Jesus Called

by Thomas Oliver

She really didn't mind his smoking although she always insisted to friends and strangers that she was allergic. Rather than complain, she cracked the car window and let in the cold wind blowing down from the mountains. It felt good, and for the first time in a while she didn’t worry about catching a cold.

She didn’t mind, either, that her uncle gulped beer from his six-pack of tall Old Milwaukees while steering his 10-year gold Bonneville from Hartsfield International through the foothills outside Atlanta into the North Georgia mountains.

She didn’t even mind he was speeding, going a good 85 miles per hour on the hilly 55 mph highways.

But when he finished his first beer and causally tossed the empty can out the window, she could no longer ride in silence.

“Uncle Pat!” she said.

“What?”

“What you just did.”

“I didn’t do nothing.”

“Throwing that beer can out the window,” she said.

He shrugged both shoulders and then pulled another beer loose and popped the top.

“I don’t want empties in the car,” he said as he took his first sip and then carefully placed the full beer between his legs. “Suppose a cop pulled me over?”

“Well, I wish he would,” she said, and both knew she didn’t mean it.

Uncle didn’t respond. He was too busy lighting a cigarette. Meagan didn’t want to think about how many hands were involved in driving, drinking and smoking. She stared straight ahead at the highway and cars, noticing how much everything had changed.

Atlanta’s persistent population boom was overtaking the state’s northern range of Appalachian hills and small mountains, shearing the slopes of their trees and homesteads, making way for the outlet malls and Jeep dealerships. There seemed to be a McDonald’s, Walmart or Log-Cabin Home builders at every new interchange that bisected the new highway.

“Things have changed here since you been gone,” her uncle said.

“I see.”

“People, too. You probably won’t recognize half your cousins.”

“Probably not.” But Meagan knew for sure she’d recognize Randy and Junior, Aunt Julia’s boys.

The twins were, what, graduating from high school the last time she’d seen those two oversized good ol’ boys.

Meagan wondered what her father would look like. She hadn’t seen him since her mother died six years ago.

Now she was back to bury her sister. Always a funeral. Always an unexpected death. First, her mother. Fifty-six. Heart attack in her sleep. Never had a heart problem and had just gotten a clean bill of health from a checkup. Meagan would always wonder if her mother suspected something. It wasn't like her to volunteer to go to the doctor. She had seen enough doctors due to her other daughter.

Now that daughter was dead.

Meagan could just hear Aunt Julia saying thank goodness your mother didn't live to see this day. "You never want to bury your children. It ain't natural. They're supposed to outlive you."

Too young at thirty-seven to die, Mary Louise's suicide surprised no one. Pretty Mary Louise had suffered from chronic, clinical depression much of her life. Maybe always. She'd been in and out of the hospital more times than Meagan could count.

The two had never been close, even though just over two years separated them. Meagan had been outgoing. Mary Louise, the younger, was always the pouter, the whiner. From being a moody prepubescent girl to a melancholy teenager, Mary Louise was a loner. She didn't want to do anything with anyone, which was fine with almost everyone except her mother, who was always on Meagan about taking Mary Louise with her. But Meagan had friends her own age. Girlfriends and boyfriends. Eventually, Mary Louise never left the house except to go the doctors or the hospital.

But she had been the prettier. Everyone said she would have been the belle of the ball if only she could perk up a little. Meagan was

neither homely nor comely. She was plain Meagan Lindsey Ivey, a name not matched by her pale skin, dull brown eyes that almost matched her dirty brown hair. At least she wasn't fat.

Or a manic-depressive.

The last time Meagan had seen Mary Louise, her sister had been in the Rabun Gap Institute. She'd been too ill to attend her mother's funeral, though she was told her mother had died. Meagan had gone to see her afterwards. Mary Louise barely acknowledged Meagan, though Meagan could tell her sister knew she was in the room. Meagan had tried to reassure her that somebody would always take care of her. Her mother had always cuddled Mary Louise. From time to time it had bothered Meagan, even though her mother had explained it simply as Mary Louise needed her more.

