

Covered Bridge

By Linda D. Brewer

A sticky-leaved little alder grew on the edge of the river bank about eight feet above the water. Mellie grasped a slim branch with one hand to steady herself as she took the first step. She lurched down the slope, sliding the last few feet as the branch tore away from the trunk. Rocks and clods of dirt flew in front of her and plopped into the river, but she managed to land upright, branch still in hand. Mere inches away the Siuslaw flowed by on its way to the Pacific, free transportation for anyone who wanted it. Mellie took off her shoes and laid her pocketbook beside them just above the waterline. She could smell the river, the smell of picnics and childhood adventures long past. She leaned over and dipped her fingers in the water. It was October and the water was cold, but she was not here to take a bath.

Using the torn branch as a staff she waded out until the hem of her dress just touched the water. The center channel of the river was deep enough for what she wanted. There would be rocks under her feet for a few more steps, and then there would be a drop-off. All she had to do was let herself relax and go under.

Someone had left an old copy of the Register-Guard in the teachers' room. Because she had walked briskly to school, because she had five minutes to spare, she had picked it up and flicked through it for news of the war in Europe, but it was only the society section, not the news section. "Mrs. So-and-so hosts bridge party." "Couple plights troth." "Troth" was an interesting word, she thought. She might assign the fifth-graders to look it up, to build their vocabulary. Then the names--Clifton Padelford, groom, Susan Lynan, bride. She felt a blow to her chest, as if a cannonball had hit her. She checked the date. The paper was two weeks old.

She got to the restroom just in time to lose her breakfast and every hope for her future. The door opened while she was washing her face. Someone said, "Morning," and she answered as she had to, "Morning." People in Eugene would know, but no one out here in Rainrock would know if she didn't let on. I must not tell anyone, I must behave normally, she thought. And the next thought. I want to die.

Leonard Peck fell asleep during reading time and snored. She made him stand in the corner for five minutes and forbade the class to laugh, then saw by their faces that she had at that moment put the idea of laughter into

their heads. During geography her stomach growled loud enough for the children in the front seats to hear. Only a few of the children completed the arithmetic work sheets correctly. She could see the bigger girls eyeing each other, sending signals. Let her try to teach us, wait her out, and then we can go on with our far more interesting lives. The witch.

After school Mr. Franklin called her into his office for a talk. One of the other teachers—he wouldn't say who—had witnessed her being sick in the teacher's restroom that morning. He didn't ask, but she saw that he wondered--morning sickness?

"I'm fine. A little stomach flu, maybe. Or nerves." She laughed, a short desperate squawk. "The children are delightful." He let that one pass, and let her go, for the moment.

"I see Clifton married another girl. Good for him. I always said he bit off more than he could chew when he was going out with Mellie Sanderson." It was what they would say in Eugene. Old and tough, that was what they meant. She was thirty years old and an oddball, despite her excellent grades in Normal School, ha ha, was what they meant.

She had come out of the school in time to see old Miss Peale, tremulous, cranky, never-married, slowly descend the school steps, her big black purse weighing heavy on her skinny arm, exhausted after a day dealing with seventh graders. That's my future now, Mellie thought, and so she had walked right past her little rented house and gone to the river.

The hem of her dress darkened, soaking up the water. Osmosis. She could teach a lesson on it. She ought to have taken her clothes off. The dress had little blue buttons from neck to hem. She began to unbutton them and was down to her waist when a boat drifted by in the channel. An anonymous boy waved at her across the water, and she hastily buttoned her dress back up. She hoped whoever it was wouldn't go home and report he'd seen the new teacher, Miss Melvina Sanderson, standing half-naked in the river. Tsk, tsk. Their tongues would wear out, clucking.

A rock shifted under her foot and she slipped and almost fell in. She steadied herself and watched the water for a while. A maple leaf floated by like a small golden raft. She could smell the last of the blackberries fermenting on the canes, and the wild scents of animals and her own unwashed hair. A big brown dog sat on the river bank, watching her. After she was gone he would probably wander down and sniff her pocketbook, looking for food.

