

“Smell that air,” Loretta’s mother said, closing her eyes and taking a deep breath. “I just love the Smoky Mountains.”

“Me too,” Loretta said.

She had never been to the Smoky Mountains before. She had known they were there, of course, starting way over on the other side of Tennessee from where she lived and stretching clear on into North Carolina. She had made a model of them one time for school, mixing up a goopy clay out of flour and salt and water and patting it into mounds on cardboard. She had painted the mountains green and brown.

Now here she was in the *real* Smoky Mountains, sitting in

the backseat of their big white van with *Murphy’s Heating and Plumbing* painted on the side. Her father’s tools slid back and forth across the metal floor of the van as they followed the winding road up the mountain.

Every few minutes, Loretta wiggled her hand, making the silver charm bracelet jingle on her wrist. She had looked at each charm about a million times, imagining the place it had come from.

The cowboy boot from Texas.

The starfish from Florida.

The cactus from Arizona.

She felt a tingle of excitement as she looked out the window at the sights along the roadside. Souvenir shops and country stores. Vegetable stands and flea markets.

When they crossed the state line, they stopped to take pictures, posing beside the **WELCOME TO NORTH CAROLINA** sign, their arms around each other, smiling and saying “Cheese.”

They ate sandwiches at a picnic table on the side of the road.

“Listen how quiet it is,” Loretta’s mother said. They all three sat still, cocking their heads and looking skyward, taking in the silence that was interrupted only by the bees buzzing around the tops of their soda cans.

Every once in a while, a car went by. Luggage piled on the top. Bicycles hanging on racks off the back.

Loretta's mother took a folded piece of paper out of her back pocket and opened it up on the picnic table.

"Maybe tonight we can decide where we wanna go first," she said.

They had made a list of the places they wanted to visit in the Smoky Mountains.

*Maggie Valley*

*Cherokee*

*Santa's Land Theme Park*

*Cades Cove*

*Tuckaleechee Caverns*

*Clingmans Dome*

*Dollywood*

Loretta's father had said they probably couldn't get to all those places on this trip, but maybe they could come back some other time.

Maybe this time Loretta would have to choose between Santa's Land and Dollywood, he said.

Loretta wished she knew exactly where her other mother had gone when *she* was in the Smoky Mountains.

When they packed up their picnic stuff and loaded the cooler back into the van, Loretta's father took his cap off and stretched. "I'm just about ready to call it a day," he said.

So they kept their eyes open for a motel.

Loretta wondered where her other mother had stayed when *she* was in the Smoky Mountains.

As they got higher and higher into the mountains, the sun got lower and lower in the sky. They passed more souvenir shops and vegetable stands, but not a single motel.

"We might have to go back down to the interstate if we don't find something soon," Loretta's father said.

"We'll find something," Loretta's mother said. "Keep your peepers peeped, Lulu."

So Loretta rolled down the window and leaned out, letting the cool mountain air blow her bangs off her forehead, and kept her peepers peeped.

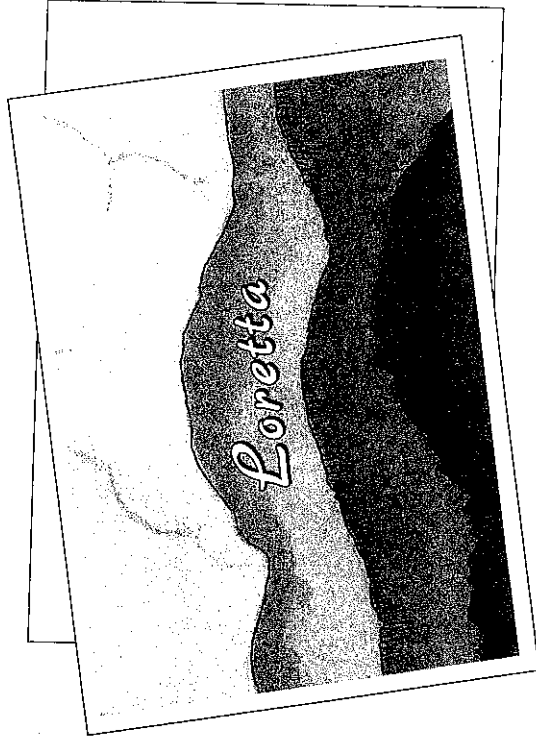
She slammed the receiver down.

