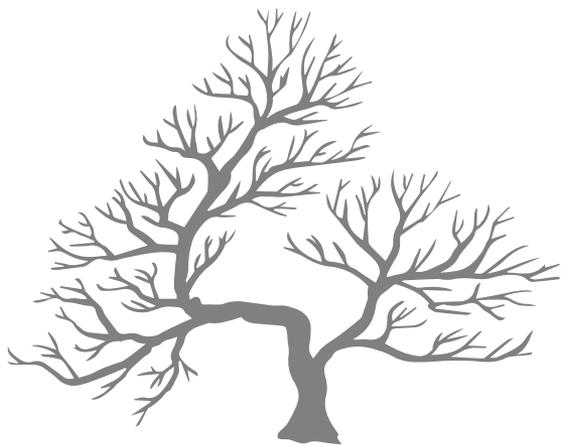


SAVING WONDER



MARY KNIGHT



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Ever since I can remember, Papaw's been giving me words. Every week a new word, beginning with *a* and running through the alphabet twice a year. It's a perfect system, or so Papaw says. "It's as if the calendar folks and the alphabet folks planned it that way." He gives me the word on a Sunday and I'm supposed to use it every day of the week. Some words I take a shine to more than others. *Lackadaisical* is one of my favorites. I like the way it rolls off my tongue.

The kids at school up in Fraleysburg aren't too keen on my words, so Papaw and I mostly use them at home here in Wonder Gap. Sometimes when I let one slip, they make fun of me. Now that I'm in seventh grade, it's even worse. Like when Carl Jenkins dropped his lunch tray next to me and his fruit cocktail shot out in every direction all mixed up with his spaghetti and meatballs. When I looked down and saw what had happened, I blurted out: "Gee, Carl, that's a verifiable mess

you got there.” Well, he was on me like a coyote in a barnyard of chickens.

I think it was that black eye that caused Papaw to *acquiesce* (first word, this year). “No use using ’em where they ain’t working,” he said, agreeing to keep my words to ourselves.

“So what’s the use of using them at all?” I said, holding a pack of frozen peas over my right eye and feeling downright *belligerent* (second word, this year).

“Well, Curley, words are your way out of the holler,” he said.

Papaw always says that, even though he’s never asked me if I wanted to go. I love my papaw, so it’s hard to argue with him. Besides, he’s all I’ve got.

My daddy died in a coal mining accident right after my little brother, Zeb, was born. I hardly remember him. Four years later, Ma and Zeb were gone, too, swallowed up by a river of sludge. It had been raining hard all week, and the coal company’s slurry pond at the top of the mountain over from ours broke through its walls. A thick stream of black mud came cascading down the holler, covering everything in its path. Ma and little Zeb were winding their way back home from old Ida’s house along the creek bed. I guess they couldn’t get out of the way fast enough.

Papaw came to get me at school that afternoon. “Your ma and little Zeb are gone” was all he said. “Just you and me now, Curley. We’re all we’ve got.” Papaw was Ma’s pa. He’d been staying with us since my daddy died, Papaw being a widower and all.

For the rest of the day after Papaw told me, I simmered in a world of hurt, wondering how Ma could have up and left me like that—taking Zeb with her and not me. It wasn’t until we showed up at the Donnelly house for the viewing that I realized they weren’t just gone, but dead. I know that sounds weird, but Papaw says our minds try to protect us from a painful truth for as long as they can. Papaw also says I kicked his shins black and blue that day, but that he deserved it for not finding a better way to tell me that terrible news.

My mother and brother were found on the banks of Miller Creek. I’ve often wondered what caught Sheriff Whitaker’s eye. Was it the pale hand of my mother reaching high out of the muck like she knew the answer? I’m told she was clinging tight to little Zeb in her other arm.

Ida Donnelly and her sister, Rosa May, took over cleaning up the bodies. They washed them in an old claw-foot tub in their backyard. Papaw said he’d forever be obliged to them for

that. He didn't think he could have done it himself and gone on living.

They put Ma and little Zeb in a coffin together, wrapped in a quilt, and buried them up on a grassy plateau by my daddy's grave with a view of our holler. Lots of folks came to the funeral. The Donnelly sisters were there, of course, and my friend, Jules, and her ma, Irene. A whole slew of miners stood back a ways, clumped together like coal, their faces all shadowy gray. They must have come right from the night shift that let out that morning, but the day shift was glaringly absent. That was back when I was seven, and things still haven't changed. Far as I can tell, here in eastern Kentucky, nothing ever does. The mines don't stop working for nobody, Papaw says, not even for one of their own.

Mr. Barkley, the owner of the mine, didn't even have the decency to show up for Mama and little Zeb's funeral. Papaw said it had something to do with not wanting to show culpability, which at the time was a word I didn't understand. The manager of the mine was standing with the others, though—Antoine Martin, a fancy name that no one had the patience for, so they called him Antsy for short. Folks say he's always fidgeting about something, but that day he was standing

stock-still. All through “Amazing Grace,” I gave him my evil eye.

Preacher Jones handed me the shovel after he said a few words. I guess he wanted me to throw down some dirt, but I threw the shovel instead. It clunked and clattered against the wooden casket as a hush settled on everyone there. No word seemed big enough for the mad I felt. Later, Papaw told me I said, “This whole thing is absolutely futile,” before I broke from his arms and ran all the way home.

Futile. That was the word for the week, as you might have guessed. Papaw and I couldn’t bring ourselves to use it again after that, but the word sat between us nonetheless.

I guess I should tell you something about myself. My name’s Curley Hines. Well, actually, it’s Michael Weaver Hines, but my folks started calling me Curly on account of my hair. I added the *e* in grade school so it wouldn’t look so girly. I think it helps.

Anyway, Michael and Hines I get from my daddy. Weaver’s from Mama’s side and Papaw’s last name. Both sides of my people are Scotch-Irish, come over from the old world to settle in the new. The way Papaw tells it, they pushed west until they recognized the green of the hills and called Appalachia home.