He wouldn't find any. Her stomach growled again, a small animal inside her demanding attention. She waded out another step and threw the

tree branch as far as she could, a pointer stick showing her where to go. She took a step in that direction.

There was a rush of nose behind her. The dog splashed past, all dumb exuberance, and swam for the branch. He grasped it in his mouth and turned around with a ridiculous expression on his face, joy at a job accomplished and hope that he would be allowed to do it again. He swam to her and dropped the branch in the water in front of her. She picked it up and threw it again, though she knew it was hopeless. Again he fetched it. She retreated to the bank and the dog followed, panting, wagging its tail. "Go home," she said. He shook himself, spattering her with river-smelling droplets, and wandered away. She thought, I will eat something first. I will have one last decent meal.

She stabbed the branch into the dirt and made her way back up the bank past the wounded alder. She walked up the path to the bridge and stepped into the dim, echoing interior. The pedestrian walkway was narrow, a strip of concrete squeezed against the bridge wall. A car came up behind her and she considered stepping in front of it. The car tooted its horn a cheerful honk-honk and she stood still until it went by her. The sound of its horn echoed off the bridge walls, and she saw a child's face laughing in the rear window.

The bottom of the mountain called Three-Finger Jack was already in shadow when she came out of the covered bridge. There were four cars parked in front of the store and the post office, and a horse tied up in front of the barber shop. She straightened her wet skirt and entered the Rainrock Grocery as if it were any ordinary day. Mr. Swartz, gray-haired and rotund in his white apron, stood at the front counter helping a customer. Mellie went down the canned goods aisle looking at the labels, trying to think what she could eat. The butcher stood behind the meat case watching her approach. He wore a ridiculous white paper cap which sat at an angle on his dark hair. He smiled and said, "What can I get for you, ma'am?"

"Nothing today," she said. She knew she wouldn't be able to chew or swallow anything with any substance. She bought a can of chicken soup and a roll of hard candies. She picked up a loaf of bread and put it back. It seemed, not the staff of life, but a mere household object, like a dish towel, nothing she would want to put in her mouth.

She walked back across the bridge, chilly in her damp dress, and tried not to think about anything. She ate some soup and let a lemon drop dissolve down her throat and went to bed. The next morning she woke up and understood that she hadn't died in the night. She got up and went to school.

Leonard Peck's sister Elmira brought him part of her lunch at noon because he had forgotten his. It wasn't much, half a sandwich and a fragment of what might have been pumpkin pie. Elmira was in the eighth grade and looked thirty-five, with a lumpy body and a look of resignation on her pale face. Leonard wore too-big bib overalls and lace-up boots out of the Montgomery Ward catalogue. He sat behind Henry Martin, Mellie's star pupil, a handsome, bright-eyed boy whose hand shot into the air a dozen times a day. Henry had started on the fourth-grade side of the room, but after a week she had moved him to the fifth-grade side. He was behind, but he was game and within a couple of weeks he had caught up. She liked him because when he read a word wrong—he pronounced "foreign" as "foragin"—he understood her correction and didn't make that mistake again.

The fifth graders seemed to accept Henry, although she worried that Leonard might try to copy his work. Leonard and his sister both had slimy, mossy-looking teeth. She planned to give him a toothbrush at Christmas and teach him to use it.

After a week she bought four ounces of hamburger, as a trial. She had recovered from the shock of Clifton's marriage enough to know that she couldn't live forever on soup and hard candy. One of the busybody little girls, Marlene Simmons, had raised her hand for no reason at all that morning and said, "Miss Sanderson, your wrists are the same size as mine." The butcher weighed her purchase and then wrote down the wrong price on the small package. He hummed as he wrote, like a happy child.

"I owe you more than that," Mellie told him. "I can read upside-down and I can do arithmetic in my head."

"Yes, teacher," he said. "Just trying to keep you healthy. You're looking better."