*Bam!*

"There's tomatoes and cantaloupes and stuff in a garden out there," Kirby said, motioning toward the back of the motel.

His mother looked up at him. There were black smudges of mascara under her eyes. Her hair stood out from her head in tangled, frizzy puffs.

She got up and padded to the bathroom in her bare feet and shut the door. Kirby took her purse from the top of the dresser and peered inside. Way at the bottom was a crumpled dollar bill. He put it in his shirt pocket, tossed the purse back on the dresser, and went outside again.



"There's one!" Loretta hollered, pointing out the window of the van.

Her father turned into the gravel parking lot. The tiny motel looked old and run-down, but Loretta liked the name of it.

*Sleepy Time.*

A black cat slept in a chair by the office door. A red pickup truck was parked in front of one of the rooms.

"Perfect," her mother said. "I like the feel of this place." She climbed out of the van with a grunt. "I'll go find out if we can get a room," she said.

Loretta watched her mother disappear inside the motel

office. A redheaded boy walked barefoot from the empty swimming pool. Loretta waved at him, but he kept his head down, his thick hair falling over his eyes. He went into one of the rooms and closed the door behind him. Loretta saw him pull the curtain aside and peek out the window at them.

Loretta's mother came out of the office and called, "Park over there, Marvin."

Her father parked the van in front of Room 6 and Loretta jumped out. An old lady unlocked the door and motioned for them to follow her inside. Her thin cotton pants were rolled up at the bottom and held with safety pins.

"I hope y'all like this room," she said.

"Like it?" Loretta's mother said. "Why, it's just adorable. Look at that, Lulu." She pointed to a clear plastic bird feeder stuck on the outside of one of the windows. A tiny bird scratched around at a few seeds in the bottom.

"I keep forgetting to fill that one," the lady said. "But then, I reckon I shouldn't tempt Ugly too much, anyway, you know?" She winked at Loretta.

"Who's Ugly?" Loretta said.

"My cat."

"That black one out yonder?"

The lady nodded. "That ugly one."

"I think he's cute," Loretta said.

The lady chuckled. "Well, he's been around the block a few times, I can tell you that."

Loretta's father came in carrying their suitcases.

"My name's Aggie," the lady said.

Loretta's father tipped his hat and said, "Marvin."

He put his arm around his wife and said, "This is Irene."

Then he put his big, warm hand on top of Loretta's head and said, "And this here is Loretta."

Aggie showed them how to pull the sofa out to make a bed for Loretta. She took some little packs of soap out of her pocket and put them in the bathroom. Then she nodded toward the wall behind the bed.

"The office is right next door," she said. "Y'all holler if you need anything." She pointed to one ear with a crooked finger. "And I do mean holler," she added. "These old ears of mine ain't what they used to be."



Loretta loved the little motel room.

She loved the flowered bedspread.

She loved the pine-paneled walls.

She loved the map of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park taped on the closet door.

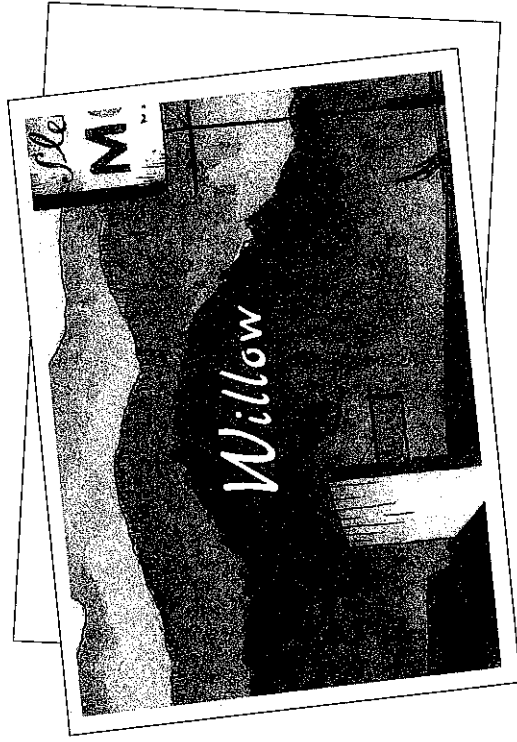
She even loved the musty smell and the window with the

