**Back to the Land**

Lawrence Watt-Evans

The house stood alone on the side of the hill, shaded by great oaks, a thousand feet back from the road at the end of a long driveway that had once been graveled, but was now just mud. The roof and the porch sagged, like swaybacked horses; the shutters, most of them still functional, were closed and latched across every visible window but two, one upstairs and one down, that Matthew placed as the front bedroom and the parlor.

Here and there clapboards hung by one end, or had fallen away completely, and no paint remained anywhere, only the bare gray wood.

The yard was mostly weeds and kudzu now where the lawn had once been; the forsythia, untrimmed, had grown into great twiggy arches on either side of the porch.

Matthew stared at the place through the autumn drizzle that misted the windshield, and wondered how his mother could stand living there.

Of course, she had never lived anywhere else; perhaps she didn’t realize how badly off she was. She had been born in that house, in the front bedroom where she now slept, and where she intended to die. She had borne her children in that same room, in the same bed where she now lay; she had refused to tell her husband when she went into labor, lest he insist on taking her to the hospital in town. Even her wedding had taken place in that house, downstairs in the parlor, the room behind one of those still-unshuttered windows, because she had insisted upon it. Her husband, his father, had wanted a church wedding, where he could show off his bride, but she had refused. She had made a home wedding a condition of their engagement.

Matthew had grown up in that house, with his sisters, but he had had no compunction about leaving it. He had loved it, but not the way his mother had, and he had left it, as she would not, so long as she still lived. He’d been delighted to move away, first to college, and then to his job in Atlanta.

This was the first time he had been back in almost five years, and he was horrified at how much the place had deteriorated.

It had needed paint the last time he saw it, and the roof had been sagging, but he didn’t remember it being anywhere near as bad as this. Could five years make such a difference in a house that had stood for over a century?

Behind the house he pulled his Dodge onto the sparse grass beside Mary’s aging Toyota; beyond it sat Becky’s Chevy pick-up. Mother’s ancient black Ford occupied the end of the driveway by the shed, where the barn had once stood.

They were all here, then, all of them together for the first time since his father’s funeral.

He sat for a moment, hoping the rain would stop completely, but it continued to fall; he opened the door and climbed out.

The rain was so thin that it wasn’t worth hurrying; if he did he might slip in the mud and fall, so he just walked briskly across the driveway to the kitchen door. As he did he noticed there was a third unshuttered window back here, the one over the sink. It hadn’t been visible from the drive.

He opened the screen door and knocked, then stood, avoiding the familiar drip from the low spot on the eaves, and waited.

When nobody responded, he knocked again.

This time he heard footsteps, and when they had marched across the bare wood of the kitchen floor he heard the knob rattle. The door swung open and he stepped in.

It was Becky who had admitted him.

“Hello, Matthew,” she said, stepping back to make room for him, “Come on into the parlor, we’ve got a fire in the stove.”

“Thanks, Becky.” He stamped his feet to loosen the mud, then wiped them on the threadbare mat before following his sister.

Mary was there waiting in the shadowy dimness, perched on the faded velvet of the antique settee, leaning toward the heat of the Franklin stove.

She couldn’t be cold, though, Matthew thought; the room was stifling hot, the air thick with the moisture that seeped in through every crack.

He wondered if the roof was actually leaking anywhere yet.

“How is she?” he asked.

“Dying,” Mary snapped. “What did you think?”

Matthew glared at her. “I mean, how bad is she?” he said. “I know she’s dying, but how is she right now? Conscious? Will it be hours, days, weeks?”

“I’m no doctor,” Mary said angrily, sitting up straight.

“She drifts in and out,” Becky said, still standing. “She’ll be conscious one minute, asleep the next. The doctor said it could be any time, but he’d be surprised if she lasted another week.”

Matthew nodded. A lump had formed in his throat.

“Would you like to see her?” Becky asked.

Matthew nodded again. “Yeah,” he said.

Becky led him upstairs, to where the frail old woman lay in her bed beneath a mound of lace-trimmed quilts and comforters, wrapped up despite the heat.

