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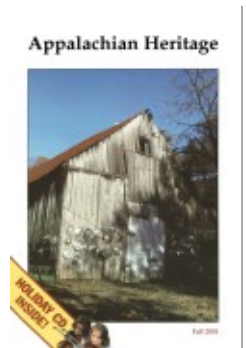
The Sitting Up

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FICTION

The Sitting Up

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CAROLINE MARKED OUT ANOTHER DAY WITH A BRIGHT RED X on the funeral home calendar that she kept under her bed. Granny got her a calendar every year, and every year it had the same picture of the big white building that had blue and yellow colored windows and square green bushes along the stone path. Caroline had never seen square bushes. From the picture on the calendar, it looked like you could use those big flat bushes for a bed that was soft as a feather; or if you spread a tablecloth over them, they would make a fine picnic table.

Caroline used the calendar to count days. She counted all kinds of days—days until Christmas, days until school began or ended, days until spring, days until Easter, days until the family reunion. Right now she was counting days until her tenth birthday on December 4, and there were only four days left until the end of November. The whole month was nearly full of red crayon X's that covered up the planting signs and moon pictures on each day. Granny knew all about the signs. Once during a barren, killing sign, Caroline had helped her bruise the stems of poison ivy that grew in the back yard. Sure enough, after about a week the poison ivy had wilted down and dried up, dead all the way down to the roots. Granny wouldn't plant or pick anything during the killing sign. It just wouldn't live, she said.

Caroline heard Mama in the kitchen, finishing with the supper dishes. The clank of the iron skillet in the dish drainer told her Mama was nearly done and would be checking to see that she was asleep soon. After all, tomorrow was a school day. She put the calendar in her secret box under the bed and rummaged through her dresser drawer for some nightclothes. She pulled out her long flannel nightgown. She hadn't worn it since last winter, but the nights were getting cool now. The flannel was wrinkled and smelled a bit musty from being packed away, but the tiny purple and yellow flowers that peppered the gown still looked fresh and bright. Caroline wished she could wear the gown to school to show everyone. She felt like a princess all dressed in flowers and with a purple ribbon that tied at the neck.

The gown was hard to put on, and when she had finally succeeded, the part of the sleeve that should have been at her wrist was halfway to her elbow. She frowned at herself in the mirror. The ruffled bottom

of the gown was up past her ankles, no longer sweeping the wooden floor as it had last winter.

"Carrie-girl," she muttered, mimicking Mama's voice, "I don't know what I'll do with you, growin' like a weed and leavin' all your clothes too small." She shrugged, climbed into bed and lay listening to the sounds of the day's end.

Caroline heard the sucking sound of the drain as Mama let out the dishwater, then the tap, tap, tap as she emptied the little food catcher that kept the drain from plugging up. The back door creaked open, and she could hear Daddy stomping his feet—smack, smack, smack—against the threshold to get the mud off his shoes. Then there was the dull clatter of freshly split wood being dumped into the wood box by the heat stove. She fell asleep to the murmur of their quiet conversation and the gentle swish of the broom as Mama swept up the bark and wood shavings that Daddy had tracked onto the floor despite all his stomping and kicking.

Caroline awoke on her own the next morning. She wondered why Mama hadn't called her. Usually it was dark when she had to get up in winter, but now the pink sunlight of early morning colored the paintings of frost on her bedroom window. The outer fringes of each curly, fern-like wisp of frost were touched with gold. Caroline knew the sunlight that caused the icy strokes to come alive with color would slowly bring about their end, turning them to droplets of water that reflected little rainbows then faded away.

She shivered as her feet hit the cold floor. She pulled on a pair of socks and ran into the kitchen to stand by the wood stove. Mrs. Pickett, the neighbor woman, was there, still in her nightgown, with a thick blue robe pulled close around her. She was shaking her head and talking to Mama in a hushed tone. Mama's eyes were puffy and red and she held a dishtowel against her cheek. A skillet of uncooked bacon sat untouched on an electric stove eye. The fire in the heat stove hadn't been stoked that morning, and the kitchen was barely warmer than Caroline's bedroom. Because Caroline's family didn't own a telephone, people sometimes called Mrs. Pickett to get Mama during an emergency. Caroline's first thought was that Daddy had been in an accident at the factory or on his way to work, but he appeared at the door with an armload of wood.

