smaller one—a favorite of mine. It’s a close-up of Esther’s hands as she spears a nightcrawler on a hook. The background is blurred—a shallow depth of field—though you can still make out stripes on the cuffs of her sleeves. You can see her wedding band. You can see clean, short, healthy nails as well as age spots and freckles on the back of one hand. So well in focus is the nightcrawler—one she dug herself—that you can count its rings. She holds the worm firmly between thumb and forefinger and punctures it with the hook. The slight rip, the tear in the worm’s fabric is hidden, but you can tell, looking closely, by the taut bend in the worm where the hook will exit.



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The third and fourth photos are mates with one another. They give mass to the bottom of the page—alongside the fifth. Lined up evenly, the three belong together, at least in terms of composition. Perhaps in terms of narrative as well. Certainly, it takes all three to support the weight of the top two photos, though none at the bottom have anything to do with fishing, at least, in the literal sense.

3

In the bottom left corner is the prophetic image. Esther sits on a guardrail facing right, facing the middle of the page, pointing to a valley



below, the scene of the middle photo. She still wears her straw hat, but now we see the full, orange-juicer shape of it. You can tell by the way it's lit, the way her clothes glow, how bright the sun is. Because the hat now shades her, her face is no longer visible. What we have, then, is a figure, bright and imposing, identity hidden in shadow. It's here that Esther reminds me of the Ghost of Christmas Past. It's in the way she points, her left arm extended straight out ahead of her, dropped perhaps twenty degrees from horizontal. Her index finger is in perfect line with her arm—straight, no crook. The sun hits that finger. Looking closely, you can see the rest of her hand, other fingers curled loosely. It's the kind of relaxed pointing you see in paintings when Jesus is calling someone. There's an ease in the pointing that seems a contradiction. You expect the extension of her arm to produce muscle strain, but for some reason, it doesn't.

You can't see much of the valley. Like Jesus and the Ghost of Christmas Past, Esther sees what we cannot, what the camera—even with a wide angle lens—cannot. The caption reads, "Pointing to the area where the homeplace of her youth was located, Esther remembers the way it was. No trace of the old farm remains."

4

In the newspaper layout, as I say, she points to the middle photo, a wide horizontal shot that shows the valley full of new construction—bulldozers, backhoes, logging trucks, caterpillars, and other agents of progress. Much of the land has been bared, some of the old fishing holes filled. "The Upper Mud River Watershed Project changed the way the Mud River valley looked to locals forever," the caption reads. "Still, Esther hopes to live to see the dam completed."



5

The last picture, occupying the bottom right corner, takes us away from Mud River, away from fishing, away from the soon-to-be-underwater homeplace, away from her homesickness. We're back at Esther's house on Bear Branch. The place where our journey begins. Here's a full-length shot of Esther, but she stands behind a small iron forge, legs hidden from view. She pretends to turn a crank—maybe she really does, I don't know now. The caption reads, "Esther remembers firing the forge that belonged to her great-grandfather William Preston Lovejoy on the Left Hand Fork of Mud River. He shod horses during the Civil War and had a son, Esther's grandfather Alfred Lovejoy, a year after West Virginia became a state." Esther is sixty-nine. The forge, it would seem, is over a hundred and thirty years old. West Virginia is a hundred and twenty-nine. Esther is tapped in, keen to the ancestral currents pulsing through her.



✿

Me. I'm twenty-five. Forty-four years younger than Esther. We've known each other a few weeks. Her daughter Mary Ann has been hired to take my place at the newspaper. I have one foot out the door on my way to a graduate program in Louisiana. Because I can't face the thought of parting from my grandparents next door, I haven't told them I'm leaving—something that sickens me with shame. For the same reason, I've said little about it to my parents.

I'm chasing a dream that began one day in seventh grade when, seeing the schoolbus up the road, I remembered I'm supposed to dress for career day. Too late for anything elaborate, I decided to carry my favorite ballpoint and pose as a writer. At this stage, in 1992, I'm trying to move from posing to writing. And Esther, though we've just met, believes in me.

Esther volunteers to show me the Upper Mud River Watershed Project, something I've been reporting on for three years without ever seeing, mostly because there has been nothing to see. Or so I thought. The project has been on paper—maps and diagrams and legal documents, place names and hollows I've never had occasion to visit, all in the middle of sparsely populated Lincoln County, home to both of us. Everything has been tied up in planning committees and legal proceedings. Once finished, the Watershed Project will be comprised of a large reservoir designed to keep the town of Hamlin and other low-lying areas from flooding. County leaders plan to turn the new reservoir into a recreation park for swimmers, light boating, and fishing. They will haul in sand and make it look like a beach—in the middle of Lincoln County! They have big plans. It will be accessible in the early stages by narrow winding roads. New roads are now being built. Some landowners have lost property through eminent domain or the divine right of kings—something like that. Esther is one of them.

