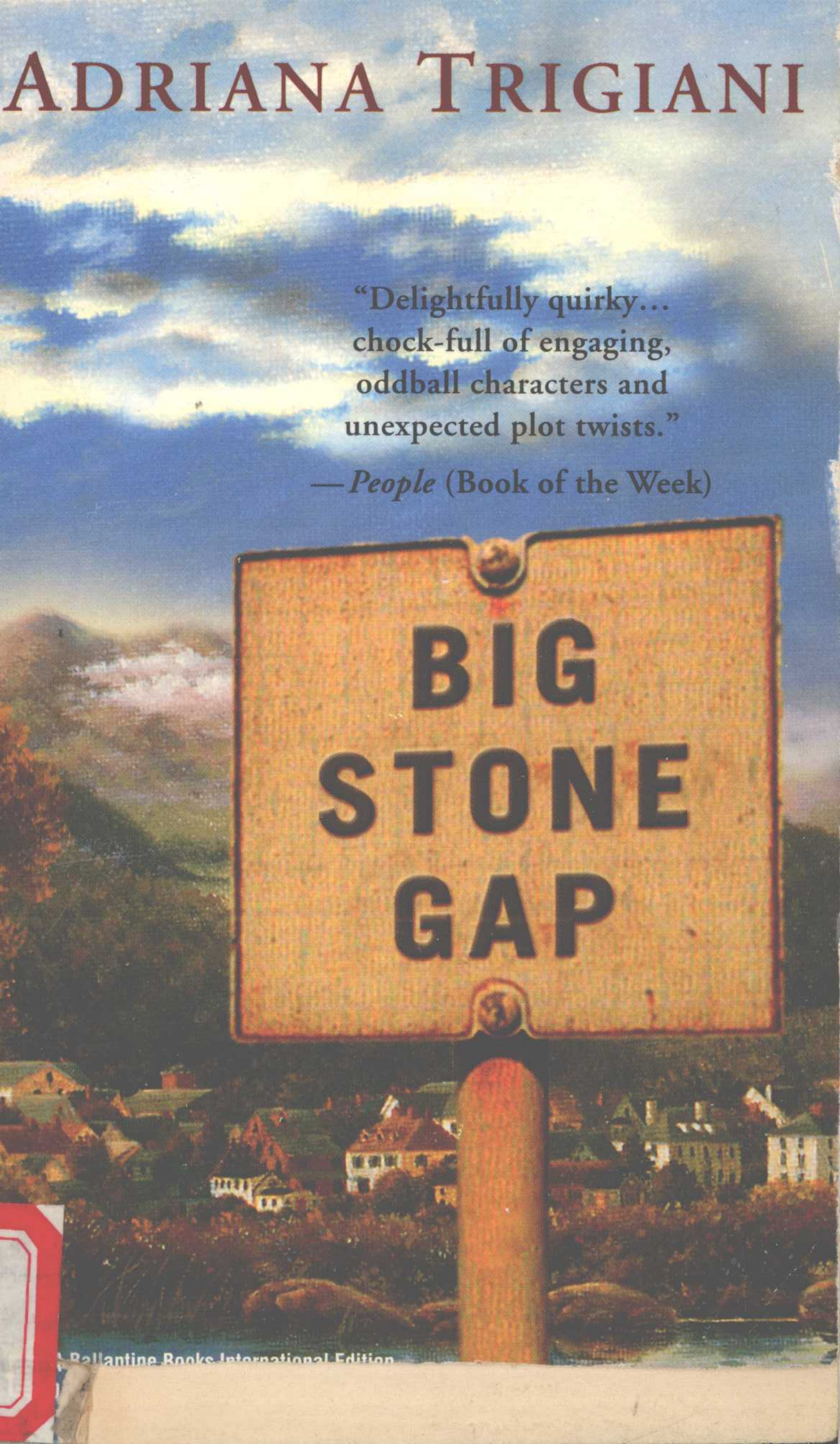
ADRIANA TRIGIANI

"Delightfully quirky… chock-full of engaging, oddball characters and unexpected plot twists."

