I knew something was wrong as soon as the car's path straightened and its headlights -- it was totally dark by then-- shined on a short, wide sign that was leaning slightly to the right with "Blue Mountain" printed in black letters on the white background.

"Where are we going?" I asked. Just a few miles earlier I had come to suspect that Papa Simms was confused when he turned right just past the large, hand-written sign that read, "McAlpine Christmas Lights" with an arrow pointing straight ahead. I had not spoken up because I knew that Papa Simms almost never took conventional routes anywhere, especially when traveling in the mountains where he knew every back road from the days when he helped build highways for the state. He was probably taking one of his many "shortcuts" for which he was so famous.

"To see the 'Blue Mountain Lights,' like we said yesterday," Papa Simms responded, a note of surprise in his voice that I was even asking the question.

"Noooooo," I butted in, "We're supposed to be going to see the Christmas lights at McAlpine!" I was surprised by own insistence, which bordered upon disrespect.

Emitting a sound that was half laugh and half grunt, Papa Simms replied, "I'm not driving for more than an hour and get in long lines of cars just to see a bunch of colored lights, plastic Santas, and fake baby Jesuses."

I stared at my great grandfather's profile, trying to figure out a way to make him correct the destination of our trip. All I could think of was how on the previous afternoon my Uncle Nathan had said that "Blue Mountain" was by far the meanest mountain he'd ever tried to drive on, and that hundreds, maybe thousands, had driven right off the side, and that at nearly 80 years old, my great grandfather wasn't the best of drivers. To make matters worse, we had a retarded girl bouncing around in the back seat, laughing and squealing like we were riding a roller coaster.

As if to underscore my fears, the headlights illuminated just in front of us a large
brownish green boulder jutting out from the mountain. As we approached the large rock, Papa Simms turned the steering wheel sharply, making my body fall to the left. Loud giggling erupted once again from the back seat.

The light from the dashboard partially illuminated my great grandfather's thin rimmed glasses, the wave of curly, gray hair combed to the right, and his nose, which seemed much larger than I had ever noticed. He stared intently at the road ahead, as he gripped the large steering wheel firmly with both hands. The car engine was beginning to whine as the incline became steep. I felt pressure in my ears.

The confusion had begun on the previous afternoon. As always just before Christmas, I was staying with my great grandparents -- everyone called them "Mama and Pappa Simms" no matter what their actual relation to them. My great Uncle Nathan and his daughter, Carla, her husband, Benny, and their three-month old son, Jonathan, had come for Sunday lunch and we had all crammed ourselves into the small living room when Mama Simms, staring out the front window, remembered that she had made Betty Jo Driggers, her new next door neighbor, promise to drop by to see the new baby, and there she was coming across the yard with her daughter. As Mama Simms rose from the couch to unlock the door, she turned, and directing her attention to me, warned that Betty Jo's girl had been born with something wrong in her head and that she limped and talked kind of funny, and that I shouldn't stare or laugh at her. I should just pretend that there was nothing unusual about her. And thank the good Lord that I was born normal.

Three timid raps on the other side of the door halted Mama Simms' little sermon. Opening the door, she exclaimed, as if surprised, "Look who's here! Betty Jo and Faith. Come on in out of the cold and have a seat. Here, let me take your coats."

As soon as they had given their coats to Mama Simms, Betty Jo moved across the room toward the couch and said, "You must be Carla. Mama Simms said you might bring the baby by this afternoon. We just wanted to come over to see him."
Carla sat the child up on her lap as Betty Jo and Faith moved in front of the baby, ignoring the rest of the people in the room.

"Ain't he a cute baby!" Betty Jo exclaimed. "And look at that red and white outfit. He looks like a tiny Santy Claus!"

Faith didn't answer. Standing there in front of me, she looked normal enough -- after what Mama Simms had said about how weird she was, how could I not stare? -- except that her narrow face and pencil-thin arms and legs made her appear horribly undernourished. She was dressed in a red, corduroy jumper with a white blouse buttoned at the top, which seemed one or two sizes too large. Her hair was thick, straight, and brown and hung down to her shoulders. It seemed to be matted down either with water or some sort of grooming grease. Though it was difficult to guess her age, I guessed that she was eleven or twelve, which would make her two or three years older than me.