As Meagan had left Mary Louise's hospital room, the younger sister yelled, "Fuck you."

McCaysville is on the Georgia side of the border with Tennessee. Its twin city is the mining town of Copperhill.

Growing up, Meagan belonged to both states and never drew any distinction between the two or the people who lived on one side or the other. Except maybe in high school. But even that didn't matter when the mine shut down.

Everyone had worked at or for the mine until the strike in 1985.

A strike can last too long and this one did. Sometimes it seemed neither side cared to reach an agreement, had long forgotten what the original disagreement had been about.

Her father had worked in management as a technical engineer, though for a brief period he had been a foreman down in the mines. He said going down a hundred feet didn't bother him, until the elevator went back up, leaving them alone. He was quick to point out that it didn't take him long to find a job up above, being a mechanical drawer in the engineering department.

When the union struck, Meagan remembered the family feared their father would have to go back down into the mines, but there were so few management men with any mining experience that the plant simply closed.

When the mine hadn't opened a year after the strike had ended, Meagan's father began installing septic tanks for an outfit in Blue Ridge. When Meagan learned what a septic tank was she became as embarrassed for her father as she would have been if he had become a garbage man riding on the back of the McCaysville garbage truck.

Now, Meagan wanted to run away when she saw her father. He looked far older than his 72 years. His eyes told her it might not be so long before she had to return. He was definitely thinner, almost skinny with thinning white hair and sunken cheeks. He fingers, in a nervous twitch or tic, tapped out a secret code on his thumb.

Sometimes he would have the fingers on both hands tapping away, as if he was typing on the world's smallest keyboard.

When he stood to walk, he used a thick, carved walking stick, which would have served him well on the long hikes he loved to take Meagan on.

They stood on the porch overlooking a worn-out garden patch, where weeds were overtaking the trestles.

"Do you think they're together again?" he asked. She knew what he meant.

"I don't know, Daddy. Maybe."

"I hope so," he said, "cause it looks like I might be joining —"

"Hush, now. Don't be talking silly. You aren't going anywhere."

"I wouldn't mind, really."

"Well, I would."

"Yeah, I guess you do get tired of coming back for funerals, uh?"

"That's not what I meant."

He chuckled. Then, "You don't have to leave, do you?"

"I have a job."

"Yeah, I forgot. You draw. Couldn't you draw here?"

"I design, Daddy. I design what goes inside office buildings, office interiors, and I have to go on site to know what to design."

Now she couldn't stop herself.

"Plus I have to constantly confer with other people. Architects, engineers, painters, furniture suppliers and carpet and

door manufacturers. Etcetera etcetera. Not to mention my team, my bosses. Plus we're always preparing a proposal for our next project."

She was almost out of breath. "It never ends, and I'm never caught up."

"I see," he said.

The truth was she often thought about quitting her dead-end job where she was overworked, underpaid and certainly under appreciated. She fantasized about moving back home, back to its slower pace and picturesque scenery and seasons that actually provided a change in the weather, but never staying the same too long. Unlike Houston's two seasons — hot and two months of not that hot.

It had felt odd even thinking about coming back. Meagan had grown up to hate the mountains. Her friends in Houston, once they got over her being a real hillbilly with all her teeth and no snuff between her cheeks, viewed living in the mountains as an idyllic setting with early morning birds chirping and cows mooing and dogs barking.

That part wasn't so bad. It was the real living, though, which produced the burdens; the chopping and hauling firewood; gathering eggs every morning; washing clothes and then hanging them out to dry. Growing a vegetable garden you depended on. Tending the goats, in sickness and health. Theirs and yours. Fences to be built or repaired every spring and every fall. And there was always something going on with the well.

Meagan liked living in a city, even one as awful as Houston.

Still, her friends mocked her choice of Houston over the Blue Ridge Mountains. Plus, there was Atlanta just down the road. And as they said: “Anywhere down the road from Houston and you’re still in Texas.”