Matthew shuddered at the thought that the cold they were trying to keep out wasn’t any ordinary chill; it was the chill of the grave.

He stepped up close to the bedside, while Becky hung back.

The face on the pillow was pale, not a normal pallor, but as if all the colors had faded away, as if the face were an overexposed image, a bleached-out copy and not really his mother at all. The skin was drawn tight across the bone, and her breath rattled in and out unevenly.

“Mamma?” Matthew said.

The half-closed eyes opened and stared, unfocused, at the ceiling. Matthew leaned over the bed.

“It’s me, Matthew,” he said.

The dry lips worked, regaining a trace of color as she moistened them with her tongue.

“Mattie,” she said, her eyes almost focusing now.

“Is there anything we can do for you?” he asked. “Anything at all?”

“’m fine,” she said.

“Would you like to go to the hospital in town, Mamma? I’m sure they could make you comfortable there...”

“No.” She took a deep, rattling breath, then said, “No hospital. Born here, lived my whole life in this house, by God I’ll die here and be buried in my own land!”

“No, Mother, the county won’t allow that, but we’ll bury you in the cemetery in town next to Dad...”

“No!” She lifted her head, eyes wide and staring. “You bury me here! This land’s been my life, given me everything, and I’m going to stay right here!”

“But...”

Becky came up behind him and put a hand on his shoulder. “Don’t worry, Mamma,” she said, “whatever you want. Matthew’s just got here, he don’t know what we got planned.”

Their mother’s breath came out in a rush, and she dropped back onto the pillow. “Good,” she rasped.

Matthew stood staring at her for a moment, groping for words, but then he felt Becky tugging at his arm. He turned and let her lead him out of the room and back down the stairs to the front hall, beside the locked, never-used front door with its two panels of frosted and etched glass.

“Don’t argue with her,” Becky whispered.

“But we can’t bury her here...” Matthew began.

Becky shook her head. “I didn’t say we would — but why tell her that? Let her die thinking she’ll stay here; let her be happy about it.”

Matthew frowned, unhappy at the idea of lying to his mother, but then he glanced up the stairs and remembered how pitiful she was, how weak. He felt tears starting.

Becky was right.

“Okay,” he said. “I won’t argue with her.”

“Good.”

“Can I go up and look at her again?”

“If you want. Sit with her as long as you like; just don’t upset her. I thought you could sleep in your old room at the back; you just go tuck yourself in there when you’re ready.”

Matthew nodded, and climbed slowly back up the stairs, afraid that by the time he got back to his mother’s bedside it would be too late, that she would already be dead and his last words to her would have been an argument.

When he entered the room she was so still that he stopped, certain his fears had been realized — but then her eyes opened. She turned her head and looked at him.

“The land won’t let you take me away,” she said clearly.

“All right, Mamma,” he said.

She closed her eyes again.

He fetched a chair and sat at the bedside; after awhile she raised a bony hand from beneath the coverings, and he took it in his own hand. Neither of them spoke.

They didn’t need to talk. He was tired from the long drive, and she was tired from her long illness, and they didn’t need to talk.

They sat there as the last light faded from the sky outside. A small bedside lamp was on, but the room was dim, the corners lost in shadows. The only sound was his mother’s uneven, rasping breath.

He sat silently, thinking and remembering, hoping that she wasn’t in pain, wishing that she could be healed, could be young and strong again. He remembered her as the absolute authority when he was a little boy, the loving figure whose word was law; he remembered her moving about her kitchen with deliberate efficiency, never hurrying but somehow always having the family dinner ready sooner than expected. He remembered her lack of interest in his schooling — until he became interested in learning, whereupon she devoted herself to seeing that he studied, that he got into college.

He thought of other mothers he had known, none of them like her.

He thought of the women he had dated, tried to imagine them raising children, and for the most part failed.

And he remembered his mother tending the land — weeding the garden, pruning the fruit trees, directing the men who bushhogged the back ten, working in the cornfields. That was the one thing that could take her away from her children, the one thing she did only for herself.