The conversations among the adults developed like concurrent tennis games as bits of conversation were lobbed back and forth between the men on one side of the room and among the women on the other side. Occasionally the conversations collided in mid-air.

As Betty Jo, Carla, and Mama Simms talked about various philosophies of decorating Christmas trees, Benny asked Uncle Nathan to tell him about the Blue Mountain lights. Soon Papa Simms' eyelids began to droop and his breath whistled lightly through his lips. Hearing the men refer to "lights," Betty Jo assumed the men were talking about the Christmas Lights at McAlpine that she had heard so much about, and asked the men if they had ever seen them. Evidently not quite as much asleep as he seemed, Papa Simms sat up and said he had seen the lights many times, since he had grown up near Blue Mountain, that they would just appear all of a sudden and then disappear just about as quick, that no-one had ever been able to explain them, and that he had once tried to take Nathan and Mama Simms up to see them, but that they were afraid of "Blue Mountain," to which Uncle Nathan added that Blue Mountain was by far the meanest mountain he'd ever tried to drive on and that hundreds, maybe thousands, of people had
driven off the side. Papa Simms, suddenly animated by his own stories, would have talked another thirty minutes about all of his experiences in the mountains if Mama Simms, recognizing her husband's confusion, hadn't jumped in the conversation to inform Papa Simms that Betty Jo was asking about the McAlpine Christmas Lights, not the Blue Mountain Lights.

Everybody laughed and moved on to different subjects of conversation until Mama Simms exclaimed, "I know what, Joe, tomorrow afternoon you can take little Robbie and Faith up to see the McAlpine Christmas Lights." She turned to ask for Betty Jo's approval, who nodded yes enthusiastically, saying that Faith loved to look at pretty lights and that it would give her a chance to get all her cooking done before the boys arrived early on Christmas day.

Papa Simms agreed, and the next afternoon shortly after four o'clock, my great grandfather pulled his 1961 Ford Fairlane out from the garage and Betty Jo and Faith came across the yard. Faith climbed in the back seat and I sat in the front with Papa Simms who, after settling himself behind the wide steering wheel, turned on the ignition, released the emergency brake, and slowly pulled the car from curb and into the street as Mama Simms and Betty Jo waved "goodbye."

Making several turns, Papa Simms brought us to the familiar sights of Main Street. We drove past the array of department and hardware stores, the bank, five or six churches of different Protestant denominations, the large drug company, a camera shop with a giant camera on the roof, a bookstore, a ski-outfitting company, two supermarkets and a few smaller convenience stores, and several restaurants and gas stations. At the edge of town, Papa Simms slowed the car and made a turn to the right which brought the mountain in front of us.

In a large field to our left, a herd of cattle was grazing. "Horses," Faith suddenly emitted from the back seat. It was the first words I'd heard her speak. Her voice sounded more like a boys than a girl's.

"No, sweetheart," Papa Simms corrected, "those are cows."

"Cows," Faith repeated.
A little further down the road we saw a small house with a Christmas tree with multi-colored lights in its front yard. A man was leading two horses toward a small building that I assumed was a barn.

"Cows," Faith said loudly from the back seat.

I laughed to myself at her confusion.

"No," Papa Simms responded, "those are horses."

"Horses," Faith repeated from the back seat.

We had gone just few miles further when I became aware of Papa Simms' confusion about where we supposed to be going.

"But isn't it dangerous going up this mountain, at night?" I asked.

"Oh, you're just a worry wart like your mama," he said, dismissing my concerns. "I'd much rather drive on this mountain than highway 18 with all those tractor-trailers and tourists that don't know how to drive in the mountains. Besides, a lot of your people lived up here. It's time that you learn about some of them."

Looking in front of us, I was struck by terror again. It appeared that just ahead of us the road came to an end, and that we were about to plunge forward into a vast, dark nothingness. Just as we reached the edge, Papa Simms turned the steering wheel sharply toward me, sending my body against the car door and my face against the cold glass of the window.

Loud laughter came once again from the behind me as I heard Faith pulling herself up from the seat.