She lives, widowed and alone, on Bear Branch, not too far from the project. But she grew up with her grandparents and father on a plot of land that will soon be underwater. This is her inheritance, she tells me. This is what was left her.

To get to Esther's house on Bear Branch, I travel roads that fork and then fork again, endlessly forking, each fork getting narrower. Though Lincoln County is home, my years as a reporter have taught me that I don't have good directional sense. Frequently, I'm sent on stories only to get lost on the backroads. On the backroads, you tend to meander. You don't dare go fast because you can't see what's around the corner. You take in the scenery instead

of focusing on the place you're going. It's like looking in the dictionary for a word and never finding the word because there are so many others competing.

But on this day, Esther has given perfect directions, anticipating all the places I might get lost and steering me specifically through them. When I pull up into her driveway, she has the car trunk up, doors open, and is already loading.

"Can you get those milk crates there?" she asks, pointing. "I don't care to sit on the bank. Afraid I'll get in poison ivy."

I stash the milk crates in the trunk, then follow her to the kitchen to help with the rest. She's packed our snack, as she calls it, and she asks me to carry the cooler. It's heavy—heavier than you'd imagine a snack could be. What has she stowed inside?

I've brought a blank writing tablet, two pens, and two cameras—one with black and white film, the other with color, both unexposed.

The newspaper publishes two weeklies: *The Lincoln Journal* and *The Lincoln Sentinel*, one a Democratic paper, the other Republican. They're identical. Except for different bannerheads and a single, full-page sheet, front and back, inserted in the *Journal* one week and in the *Sentinel* the next. This sheet comprises twenty percent of the editorial content, the twenty percent that allows our publisher to charge advertisers double the price each week for having their ads appear in two different newspapers. Every two weeks, I scramble for stories and photos for these two pages. The editor calls it filler.

Occasionally, with time and a catalyst, I try for something creative, a feature story in a layout like you see in big-city newspapers with sections that begin in large-letter initials, text flanked by four or five related photos. A story that allows for the creative use of white space—a precious but elusive commodity little understood by publishers. By this time, I've already arranged two such stories: one about a trip to Rome the summer before, with photos of the Pantheon, Roman baths, and the needy cats at the Coliseum, and the other about a related week in Pompeii, where the grass was growing knee-high in the amphitheater.

Following my excursion to Mud River, I will write a full page story about Esther Lovejoy.

On Mud River with Esther Lovejoy

It's not the Amazon, but there's a wildness about it, an alluring beauty seen in the grapevines hanging lazily from the trees along the riverbank, heard and felt in the stillness, just plain stillness, all around.

For some Lincoln residents, the Mud River valley is home. And so it is for Esther Lovejoy.

If you plan to spend time here, you'll need a knowledgeable guide, and there are probably few better than Esther. She can walk you through the modern valley where satellite dishes compete with dandelions for yard space and through memories of the way it was sixty years ago.

A native, she knows the people. She speaks the language of gardeners, homemakers, people sitting on front porch swings. Esther is familiar with the lingo of fishers.

Traveling with her, one soon understands she is an ambassador of good will, someone with a genuine interest in the people around her. Her compassion reaches not only to the senior citizens she regularly visits at the Lincoln Continuous Care Center in Hamlin, but it also touches everyone she meets.

Before Friday she'd never met Sarah Lovejoy, a resident on Upper Mud River. But Sarah had heard good things about Esther. They chatted about lettuce beds and onions, family members who have died, and mutual acquaintances. Sarah told Esther she bore fifteen children.

Earlier Friday Esther consulted with some of the local young men who pass time drinking beer on the banks of the Mud River. After listening to the directions of one, she asked how things were going for him.

Postcard

I'm a young twenty-five. My first night in Lake Charles, Louisiana, I call the one graduate student I've met by phone in the MFA program: Mike Kelsay. He lives, he says, not far from the Motel 6 where I'm staying. I drive out in the dark to see

him, my car weighted down with eighteen Avon boxes of books and two boxes of dishes carefully wrapped in heavily-inked newspaper pages. The moon is over the bayou. It is, I have to admit, amazing. There's Spanish moss in the trees—just like in the brochure. We sit on the dock on the bayou out back from the cabin he shares with two other students. The smoke from his cigarettes keeps the mosquitoes at bay. He says writing is hard. I believe him.