The surest sign of how sick she had been, he thought, was how overgrown the lawn had become.

And then he woke up, suddenly aware that he had dozed off and that something had startled him awake. He blinked and sat up.

Nothing seemed wrong. No one else was in the room; his mother was still lying peacefully in the bed, and he was still holding her hand. The sky outside the window was as black and empty as if nothing beyond the house existed at all. Everything was still.

Too still. She wasn’t breathing.

And, he realized, her hand was already cold.

He pulled his fingers away and felt her cheek and forehead.

He couldn’t define exactly how he knew so certainly, exactly what the difference was, but she was unmistakably dead. Whatever had made her his mother, a person, and not just an object, was gone.

“Becky?” he called. He got to his feet, stiff from sleeping sitting up, and realized he had no idea how long he had been there, or what time it was. He glanced at his watch.

3:34 a.m.

He debated with himself as to whether he should wake his sisters. They would want to know that their mother was gone, but in the middle of the night like this? Couldn’t the news wait until morning?

He hadn’t been here when their father died — that had been a much quicker thing, and he hadn’t made it home in time. Was there anything that had to be done right away, anyone who had to be notified?

He couldn’t think who or what might matter at this hour.

The best thing to do, he thought, was to go get some rest. Nothing he did would matter to his mother any more; she didn’t need anything now.

Becky had said to use the bed in his old room. His suitcase, with his pajamas and clean clothes, was in the trunk of his car — it wasn’t worth fetching it at this point, he could do that in the morning.

He leaned over and kissed his mother’s cool, dead cheek.

“Goodbye, Mamma,” he said.

He straightened up and looked down at her.

He might never see her again; in the morning there would probably be people from the funeral home, maybe some doctor to make it official, and then they’d take her away, and he’d never see her again.

Something creaked, somewhere downstairs.

He glanced at the door, startled. “Becky?” he called.

No answer.

It must have just been the house settling, he thought. There had been creaks sometimes when he was a boy. His concrete and steel apartment in the city didn’t creak, but this place was tired old wood. Of course it made sounds sometimes; he’d forgotten, that was all.

Wood creaked again, a long, drawn-out sound, and Matthew looked about uneasily. Surely, the house hadn’t made noises like that when he was a boy?

Was there someone downstairs?

Moving as quietly as he could, he crossed to the bedroom door and peered out into the hall.

It was dark, the only light coming from behind him; he could faintly see the floral pattern in the wallpaper as black splotches on dark grey, and he found himself thinking it looked unhealthy, like bloodstains or mold, as if the house, too, was sick or dying.

Something rumbled. Thunder?

But he heard no wind or rain, and the sound had seemed to come from below him somewhere.

This was all too much for him — waking up in the middle of the night to find his mother dead, and the house making strange noises. He didn’t want to deal with it.

But he couldn’t just go to bed. And he couldn’t bring himself to wake up Mary or Becky — what if the noises were just his imagination, just the normal settling sounds, maybe distant heat lightning, magnified by the late-night silence?

He would go downstairs, he told himself, and sit for awhile. Maybe he could figure out where the sounds were coming from.

The stairs were dark; the light switch was down the far end of the passage, at the head of the stairs. He shuffled forward into the darkness, moving slowly in case there were some old toy or forgotten shoe lying in his path; he didn’t want to trip.

Wood groaned, the low, painful sound of heavy timbers under massive pressure, and he stopped dead in his tracks.

“Becky?” he said again, quietly. He stood still and listened intently.

He heard a faint susurration, a shifting, sliding, brushing sound, like wind-tossed leaves scraping the clapboards. Wood creaked again

The house almost sounded as it might during a storm — but there was no storm. He heard no wind in the eaves, no rain on the roof — only the house.

This was ridiculous, he told himself. He forced himself to march briskly forward into the gloom, and groped for the light switch.