"Than what?" she asked.

"Better than a day in June," he said. He had dimples, ridiculous in a grown man's face.

All the way back across the bridge she repeated his words in her head, trying to find something interesting about them. Banal, she thought, and he wouldn't even know what "banal" meant. He represented the contented people who could eat well and joke and didn't have a feeling like doom inside their rib cage.

She bought a little more food the following week, and the week after that, and then one day her appetite returned and she splurged on a steak. The butcher said, "Congratulations on whatever it is you're celebrating."

"Thank you," she said, and let it go at that.

One day in November she came into the store and found herself in the middle of an argument about the war. It was cold and raining. The children had had to stay inside at recess for several days. Today she had taught them square dancing at the suggestion of Margaret Price, the third-grade teacher, and the experience had left them all in a better mood. She had let them square dance through history and geography, all afternoon until it was time to send them home.

Mr. Swartz, said, "No. There's no reason for us to get into it. Let them fight it out amongst themselves."

Curtis Reed, who taught the other half of the fifth grade as well as the sixth, said, "There are plenty of reasons."

"Thou shalt not kill," Mr. Swartz said. "That's good enough for me."

"Thou shalt not do a lot of things, but people do them anyway," Curtis Reed said. "I wouldn't want my students to go and fight, but Hitler has to be stopped."

Mellie made her way around them and went back to the meat counter. She said to the butcher, Wallace Hoppe was his name, she knew that by now, "Where do you stand on isolationism?"

"Where do you stand?" he asked, as if they were asking each other riddles.

She tried to collect her ideas and put them into words, to have a serious conversation with him for once. After a moment she said, "My father was in the war and he still suffers from it. I don't want us to get into another one."

"Then that's what I say." Wallace leaned over the counter. "I've got my car fixed up. We could go for a ride one of these days, me and you. We could drive up into the hills and get you a Christmas tree."

"Christmas is weeks away," Mellie said.

He nodded. "Yes, teacher." There was dark hair on his forearms. If he'd been a big shaggy dog she could have petted him and no harm done.

The bell over the front door jingled. Wallace said, "Meet me at the Sweet Creek turnoff at two o'clock, a week from Saturday. I'll have the day off." She started to say of course she wouldn't, but he held up his hand. "Only if you dare." His voice was as jaunty as his cap, but his eyes searched hers. They stared at each other for half a minute. "But if you don't dare, I'll understand." He shrugged and turned back to his work.

"I dare," Mellie said, because he had called her "teacher" and because she was tired of being heartsick. She knew he was not worthy of her, but then she remembered how he had lifted her spirits over the weeks. Without

his silly remarks and his paper cap she might have gone back to the river and jumped in. What an embarrassment to the school that would have been, and terrible for the children.

She stood at the checkout stand without knowing how she had got there. "This is madness," she said. Mr. Swartz said, "You're darn right."

All the way across the bridge she went over what Wallace had said and what she had said.

"Only if you dare." "I dare." I am not in my right mind, she thought. She ought to have stayed in Eugene and faced up to the fact that Clifton had broken off with her. Let him marry whoever he liked. She didn't need to flee to the hills to live among the loggers. Some of the children in Rainrock lived in poor conditions and not all the parents were married, but they had got along fine before she arrived, and they would get along when she left.

It's still two weeks away, she thought. I can cancel the date before then. A Christmas tree. Then she thought, appealing to the judge in her head, but I am happy.

Time went by and she didn't cancel the date because she kept expecting Wallace Hoppe to cancel it for her. The last Saturday in November was cold, with intermittent episodes of sleet. She'd imagined Wallace Hoppe and herself sitting on a moss-covered log watching the sun set over the Coast Range. If the logging road went high enough up the mountain they might even be able to see the ocean. The weather made that tranquil scene unlikely.