—*People* (Book of the Week)



Ballantine Books International Edition

BIG STONE GAP

Adriana Trigiani

BALLANTINE BOOKS • NEW YORK

A Ballantine Book
Published by The Ballantine Publishing Group

Big Stone Gap is a work of fiction. While Chapter 6 and a few other references in this novel were inspired in part by a real-life campaign stop by John Warner and Elizabeth Taylor in Big Stone Gap, Virginia, in 1978, during which Elizabeth Taylor was hospitalized after choking on a bone, the visit described in this book is entirely imaginary and fictional. None of the events, actions, dialogue, costumes, or attitudes attributed to Elizabeth Taylor or John Warner actually occurred, and the scenes depicted here are in no way meant to denigrate the awesome career and stardom of Elizabeth Taylor or the democratic process of campaigning for elected office in the United States of America. All other characters, events, and dialogue are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to real people or events is entirely coincidental and does not change the purely fictitious nature of this work.

www.randomhouse.com/BB/

A Library of Congress Catalog Card Number can be obtained from the publisher.

ISBN 0-345-44301-2

This edition published by arrangement with Random House, Inc.

Manufactured in the United States of America

First International Mass Market Edition: February 2001

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

BIG STONE GAP

For Tim

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am filled with gratitude to Suzanne Gluck, my longtime friend and now agent, who encouraged me to write this book in the first place. My thanks to Suzanne's right arm, Karen Gerwin, and to her left, Caroline Sparrow; to Laura Davies, ICM's answer to international coffee; and to Lorie Stoopack, my answer to domestic caffeine.

I have been graced with a great editor in fellow Virginian Lee Boudreaux; also at mighty Random House: Ann Godoff, Pamela Cannon, Beth Pearson, Andy Carpenter, Todd Doughty, Amanda Maher, and Sherry Huber. At Ballantine, my thanks to Gina Centrello, simpatico Italian girl and paperback whiz.

My undying gratitude to my fellow writers whose advice, criticism, and encouragement were invaluable: Tom Dyja (whose faith in me was ever true), Michael Patrick King (everyone needs such a champion), Ruth Goetz, Rosanne Cash, Susan Fales-Hill, Richard Kirshenbaum, Lorenzo Carcaterra, Charles Randolph Wright, Kare Jackowski, and Mary Trigiani.

I owe a great debt to all my teachers in the Wise County public school system whose love of books and reading opened up the world to me.

I am grateful to Brownie Polly III and Brad Cavedo for sharing their memories of the Gap; June Lawton, who introduced me to the art of Chinese face-reading; and Gina Casella for her Italian flavor and flair.

My thanks and love to: Ruth Pomerance, Caroline Rhea, Bob Kelty, Greg Cantrell, Mary Testa, Sharon Watroba Burns, Nancy Ringham, Dana Geier, Jake and Jean Morrisey, Beata and Steven Baker, E. J. Jones, Joanne Curley Kerner, Sharon Hall, Todd Kessler, Chris Sarandon, Wendy Luck, Dee Emmerson, Cynthia Olson, Constance Marks, Susan Toepfer, Adina and Michael Pitt, Rosemarie and Anthony Casciole, Marisa Acocella, Nancy Josephson, Jill Holwager, Danny Greenberg, Jeanne Newman, John Farrell, Craig Jacobson, and Lou Pitt and the Pitt Group.

I am very lucky to have been influenced and mentored by Monsignor Don Andrea Spada, Mario Mai, Lucia Spada Bonicelli, and Michael A. and Yolanda P. Trigiania. Their impact on my life in incalculable.

In movieland, endless thanks to my magnificent men of the Shooting Gallery: Larry Meistrich, Jim Powers, Todd Steiner, and Mark V. Lord.

My eternal thanks and love to my father, Anthony, who found Big Stone Gap, and my beautiful mother, Ida Bonicelli, who made our home there; also to my partners in crime on Poplar Hill, and my brothers and sisters: Mary Yolanda, Lucia Anna, Antonia, Michael (and wife Lisa), Carlo (and wife Tina), and Francesca (and husband Tom). Many thanks, too, to the Stephensons—sometimes you get lucky and marry a good bunch.