On Mud River with Esther Lovejoy (continued)

Not quite a septuagenarian, Esther is acquainted with many people, partly because she was born and reared in the valley and partly because she worked nine and a half years as an extension homemaker agent for West Virginia University before retiring in 1986.

During her time as a nutrition agent, she traveled the county extensively, meeting families and showing housewives how to grocery shop, plan meals, cook, can foods, and plant gardens.

In some cases it was rewarding, Esther said. There were some who really wanted to learn how to provide good nutrition for their children. Up until about a year ago, people still called with questions about canning and cooking.

But in other cases, the job was frustrating. Month after month she would enter homes where no changes could be seen, where houses were dirty, and children were still surviving on junk food. "When you came out, you could still taste the odor, an odor of . . . filth, not just dirt, but filth," she remembers.

"People find it easier to buy ten loaves of white bread and five pounds of bologna," Esther explains. "Making sandwiches beats cooking a pot of pintos and baking a pone of cornbread."

Hope Chest

Does she deliver them, or do I pick them up? Maybe she drops them off at the newspaper office. They include a set—a full set—of dishes her daughter used in college, barely off-white and heavy: four

large, deep-dish plates; four good-sized cereal or soup bowls; four medium-sized plates for salads or cornbread; four saucers; four teacups.

They're simple, sturdy, substantial. For the next fifteen years, I will eat every meal from Esther's dishes. And when I eat, I think of her.

Cornbread Recipe

Oiled iron skillet
1 cup meal
1/4 cup self-rising flour
1 egg
1/2 cup milk and 1/2 cup water

"To keep your cornbread from sticking," Esther tells me, "put oil in the skillet and add a tiny bit of meal—just sprinkle it around." She dusts the skillet. Then she takes up her wooden spoon. "Mix all the ingredients together," she says. "Mix it good." She shakes the spoon for emphasis. "You don't want to bite down on dry meal; it'll feel like sand in your mouth."

In a few days, I'll be leaving, and Esther is giving me recipes. I've learned some cooking from my mother and grandmother, but that's nothing, Esther says, compared to what I'll learn on my own. All summer she's been teaching and feeding me. Around and around her hand goes, stirring.

"If it's too thin, throw in meal." She sprinkles in a pinch to illustrate. It doesn't occur to her I might not know what too thin is. "Keep your meal in the freezer or refrigerator," she tells me. "You don't want it to get buggy."

"Spread it all out in your iron skillet. It's as simple as that. Keep the skillet oiled," she says. "There's no need to wash it in the dishwasher. That makes it rust. Just wipe it out, oil it up again. That way it's ready to use. That's the way my grandmother done it all her life.

"If you cook in the skillet, you'll get iron from it. If you can't afford much meat, you'll need iron or you'll turn anemic. Kidney beans have a lot of iron. Of course, here, what we eat mainly is pintos. To my mind, you can't beat pintos. But when Roger was in the service, we visited him in Louisiana, and what they ate down there was kidney beans.

"They'll probably try to convert you to rice.

But it won't satisfy you the way cornbread will. Your heart—and gut—will be here in the hills, not the swamp. You'll crave food the way you crave the landscape, the music, the way we talk.

"And listen. You can eat cornbread. Or you can eat beans. And separate, they're fine. But you have to eat them together for the best protein. When you go to fix dinner, remember what I tell you." She opens the oven and slides her black skillet onto the rack. "Beans and cornbread. Trust me, honey. I know what I'm talking about."

On Mud River with Esther Lovejoy (continued)

Traveling along the roads in the Mud River Valley, Esther points out places of interest. There's the Mud River Mall—Upper—where a weekly truckload of clothes and furniture is brought in to sell.

"People come from all around, from Charleston and Madison, to shop there because they can get good deals," Esther says. She bought men's white dress shirts there for 25 cents each when her daughter was a waitress.

On down the road there is the Lower Mud River Mall where similar bargains are to be had.

Postcard II

Uneasy about life in the Motel 6, I hastily rent a small apartment for \$450 a month and sign a six-month lease. This is what I think can afford. I'm young. I'm optimistic. I'm wrong. As a teaching assistant, I'll earn \$4,000 the first year, then \$6,000 the second.

I have \$150 from my piggy bank—and a thousand in savings for a computer. The \$150 is for a bed. In the local newspaper, mattress sets sell for \$99. My brother takes me to the warehouse in his truck. He and his friend Charlie make a deal with the hip, young salesman who gives us a card: "Jesus Loves You: Unclaimed Freight." They load up my mattress and a single bookcase (for eighteen boxes of books). We take off on I-10, back to my new apartment.