"Rake them coals up front for me, girl, and be careful," he mumbled, handing her the long-handled fire poker. She opened the stove door and welcomed the warmth of the scattered, glowing coals. She quickly pulled the hot coals towards the open dampers, careful not to block the air passage, and moved aside so Daddy could lay-in the chunks of dry oak and hickory. The wood crackled and sparked before

catching up in a warming blaze. Caroline stood with her back to the stove and surveyed the kitchen scene.

Mrs. Pickett had walked towards the door, still saying how sorry she was to be the bearer of bad news and that if she could help by cleaning the house or cooking or watching the younguns, not to hesitate to call on her. But now she had to get back home and get Bill's dinner ready for him to take to work. Mama said thank you for going to the trouble of coming out on such a cold morning and letting her know. It was more than any good neighbor ought to be called on to do, she said.

Caroline stood uncertain whether to ask what was happening. She glanced at the clock above the sink. She had fifteen minutes to get to school. Maybe she should go get dressed. Mama would have to write a note saying why she was late. She had pulled back the curtain over her bedroom door when Mama spoke. "Get dressed in your good clothes, Caroline. We got business to do in town. And bring that outgrown nightgown to me after you get your clothes on. It's time to give that to your sister."

"Yes, Mama," Caroline mumbled, trying not to show her disappointment that she was not going to school today. She hadn't missed a day so far this year. She had wanted to get one of those certificates for perfect attendance. Last year the chicken pox had made her miss some days, but she had sworn not to let herself get sick this time. So what could be happening that had made Mama so sad and also meant dressing up to miss a day of school?

She could hear Daddy saying something about there being no reason to take the younguns along to make the arrangements, but Mama answered him in her "ain't gonna take no more of this business" voice, saying that the whole family should be together for such things and that she wasn't going to raise children who didn't understand what happened in the hereafter.

The hereafter. Somebody had gone to heaven, Caroline realized. That's why Mama was so sad. Caroline wondered if Uncle Howard had been trapped in the mines again. Around Thanksgiving last year he had almost died when the roof had caved in. Mama didn't like Uncle Howard or his wife Angela very much, but she had said then, too, that families should be together for such things.

Caroline put on one of her Sunday dresses, a dark green one with white lace around the bottom. Mama always said she liked it. Maybe it would make her feel better.

When Caroline came back into the kitchen, her little sister Kate was eating Cheerios and Mama was frying the bacon. Caroline took a cold

biscuit left over from supper the night before and crumbled it onto the plate Mama had set out for her. She spooned some honey onto the crumbled bread and ate in silence watching Mama's back, hoping for some further sign of what was happening.

Mama finally turned around with the cooked bacon and began putting slices on each plate. "You girls be careful with this meat now. It's hot." She set the skillet back on the stove. "We got to go to the funeral home today. Your Uncle Howard found your granny this morning. She had sent word to him last night that she didn't feel too good. Your uncle Howard found your granny" Her voice trailed off as she repeated herself.

Kate kept spooning Cheerios, more intent on keeping the milk in her bowl than on listening to Mama, but Caroline suddenly felt her stomach clamp tight, and not even the honey and biscuit looked good to her now. The hereafter, Granny, the funeral home. Mama was sad because Granny had gone to the hereafter. Caroline wondered if she should cry now, but she didn't feel like crying. She felt like Granny might still walk in the back door and say not to worry, that Uncle Howard had been on a big drunk again and had gotten the story all wrong.

During the drive to the funeral home, Mama told Caroline and Kate how to behave when they got there. They were not to speak or run or laugh out loud, or even to cry and throw a fit over Granny. She was going to be busy telling the funeral man how Granny wanted her arrangements. Caroline had heard Granny discuss arrangements with Mama often—how she wanted to be buried in a dress the color of her lilacs and how she wanted her sitting up to be at home, not in some funeral parlor, and for her services to be in the church she had gone to all her life, where she had been baptized and met her husband, had been married and had raised her children and had seen them and her grandchildren accept the Lord as their Saviour. And she was to be buried right beside Grandpa, in the plot under the rock marked with a big "C" for Cooper.