She and Clifton had exchanged kisses that made her heart beat fast from what she took to be love. But one mild June evening on her parents' porch swing he had put his hand up her skirt. When she pulled away he said, "Don't object too fast, Mellie. There aren't many men with my kind of taste in women." It took her a moment to understand that because she was not beautiful he expected her to do whatever he wanted. Apparently her eyeglasses and her love of natural history obliged her to agree to his every wish. But Clifton wasn't handsome, and his breath often smelled bad. She'd pointed these facts out to him there on the porch swing. The swing stopped dead, and they looked at each other, and neither of them liked what they saw. "I'm sorry," she said. Of course she apologized, for what she had said to him and for being less than beautiful. They had exchanged letters and they had cried, and then they had stopped seeing each other. She hadn't expected him to marry someone else so soon. Now she almost didn't care.

I am under a spell, I have gone round the bend, she said to herself, but still she put on her good wool sweater and her old wool ski pants and her boots and her raincoat and gloves. She walked to the Sweet Creek turnoff,

but she felt conspicuous loitering there. She made her way off the side of the road to a bigleaf maple, whose tattered leaves littered the grass around it. She picked up a leaf and inspected the stem and veins for the benefit of anyone passing by. She could always say she was collecting specimens for a science lesson.

At ten past two a car rumbled through the bridge, but it wasn't Wallace, it was the farmer whose cow pasture neighbored the far end of the playground. At a quarter past two it began to rain again, and she began to shiver.

The rain turned to hail. At two-thirty she walked back to her house carrying an armful of wet leaves. She took off her raincoat and hung it on the wall near the wood stove, then hovered over the stove to thaw her frozen hands. She promised herself it would take longer for her raincoat to dry than it would for her to recover from Wallace Hoppe's rudeness. She was glad he'd stood her up. It was the best thing he could have done for her, said the judge in her head. She switched on her small radio and began to knit a pair of mittens for poor Miss Peale.

Monday morning Henry raised his hand and when she called on him he said, "I have a new baby sister. My daddy and mama went to town and they came home with her. Her name's Becky Louise."

"Where were you?" Mellie asked.

"I stayed in town with my Grandma Agnes. She gave me a book about airplanes."

Leonard Peck leaned forward and muttered something down the back of Henry's neck. Mellie tapped on her desk with her rule, and Leonard leaned back in his seat. They were writing their spelling words, ten words, ten times each. Henry had finished his and was studying the words for the next week's lesson. He was the one she would send on to college. The rest of the children were future housewives and loggers-to-be, but Henry was going to be a success. She saw him in a cap and gown, thanking Miss Sanderson for her encouragement.

She had playground duty that week. The rain had let up and the children were full of energy. Three of the girls were swinging, pumping up high and swooping down, chattering together like birds. The sky was overcast, the air damp. Mellie could hear the bells from the farmer's cows at the end of the playground. She put her hands in her sweater pockets and let herself think about Wallace. He had told her that he'd come to Oregon from Minnesota to be a logger, but found it too difficult. "You notice they're all missing fingers, or their ribs are stove in. I'm too pretty to hurt myself like

that. It's easier to feed a logger than to be one." He expected her—and all of his female customer, no doubt—to fall in love with him. She wanted to slap him. The next time she saw him she just might.

One of the swinging girls yelled, "Miss Sanderson, look!" and pointed to a commotion in a corner of the playground. Two boys were fighting while half a dozen other boys gathered around. She hurried across the muddy ground and saw out of the corner of her eye that Mr. Franklin was coming down the steps from his corner office.

It was Henry Martin and Leonard Peck. They grunted softly as they pushed each other back and forth inside the circle the boys had drawn to play marbles. Leonard pushed Henry down and fell on him, and Henry kicked and got away. They were like puppies roiling together. She grabbed Leonard by the back of his overalls and pulled him away, surprised by the resistance of his thin body. Mr. Franklin yelled, "Break it up." The other boys backed away and stood still, hoping to avoid punishment. Mr. Franklin took Henry and Leonard each by an arm and marched them up the steps to the school building. Mellie ran after them. In the secretary's office she asked Jean Remsburg to watch her class, and then she went into the principal's office, where no child, or teacher, went with a light step.