"You need to relax, little Robbie," Papa Simms said, "and enjoy the ride, like Faith."

"But she's an idiot!" I protested, to myself.

Papa Simms directed me to open the glove compartment to retrieve some chewing gum, which he said would help release the pressure building in our ears. Following his directions I found a package of Juicy Fruit, which I opened and then handed across the back seat to Faith who took two pieces. After Papa Simms declined my offer of a piece of the gum, I pulled out a
piece for myself, removed the outer yellow cover and then the silver inner wrapper, and placed
the papers in my coat pocket, as I put the fruity stick into my mouth.

"If you look up here to your right, you will see what's left of the house my grandfather --
your great, great, great grandfather -- lived in," Papa Simms said.

To the right, a large space opened up, and for a moment, as he slowed down, the light
spreading to the side of the car illuminated what appeared to be the floor and a chimney of a
house. Thick layers of gray vines covered the floor and wrapped around the chimney like a host
of long, thin fingers growing from the earth. Then, the house vanished in the darkness.

Huge, irregularly shaped, dark boulders bulged from the side of the mountain; it seemed
at any moment they might fall onto the road. A few short trees, their limbs barren of leaves, shot
upward from the mountain side. The road, which was becoming even steeper now, seemed once
again to disappear into nothing. As we approached the edge, Papa Simms turned the wheel
sharply back to the right, sending my body sliding into the door. From the back seat, I heard
Faith laugh again. For a few moments the road seemed to level off and I stared to the left over
the side of the mountain trying to see the lights of Middleton, McAlpine, or some other town or
marking, anything to make me feel connected back to my familiar world. A few small specks of
light flickered in the distance, but I doubted if they were from a town.

"Horse!" Faith exclaimed from the back seat.

"No, sweetheart," Papa Simms said as he slowed the car down, "that's a bear."

Papa Simms' pronouncement made me swing my eyes to the front where I saw the rear
end of a large, brown bear, walking lazily ahead of us about one hundred feet. Apparently
unfazed by our presence, the bear gradually moved off to the right side of the road and
disappeared into the darkness.

"Bear. Bear. Bear." Faith proclaimed, almost singing, from the back seat, as Papa
Simms resumed his normal speed.

Returning the package of gum to the glove compartment, I felt a large, lumpy stone
among the papers that filled the small space.

As I pulled out the stone and tried to examine it in the darkness, Papa Simms announced, "That's a magic rock, Robbie."

"Magic?" I asked, surprised. "What does it do?"

Papa Simms laughed, "I'm not quite sure, except that it was given to me by an Indian woman who told me it was magic."

My mind was diverted from the magic rock by another sharp right turn that again sent me leaning against the window of the car. Again laughter came from the back seat.

"Robbie, when I was a boy, just about your age, I stayed with my grandfather one summer up in that house we just passed, and at that time his mother, very old at the time, had come to live with him. Now, Grandma Simms, it just so happened, was a Simms before she married my great grandfather, Luther Simms, and the story was that a woman whose name didn't change when she was married could cure a baby's illness just by blowin' in its mouth. For some strange reason, it would work only on babies and small children. After a child got to be six or seven, she couldn't help it."

"When I was growin' up I heard all sorts of stories about people bringing in half-dead babies and my grandmother curin' them instantly by just breathin' into their mouths. But I had never seen it until one time when she must have been close to a hundred years old. It was nearly dark, when we heard this soft knock on the front door. There was this short reddish skinned woman with dark hair standing there with a bundle of blankets in her arms. The woman explained she had come all the way from Cherokee to have my grandmother blow in the child's mouth. 'I've taken him to Indian doctors and white doctors and they all say they can't do a thing,' I can still hear the woman saying. By that time my grandmother had had a stroke so she could barely talk. She gave a sort of grunt as if to say, 'Don't get your hopes up.' The Indian woman must have taken the grunt for a "no," because she responded, 'Please, please, try.'"