CHAPTER ONE

This will be a good weekend for reading. I picked up a dozen of Vernie Crabtree's killer chocolate chip cookies at the French Club bake sale yesterday. (I don't know what she puts in them, but they're chewy and crispy at the same time.) Those, a pot of coffee, and a good book are all I will need for the rainy weekend rolling in. It's early September in our mountains, so it's warm during the day, but tonight will bring a cool mist to remind us that fall is right around the corner.

The Wise County Bookmobile is one of the most beautiful sights in the world to me. When I see it lumbering down the mountain road like a tank, then turning wide and easing onto Shawnee Avenue, I flag it down like an old friend. I've waited on this corner every Friday since I can remember. The Bookmobile is just a government truck, but to me it's a glittering royal coach delivering stories and knowledge and life itself. I even love the smell of books. People have often told me that one of their strongest childhood memories is the scent of their grandmother's house. I never knew my grandmothers, but I could always count on the Bookmobile.

The most important thing I ever learned, I learned from books. Books have taught me how to size people up. The most useful book I ever read taught me how to read faces, an ancient Chinese art called *siang mien*, in which the size of the eyes, curve of the lip, and height of the forehead are

important clues to a person's character. The placement of ears indicates intelligence. Chins that stick out reflect stubbornness. Deep-set eyes suggest a secretive nature. Eyebrows that grow together may answer the question *Could that man kill me with his bare hands?* (He could.) Even dimples have meaning. I have them, and according to face-reading, something wonderful is supposed to happen to me when I turn thirty-five. (It's been four months since my birthday, and I'm still waiting.)

If you were to read my face, you would find me a comfortable person with brown eyes, good teeth, nice lips, and a nose that folks, when they are being kind, refer to as noble. It's a large nose, but at least it's straight. My eyebrows are thick, which indicates a practical nature. (I'm a pharmacist—how much more practical can you get?) I have a womanly shape, known around here as a mountain girl's body, strong legs, and a flat behind. Jackets cover it quite nicely.

This morning the idea of living in Big Stone Gap for the rest of my life gives me a nervous feeling. I stop breathing, as I do whenever I think too hard. Not breathing is very bad for you, so I inhale slowly and deeply. I taste coal dust. I don't mind; it assures me that we still have an economy. Our town was supposed to become the "Pittsburgh of the South" and the "Coal Mining Capital of Virginia." That never happened, so we are forever at the whims of the big coal companies. When they tell us the coal is running out in these mountains, who are we to doubt them?

It's pretty here. Around six o'clock at night everything turns a rich Crayola midnight blue. You will never smell greenery so pungent. The Gap definitely has its romantic qualities. Even the train whistles are musical, sweet oboes in the dark. The place can fill you with longing.

The Bookmobile is at the stoplight. The librarian and driver is a good-time gal named Iva Lou Wade. She's in her forties, but she's yet to place the flag on her sexual peak.

She's got being a woman down. If you painted her, she'd be sitting on a pink cloud with gold-leaf edges, showing a lot of leg. Her perfume is so loud that when I visit the Bookmobile, I wind up smelling like her for the bulk of the day. (It's a good thing I like Coty's Emeraude.) My father used to say that that's how a woman ought to be. "A man should know when there's a woman in the room. When Iva Lou comes in, there ain't no doubt." I'd just say nothing and roll my eyes.

Iva Lou's having a tough time parking. A mail truck has parked funny in front of the post office, taking up her usual spot, so she motions to me that she's pulling into the gas station. That's fine with the owner, Kent Vanhook. He likes Iva Lou a lot. What man doesn't? She pays real nice attention to each and every one. She examines men like eggs, perfect specimens created by God to nourish. And she hasn't met a man yet who doesn't appreciate it. Luring a man is a true talent, like playing the piano by ear. Not all of us are born prodigies, but women like Iva Lou have made it an art form.