screen falling out and the light fixture that made a little buzzing sound.

She wondered if her other mother had stayed here and if she had loved it, too.

While her mother unpacked their things and her father cleaned out the cooler, Loretta put the box with all her other mother's earthly possessions on the little table beside the bed.

Then she went outside to look for Ugly.



Willow hated the little motel room. It smelled bad. The carpet was stained and dirty. The faucet in the bathroom dripped.

*Plunk. Plunk. Plunk.*

Her father said he would sleep on the lumpy pullout couch, but the bed didn't look much better.

Willow stared glumly out the window while her father studied all those papers from the bank.

Those papers he needed to buy the motel from Aggie.

"Daddy," Willow said.

Her father looked up from his paperwork.

"How will Mama know where we are?" Willow said.

"She'll know."

"But how?"

"I'll tell her."

"When?"

"Soon."

"Can she come stay here, too?" Willow said.

"Willow . . ." Her father took his glasses off. "Your mother has chosen to leave us."

"But where is she?"

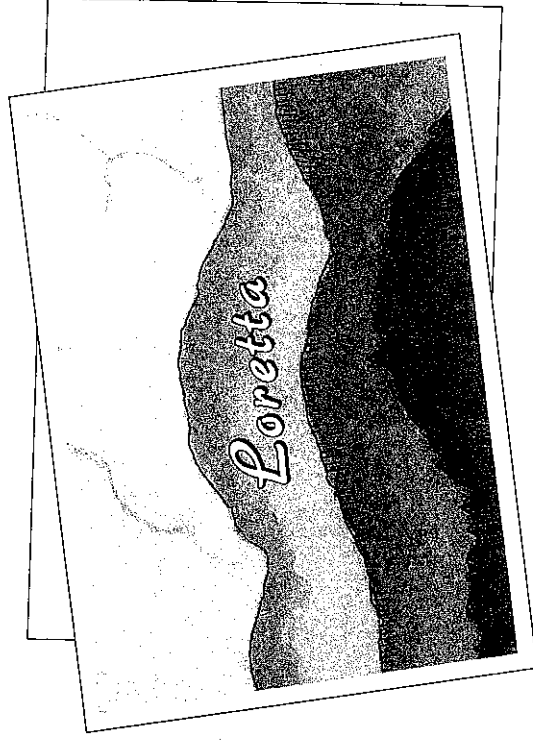
"I've told you before. She's with her sister in Savannah."

He put his glasses on and went back to his paperwork. "If she wants to contact us," he added, "she knows where your grandmother is."

Willow felt a blanket of sadness settle over her, weighing her down.

She went outside and sat in a rocking chair made out of tree branches. She buried her face in her knees and squeezed her eyes shut. Tight.

Then she whispered, "Dorothy, Dorothy, Dorothy," over and over again.



That night, Loretta sat in the lawn chair outside the door to Room 6. Lightning bugs were beginning to flicker out across the parking lot.

She had finally coaxed Ugly to sleep on her lap. The red-headed boy came out and ambled around the motel, kicking rocks and glancing over at her every now and then. Down at the other end of the motel, a girl sat in a rocking chair, pushing against the pavement with her bare foot, making the chair rock.

Back and forth.

Back and forth.

Loretta called out "Hey," but the girl didn't look up.

"Come see this cat," Loretta called.