As I stared at my great grandfather's profile, I noticed that Faith had pressed her eyes and
face to the window. She seemed to be seeing something in the vast darkness to the left

"The woman unwrapped the blankets to reveal a small child. To this day I believe that baby was already dead. It looked stiff and blue all over. I couldn't see it breathing a bit. My grandmother looked rather doubtful as she took the baby from the mother's arms and laid it down on the table. She stood there with her eyes closed for a moment or two, and then leaning over to bring her mouth close to the baby's head, pulled the lifeless child's mouth open, and then breathed three times, 'Haugh. Hauggghhhh. Hauggggghhhhh.' We all stared at the baby. Nothing happened. My grandmother repeated her actions. Again, nothing happened. Tears began to stream down the mother's cheeks and drip onto the floor around her as she started sobbing. My grandmother just turned away, lookin' kinda disgusted. And then -- I was the first to notice -- the baby's left arm twitched. After another second or two the baby's arms and legs began to move. 'It's movin!' I shouted out. And as everybody stared at the baby, it opened its eyes looked around, and started screamin' as loud as a newborn. The mother's sobs turned to shrieks of joy as she gathered the baby into her arms and hugged it tightly. Through her sobs, she kept repeating 'Thank you. Thank you.'"

Glancing forward, I noticed again that the car was headed for the edge of the mountain. Papa Simms turned the steering wheel sharply toward me. My upper body moved only slightly toward the window. I was getting used to it all.

"As the Indian woman was leaving, she reached into her pocket, and pulled out a small stone. 'I don't have anything to pay you,' the woman. 'But take this rock. It's supposed to be magic.'"

"Again my grandmother grunted and turned away. 'Here,' the woman held the small rock out to me. 'You take it if the old lady won't.' The woman showed me how if you held the rock up in the light of the fire, you could see little specks of silver sparkling in it, but I've never figured out how it was magic."

"I tell you what, Robbie," he said, "you keep it."
For several minutes I tried to see the silver specks but it was too dark in the car. Absorbed in Papa Simms' stories, I hadn't noticed that we had come to the top of the mountain. He pulled the car to the side of the road and brought it to a stop.

"We're at the top now," Papa Simms announced. "If it's not too foggy, we can see the Blue Mountain lights perfect from here. Even if we don't see the Blue Mountain lights, it will be best view of the stars that you'll ever have."

As I opened the door, Papa Simms grabbed my arm. "No, Robbie, you get out from this side. You're too near the edge over there."

I slid across the front seat as Papa Simms opened Faith's door and helped her out of the car.

"Pull your coats tight," Papa Simms instructed. "It's cold out here."

As we stood there beside the car, my great grandfather walked to the back of the car, opened the trunk, pulled out some large blankets, and handed one to each of us. "Wrap these around you."

When Papa Simms shut off the headlights of the car, I felt surrounded by darkness. But, as my eyes began to adjust, the surroundings began to take shape beneath the light of the moon and stars. The road ahead stretched out far into the distance where it turned to left and slightly downward and disappeared. In front of us was a short ridge of stone which stood in front of what appeared to be a vast expanse of nothingness. As I grew more accustomed to the darkness, more and more stars began to pop out from the black sky.

The moon, a bright ball of whiteness with dark ridges running across it, hung in the sky in front of us. I had never seen it so large.

Faith was the first to break the silence.


"Yeah, it does look sort of like a big pie, dudn't it," my great grandfather laughed. "If you look over to the right, down toward the foot of that big mountain over there, you may see the
I stared in the direction where Papa Simms pointed, but didn't see a thing but darkness.

"My grandfather used to bring me up here a lot when I was young. Of course, in those days, there weren't no road yet. We had to come up on a horse and buggy.

"Sometimes while we were waiting for the Blue Mountain lights," Papa Simms explained, "my grandfather would point out all of the consolations."

"Constellations." I corrected him in my mind.

"Look up there," he said pointing upward, "you can see the big dipper real good."

Following his fingers upward, Faith exclaimed, "Dip Her."

I kept staring in the direction of the Blue Mountain lights.

"Look over there," Papa Simms said, moving his forefinger like he was writing in the sky, "There's the big dog."

Faith and I both followed his fingers. I couldn't see anything but a lot of stars.

"Dog!" Faith proclaimed, excitedly.

Could she really see the image of a dog?