Midway there, we hear a noise, a sweeping whoosh, and see a flashing in the mirrors, in the windshield's reflection, in our peripheral vision. We look back to see the mattress flying from the truck, gliding high into the air, and landing down, one corner stubbed—as a cigarette—on the highway. We pull off to the shoulder. One of us will have to cross three lanes to retrieve the mattress. An eighteen-wheeler barrels through, flipping the mattress before crushing it. My legs begin to itch, then burn. Red ants are swarming my feet. Are they biting or stinging? They leave their poison.

On Mud River with Esther Lovejoy (continued)

Esther explains that a good deal of the land along the way will be under water when the Mud River Watershed Project is completed. Like other locals have said, she believes flooding in Hamlin could have been prevented if folks would have just cleaned the trees and brush out of the creeks and rivers.

Still, she hopes to see the dam completed. After all, one of the project roads has already claimed her homeplace down on the Left Hand Fork of Mud River.

Her great-grandfather William Preston Lovejoy settled there in the valley and gave the land to his children. He shod horses during the Civil War. Esther still has his blacksmithing tools. She remembers firing up the forge when she was a little girl.

Postcard III

I send letters to my parents and grandparents. They call. I call. Esther also calls. I take a photo of her dishes on my table with this simple meal: steak and a baked potato and fried apples. I send the photo to her. She writes back, asks if I've been making cornbread. Soon enough, I'm making cornbread. Soon enough, I'm not buying steak. Soon enough, I'm buying pinto beans and red beans and white beans and black beans and navy beans and fifteen-bean soup. I eat well. I work hard. At this stage, I can live on twenty-five dollars' worth of groceries a week.



Any Bean Recipe

1 pkg. beans
1 onion
1 bell pepper (optional)
cloves of garlic
cooking oil
2 cans of stewed tomatoes
salt and pepper

“Best to soak the beans overnight in a pot,” Esther says. “Or parboil them—put them in two or three inches of water, bring to a rapid boil, then pour off the water.

“Cook the onion and garlic and pepper with just a little oil in your skillet. Add bell pepper. The secret to flavoring beans is bringing out the flavor of your spices. You can throw in chili powder, especially if you’re cooking red beans. Add the cooked mixture of onion and garlic and spices to the beans.

“Put in some canned tomatoes. They’ll give you moisture and flavor, plus extra vitamins—A and C. Tomatoes will keep you from getting the scurvy,” Esther says. “Though folks nowadays, I guess, don’t worry about it like they used to.

“Depending on your preference, you can cook the beans and leave them firm, or cook them till they break up and get soupy. I’ve always liked mine soupy, everything blended together.”

Keepsake

When I leave West Virginia, Esther gives me another gift. It’s a writing tablet, mauve-colored and vinyl, but meant to look like leather. It folds together and has a clipboard inside. It has a little pocket for notes. There’s a blank writing tablet inside.

“I didn’t know what to get you,” Esther says—as if the dishes aren’t extraordinary—“but thought maybe you could write some of your stories in this.”

For a while I do write. And write. And write. Then for another while—too long a while—what with adjunct work, then a permanent teaching job, then buying a fixer-upper house, then fixing it

up, then tending the yard and flowers and ginger beds, then editing a journal, and all the while teaching and grading, grading and teaching—the years go by. I stow the tablet in the top drawer of my desk, careful not to put anything on top of it. It never gets buried. But in recent days—it’s 2006 and I’m turning forty—I’ve been sliding the tablet out, making notes. I discover there’s plenty to say, plenty to write. So much that I’m afraid of running out of pages.

Postcard IV

The first apartment turns out to have the Port of Lake Charles behind it. There’s water everywhere. Someone says not to fish there unless you want a mutant fish. Chemical plants, fertilizer processors, bleeding valves abound. The university, though small, frightens me. Making new friends is a slow process. I have to teach freshmen writing classes. This scares me.

From a phone booth, I call home. I’m ready to pack up, drive the nineteen hours back. My father says, “Give it a little more time.” My mother agrees. They say these things for my sake only because I hear behind the curtain the anxiety in their voices.

On Mud River with Esther Lovejoy (continued)

She locates various landmarks by surveying the hollows around her. Another hill is where the Lovejoy school was located. It converted into a church, and people were baptized below in the river.

“That part of the river is where my sister used to turn me loose in deep water, and I couldn’t swim,” she says. “Over there’s where I used to fish.”

Wearing a wide-brimmed, straw hat—“the sun breaks me out like poison ivy,” she leans against a shiny new guardrail, picturing in her mind the way things used to be.