Henry and Leonard sat on wooden chairs in front of Mr. Franklin's desk. The spanking paddle, a flat piece of wood with holes cut in it, hung on a leather thong on the wall behind his chair, impossible to ignore.

"Tell Miss Sanderson and me what the fight was about," Mr. Franklin said.

"He hit me for no reason," Leonard said.

"Is that true, Henry?" Mr. Franklin asked.

"He said something about my mother," Henry said in a low voice.

"What did he say?" Mr. Franklin asked.

"He said she had my baby sister because she and my daddy did something bad. He used a bad word."

"You don't have to say the word," Mellie broke in.

"And then what happened?" Mr. Franklin asked.

"I asked him to take it back and he wouldn't. I asked him again and he wouldn't, so I hit him. I had to."

"Is that what happened, Leonard?"

"It's only the truth," Leonard said. "He didn't need to hit me for it. My daddy and momma do it all the time. I've got four sisters." It was the longest speech Mellie had heard him make.

Mr. Franklin looked at her and shook his head. "What should we do

about this?" he asked the boys.

Henry said, "If he takes it back, I'll shake hands with him."

Oh, you poor love, Mellie thought. You are a knight of the Round Table.

"How about it, Leonard?" Mr. Franklin said. "Take it back, shake hands, and never talk about it again."

Leonard agreed. His feet were kicking against the legs of the chair as if of their own volition. Mellie thought both boys were probably in shock. They stood up and Leonard said, "I take it back.." Henry stuck out his hand and they shook.

"Now get cleaned up and get back to your classroom and set a good example for the others," Mr. Franklin said.

The boys came out of the bathroom looking bruised and tired. There was no trouble from either of them the rest of the day. She sent a note home with Henry. "You have a brave son. He fought in a good cause. Please do not punish him." She sent a note home with Leonard that said, "Your son has been in a fight at school. Please talk to him about behaving better towards his classmates."

There was no going into the store and pretending she didn't see the butcher waiting behind his counter. She made her own bread that weekend and bought eggs and milk from the farmer down the road. She decided that in weeks to come she would hitch a ride into Florence with whoever from the school was going. In a year or so, she hoped, she might acquire a car of her own and return the favor. She wrote to her father in Eugene. "Teaching is going well. I have been catching up on my knitting in the evenings and plan to teach the girls to knit in the New Year." Her mother had died years earlier after a long illness. Her father sat and read all day, indifferent to the rest of the world. Some of the books he read were about geology and botany, though he never went out on field trips. "There is a lot of Nature here in Rainrock, animal, vegetable and mineral. I may even take up fishing in the spring," she wrote.

The next morning she listened to the radio while she made breakfast. A singer crooned that she had it bad and that wasn't good, and Mellie agreed, though she liked the tune. The music broke off and she fiddled with the dial to improve the reception, something she was getting better at doing. She heard "Bombs," and then, "Pearl Harbor" but above all she heard the tone in the announcer's voice that told her something terrible had happened. She listened for an hour alone in her house. She thought of calling someone on the telephone, but the other teachers were all married, except Miss Peale, and

talking to her would only make her feel worse. She paced the room and finally put on her coat and walked across the bridge to the store. It would be closed on Sunday, but there might be someone in the barber shop.

The store was open after all. Mr. Swartz and half a dozen others sat on chairs and boxes listening to a big radio he had brought in from the back room. Mrs. Swartz had made coffee. Wallace Hoppe was there, minus his apron and paper hat. Mellie was glad to see that he wasn't joking. Their eyes met, and he nodded but didn't attempt to talk to her, which was only right

"We're in it now. It's up to us," Mr. Swartz said.

"How many ships did they get?" Mr. Reid asked, but no one knew how many ships had been sunk, or how many men killed.

A man Mellie didn't know, though he looked familiar, said, "How do we know it's the truth? Could be just the government trying to scare us."

"To what end?" Curtis Reid asked.

