

# Your Stories

...where one image leads to many places

## Fiction

### Last Picture

I remember the day you took this picture of me. I guess the worry shows on my face. You kept on saying, "Smile, Virginia." I didn't feel like smiling, and I told you so.

"Why are you taking so many?" I asked, and you informed me you had to be sure that you got at least one good one. If this is the best, the others must have been terrible. It's like you weren't taking a picture of me, but wanted a picture of the road and those silly hounds.

We were always fussing about something. We weren't really ever mad at each other; we just didn't know how else to communicate. We were kinda like Midnight and Hawk. Those dogs acted like they were going to kill each other, baring their teeth and growling, but they were just pretending. Nothing could keep them apart, though occasionally they would stop their make-believe war to chase a squirrel. It was like that with us. Occasionally, we were civil to each other.

I asked you why you wanted to take a picture in the first place. You said it was a turning point in my life, and you were making a record. I guess it was a new beginning for me. I wanted things to be like they were. I wanted Mama back. I wanted to run back down that road and burst into the kitchen and find Mama frying fish and hush pup-

pies. I had to set my face firm to keep from crying while you took your silly pictures. I knew Mama could not come back. Nobody came back from Laurel Hill Cemetery.

This picture does bring back sad memories, but I remember happy times on that road that went from our house to the highway. I had played along that sandy road all my life. We used to play pioneer and Indian games and chase each other with homemade weapons before you became too grown-up for such things. I skipped down this road to meet the school bus and walked down it to church with Mama.

It was in the fall when I left to live with Aunt Leona in Atlanta. Daddy said he'd have his hands full raising Josh and Ed, and it seemed more fitting that I live with Aunt Leona. When I left that day, every hardwood in the country was in blazing color and the magnolia leaves were drooping and dark brown from the first frost. The air was so crispy everything felt new and fresh, like turnips from the springhouse. It was cool enough for a light jacket, and I wore the one Mama had made me for school that year.

Did you come all the way from Thomas County just to give me this? Is it the only one to survive after all these years? I should be mad at you for not sending it to me right after you took it. Why didn't you? Well, maybe it would have been painful to look at it then. Yes, I heard the road is gone, covered

over with concrete like a big gravestone. Why are you bringing it to me now? Are you on some nostalgia trip? Did you think I needed it to remember where I came from? Thank you kindly. I know where my roots are. Believe me, this road runs right through my heart. How often I go back there in my memories when life in the city begins to stifle me. It's my secret place.

I thank you for the picture. Now, care to answer my questions? You know, you haven't changed a bit. You're as aggravating as ever.

*Sarah Anderson  
Topeka, Kans.*

### Shepherd

Nothing fun to do that July day. Nobody to play with. Mama hurried around the kitchen, distracted by all she had to do. She was frying pork chops and slicing potatoes for the mid-day meal. She was always cooking. The scorched, salty smell of browning meat filled the stifling kitchen.

Daddy was at work across the street, at the shop. My brother James was there too. Everybody was always working, working.

Hot, hot that day. Even our back porch, screened on two sides, was hot, dry, dusty. The small porch trapped the heat and kept it to itself long after the rest of the house cooled.

Outside, a few young shade trees promised cooling relief from the burn-



ing sun—perhaps some day in the future, but not today.

And on this day, thunder rolled at a distance.

“Maybe it will rain today,” my mama had said at breakfast.

I headed through the door from the kitchen to the back porch.

“Keep that door closed,” Mama called, “it just lets in more hot air.”

The dog was there. Maybe he would want to play. The airless porch was stale with the strong smell of a big, panting dog.

The huge German shepherd was a worker too, one of my father’s employees. Daddy owned an auto shop. It was the 1940s, and auto parts and tires were rationed because of the war. The dog was the night watchman. People desperate for tires would resort to stealing, but they would think twice about smashing a shop window or jimmying a door if the shepherd was on duty.

During the day, the dog lounged at our house, which was in a beeline across from the auto shop. The sole person he seemed interested in was my

father, who fed him. And on shimmering, miserably hot days like today, Daddy brought him onto the back porch, so the dog would not have to lie in the brutal sun.

Today, as I opened the kitchen door, the shepherd sat up from the faded rag rug near the screen door. He arranged himself, eyed me intently as I came near to sit cross-legged in front of him. He panted nonstop, looking interested. Maybe he wanted to play.

“Hi, Doggy,” I said, cupping his ears with my hands. His damp breath fluttered on my face. I leaned against him and nestled my head against his great chest.

Slowly, a sound rose from deep inside him—a rumbling, vibrating u-u-o-o-ooomm sound, swelling, welling up inside his chest.

Or was that *thunder* outside?

Maybe it was going to rain, like Mama said.

Suddenly I was in my mother’s large arms, and I felt the bounce, bounce of her frantic gait as she ran across the street toward my father’s shop. As if

slowly awakening from a dream, I sensed her pounding heart thundering inside her heavy bosom.

Was it raining now? My cheeks were wet, and my eyes were wet. My father was there but seemed far, far away, and I faintly heard him cry, “Oh, my God, my God!” And I could see through the mist, the dampness on my face—sort of see—that his face was wet too.... *Was it raining?*

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The wounds were sutured at Doc Kramer’s. He closed the tear in the upper eyelid and stitched down the eyebrow. He taped over the punctures caused by the incisors.

“Lucky girl,” Doc said, patting me.

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When I was older, my brother James told me that one thunderous shot from my father’s deer rifle ended the shepherd’s life.

“Dad fell to his knees and wept.”

*K. F. Fairchild  
Pittsboro, N.C.*

*End of excerpt*