When Daddy parked the car at the funeral home, Caroline saw Uncle Howard and Aunt Angela smoking cigarettes outside the stained glass chapel doors. The blue and yellow glass squares sparkled in the winter sun and the white building was hard to look at without squinting, just like in the picture on her calendar. She was disappointed to see the scraggly bushes along the brick path. They didn't look nearly as square or as soft as they had in the calendar picture. Still, Caroline brushed a branch as she passed by, just to see if it held any promise of softness. Its harsh scratch reminded her of the

little hickory switch Granny kept on the fireplace mantle but had only really used once.

The family stood in the cold and talked with Uncle Howard and Aunt Angela in tones so hushed that Caroline could only catch snatches of the conversation. She guessed they were discussing Granny's arrangements. The cold wind blew around her ankles, and she huddled closer to Mama to be out of the wind and to hear better.

Mama and Uncle Howard were arguing about where the sitting-up should be held. He wanted it to be at his house. "After all, I am the oldest son," he stated, "and Mama would want it that way."

Aunt Angela interrupted sharply, "Well, I won't have no dead person in *my* living room! You'll have to do it at your house, Margaret!" Her hands were shaking as she jerked open the stained glass doors and disappeared into the building.

Caroline knew Aunt Angela had given Mama what she wanted, but she hated her aunt during that moment. How could she not want Granny to spend the sitting-up at her house? Granny had done nothing but help her after she had married Uncle Howard, like the time she had needed them to help put up the wood stove because Howard was out on a hunting trip and the weather had turned cold unexpectedly. Or the time when Angela's garden hadn't made anything and Granny had given them thirty-eight quart jars of green beans, plus all those pickles and apple butter. Mama always said that woman never appreciated anything anybody did for her.

The inside of the funeral home was fancier than Caroline had imagined. The air was warm and heavy with the sweet scent of flowers. The hallway was lined with silk covered couches and a table with a Bible lay open to the twenty-third Psalm. Set in a golden frame, an angel smiled down on two little children crossing a bridge in the dark. In another picture, Jesus held a lamb in his lap and stared out across a flock of grazing sheep. One of His hands was raised towards a flying white dove, and He was smiling.

Caroline ran her fingers along the wall. The wallpaper was more like cloth than paper and was covered in silvery green vines, with bunches of grapes among the leaves. A chandelier with pretend candle lightbulbs hung in front of an arched doorway that led into the main chapel. From somewhere out of the ceiling, soft organ music floated. Granny would like this place, but Caroline could understand how she wouldn't feel at home among all the fanciness.

The man who greeted Mama at the door marked *Office* was wearing a black suit with a red tie and shiny black shoes. His voice

sounded soft and sad as he talked to Mama about Granny's arrangements. Daddy hung back in the hallway with Caroline and Kate. Uncle Howard and Aunt Angela had gone back out to their car.

"Daddy," Caroline asked, "did he know Granny? He sure seems sad about her."

"Hush, girl," Daddy whispered, "of course he don't know her. It's his job to look sad. You don't act happy around somebody whose Mama just died."

Caroline bit her lip. She remembered when her teacher's mama had died. She had wanted to act sad, but she really wasn't, so she didn't. It seemed very unfair that someone should be paid to pretend to be sad.

When Mama came out she was crying again and the man was following her, saying he was sorry but it was the best they could do, given the amount of money she had for the funeral. Mama just looked out the doors at the scraggly bushes lining the sidewalk. Well, he finally added, maybe he could talk to the director and work up a deal. Sometimes they could do that. It would help that they were having the viewing at home, instead of using one of the funeral home's rooms, he assured her.

Mama seemed angry when she took Daddy aside. She told Caroline to take Kate to the bathroom. Caroline led her sister into the bathroom and showed her how to work the soap dispenser to wash her hands, then tiptoed back into the hallway. Her parents were whispering just around the corner. Caroline gathered that there wasn't enough money for Granny's arrangements.

"We'll just have to see if they'll let us use some of this year's tobacco money when it comes," Daddy said finally. "Talk to him about that."

Caroline heard the office door ease open and Daddy let out a big tired sigh. She looked around at the smiling cherubs and fluffy white sheep that grazed under Jesus' watchful eye. The pictures blurred as her eyes filled with hot tears and her chest filled with the urge to slam the Bible shut and throw coal dust onto all the clean furniture and carpet. Then she heard Kate crying to be let out of the bathroom. Caroline kicked the door hard before she opened it.