"Raise taxes. Get our money," the man said.

"Ignorance is the last thing we need right now," Mellie said. "We need behave intelligently."

"It's only the truth. The government's after our money," the man said, and she knew who he was—Leonard Peck's father. He looked like an older, tired version of Leonard, dressed in the same fashion of bib overalls and worn boots. He wasn't an old man but he was already missing a couple of teeth. After a few more minutes she left the store for fear of saying something to him she would regret.

She went to school early the next day and located Pearl Harbor on the map so she could show the children how far away it was. Her idea was to reassure them that bombs weren't going to fall on Rainrock. Several students stayed home, kept in by worried parents. Mellie went through the lessons, writing arithmetic problems on the board, drilling the children on the states and capitals. After lunch she had them copy "Invictus" in their poetry notebooks. When she thought of how careless she had been for the last few months she was ashamed of herself. She had to teach the children everything they needed to know to survive in this terrible time, and teach them as soon as possible, without frightening them.

Several Rainrock men enlisted in the Navy, Wallace Hoppe among them. The night before he left he knocked on Mellie's door and when she opened it he stepped in before she could invite him. He handed her a small pine bough with a red ribbon tied around it.

"You never got your Christmas tree. I'm leaving tomorrow. I just stopped to ask if you'll write to me." She studied his face. He looked tense,

as if poised for some action, but not sure what it should be. She felt the same way.

“Yes, I’ll write,” Mellie said.

“It would help to know someone’s thinking of me.”

“I’ll pray for your safety,” she said. Wallace leaned over and kissed her on the cheek, and then he took her in his arms and kissed her on the mouth. She permitted it because it might be the last time he—or she—kissed anyone.

“That time we were supposed to meet. Did you show up? Did you think I would?”

“Yes, I did.” She didn’t add that she had waited in a hailstorm like a dumb hen, afraid to go home for fear of missing him.

“I didn’t think you would. I thought you’d think it was a bad idea.”

“I did think it was a bad idea. I didn’t care.”

He smiled faintly. “Guess you’re braver than I thought. I apologize.”

“Apology accepted,” she said. “Just take good care of yourself.”

She washed her face, kiss and all, before she went to bed. Kissing him had been a kind of patriotic duty, she thought. She wondered how many other patriotic women he had visited before he left town.

It got dark early by mid December, and the lights in the classroom emphasized the blackness outside. One day a week before Christmas Mellie saw her reflection in the window glass and could have sworn it was the middle of the night. The wind was up, driving the rain sideways against the glass. The lights flickered off, and then, as the children oohed, came on again. She told the children to put away their work and get out their crayons. She moved among them smiling, passing out colored paper and paste, and let them make Christmas cards until it was time to go home.

Christmas and New Year’s and Valentine’s Day came and went. She had the children make top hats for Lincoln’s birthday, a project even they thought beneath them, after weeks of drilling in arithmetic and history. The next day she received a letter from Wallace. He was now in Bremerton, Washington. He said he still regretted standing her up that November afternoon. “I consider it the happiest day of my life even though it never happened,” he wrote. She wrote back to him that the day meant a lot to her as well. When a man was in danger of losing his life in war, simple answers seemed best.

Rainrock seemed empty with so many men gone. A few of the women took jobs at the plywood mill in Cushman, and came into the store smelling of sweat, with their hair full of sawdust. They seemed like travelers, women

who had crossed into a country they hadn't even known existed, who returned every night to cook supper for their families.

On the Friday before Washington's birthday she asked the class, "What does Washington's birthday mean to you?"

Leonard Peck raised his hand for the first time all year, and she called on him. "Time to plant peas," he said. Someone giggled.

Mellie said, "Why would we do that, Leonard?"

He blushed. "You plant peas on Washington's birthday so they'll be ready when you want them."

"Then what?" she prompted.

"You pick 'em, shell 'em, and eat the suckers." More giggling. Mellie smiled. "Is that what you're going to do?"