The Bookmobile doors open with a whoosh. I can't believe what Iva Lou's wearing: Her ice-blue turtleneck is so tight it looks like she's wearing her bra on the outside. Her Mondrian-patterned pants, with squares of pale blue, yellow, and green, cling to her thighs like crisscross ribbons. Even sitting, Iva Lou has an unbelievable shape. But I wonder how much of it has to do with all the cinching. Could it be that her parts are so well-hoisted and suspended, she has transformed her real figure into a soft hourglass? Her face is childlike, with a small chin, big blue eyes, and a rosebud mouth. Her eyeteeth snaggle out over her front teeth, but on her they're demure. Her blond hair is like yellow Easter straw, arranged in an upsweep you can see through the set curls. She wears lots of Sarah Coventry jewelry, because she sells it on the side.

"I'll trade you. Shampoo for a best-seller." I give Iva Lou

a sack of shampoo samples from my pharmacy, Mulligan's Mutual.

"You got a deal." Iva Lou grabs the sack and starts sorting through the samples. She indicates the shelf of new arrivals. "Ave Maria, honey, you have got to read *The Captains and the Kings* that just came out. I know you don't like historicals, but this one's got sex."

"How much more romance can you handle, Iva Lou? You've got half the men in Big Stone Gap tied up in knots."

She snickers. "Half? Oh well, I'm-a gonna take that as a compliment-o anyway." I'm half Italian, so Iva Lou insists on ending her words with vowels. I taught her some key phrases in Italian in case international romance was to present itself. It wasn't very funny when Iva Lou tried them out on my mother one day. I sure got in some Big Trouble over that.

Iva Lou has a goal. She wants to make love to an Italian man, so she can decide if they are indeed the world's greatest lovers. "Eye-talian men are my Matta-horn, honey," she declares. Too bad there aren't any in these parts. The people around here are mainly Scotch-Irish, or Melungeon (folks who are a mix of Turkish, French, African, Indian, and who knows what; they live up in the mountain hollers and stick to themselves). Zackie Wakin, owner of the town department store, is Lebanese. My mother and I were the only Italians; and then about five years ago we acquired one Jew, Lewis Eisenberg, a lawyer from Woodbury, New York.

"You always sit in the third snap stool. How come?" Iva Lou asks, not looking up as she flips through a new coffee-table book about travel photography.

"I like threes."

"Sweetie-o, let me tell you something." Iva Lou gets a faraway, mystical twinkle in her eye. Then her voice lowers to a throaty, sexy register. "When I get to blow this coal yard, and have my big adventure, I sure as hell won't waste my time taking pictures of the Circus Maximus. I am not in-

terested in rocks 'n' ruins. I want to experience me some flesh and blood. Some magnificent, broad-shouldered hunk of a European man. Forget the points of interest, point me toward the men. Marble don't hug back, baby." Then she breathes deeply, "Whoo."

Iva Lou fixes herself a cup of Sanka and laughs. She's one of those people who are forever cracking themselves up. She always offers me a cup, and I always decline. I know that her one spare clean Styrofoam cup could be her entrée to a romantic rendezvous. Why waste it on me?

"I found you that book on wills you wanted. And here's the only one I could find on grief." Iva Lou holds up *As Grief Exits* as though she's modeling it. The pretty cover has rococo cherubs and clouds on it. The angels' smiles are instantly comforting. "How you been getting along?" I look at Iva Lou's face. Her innocent expression is just like the cherubs'. She really wants to know how I am.

My mother died on August 2, 1978, exactly one month ago today. It was the worst day of my life. She had breast cancer. I never thought cancer would get both of my parents, but it did. Mama was fifty-two years old, which suddenly seems awfully young to me. She was only seventeen when she came to America. My father taught her English, but she always spoke with a thick accent. One of the things I miss most about her is the sound of her voice. Sometimes when I close my eyes I can hear her.

Mama didn't want to die because she didn't want to leave me here alone. I have no brothers or sisters. The roots in the Mulligan family are strong, but at this point, the branches are mostly dead. My mother never spoke of her family over in Italy, so I assume they died in the war or something. The only relative I have left is my aunt, Alice Mulligan Lambert. She is a pill. Her husband, my Uncle Wayne, has spent his life trying not to make her angry, but he has failed.

Aunt Alice has a small head and thin lips. (That's a terrible combination.)