Yet, every time back home, she felt the same sadness. And it was more than just the funerals. It was that mournful moment when the sun drops behind the mountain; the tangled beech with it leafless autumn trunk and limbs twisted in fright. It was the sphere of red maple that made you stop for a moment, no matter how many times you had seen it, because you knew its leaves would soon turn brown and pale yellow before dropping.

The seasons each had their sorrows, whether it was winter’s death or spring’s renewal, each evoking the knowledge that it, too, would fade. That this summer could never be like last summer, or next summer, any more than next fall could replace this year’s walk along the creek.

In the city, the paved streets and sidewalks and towering buildings did not sway or look or feel differently from one season to the next. From one year to the next. There, nothing changed except the people, who sometimes resembled leaves as they floated by; or bees darting in and out of bushes. Lately, the people in the city reminded Meagan of lightning bugs, flickering on and off, like banished spirits signaling for help.

“Well, Lord Almighty, Meagan Lindsey,” Aunt Julia said. “You look like you eat once a week, child. Be careful up here, we got winds and you’re liable to be carried away. Blown clear to Kentucky.”

Aunt Julia wasn’t overly plumb, but if she ever gave up hiking, she’d balloon big as a barn.

“Don’t be surprised if Randy and Junior show up,” their mother said. “They are hard to pass up free cooking, and there isn’t anything like a funeral to being out the casseroles, cakes and pies. Junior is partial to pies.”

Randy and Junior were Aunt Julia’s cross the bear, as she referred to them. They were trouble day one, twins born to a young bride who enjoyed making babies more than rearing them. Randy and Junior ran off their daddy, as she tells the story, which is the only favor they ever did her. From the way she talked about them, one would have accepted them as sullen malcontents who rebelled over their runaway father and a loudmouth, showoff mother.

But Randy and Junior were the two happiest, most content people Meagan had ever known. They were polite, finished high school, worked at the lumber yard and had never been arrested. They fished but didn’t hunt; attended church; were great to their mother and, yes, they liked to eat. They both weighed exactly 260 pounds, which was spread unevenly over their six-foot frames.

“They aren’t fat exactly,” their mother said. “But they would be if I didn’t nag them. And if I didn’t nag them about their weight, well, life wouldn’t be near as much fun.”

Meagan never understood why her aunt hadn't moved to Atlanta where there were better jobs than being a cashier at the Piggly Wiggly.

Aunt Julia always dismissed such questions as unrealistic.

At the funeral home, Mary Louise was laid out in an open casket. She looked just like Meagan remembered: a pug-nosed brunette with creamy skin. There were flowers.

And then there were flowers.

"Lord have mercy," Aunt Julia almost shouted. "You'd think we were thumpers from Hell's Hollow."

She pointed to a wreath of white and red carnations designed to look like a telephone. The gold inscription on the navy blue satin sash read: "Jesus called."

Meagan starting laughing and then caught herself. Then realized she wouldn't be able to contain her laughter that was forcing its way out. She walked quickly, almost at a trot, to the bathroom, which was packed with blue hairs, which made Meagan want to laugh even more. She hurried outside holding both hands over her mouth.

As soon as she was outside, the need to laugh left her, perhaps quelled by the stranger smoking a cigarette.

"Can't smoke anywhere anymore," he said, blowing smoke the color of clouds.

"I guess not," Meagan said.

“That’s okay,” he said. “It gets me outside and I like it out here. Well, not here exactly but you know, outside.”

“Yeah, me, too,” she said. She could hear the organ beginning its windup dirge.

“Well, I guess it’s about to start,” he said, flicking the ashes off the cigarette tip. “I feel sorry for Mr. Ivey,” he said. “First his wife and then his daughter. That’s got to be rough, especially when his other daughter lives in Texas somewhere.”

He dropped the cigarette and stepped on it as he turned and went inside.

It grew dark early in the mountains during the fall, when it always felt like rain and the shadows from the last light mingled with low hanging clouds.

The Macedonia Baptist Church’s graveyard was down the hill from the sanctuary. Headstones of gray granite and white marble dotted the brown grass and fallen leaves.

