

Rod is five minutes late, and I pray that he's dead. *Please, dear Lord, let him be dead, let him be dead*, I plead for the millionth time. I peer out the window into the night. Can't see a dang thing. Just my own gray-eyed self. I fork the potatoes into the bowl for mashing.

January creeps in beneath the crooked door, coils its icy grip around my ankles. I lean into the stove, soaking up the hint of heat. *Let him be gone, let him be gone, let him be gone*, I chant to the *thock, thock, thock* of the potato masher as I thrust it firm into the bowl.

Ten minutes late. *Let him not come home. Let him not come home*. I add water to the gravy, which has gone too thick with the wait. I sniff. Smells savory and warm as a blanket.

Coulda been a crash. There's still ice on that hairpin ramp on 322. It happens. I seen a crash once. Me and Sandy and Joann was lingering in the church lot, and there comes a roar like could split your eardrums. Dale Lane crosses Shucker Road there, and excepting the church lot, all's there is cornfields and weeds. We turn to see this motorcycle flyin', turnin' too sharp, tippin' rear over front as it slams the cement culvert hidin' among the weeds. A girl flies off the back, bouncin' down Dale, ragdoll-like. The driver somersaults headfirst into the gully. I, bein' closest, run to the boy, see his head twisted front to back, blood drippin' onto the broken stalks, his belly carved open, his innards spillin'. The girl was screamin', "Is Donny okay? Is Donny okay?" But, o' course, he wasn't. Life can snuff out faster than a matchstick. It could happen to Rod.

Fifteen minutes late. *Please, Lord, let him not come. Let him be gone for good*.

But, no. There's the spit of gravel as the car careens into the drive. At the hard thump of his work boot on the step, I flinch, and deep inside I sense another twitch. My hands fly, automatic, to cradle my belly, then I snatch them away. Rod can't know. He can't know. I have four, five weeks, maybe, before he'll surely notice. *Send me a ticket out, Lord. Please*. For I, Lettie Betts, won't raise this child under Rod. I swear to God.