I turned back to watch for the Blue Mountain lights.

"And look over there," Papa Simms said, again tracing figures against the sky. "There's Orion the warrior. Those three stars make his belt."

"Belt!" Faith announced loudly.

I looked in the direction Papa Simms and Faith were pointing, but saw nothing but specks of light. I turned my gaze back toward the dark mountain.

"Lion," Faith exclaimed. Imitating Papa Simms, she traced a figure as she pointed to the stars.

"Yeah, I see him," Papa Simms said. I wondered if he was telling the truth or just humoring this idiot girl.

Turning to point to another direction, Faith was tracing another figure. "Cat!" she
proclaimed.

"Uh-huh." I knew Papa Simms must be lying. There was no way any normal person could see a cat in that collection of flickering lights.

More and more stars came into view as my eyes grew more accustomed to the night. I'd never seen so many before.

Faith must have had the same sensation as I because she continued to see other images in the sky. "Sheep," she announced quickly as she pointed to the left. This was followed by "Duck!" as she pointed in another direction. Moving her finger against the sky and spouting out names, Faith was as excited as Helen Keller drawing water at the well with Annie Sullivan.

I suddenly felt excluded as my great grandfather shared her excitement, responding to each exclamation with a "Oh, yeah," or "You're right, I'd never seen that before." If he was lying, he was sure doing a good job of it.

For the life of me, I couldn't see any of the figures Faith was pointing out.

Faith's burst of excitement was followed by silence as they continued to gaze at the stars and the moon, and I in the direction of the Blue Mountain lights. The silence was broken in several seconds as from far below on the road, we heard the faint whine of a car engine climbing the mountain. I was suddenly struck by the recognition that we had seen no other cars on the mountain.

Papa Simms pulled out his pocket watch and held it horizontally so the light of the moon illumined the face.

"Oh, my lord," he exclaimed, "It's after eight. I bet your grandmama has called the police."

The black and white patrol car had no sooner come to a stop when Mama Simms jumped out from the passenger's side speaking loudly and angrily.

"Joe-seph Simms, how could you do this!" Mama Simms face was alternately red and black as the spinning red light, which remained on even after the engine was shut off,
illuminated her face. "At your age, driving these children up on this mountain. We've been worried sick!"

I followed my great grandfather as he walked toward the police car that had stopped about twenty feet behind Papa Simms' car.

A huge man dressed in a white shirt, dark pants, and a tall cowboy hat emerged from the driver's side of the patrol car. It was Sheriff Burns, whose family had known mine for years.

"Hi Ken," Papa Simms said, trying to ignore my great grandmother's anger.

"When ya'll weren't back by seven, I knew something was wrong," Mama Simms explained, her anger subsiding, "and the thought struck me, 'Surely, he wouldn't take those kids up on Blue Mountain.' But, something told me, I'd better call the police. Ken was nice enough to tell me he would drive me up here. I lied to Faith's mama. I called and told her everything was fine, that you were just running a little late."

"Oh, there's no need to get so excited," he responded to Mama Simms. "Anyway, we were just about ready to...

Papa Simms was interrupted by the sound of Faith shouting from behind us. I could see Papa Simms' face flash fear as he had recognized that she had not followed us away from the edge of the mountain.

"Lights, lights, lights," she shouted, pointing in the direction I had been staring so long.

"Did you see the Blue Mountain lights?" he asked, coming near enough to wrap his arms around her in a tight hug to prevent her from walking off the side of the mountain.

Leading her back on the safe side of the car and opening the door, Papa Simms announced to the rest of us who had followed him back to our original spot, "I believe Faith saw the Blue Mountain Lights."

She nodded her head, excitedly, in agreement.

Papa Simms opened the driver's side front door of the car for Mama Simms to get in.
"Thank you, Ken," she said as she climbed in the car and slid across the front seat.
"No problem," the sheriff replied.

Papa Simms opened the back door and directed Faith to climb in, and as he waited for me to follow, I was struck by an idea.

"Can I ride down the mountain in the police car?" I asked.

"Sure," the sheriff shrugged.