He found it, and warm yellow light burst from the blackened brass bowl above the stairs. The dark stains on the walls were transformed to faded red flowers and dull green leaves, and the steps appeared at his feet, solid wood beneath worn green carpet.

A drink, he thought. He needed a drink. His mother had just died; didn’t he need a drink?

He marched down the stairs and through the darkened parlor — his mother had always kept the liquor in the cupboard above the silver.

He was on the kitchen threshold when the loudest, longest sound yet came, one that combined a deep rumble with the groaning of wood and a series of sharp snapping sounds; the floor shifted under his feet, and he caught himself against the doorframe.

Earthquake!

It had to be that. He had never felt a real earthquake, but what else could it be? The floor had moved beneath him!

An earthquake here, in the Kentucky hills?

There’d been the Maysville quake back in the ’80s, when he was away at college, and there was that big one back in the early nineteenth century, but now?

Well, why not? At least that would make sure everyone around here remembered the night Esther Kittridge died.

“Matthew?” someone called.

“Down here,” he replied. He decided his drink could wait; the quake must have wakened Becky, and she’d want to know what was going on. He headed back through the parlor.

The floor jerked, and he almost lost his balance again.

Aftershock?

Except it seemed to continue; after the initial jerk there was a steady vibration, and he could hear a dull grinding noise from beneath the floor.

He met both his sisters at the foot of the stairs.

“What’s happening?” Becky asked.

“What about Mother?” Mary demanded.

“Mamma’s gone — I don’t know exactly when, I’d fallen asleep, but... well, she’s gone.” He glanced up at the door of the front bedroom.

Mary tightened her lips, and Matthew thought he saw the gleam of tears in her eyes, but she said nothing.

“What’s that noise?” Becky asked.

“I don’t know,” Matthew replied. “I thought maybe it was an earthquake.”

Becky’s eyes widened. “Shouldn’t we get outside, then?”

Wood creaked and popped somewhere.

“You’re right,” Matthew said, turning to look at the front door.

“But what about Mother?” Mary said, an edge of hysteria in her voice. “We can’t leave her in here alone!”

Matthew turned and stared at his sister.

“Mary,” he said gently, “Mother is dead.”

“I’m not leaving her.”

Matthew glanced helplessly at Becky, who shrugged.

Then the floor shifted under them all, and Matthew barely caught himself against the wall. Becky grabbed the newel post, and Mary the bannister.

Wood groaned, something cracked, and plaster dust sifted down from somewhere above.

“Come on,” Matthew said. He lurched over to the front door and grabbed at the knob.

It wouldn’t turn.

He found the bolt and slid it open, looked for another lock and found none, but still the knob would not turn. He looked the door up and down, but could see no obstruction. He heard a faint scratching, but could not see how that might have anything to do with the door’s reluctance.

“It won’t open,” he said. “It must be rusted solid from disuse.”

“Then we’ll go out the back,” Becky said. “That’s where the cars are, anyway.”

Matthew nodded, and he and Becky hurried through the parlor and into the kitchen. Becky flipped on the light; Matthew grabbed the doorknob, turned it, and pulled.

The door didn’t move.

Startled, Matthew looked at it, and saw that the frame had twisted and broken from the house’s movements, wedging the door solidly in place. “Damn,” he said. He turned to the window over the sink.

There he stopped, staring in astonishment.

Becky came up beside him and stared as well.

The light from the kitchen was not spilling out through the glass to be lost in the darkness of the yard; instead it shone on rich black earth, packed against the windowpane, and sliding slowly upward.

“Is that mud?” Matthew asked. “How can it move up like that?”

“It’s not mud,” Becky said. “It’s earth. And it isn’t moving up. We’re sinking.”

“What?”

She didn’t bother to answer; she didn’t have to. He could see it for himself. He could feel it, as well, now that she had pointed it out.

The house was sinking, slipping down into the earth.

“The earthquake did that?”

“If it was an earthquake,” Mary said from behind them, startling them both. Matthew whirled to face her.

“What else could it be?” he demanded.