"I guess so. My daddy's not home but I reckon I can do it myself."

"Tell you what," Mellie said. "If you plant peas, I'll plant peas. For all we know, President George Washington planted peas on his farm." She got out the encyclopedia and copied a picture of a pea plant on the blackboard, and from there told them as much as she could remember about Gregor Mendel's experiments. The lesson went well, overall, she thought.

She bought a packet of planting peas on Saturday and worked all day in the patch of soggy ground behind her little house, using a rusty shovel from the lean-to shed. Turning over the soil and planting the peas took hours and blistered her hands, but she felt invigorated and more productive than she had in months. She wrote her father that evening, "Excuse the muddy smears on this letter. I have begun to plant a Victory Garden!"

Leonard Peck was absent on Monday, a disappointment because she wanted to tell him about her garden. Henry Martin and his father had also begun a garden. "We're going to grow all our own food except sugar and coffee, my dad says. We're going to have strawberries this summer." She could imagine the kind of well laid-out, well-cultivated garden the Martins would have. Thinking of her own crooked rows and tufts of untamed grass she felt that she and the Pecks were probably on par with each other in this respect.

She let Marlene Simmons take the attendance sheet to the office, a task she knew the girl coveted. A few minutes later Marlene returned, the attendance sheet still in her hand, followed by the secretary, Judy Remsburg.

Judy beckoned her into the hall. "It's bad news," she said. "Leonard Peck died yesterday."

"He couldn't have. He wasn't sick," Mellie said. She glanced past Judy, as if Leonard might be just now coming in late to school.

“He was killed. The tractor rolled over on him. Elmira saw it. The parents weren’t home at the time.”

“Why would Leonard be driving a tractor?” Mellie asked, but then she knew. “He was planting a Victory Garden.”

Judy handed her a handkerchief and whispered, “They can hear you. Cry later. The children can hear you.”

She went to Leonard’s funeral. It was held at the Evangelical United Brethren Church and was poorly attended. After the service she went up to Mrs. Peck and tried to say how sorry she was, but Mrs. Peck, obviously pregnant, only stared at her as if she didn’t recognize her, and continued to cry. Beside her in the pew, Elmira and three littler girls also cried. They all, mother, father, and children, looked older than they were, as if they’d been born with a twenty-year head start on everyone else. Leonard, it seemed, had been the family’s golden boy. “He was learning to play the fiddle,” Mr. Peck said. From then on when Mellie thought of him, she tried to imagine him sawing out a tune on a fiddle the family had brought with them from Arkansas, rather than seeing him over and over again struggling to keep a broken-down tractor upright on a muddy hillside.

“It isn’t fair. He was only eleven years old, and he was trying to do more than he knew how to do. It isn’t fair,” Mellie wrote, but she didn’t mail the letter to anyone.

She taught the girls how to knit. She folded the other half of the fourth grade into her classroom when that teacher moved away. She didn’t pray. She did not trust in God. Year after year she tried to teach the children everything they would need to know, and in the process she began to learn more herself: how to row a boat, how to catch and clean a fish, how to cut drainage ditches in the field behind her house so the flooding river wouldn’t come up to her door, how to buy a car, how to drive, how to bake a cake with mayonnaise, how to tune in more stations on her radio, how to conduct herself at her father’s funeral, how to conduct herself at the funeral of Mr. Swartz’s son Bobby, who had been captain of the Rainrock football team only a few years earlier, how to speak to Mrs. Swartz in a way that conveyed something of her sympathy. By that time she would have liked to speak to Mrs. Peck again, but they had moved away. Mellie suspected that Elmira would not finish high school, wherever they ended up.

“We finally got them,” Mr. Swartz said. “We dropped the bomb.” He held up the newspaper and she read the story and read it again, trying to make sense of the big black headlines “It’s too good to be true,” she said, but “good” wasn’t the word she wanted. She imagined a Japanese

schoolteacher, trying to get her pupils to learn their multiplication tables one minute and seeing them go up in flames in the next. It was a sickening end to the conflict. She was glad it was over, but she was not glad about the state of the world.