Water was streaming over the blue porcelain sink and onto the carpet. Caroline pushed her sister out the door and reached to turn off the faucet but stopped just short of the handle. If she left the water running, it would eventually rush out the bathroom door and into the sad man's office and wash him into the street and down to the river by Daddy's factory. Then another man who was paid to be sad could tell the first man's family how sorry he was they couldn't get what the drowned man had always wanted for his arrangements.

Someone must have found the flood in the bathroom before the water could wash away the sad man, because that afternoon he knocked on the door at Caroline's house. His big black hearse was parked beside the road, and he was carrying a green wreath covered with white flowers. He had come to find out where Granny should be laid for the sitting-up. Caroline hid behind the kitchen door and listened as Mama tried to rearrange the room to make space for the coffin.

The man was talking to Mama in his soft, kind tones and said he had workers outside who could help arrange the room. There was no need for her to do anything. And he would bring in the flowers that people had sent. Caroline heard Daddy come in from the front porch, where he had been hanging the wreath.

"Margaret," he mumbled, "Mrs. Pickett said you need to come and talk to Angela. She's called over there all upset and crying. She's afraid you're mad at her because she was nervous about having your mama's sitting up at her house."

"I ain't got time to ..." Mama started, then shook her head.

Daddy put his arm around her shoulders. "Now these men know what they're doing. They'll have everything set up by the time you get back, and then you can fix the flowers and such like you want. I'll watch after the younguns." He followed Mama out onto the porch.

Caroline leaned her knees on a sack of potatoes and peeked through the space where the kitchen door was hinged to the doorway. She could just see the part of the living room where the man and his workers were moving furniture and setting up folding chairs. They were done in a matter of minutes and had rolled the coffin in on a steel frame. The man put a white curtain around the bottom of the frame to hide the ugly black wheels and steel bars. He looked at his watch and spoke softly to the other two workers.

"Let's get this done. We've got another one over on Fall Creek tonight, and they've got two truckloads of flowers and stuff from the family alone."

They quickly set three baskets of flowers in front of the casket, then laid a large green spray with white and pink carnations on top. The last thing they did was open the lid.

Caroline crept into the living room. She peered through a crack in the curtains. Daddy was talking to some of the men on the porch. The carnations had started to fill the room with a heavy, sleepy scent that reminded Caroline of the funeral home. She glanced at the picture of Jesus that hung above their fireplace mantel. He looked sad in this picture and was knocking on a door in the middle of the night. Granny

said it was the door to a sinner's heart. He knocks on everybody's door some time, she said, but it was up to the sinner to answer. Granny said when you answered Jesus' knock you would know, because you could feel him in your heart.

Caroline liked her Jesus picture better than the one at the funeral home. Jesus wasn't supposed to look happy when there were sinners in this world who wouldn't open their doors. And Granny always said there were plenty of sinners.

Caroline moved toward the open casket. She gripped its edge, the grey metal cold on her hands.

Granny's eyes were closed. She looked like she was asleep, except that she was wearing makeup. Her cheeks had two pinkish spots and her lips were the same color. Granny never wore makeup, even when she was awake. Her white hair looked too curly, too. Usually she kept it pulled back into a tight knot on the back of her head. It had never looked curly before. Caroline looked quickly around the room. If she could rub off all that makeup and fix Granny's hair, she sure would look better. The way she looked now Jesus wouldn't even recognize her.

In the bathroom, Mama had some cold cream and a soft-bristled hair brush that she used for Kate's hair. Caroline slipped into the bathroom and eased the door shut. The cold cream was on the top shelf of the closet where the bed sheets and towels were folded. She climbed the bottom two shelves and braced her back against the door facing of the closet. Although she couldn't see onto the top shelf, she knew Mama kept the little white jar of cold cream sitting snug against the wall that was closest to the bathtub. She felt her fingers close around the short, fat shape of the jar, grasped it tight and jumped backwards onto the floor.