“It could just be the house sinking,” Mary said. “Maybe nothing else shook; maybe it’s just the house. I saw it in the parlor window, the same as you see it here — it’s sinking.”

“It must have been built on a fault or something,” Matthew said.

“Or maybe it’s the land, claiming us all,” Mary said. “Maybe it’s the land making sure we don’t take Mother away. She spent her whole life here, and it wants her to stay.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Becky said. “You make it sound like the land’s alive, Mary.”

“Mother thought it was.”

“It’s the earthquake,” Matthew insisted. “That’s all.”

“Whatever it is,” Becky said, “shouldn’t we get outside?”

Matthew looked at the window; the soil now covered its full height, and was still moving upward. “How?” he asked, his voice unsteady. “Dig?”

“Upstairs,” Becky said, pointing.

Matthew felt suddenly stupid for having missed the obvious. “Come on,” he said, trying to cover his idiocy.

Together, walking quickly, the three siblings made their way back through the parlor and up the stairs. Around them the house continued to creak and groan, the earth outside to scrape and hiss against the clapboards. At the top of the stairs Matthew hesitated.

“The shutters are closed everywhere but Mamma’s room,” Becky reminded him.

“Right,” Matthew agreed. He led the way down the passage to the front bedroom.

As they approached, though, he slowed with every step. His mother was still in there, he realized, and irrational childhood terrors stirred in the back of his mind. A dark house at night, a dead body...

What was waiting in the room at the end of the passage? He looked through the open door and saw the great rearing shadows thrown by the little bedside lamp, black smears of darkness across the warm golden light.

Would there be flies crawling on their mother’s face? He wasn’t sure he could take that. Would she have begun to decay, to turn from his mother into something bloated and dark and horrible?

But she hadn’t moved, hadn’t changed; at first glance she might still have been asleep. Had her mouth fallen open a little further? Had her color worsened?

Maybe — but there were no vermin, no gruesome discolorations, no foul odors. She lay undisturbed, and the room smelled of dust and old fabric.

“Mother,” Mary said, almost whimpering. She pushed past Matthew and walked to the bedside, moving with a strange, jerky step, an apparent unwillingness, almost as if something were dragging her across the room. She bent over the body.

Becky followed her, and stood behind Mary for a moment, looking over Mary’s shoulder.

Matthew watched for a moment as his sisters paid their respects, then turned to the window. He blinked in surprise, then stepped closer, to make sure the poor light wasn’t playing tricks on him.

The shutters were closed.

This had been the only upstairs window that was not shuttered; he had seen it from the outside as he drove up, and again from inside.

They must have come unhooked and swung shut, he told himself. The vibration had done it, the shaking from the earthquake. Nothing else made any sense.

They wouldn’t be latched, though, and they must swing freely. He knew some of the shutters on the house were jammed, latches and hinges rusted; the shutters on the back storeroom had been nailed shut, twenty years before.

But these shutters had been open a few minutes earlier, he was certain.

He hurried across and pried at the latch on the window sash; it wouldn’t move.

“Oh, shit,” he said — then glanced guiltily at his mother, as if she might come back from the dead to chastise her son for using such language.

“What’s the matter?” Becky asking.

“It’s stuck,” he said.

Before Becky could say anything more, for once acting on his own without her advice, he picked up a heavy silver-backed hand mirror from atop the dresser and swung it at the window like a hammer.

Glass shattered spectacularly; Mary looked up, shocked.

“What are you doing?” she demanded.

“Getting us out of here while we still can,” Matthew replied, as he swung the mirror back and forth like a duellist’s sword, smashing away shards of glass and crumbling century-old window putty. The hot, stuffy air of the bedroom rushed out, and cool, moist night air spilled in through the opening — along with the smell of damp earth.

The wooden divider between the panes of the lower sash did not break when he whacked at it with the mirror, so he stepped back and kicked at it, snapping it.

“Stop it! Stop it!” Mary shrieked. “Can’t you... this is Mamma’s bedroom! Stop it!”

Matthew looked at her, startled. The fact that she had slipped and said “Mamma” instead of “Mother” told him how upset she was.