Pointing to a hill, she explains she used to get mountain tea there. The children chewed on leaves of the plant and ate the sweet, red berries.

“Here is where my father led the horse from the barn to the pasture, and right over there was my dad’s favorite fishing place.”

Other Trips, Other Photos

In the summers I’m pulled back to West Virginia where I visit my family. Esther and I take other trips. Sometimes we go to Mud River. Always we are carting food—canned beans, canned corn, pies, homemade bread, squash and cucumbers just picked from the garden—gifts Esther delivers to old neighbors and friends and distant cousins, to folks laid up or shut in, to ones suffering from dropsy or sugar or cancer.

We drive to see the completed dam. We walk on the sandy beach and have a picnic: peanut butter sandwiches and apples and oranges and fig newtons. In the reservoir, we see skinny, bare treetops, their roots anchored maybe twenty feet below the surface.

“The fish must think it strange to live in the branches of trees like birds,” Esther says. “It must give them a different perspective.”

Everywhere we go, I take photos—mementos for us. There are shots I want—goats on trailers, goats climbing rocks, kid goats frolicking. They remind me of the goats we kept as pets when I was growing up. But besides the goats, there are old log houses resembling those in my grandparents’ pictures, large fields of tobacco rows—tobacco nearly as tall as me—with pink, clustered blossoms appearing just above the broad green leaves. Centered in vacant lots are lone, bare chimneys, crooked and leaning. The land is in transition. Time is passing. The past is fading to background. I cling hard to it. Esther and I, we both cling hard.

We spend a lot of time on the back roads. There are shots Esther wants—the lot that once held the one-room school she attended and where her father taught, and the steps still there, leading up to and down from nothing. There’s the patch beside the old birch tree where her father used to smoke his pipe or cigar, I don’t remember which. The birch tree is old and enormous. Esther is amazed at how it’s grown over the years. She carefully makes a path through patches of poison ivy to stand beside it. It’s the largest birch I’ve ever seen, at least three times wider than Esther. I take her photo beside

it. On this day, I’ve forgotten my wide angle lens, and it’s hard to frame everything.

One day we visit her great-grandmother’s grave deep in the woods. The small cemetery is fenced in so cattle won’t graze over the plots. Unlike other old cemeteries you might come across, this one is cleared, mowed, cared for. Giant cedars shelter it. I take a lot of photos—in color this time. Esther is wearing a pink pants suit. Everything else is deep green or brown or gray—earth tones. Esther clasps the top of a headstone, bends over to decipher the name. The headstone is hand-carved. For all our trying, we can’t make out the words.

Esther stands amidst the beautiful cedars—widest and tallest cedars I’ve ever seen—taking in the whole of the cemetery. She points—that prophetic signaling again—to the graves, *memento mori* fashion. Same straight arm angled slightly downward. Same ghost-like tilt of hand. It’s on film. In the album.

The trunks of the cedars are thick, and the bark, in places, hangs off in red and orange strips as if the trees themselves are bursting from fibers that hold them together. All around us, the shade from the high, green branches of the cedars is cool and deep and encompassing. Esther tells me stories her grandmother told her. But sometimes, looking at a headstone, stooping to brush the



moss off, she's quiet, and in these moments, her silence says as much as words.

In the woods on the way out, we stumble across an old rusty tricycle, wrecked upside down. It's been left to decay, something no longer of use but still a thing someone could not bear to put out for garbage collectors. It resembles my own first tricycle, which had been my father's—something he saved so he could take photos of his children riding it. The handlebar is round—half a circle—with handle-grips of cracked rubber.

I take a roll of film on the tricycle alone. This will prompt Esther, through the years, to say, "Remember those pictures you took of that tricycle? I always wondered what you saw in it." And we will laugh. What did I see? Most of those pictures, now, look the same. But at the time, there was concern for light and composition. The rusty rim of the large front wheel is in the upper right quadrant, rusty spokes flaring from the hub where the pedals are intact—the rubber pads worn down to metal pegs. At one point, I ask Esther to kneel beside the tricycle. She does and pretends to investigate like an archaeologist might. I catch her in moments when she's not laughing. But now I wish I had caught her laughing too.

The leaves are rust-colored, same as the tricycle. It's hard to get contrast, hard to make the tricycle stand out. What I see now when I look at the photo is Esther in her pink outfit beside the bright green leaves of poison ivy—there is contrast for you. But all those years ago I didn't see the poison ivy. I simply asked Esther to kneel beside the tricycle. Surely, she noticed the poison ivy. And probably she was careful, but she didn't refuse.