"I'm gonna take a smoke, honey-o." Iva Lou climbs down the steps juggling two coffees and her smokes. In under fifteen seconds, Kent Vanhook comes out from the garage, wiping his hands on a rag. Iva Lou gives Kent the Styrofoam cup, which looks tiny in his big hands. They smoke and sip. Kent Vanhook is a good-looking man of fifty, a tall, easygoing cowboy type. He looks like the great Walter Pidgeon with less hair. As he laughs with Iva Lou, twenty years seem to melt off of his face. Kent's wife is a diabetic who stays at home and complains a lot. I know this because I drop off her insulin once a month. But with Iva Lou, all Kent does is laugh.

I like to be alone on the Bookmobile. It gives me a chance to really examine the new arrivals. I make a stack and then look through the old selections. I pick up my old standby, *The Ancient Art of Chinese Face-Reading,* and think of my father, Fred Mulligan. When he died thirteen years ago, I thought I would grieve, but to this day I haven't. We weren't close, but it wasn't from my lack of trying. From the time I can remember, he just looked through me, the way you would look through the thick glass of a jelly jar to see if there's any jelly left. Many nights when I was young I cried about him, and then one day I stopped expecting him to love me and the pain went away. I stuck by him when he got sick, though. All of a sudden, my father, who had always separated himself from people, had everything in common with the world. He was in pain and would inevitably die. The suffering gave him some humility. It's sad that my best memories of him are when he was sick. It was then that I first checked out this book on Chinese face-reading.

I thought that if I read my father's face, I would be able to understand why he was so mean. It took a lot of study. Dad's face was square and full of angles: rectangular forehead,

sharp jaw, pointy chin. He had small eyes (sign of a deceptive nature), a bulbous nose (sign of money in midlife, which he had from owning the Pharmacy), and no lips. Okay, he had two lips, but the set of the mouth was one tight gray lead-pencil line. That is a sign of cruelty. When you watch the news on television, look at the anchor's mouth. I will guaran-damn-tee you that none of them have upper lips. You don't get on the TV by being nice to people.

On and off for about four years straight the face-reading book was checked out in my name, and my name only. When I went up to Charlottesville on a buying trip for the Pharmacy, I tried to hunt down a copy to buy. It was out of print. Iva Lou has tried to give me the book outright many times. She said she would report it as lost. But I can't do that. I like knowing it's here, riding around with old Iva Lou.

I guess I'm staring out the windshield at them, because they're both looking at me. Iva Lou stomps out her cigarette with her pink Papagallo flat and heads back toward the Bookmobile. Kent watches her return, drinking her in like that last sip of rich, black Sanka.

"I'm sorry. Me and Kent got to talking and, well, you know."

"No problem."

"Face-reading again? Don't you have this memorized by now? Lordy."

Iva stamps the books with her pinky up.

"See you next week." I wave to Kent casually, just to make him feel that there is absolutely nothing wrong with talking to single, available, willing Iva Lou and sharing a smoke. He smiles at me, a little relieved. I think most folks in Big Stone Gap know their secrets are safe with me. (God knows I don't get any pleasure in knowing that the town manager performs self-colonics.)

* * *

I have a delivery to make. I promised Mrs. Mac—MacChesney is the full surname—that I would bring her a new prescription to tame her high blood pressure. She is known around here as "Apple Butter Nan" because nobody cans it better. Her house is way up in Cracker's Neck Holler. There are lots of twists and turns to get there, and I sort of fly around the curves like Mario Andretti (another great Eye-talian). There's an element of danger in mountain roads—there are no guardrails, so it's you and your rack-and-pinion steering. If you lose your concentration, you could go over the mountain. One foggy night the Brightwell brothers lost control of their truck and drove off the cliff. Luckily, the trees broke their fall. A state cop found the boys hanging in the branches like fresh laundry the following morning. They lost their truck, though. On impact, it fell off of them like pants. Now it rests at the bottom of Powell Valley Lake.