She saw Wallace Hoppe two months later in the post office. She turned away from the counter and saw him just coming in the door. He looked older and thinner. He was wearing green twill pants and a matching work jacket. There was something wrong with his left hand. She forced herself not to stare.

“I just mailed you a letter,” she said. What she wanted to say was, don’t make me feel sorry for you. I am sorried out.

“Thank you,” he said. He put his hand in his pocket. “I came back. Guess you didn’t expect that, huh?”

She saw the postmistress watching them. She said, “Shall we go for a walk?”

He nodded. She took his arm and they walked out into the autumn sunshine. “There’s a lot to talk about, I guess, but we don’t need to say it in a public place.”

She walked across the bridge with him and showed him her path down to the river. It was a cool day, but clear. The little alder had long since washed away, and a spruce had sprouted in its place.

“This is where I sit sometimes and think,” Mellie said. “Or I mean, where I don’t think. I just sit and listen to the river and the birds.”

“Thinking is hard work,” Wallace said. “I never liked it much.”

They sat, each on a rock. After a few minutes Wallace said, “I’m going to start work at Patterson Lumber next week. They’re going to let me try being a lumber grader. I don’t need two hands to write down numbers.” He held up his left hand. The last two fingers were missing and the edge of his hand was red and misshapen.

“It’s the least they can do,” Mellie said. “You’ve served with courage. Was it on the ship, where it happened?”

He shook his head. “I didn’t get wounded in action. If I never tell you anything else, I have to tell you the truth about this.”

He had injured himself working in a hospital kitchen, he said. He was talking to a friend, and working the slicer without paying attention to what he was doing. “I got to talking and my hand got caught. I couldn’t get the machine stopped. My buddy pulled me away but my fingers stayed in.” He gave a grim chuckle. “Nobody wanted second helpings that day.”

Mellie said, “I got your letter but I didn’t know what you were talking

about. I thought you must have lost your mind—from the war, I mean.”

“I can’t even remember what I wrote. They doped me up pretty good.” He picked up a pebble and tossed it into the river. “I just talk too much. I used to get in trouble for it in school, and then in the service. And right now, I guess. Am I talking too much?”

“No,” Mellie said. “Not yet.”

“It’s nice here,” he said. “The river is peaceful.” He began to tell her about some of the things he had done, and things that had happened to him. How bad he’d felt being in the hospital, lying alongside men who had been wounded in the war. “Phony baloney. That’s what I used to call myself. I couldn’t wait to get out of there.” He told her that he planned to learn everything he could about grading lumber. “I’m replacing Tom Cowell. You knew him.”

“I knew of him,” Mellie said. “He was killed.”

Wallace nodded. “I’m replacing a hero. I’ve got to do the work as well or better than he did.” He stood up abruptly, and looked up at the bridge. “What’s that noise?”

“A truck. The sound echoes inside.”

He sat back down. “When I get as good at lumber grading as any man can be, I’ll move on up. I’ll inspect the inspectors. That’ll be a good job.”

Mellie nodded.

“So then would you think about marrying me?”

Mellie almost said, “you?” She said, “Me?”

“You’re the best woman for miles around.”

Mellie picked up an alder leaf and twirled it in her fingers, thinking.

“I know things weren’t easy for you here at home. You had to go without things. I’d try to get you whatever you wanted,” Wallace said.

She thought this was how it would be. She wouldn’t tell him about all the sorrows she had gone through during the war, because he was a hero. He had signed up, not knowing what that meant. Now he jumped at a truck rumbling over the bridge, while she, who had walked across it hundreds of times in all weathers, sat still.

“If you would have me, that is,” he said. “Teacher.”

“I think I could teach you,” she said.

“To do what?” He smiled his ridiculous dimpled smile.

“To be a good father.”

The Siuslaw flowed bright and cold on its way to the Pacific. She cast her words out over the water like a spell, and hoped he would bring them back.