A dozen relatives and a few strangers, plus the preacher stood around the cherry-stained casket as it hung above the dug-out grave. Next to Mary Louise’s graves was their mother’s. Meagan looked away and noticed the cigarette smoker. He wasn’t smoking now as he looked at her oddly. As she bowed her head, she wondered what his look meant.

After the preacher finished assuring everyone Mary Louise was with her mother and Jesus now, they small crowd dispersed and then

Meagan watched the caretakers lower the casket into the deep red, damp grave, racing the last of the sun and the first of the rain.

Meagan stayed even as the diggers began plopping shovel loads of dirt onto the coffin below. She remembered Mary Louise as a needy child. Her mother had said she was a colic baby. Also allergic to milk. As a toddler she dragged a baby's blue blanket wherever she went. She could stuff so much into her mouth at one time that Meagan often thought she'd chock. Her parents thought it was cute. Everyone called it Mary Louise's "blankee."

Meagan once hid "blankee" in the attic and watched Mary Louise panic, not crying so much as sucking in air as if oxygen could replace the blue blanket.

"I'm sorry," Meagan heard a man say. She nodded her head without looking in the direction of the voice.

"No, I mean I'm sorry for what I said." Meagan turned and saw the cigarette man. "You know, when you came out and I was smoking?"

Meagan nodded but she didn't mean it. It was reflex. She wanted to leave now.

"Thank you," she said. "I guess I need to go. My dad is waiting."

"Sure, sure," he said. "And I'm sure you're a great comfort to him. I didn't mean to imply otherwise." He looked like he was about to take off running. "I didn't know who you were. I meant no offense."

“None taken,” she said as she started up the hill. When she mumbled, “Fuck you,” she wondered if he’d heard her. “No offense,” she giggled to herself.

When Meagan came downstairs in the morning, Aunt Julia was in the kitchen frying bacon and scrambling eggs. Biscuits were rising in the oven.

“Where’s Pop?” she asked.

“He hasn’t come down,” Aunt Julia said as she poured Meagan a cup of coffee. “You don’t take anything, right?”

“No, black’s fine. Is he up?”

“Oh, good heavens, yes. I don’t think he ever went to sleep.”

Meagan wondered what would happen to her father, now. How old was he? Seventy-two? Not old-old, certainly not old enough to be feeble, but some things are bigger than age.

“He’ll snap out of it soon enough,” Aunt Julia said. “Don’t worry your father. Shoot.”

“Maybe I should call work and tell them I’m needed a few more days here. They could make do without me.”

“You don’t need to do that. Really. He’ll be fine. I’m not going to let anything happen to my big brother, now am I?”

After breakfast, Meagan borrowed the keys to her father’s truck and drove down into Blue Ridge. Maybe there, instead of McCaysville/ Copper Hill, she wouldn’t run into anyone who knew her. She could collect her thoughts, browse the shops and grab some coffee.

She saw him as soon as she entered the coffee shop. The cigarette man stood behind the counter watching her as she walked in. He smiled. She nodded but wanted to turn around and leave, and then she couldn't after he said: "Come in. Get some of the house special blend. I just brewed it."

The shop was heavenly. The designer — our friendly barista? — had created several cozy little areas, with an armchair and side table in an area, and a loveseat next to an overflowing bookcase in another spot. The two sitting areas shared a fireplace. There were large landscape photographs framed on what wall space managed to avoid being one more bookcase.

Meagan loved it, though she wished he wasn't part of it.

"Fresh gingerbread? It's my grandmother's recipe."

"Thank you, that would be nice." Soon a tall pottery cup steaming with coffee appeared on the counter along with a small plate with a dark brown piece of gingerbread.

"First one's on the house," he said. "After you're hooked, I gouge you like the rest of the tourists." He laughed. She liked his rubbery grin when he laughed.

"Thanks."

"When are you headed back?" he asked.

"I'm not sure," she answered honestly. She then noticed an older couple had come in and was waiting to order.