“Sorry,” he said, a bit shamefaced. He dropped the battered mirror back on the dresser, then crunched across the broken glass to the window. He reached out and pushed at the shutters. They opened only slightly before scraping to a stop. Matthew peered out through the inch-wide crack between them.

He was looking out at ground level, as if from a basement; the shutters were blocked at the bottom by thick turf. As he looked, a small clod of dirt rolled in through the crack, tumbling onto the windowsill. An earthworm followed it.

The ground rumbled, and wood creaked; the shutters twisted slightly under the upward pressure of the earth, so that the crack between them widened at the top.

“If we’re going out this way we’re going to have to hurry,” he said.

“What about Mother?” Mary asked, her calm restored.

“I don’t know,” Matthew said. “Should we try to bring her out? It won’t be easy.”

“No,” Becky said, “what good would it do?”

“We can’t just leave her here, to be buried alive!” Mary said, horrified.

“She’s not alive, Mare,” Matthew said gently.

“She always wanted to be buried here at home,” Becky said.

“But we can’t just leave her!” Mary repeated.

“Why not? We have to get out of here! Come on!”

Wood cracked loudly, and one of the shutters snapped back into its closed position, forced by the rising earth. Matthew jumped at the sound, and turned to stare at the ruined window.

Becky stepped up beside him. “I’m not sure we can get out that way anyway,” she said.

“We’ll have to smash the shutters,” Matthew agreed.

“And then dig.” The level of the ground, which had been perhaps three or four inches above the sill when Matthew first tried to force the shutters open, was now halfway up the lower sash and still rising.

“This is insane,” Matthew said. “How can this be happening? I never heard of an earthquake going on and on like this. And how can the house just be sinking straight down? It hasn’t even tilted!”

“I think maybe we better find another way out,” Becky said, as the other shutter was pushed firmly back into place.

“What, up the chimney? The flue can’t be more than eight or nine inches across.”

“The attic, maybe?”

“There aren’t any windows in the attic.”

“Can’t we just smash a hole somewhere?”

Matthew nodded. “I guess,” he said. “Where’s the splitting maul?”

Becky grimaced. “In the shed out back.”

Wood groaned. A trickle of black earth spilled in through the shutters onto the broken glass that littered the floor.

“I think we better just get up there and try, even if we have to use our bare hands,” Matthew said.

Together, the two of them hurried down the passageway to the unlit back bedroom. There, one shadowy wall held two identical doors — one that led to a closet, the other to a steep, narrow stairway to the attic, steps of bare wood between walls of ancient wooden lath.

They both knew what it looked like; both had been up there countless times. Matthew remembered the hot, dry air of the attic, the summer sunlight seeping dimly in under the eaves and through cracks in the gable walls, turning everything brown and warm...

But the sun wasn’t up yet. The stairwell was utterly black.

It occurred to Matthew that it was a miracle the power hadn’t gone out; the lights in the hallway and the front bedroom were still working.

The attic didn’t have any lights.

“Is there a flashlight or a candle somewhere?” he asked.

“I think so,” Becky said. She opened the top drawer of the bureau that stood between the attic door and the closet, and fumbled through old handkerchiefs before bringing out a thick stump of candle and a book of matches. She lit the candle and held it high.

Matthew’s shadow, huge and black, preceded him up the attic stairs.

The place was smaller than he remembered, and the smell had changed; now it reeked of damp decay, of mildew and rot. The old steamer trunks that lined either side were black and gray, with ugly stains discoloring them. He had to duck under the tie-beams; the roof was only high enough for him to stand upright in the center portion.

That roof looked distressingly solid, though. The wood was old, and blackened with tar; here and there metal points projected through where roofers had used unusually long nails.

“Look!” Becky said, pointing.

Matthew looked and saw it, up near the central roofbeam, at the roof’s highest part — a wooden square.

A trap door — their way out. It was meant, perhaps, for clearing snow off, not that it snowed much around here, or for cleaning the gutters; whatever its purpose, it was their way out.