On Mud River with Esther Lovejoy (continued)

Esther never did learn to swim, but she picked up some excellent fishing skills and retained them after she moved from Left Hand Fork, married her husband Emmitt, and reared two children, Roger and Mary Ann.

Besides her knowledge of the river, she packs a heaping serving of hospitality on fishing trips. For

a "snack," she has packed peanut butter sandwiches, apples, oranges, bananas, yogurt wafers, peanut butter crackers, water, and iced tea. These she lifts from the cooler with care and passes them to her guest.

But her generosity does not stop there. "Here, do you want me to bait your hook?" she asks a squeamish tag-along. Hook in hand, she reaches into her bait box for one of the nightcrawlers she caught two weeks ago and . . . enough said.

Salmon Patty Recipe

1 can of pink salmon
1 tablespoon of corn meal
1 tablespoon of flour (or more if the mixture is gooey)
1 egg
1/2 onion

"Remove the large bones and skin," Esther says. "But don't worry if you eat some of the bones. You'll get calcium that way. Put in your egg, your corn meal, and your flour. Chop your onion and add it. Put oil in your skillet. It's best if you keep your skillet oiled good—always ready for use.

"Pat out the mix into patties." She grabs a handful, rolls it between her hands, then presses it flat on wax paper. She lifts it, lays it gently in the skillet. It sizzles with contact. "Cook both sides," she says. "There's nothing to it."

Whenever Esther gives me a recipe, she cooks it once to illustrate. Then we share the meal. There's always enough and always a little left over to take home.

"You can try salmon other ways, but it comes best in the cast-iron skillet. And then, like I say, you get extra iron. Which is good if you can't afford meat."

Postcard V

Within the first month in Lake Charles, I have new friends, new prospects for living quarters, rent down from \$475 to \$300 a month. I move to the top floor of an old house with other graduate students living below and out back over the garage.

In no time there's a hurricane churning in the Gulf of Mexico. His name is Andrew. Everywhere there are hurricane preparations—the boarding of windows, the batting down of hatches. You're encouraged to take in supplies. At the grocery store you fill your shopping cart with provisions: flashlights, batteries, water, bread, peanut butter, salmon, crackers, yogurt wafers—things you can store without a refrigerator. Nonperishables. You steer your shopping cart to the lines at the register, only to see items in other carts you probably should go back for: duct tape, canned juices, canned fruit, raisins, peanuts. Time and again, you go back through the chaotic aisles of diminishing supplies.

There's a hurricane watch. Then a hurricane warning. There's a hurricane party. People drink hurricanes.

Esther calls the next morning. "Are you all right? Is the power off? Will you have enough to eat?"

"It's over," I say. "We weren't touched. Nothing more than clouds."

"Weren't you scared?" she asks. "Didn't you see anything?"

"Armadillos," I say. "Dozens of them. Seemed like there were whole families running through the street, running one direction. Maybe they were looking for shelter. They must have sensed the storm coming."

"What are they like?" she asks. "I've never seen one. Are they like raccoons?"

"Something like a possum mixed with a terrapin. They're fast but with a shell. They're armored all over. When they run, it sounds like they're wearing high heels, clack-clack-clacking along, every step. I hear they get into everyone's gardens and root around."

"I wouldn't like that," Esther says.

"One lady says there's a mother armadillo brings her babies to this woman's garden, teaches them how to grub."

"Well, I'll be," Esther says.

"How's your garden?" I ask. "Finished for the year?"

"Thankfully, I don't have armadillos," Esther says. "Last week I canned twenty-eight quarts of tomatoes and fourteen quarts of beans."

Easily I can picture this production, having

witnessed Esther in the middle of it. My mind travels to her kitchen. All the counter space is taken. The jars are sterilized and drying on clean dishcloths. All around are bowls of peeled tomatoes. Maybe a sinkful of green beans, already snapped and soaking.

"I hope to get seven more quarts of beans," Esther says, "but I'll be scraping the bottom of the barrel. I'm letting some go to seed, you know."

Through the years, there are other hurricanes: Lili, Katrina, Rita, Ike—some closer than others. Some right on top of us. Through the years, Esther calls. "When the power goes off," she says, "I guess you don't have a choice but to eat everything in your freezer. Then you have to start all over again."

Missing Pictures

One summer I take Esther to see Black's General Merchandise, one of the last of its breed, tucked away in Myra where Gen. Charles "Chuck" Yeager, our Lincoln County hero, was born. The store is nearly a hundred years old. It's one of those words in the dictionary I've come across while looking for something else.

