

Prologue

WITHOUT ME you would not hear this story, yet I am of no importance in the story. I knew the creek, its shining slick rocks, its minnows to catch in jars, a peaceful snake, and love that asked no return.

I knew the hills, dark and bathed in shade, with magic hidden places for children at play. I knew them when they were rich with autumn's trove of nuts, and with winter's red berries. I knew their summer cool. And I knew the valley. Oh, the valley, that I could see coming down from the summit of Green Shoal Mountain after the long climb. When I saw the creek my heart leaped. I was up on Ugly.

But the story I will tell happened long before I felt the creek's cool on a hot day, long before I knew the narrow valley's darkness. It began when settlement on the Indian hunting grounds along Big Ugly Creek was less than eighty years old. It is a story that I was told and that I have imagined.

Sarah is buried in the Ferrell Graveyard behind her brother Milt's house. The graveyard is on a rocky hill with scrub pine and not much else growing on it. Down below, the creek curves past Lena's house, then Fult's, and on to

where you cross to climb Green Shoal Mountain. I am not sure Sarah ever crossed Green Shoal.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, when a group of Scotch-Irish families came across Green Shoal to settle in the narrow valley, it was nearly untouched by people. Native Americans, trappers, and hunters from settlements along the Guyandotte River had used it as their hunting ground. Even now, in the twenty-first century, few people live there, and those who do love the creek as fiercely as Sarah's girls did.

Behind Milt's house, along the hillside, coal could be seen on the surface. Milt sometimes dug it out and traded to other families for services such as sorghum making. It was known to make a fire hotter than wood could make.

Down the creek, past Lena's and Fult's houses, was a green valley where a branch ran into the creek. It was called The Sulphur because of the sulphur springs there. Around this idyllic place hills rose more gently and rocky outcroppings harbored teaberry, mountain mint, and other herbs that Lena knew how to gather and use. She was known as one who could treat coughs, headaches, stomach sickness, and even flux. She was also one known to set a fine table, at which any traveler along the road was welcome.

It was Lena's niece, Sarah's girl Pearl, who sent for me when she was old and gave me a yellowed manuscript. I do not know why she entrusted me with it, but it did not surprise me. I had listened to all of Sarah's girls, Madge, Pearl, Ida, and Edna, all my life as they remembered what I had not known, and always Big Ugly was part of the stories.

I loved them and Philip, Lena, and Clint as a child dares to love, and I shall tell their story with deep affection, af-

fection for the people and for Big Ugly Creek. The manuscript I was given is only a fragment of this book, but it was like a rock in my shoe that could not be ignored. I have imagined Pearl's journal, but the story she reads to her sisters is a condensed version of the story she gave to me.