After the sheriff and I walked back to the police car, Papa Simms started his car and carefully turned it around and drove slowly by the police car. Sheriff Burns motioned me to get in the front seat. He started the car, turned it around, and followed closely behind Papa Simms. He flipped a switch on the dash and the red light stopped flashing.

"Could we keep it on," I asked.

Without saying a word, he flipped the switch again and the red lights resumed their flashing.

From the light of the red light flashing on top of the car, I could see Faith's head bobbing up and down as she slid across the back seat and fell over with the sharp turns of the car. Each time, the sound of her loud laughter came to mind.

I saw Faith only twice after that Christmas Eve. The first was just after Papa Simms' funeral the next summer after our ride to see the Blue Mountain lights. There was a crowd of family and friends in the kitchen serving their plates from the table that was overflowing -- thanks to the generosity of the neighbors and church friends -- with meat loaf, pot roast, fried chicken, pork chops, macaroni and cheese, green beans, green peas, lima beans baked apples, potatoes of numerous varieties, gravy, and much much more. I was standing by the dessert table, filling my plate with chocolate cake, brownies, fudge, and cookies, when I noticed Faith standing in a corner behind her mother, who was talking to another woman, whom I did not know. Faith was dressed in a green and white dress with flowers on it. Her hair was cut short and she seemed to have grown an inch or two taller in time since I had last seen her. Bits of Betty Jo's
conversation floated to me above the loud buzz of voices throughout the room.

"She became very close to him before he died," Betty Jo was explaining to the woman. "After he came home from the hospital, she would go and sit by his bed for hours at a time. He seemed to appreciate it. When he woke up and saw her sitting there, he seemed to try to smile, but with the stroke, he had trouble moving his mouth."

I bit into a piece of fudge and the taste of chocolate and peanut butter exploded in my mouth.

"When he woke up, he would look around for her if she wasn't there." Betty Jo leaned forward slightly and lowered her voice as if to keep Faith from hearing her next words. "I'm not real sure if she knows what has happened. She has seemed calm throughout the whole thing."

The next time I saw Faith was the following Christmas Eve, exactly one year after our journey with Papa Simms. Betty Jo was making plans for their move to Oregon where Faith would enter a special school for people with problems like hers. Mama Simms persuaded Nathan to drive Betty Jo, Faith, me and her over to McAlpine to see the Christmas lights. Faith seemed eager to leave as we all climbed into the car. Sitting in the back seat between Mama Simms and Betty Jo, she alternately leaned over one and then the other to peer out the window. When we drove by the road that led to Blue Mountain, she started making gestures and pointing.

"No need to worry," Mama Simms said, "we're not going up on that scary mountain ride tonight."

Faith sat back in her seat in disappointment as we finally arrived in McAlpine and drove through the narrow streets filled with blinking lights of all colors, plastic Santa Clauses, and fake Jesuses. A chorus of "Ahs," and "Oohs," and "Look at that!" came from Betty Jo, Mama Simms, and even Nathan, who had made the trip only reluctantly. Once Nathan, watching a Santa Claus twirling around on the top of an enormous, lighted candy cane, exclaimed, "I've never seen anything like that before!"

Both Faith and I remained silent.
When we arrived back home, and we all piled out of the car, Mama Simms asked, "Well, Faith how did you like the Christmas lights?" She really didn't expect an answer. "They were really something weren't they?"

Faith moved her head forward in a half-nod. At that moment her eyes met mine, and I knew exactly what she wanted to say.

"Faith thinks the lights were nice, but not nearly as incredible as the lights we saw at the top of Blue Mountain."

Faith smiled.

I'll never fully understand what I did next. As we said our goodbyes, and started to disperse toward our houses, I called out to Faith. Walking toward her, I reached in my pocket and pulled out the small stone that Papa Simms had given me just a year earlier, and held it out toward her.

For a moment she seemed puzzled.

"I want you to have it," I said offering the stone to her.

"Thank you," she said in gruff voice, evidently recognizing it as the stone Papa Simms had told us about in his story.

And for just a moment, as I passed the small gift into her hands and the black stone caught the light of the moon, the specks of silver sparkled against the dark surface and it seemed like I was looking into a sky filled with millions of stars.