The store still sells bib overalls, canning jars, hoes and rakes, harmonicas, corncob pipes, handkerchiefs, marbles, fabric by the yard. Esther loves it. Eventually, when it does turn a hundred, I write a story about it for *The Lincoln Journal*—though I'm living away in Louisiana. I do a full-page spread with large initial letters and white space, photographs of various sizes. Filler, what some might call it.

It's in Myra that Esther and I come across an old, white, two-story farmhouse with a white goat tied on the front porch—near Black's. We knock on the door but no one answers. There are no curtains in the windows. The goat, like most goats, is curious, eyeing us as we eye her. I take photos. As with the tricycle, I take shots from various angles. It's a white goat against a white house. How can I make her stand out?

The wood siding of the house is weathered and lovely. Esther gains the goat's trust and attention. She lures her to the banister where the light is better, where maybe I can catch her head in relief

against the grass in the yard. Possibilities abound. The goat climbs up and down the front steps, her hooves thumping on the wood, her udder swaying side to side. She poses. The goat is wonderful, every shot, and the paint on the banisters is peeling, and so on. And, of course, here is Esther, right in the middle of it, sometimes in the picture frame, sometimes out, but in constant interaction with the goat. We take a whole roll of film. We laugh the whole time. We can't wait to see the pictures.

An envelope comes back from the processing company: "We're sorry. We received your envelop with no film inside." It's the first and only time I've lost film. And I've never forgotten. You take thousands of photos. But the pictures you remember are the ones lost. You remember the triangle of joy—Esther and the goat and you—the camaraderie, the shared experience. You remember the laughter. You remember Esther getting the goat's attention, getting the goat to turn her head.

Did I get the goat to turn her head? Esther will ponder when she reads this.

For Esther and me, there's no tangible evidence of the adventure. We're the only witnesses. When one of us dies, there'll be no one to corroborate, no one with whom we can say, "Remember that time we took those pictures of that goat tied on somebody's front porch."

On Mud River with Esther Lovejoy (continued)

On Left Hand Fork, she pulls the car over to the side of the road. "Right here, under us, is about where my grandparents lived. Over there is where my daddy's house was." His name was Asa Lovejoy. Esther's grandparents, Alfred and Sarah Cooper Lovejoy, reared her after her mother died before Esther was five years old.

From their home she has kept a single brick. It was too painful to watch the house being torn down, she admits. "When I came back and saw the road and nothing left of the house, that's where the heartache came."

Dates

Although it was fifteen years ago, I can barely talk or write about it today. Leaving is the single hardest thing I've ever done. I load my red Chrysler LeBaron with eighteen Avon boxes of books and two Avon boxes holding the dishes from Esther. My brother loads his truck with my other belongings. The books I want in my car where I can lock them up. It takes hours to load up.

I don't remember saying goodbye. My mother is in the house pulling things from her closet, supplies she's bought over the months and stashed away—a little pan for boiling eggs, an iron, a colander, an iron skillet, bags of pasta, sharp knives, pot holders, dish towels, a large stock pot I'll end up using every weekend for beans. From her closet an abundance of provisions appears.

My father and grandfather are mixing concrete. They're building curbs for the bridge in front of our house, a project my father's been planning since he poured the bridge on October 13, 1969. In the wet concrete, he forms this early date on one curb. Then on the other curb, he forms the date of the bridge's completion—this date, August 15, 1992—the day I'm leaving. Driving across the bridge, I don't stop to say anything. What would I say? On this day, no words are suitable. I wave. It's August and it's sunny—a good day to pour concrete. I remember this so vividly, but the sun is slanted, has already begun its autumnal track, and so everything, on this day, has long shadows.

This is the closest I've come to writing about it. That first night we made it to Nashville.

On Mud River with Esther Lovejoy (continued)

On her fishing trips, Esther brings milk crates to sit on. And cushions for the milk crates. With no fish biting, Esther begins to wonder if there isn't something to the signs after all. According to astrological data, Friday wasn't supposed to be a good day for fishing. "I'm not patient when they're not biting," she confesses. "It makes me want to go somewhere else. I always move to where I can catch some."

"I like to fish," she says, "but I don't keep many. I don't need many for myself. I throw a lot of them back. It just depends on how many people are coming to dinner."

Deaths

We lose people. My grandfather dies the first summer I'm back home to visit. I'm with him. All of us. We're with him.

"You need people to help you live," my father tells me, "and you need people to help you die."

Over and over, silently, I say to my grandfather, even as he takes his last breaths: "I have loved you so much." And this, too, is hard to write about. It's my first time mentioning it.