“Well, I hope I see you again,” he said, turning his attention to the couple.

She took her coffee and plate over to the fireplace and sat. The picked up the local Observer and settled in to drink her coffee.

The gingerbread was good. Thick and chewy with only a slight ginger taste, nothing like those horrible gingersnaps. Harder than a brownie; flat as a slice of bread. She resisted dunking a piece into her coffee.

The Observer had Mary Louise’s obituary. It was long, as most of the paid ones are in small weekly newspapers or shoppers. But because the family wrote it, probably Aunt Julia, it made no mention of suicide or Mary Louise’s long history of mental illness.

Next thing Meagan knew she was looking at the help-wanted ads. Short-order cooks, maids and plumbers were in demand, but Meagan didn’t see a single professional job, certainly none that required a college education. If she wanted to design the interior of Waffle Houses, she might have a prayer, but other than changing careers — selling log cabins homes — there didn’t seem like a lot to consider.

“Can I help with anything,” the cigarette man asked. He was leaned on the customers’ side of the counter, sucking now on an unlit pipe. Pipes always look better, Meagan thought. The couple had gone, and now she was the only one in the shop.

“No I’m okay, thanks, I was just thinking, that’s all…”

“About moving back?” he smiled.

“Not really, but I was checking the want ads. I’m an interior designer. Offices, mainly.”

“You’re out of luck,” he laughed. She did like his laugh, even when he was laughing at her.

“I was a software designer,” he said. “Moved up here with the fantasy of telecommuting and continuing to write software. I mean if software programmers can’t telecommute, who can, right?” He laughed, and this time she did, too.

“But,” he said. “It didn’t work out, and to tell you the truth, I was glad. I was tired of being the rat in the maze, which is actually a very apt description of a software programmer’s day. So I chunked it and said what the hell. I brew coffee, sell more gingerbread than books, and it smells better. Anyway.”

“So,” Meagan said, “are you doing, okay, I mean….”

“Financially, you mean? Ok, most of the time. Sometimes, barely. But hey, I don’t really care. I like it up here. We have a little place, a view of the mountains and a short walk to the river. And nobody hassles me. Except the bank every now and then,” he added almost as a joke.

“Well, good luck,” Meagan said. “ Love the gingerbread. Thanks again.”

“You could always open another antique shop or rafting outfit,” he said. “It really isn’t very expensive up here, but you know that, or do you? And you would have a place to live, wouldn’t you?”

“I have a place to live now,” she said, suddenly angry. “In Houston,” she said, stepping through the door to the outside. He’s probably gay, anyway, she thought. “No offense,” she giggled to herself.

As she walked down the sidewalk she couldn’t help but notice the numerous antique shops and outfitters. Blue Ridge had remade itself into a cute tourist town square. They said McCaysville itself was overrun with college kids in the summer, all wanting to raft, canoe or kayak the Ocoee. She pictured California beach boys and surfers. She had never done more than float down the river in an inter-tube.

But she remembered how cold the water got, no matter if it was the hottest summer day. And, Lord, did it get hot in the summer. In the fall, winter and spring, you forgot just how hot the summers were — scorchers layered with a thick, sticky humidity. A lot like Houston. But it never got hot enough or long enough here to heat the waters coursing through the springs hidden underneath these mountains.

When her Uncle Pat drove her back to Atlanta, he smoked but didn’t drink. He was probably waiting for the return trip to buy his six pack of tallboys. He barely exceeded the speed limit.

“Everybody sure loved seeing you, Meagan,” he said. “Your dad especially.”

She realized only then that if she didn’t come back sooner rather than later, her next visit might be for another funeral.

“Think you’ll be coming back any time soon.”

“Maybe. I need to catch up at work and then see where I am,” she said.

When he dropped her off at the airport, she watched him drive away. She smiled as she pictured him flying up the interstate with a smoke-filled car and an Old Milwaukee nestled between his legs.

“Don’t let ‘em catch you with empties of the floor,” she said, shaking her head and laughing.