She drew her breath in fast at the loud thump she made, then waited to see if Daddy had heard her. No sound came from outside the bathroom door, so Caroline ruffled through the bathroom towels to find a soft white one. Pausing for a moment, she laid the towel she had chosen back on the shelf and picked up a roll of toilet paper. It would be best not to make more laundry for Mama to do. She grabbed the little white hair brush from beside the sink and tiptoed back into the living room.

Daddy was still on the porch with the men and Kate was still napping in the bedroom. Mama would be on the phone with Aunt Angela for a long time. Caroline dipped a wad of the toilet paper into the cold cream and took a deep breath.

The cold cream made a white streak across Granny's cheek, and little bits of toilet paper stuck in the cream. Caroline sighed and bit her lip.

She would have to get a towel after all, but first she had to get the toilet paper off Granny's face. She raked her finger through the cream and gasped. Granny's face felt like a cold stone! Caroline backed away from the coffin. Granny was gone. A cold shell lay before her, but everything that made it Granny was gone. It didn't matter that the makeup was wrong or that the hair was too curly. This wasn't Granny anyway.

She looked at the cold cream jar in her hand. Its smooth, hard side felt like Granny's face. That's what this person in front of her was—an empty bottle with all the life used up. But when you use up cold cream you just go buy more. You can't buy more Granny. Caroline felt a tear slip down her cheek, a tear warm like Granny's kiss used to be.

The sound of the front door opening made Caroline jump. Mama stopped in the doorway with a look of surprise on her face. Her eyes moved from the jar of cold cream in Caroline's hand to the wad of toilet paper stuck to Granny's white-streaked face.

"What are you doing, child?!" Mama hoarsely whispered.

Caroline felt her tears coming fast now as she struggled to answer. "I—I just ... " she finally stammered in a rush, "Gr—granny just don't look right. I was tryin' to fix her face. What happens if Jesus don't recognize her?"

Daddy's voice boomed out from behind Mama. "You put that stuff up and get in your room. You ought not be messin' with the dead in such a way."

Caroline felt caught in a dream. The voices seemed far away and her legs wouldn't move. The jar of cold cream felt heavy in her hand, and she grasped it tightly to keep it from falling.

Mama's voice came to her, softly. "It's ok. We'll fix her." She grasped Caroline's hand that held the cold cream. Mama's hand felt warm and strong. "John, you go get me one of them soft towels out of the bathroom. Caroline, you let go of the cold cream now."

Caroline released the jar and looked into Mama's eyes. Under a mist of tears, Mama's eyes were the same grey color that Granny's used to be, and the same color that had been passed on to Caroline. Mama bent to kiss Caroline, her warm breath touching the girl's cheek. She took the towel from Daddy and instructed him, "You take Kate out for a walk when she wakes up." Then she said quietly to her daughter, "Let's make Granny look right."

Together, they carefully wiped away the cold cream and makeup. Caroline still shuddered when her hands touched the icy skin, but Mama's hands seemed strong and sure as they caressed each nook and cranny, removing the thick cream to reveal the natural skin. Then

Mama took some of her own makeup and restored a little color to Granny's cheeks. She handed the hairbrush to Caroline, and the soft bristles gently straightened the too-curly hair and brought it to a soft shine. Every action felt slow to Caroline, but as she brushed the strands of white hair, she felt the strength returning to her arms and her breathing came easier. Mama helped tuck the hair under Granny's head, so that it looked neat and smooth.

As they finished, Mrs. Pickett arrived with a macaroni casserole and a sympathy card in her hand. She put them on the kitchen table and came back to the living room. Peering into the casket, she commented to Mama, "Why, I just can't get over how natural she looks."

Caroline nodded slightly at Mama and went to put away the hair brush and cold cream.

The Old Time Words

I wheeled the pickup down the holler,
past the crick and past the nar'ers,
went to Kee's to spend my dollar,
and dickered for a new wheelbar'r.

I told the clerk, "I seed an angle spar'r
this morning flying crost the fields."
He said, "You saw a what?" his mouth ajar,
and then he sold me a poke a' meal.

In the war the gov'mint sent me
crost the waters, and I done my duty,
shot them Japs and seed them flee,
then rambled home and wed my Lutie.

I went to college on the G.I. Bill
and learned English by the rules,
but when I'm home, I sometimes will
use the old time words and plow the mules.

—Paula Wells