The Gap, or "down in town" as the holler folks call it, is in the valley. The hollers are little communities nestled in the sides of the Blue Ridge Mountains. I couldn't give you directions to places up in the mountains, but I could take you there. There are no signs anywhere; you have to know your way. When you climb to the highest peak around here, you can see the borders of five states: Virginia, Kentucky, North Carolina, Tennessee, and West Virginia. You can't actually see the divider lines of course; you just know that you're looking at five states because there's a plaque that says so and because we were taught that in school. Tiny Miss Callahan, my fourth-grade teacher, would be very happy that I retained this information and shared it.

Each holler has its own name and singular history. Families found pockets that suited them in these hills and never left. Where people settle tells a lot about them. This is the only place I've ever lived, except for college. I went away to school, all the way up to South Bend, Indiana, to Saint Mary's, a small women's college. It was just big enough for me. When I got my B.S., I came home and took over man-

agement of the Pharmacy. I was needed here. My father had gotten sick and had to quit, and Mama couldn't handle it alone. It wasn't that she was a weak woman; she just couldn't handle change.

I've made it up to Cracker's Neck in record time. The MacChesney homestead sits in a clearing. It's a square stone house with four chimneys. Hearth fires smell better in stone houses, and Mrs. Mac always has one going. I park and wait for the dogs to circle. We have hundreds of wild dogs in the mountains, and they travel in packs. Most aren't rabid, and when they are, they get shot. I count six thin dogs sniffing my wheels. Buying time, I unzip my window and toss out the sign that identifies me to customers. It's a white plastic square that says: THE MEDICINE DROPPER. (I sprung for the extra artwork, a silhouette of a nurse in a rush.)

I usually find the guts to get out of the Jeep when I see Mrs. Mac peeking out of her window. The last thing I want to appear to customers is chicken. Truth is, I appreciate her watching out for me as I open the door and swing my legs out. Ever so casually I pull myself to a rigid standing position and walk confidently through the yard to the front door, like Maureen O'Hara in every movie she ever made with John Wayne. Maureen O'Hara is short-waisted like me. She is my inspiration in wardrobe and courage. I've even taken to wearing my hair like her—simple and long in a neat braid. I pack less punch though; my hair is brown, hers lustrous red.

The porch is freshly painted gray without a speck of dirt anywhere. The firewood is stacked neatly to the side of the house in a long row, in a lattice design. I try not to have favorites, but Mrs. Mac and her orderly home definitely top my list.

"Took you long enough!" Mrs. Mac exclaims as she snaps open the screen door.

"Iva Lou and I were chatting."

"I done figured that." Mrs. Mac points to the fire. "Is that a good un, or is that a good un?" The flames lick the grid in hungry yellow bursts.

"That is the best fire I have ever seen." And I mean it.

"Come on back. I made corn bread."

I follow Mrs. Mac to the kitchen, a sunny, spacious room with exposed oak beams on the ceiling. I hear a noise behind me. Praying that it's not another dog, I slowly turn and look, first low, then eye level. It's not a dog. It's a man. Mrs. Mac's son, Jack MacChesney, in his underwear, a faded-to-pink union suit that sticks to him like a leotard. We look at each other, and both our faces turn the color of his underwear before it faded—bloodred.

"Jesus Christmas, Jack. Put some clothes on," Mrs. Mac demands.

"Yes, ma'am," he says to his mother, as if on automatic. "Good morning, Ave Maria," he says to me, and goes. I can't help it, I watch the man go. He has a fine, high rear end. I wish I did. I pull my belted CPO jacket down over my flat behind and follow Mrs. Mac into the kitchen.

Mrs. Mac and I cross the kitchen to the big table by the windows, where she pours me a cup of hot black coffee that smells like heaven. She serves me fresh cream and snow-white sugar, which I dump into the mug. "So what's happening in town?" Mrs. Mac asks. She has a mountain-girl face—a fine nose you could draw with a compass, shiny green button eyes, Cupid's-bow lips, smooth cheeks. You can tell that she was a great beauty in her youth, and she still is.

"Is 'Nan' short for anything?" I ask her.

"What? You mean my name?" Mrs. Mac cuts the corn bread in the iron skillet into neat triangles. "My mamaw's name was Nan. My middle name is Bluebell because that field was covered with 'em when I got born." She points out the window with her spatula to indicate the field in the back.

"Nan Bluebell. Pretty. What was your maiden name?"