The house shook.

Matthew could reach up and touch the lower part of the trap door, but he couldn’t just push it open; together, he and Becky hauled one of the steamer trunks over. He climbed atop it, braced both hands against the trap, and shoved.

It didn’t yield.

“It’s stuck,” he said. “Maybe they shingled over it — I don’t remember ever seeing it from the outside.”

Becky looked around for a tool, and spotted an old plank, perhaps eight feet long, that lay on the floor behind where the steamer trunk had stood. She set the candle down on another trunk, then slid the plank free and passed it up to Matthew.

He hefted it, then drove it up at the trap, using it as a battering ram.

The trap gave slightly, and Matthew heard the sound of tar paper tearing; the trap was shingled over. Fortunately, the shingles were in sorry shape. “Give me a hand,” he said.

He held the plank near the middle of its length, while Becky put both hands under its lower and, and together they drove it upward again.

“Keep pushing!” Matthew shouted, as he felt the shingles move.

They both stumbled, and Becky fell across the trunk, when the trap door finally burst open. Cool air poured in. They could hear the dislodged hatch cover skidding down across the sloping roof.

Matthew boosted Becky up and out, then jumped up, catching himself on the lower edge of the opening. Becky grabbed at his shirt and pulled, and one of his flailing feet managed to catch the nearest tiebeam to provide a further impetus.

In a moment he was clambering out onto the roof, looking around in amazement. The clouds had dispersed and the moon was up, shedding a faint glow across the yard that allowed him to see what was happening.

He and Becky were kneeling on the roof of the house, on the gritty asphalt shingles, but they were only a few feet above ground level — and sinking, even as he watched. The house was vanishing into the ground beneath them.

Nothing else was disturbed at all. The cars were just where they had been left, the shed stood where it always had. The one odd feature, other than the house’s absence, was the electric line — it came in from a pole in the back yard, and had always hung in a graceful black curve between the pole and the corner of the house.

Now the wire was stretched taut, a straight line from the top of the pole down to corner of the house, a corner that had dropped about twenty feet.

“Where’s Mary?” Becky asked suddenly.

Just then the electric line snapped; the wire whipped up, spraying yellow sparks wildly for a moment, then fell lifelessly to the ground.

Matthew turned back to the trap door and shouted, “Mary! Are you in there?”

The candle was still burning, and he could see the attic clearly, but the lights would be out in the rest of the house now. He tried to imagine Mary down there, alone in the dark with their mother’s corpse, and shuddered.

“Mary, the attic!” he bellowed. “We’re outside! Hurry!”

“Hurry!” Becky shrieked.

Startled, Matthew turned and saw why Becky sounded so desperate — the eaves had reached the ground, and the first scatter of black earth was spilling into the gutters and onto the shingles of the roof.

He heard movement below — not just the steady grinding and rumbling, not the groaning of straining wood, but a human sound, footsteps or something dropped.

“Mary!” he shouted into the hatchway.

“I’m coming,” his sister’s voice replied unsteadily.

And then she was in the attic, he could see her. She climbed up on the steamer trunk, and a moment later he and Becky were pulling her up and out.

Together, the three of them ran for the cars. They jumped from rooftop to solid ground, across a yard-wide expanse of churning black earth.

“That was no earthquake,” Becky said, as they watched the house vanish completely beneath the seething black soil.

“Mamma’s still in there,” Mary said, dazed.

“She wanted to be buried here,” Matthew said. “Now she is.”

“We aren’t going to dig her out?” Becky asked.

A heavy rumble sounded.

Matthew shook his head. “I don’t think the land will let us,” he said.

Becky nodded, and Mary let out a little moan.

Matthew stared at the emptiness where his childhood home had stood, then grimaced. “At least this way we won’t be fighting over the furniture,” he said. “I guess I’ll be taking a room at the motel on Route 12; anyone care to join me there for coffee?”

Then he turned away, and climbed into his car.

In the east, the first traces of dawn were beginning to show.

*end*