Esther's son, Roger, dies. He's mowing the hillside at Bear Branch and the tractor rolls over. By now, Esther has moved to Alum Creek to live beside him and his wife and their son. But she keeps the farm at Bear Branch for gardening and blackberry picking. There's a constant battle with weeds and woods, all nature's attempts to reclaim it.

When Roger is killed, there's nothing to touch the grief of Esther. She's with him when it happens. My mother calls to tell me. I spend hours writing and rewriting the next letter I send.

When my grandmother dies in 2003 after ten years of dementia—and ten years of care from my mother—I ask Esther to tour the old house. In the kitchen, on the table and on the countertops, my mother and I have lain out the contents of the cabinets: old tins of ginger and nutmeg and Durkee's apple pie spice, glass sugar bowls and creamers, a wooden rolling pin, water glasses and measuring cups, pots and lids, dessert bowls wrapped in cellophane, a butter dish, two sets of chipped dinnerware—one set flowered, one set not, plenty of mismatched pieces.

"What will you keep?" Esther asks. "What will you give away?"

"I want to keep it all," I say.

She smiles. "You can't keep it all, honey. You'll have to give something away."

Preserves

Every summer when I leave, Esther loads me up with jars of apple butter and preserves she's made: strawberry, blackberry, blueberry. I save them. I hoard them, in fact, afraid that one day Esther will slip away, and the most recent batch will be the last.

"It's constant," Esther says. "It keeps me busy all through the year. You pick your berries in the spring, and there's so many, you have to make preserves. Meantime, you're getting your garden ready. You go out and plow and plant. Then you hoe and weed the garden all summer. Before you know it, it's time to harvest. Then you've got to figure out what to do with it all. You end up canning or freezing most of it. Then the apples start coming in, and it's time to make apple butter. In no time, your shelves are full of jars, and you start giving some away, first to one person, then to another, and so on. And just when you think you've gotten rid of it all, there's more—a few jars back in the corner you've forgotten about."

Esther is eighty-five and counting. It's been fifteen years since we made our first journey. That summer I was too busy to say much about it. In my journal, there's only a short account of it. Somewhere, I remember writing that it was one of the best days of my life. But I've searched page after page and can't find it now. Maybe it was something I didn't put to paper.

On Mud River with Esther Lovejoy (continued)

Fishing in the river that runs by her old homeplace—since filled in with crushed rock—Esther thinks maybe a fishing hole closer to her Bear Branch home might prove more fruitful.

Just as she begins gathering her things, something tugs on her line. "Look, I've got a bite. See how the float's moving. I've got one. I've got a fish."

She hauls up a seven-inch sucker and cannot hide her disappointment. After all, it doesn't compare to the fourteen-inch bass she caught last week.

She tosses the little fellow back with her best wishes: "I hope you live." This is what she's been saying to everyone all day, to everybody all her life.

Legacy

This morning I ate my cereal from one of Esther's bowls. This evening I'll eat my dinner from one of her bowls. I'm having vegetarian chili—full of beans. I'm having cornbread. I bake it now in my grandmother's iron cornstick pan.

Esther is on oxygen now, tethered, in some ways, to her house. When I visit her over Christmas, I find she's already had someone in her kitchen cooking white beans, cornbread, and salmon patties for our lunch.

"I've gotten to where I like white beans better than pintos," she confides. "Can you believe that? I guess I just started to want something different."

We eat at her table. In the background, the oxygen pumps continuously. Esther shows me pictures. A fishing trip in October, compliments of her grandson. They traveled to Bear Branch with a portable cannister of oxygen. There, Esther caught a sixteen-inch catfish—biggest she's ever caught. So big, she says, she had to have help hauling it in. Since then, she's been up and down, made several trips to the hospital and had what she describes as "some awful bad nights." Enough to make her go out and buy a casket.

"If I'm feeling good next summer when you're in," she says, "we'll have a picnic. We'll go back to Mud River. You can show me your stories."

Fifteen years have passed. Two years have passed since I began writing this story. I've held onto it a long time, but lately I've been thinking I'll turn it loose. Esther and I, we're still in the middle. Everything is still in transition. The landscape is changing. The past fading to background. Esther has moved into a nursing home. There, once a week, oxygen cannister in tow, she plays Bingo and wins tickets so she can take me to lunch in the cafeteria. I'm sure there's another adventure for us. Another goat somewhere, tied to somebody's porch, waiting to be photographed. No matter what happens, no matter what details crowd the end, this story is one that will never change. Esther is always catching a fish, then turning and giving it back again. ✱