

THE AGE OF THE EARTH

By Mary Pat Koos

At the top of the steps Eugene held her back. "Aren't you going to knock?" Mary Margaret laughed, her breath fogging the air. "This is my house," she said, and opened the door.

"Mama, Daddy?" she called. It was only then, as she waited, that she felt a tremor of fear.

Last night, Friday, February 28, 1948, they'd been parked out behind the stadium. Mary Margaret's dormitory curfew had long passed, and she said, "I can't go back now." So they'd driven north, aiming for Oklahoma, or maybe the North Pole, but they only got as far as Gainesville before Eugene's car blew a tire. Some people might have considered that an omen, but they just waited for a filling station to open and had the tire fixed, and then they found a justice of the peace. When they came out of the little frame house, blinking in bright sunshine, she kissed him and said, "I guess we better go tell my mama and daddy." He looked at her with such alarm that she said, "You weren't planning on keeping it a secret, were you?"

"Of course not," he said. She wondered then, who does Eugene have to tell? Since last night she'd felt like they were one person, as if she were being carried around inside his skin, but now here she stood looking up at this man, and she couldn't ask. "Then let's go," she said, suddenly, overwhelmingly homesick.

Mary Margaret knew they'd be back in the kitchen—Daddy reading the paper and Mama getting a head start on Sunday dinner. And now here they came, startled as if from sleep—she drying her hands in her apron and he with his glasses sliding down his nose, still clutching the sports section.

"Memo—" her daddy said, which was her own baby name for herself, but then he caught sight of Eugene, and whatever else he'd been about to say died on his lips.

"You're letting in all the cold air," her mama said. Mary Margaret turned to see Eugene still standing on the porch. At last he ducked through the door and closed it behind him, a tall stranger who by now needed a shave.

"I'd like you to meet my husband," Mary Margaret said. Her mama and daddy exchanged a look, so full of pain it made her catch her breath. But what could she have expected? She was their only child, their baby girl, and

the last they knew, she was practically engaged to a preacher.

They all sat down in the living room. Mary Margaret tried to look at her mama and daddy through Eugene's eyes. Even if she hadn't already told him, (or had she?) Eugene might have guessed that her daddy was a high school principal, from the way he sat with his arms crossed, saying with his steely gaze, Well, young man, what do you have to say for yourself? Eugene sat in a wing chair, the one with scratchy upholstery, with his hands dangling between his knees. She wondered if her daddy could tell, just by looking, that Eugene had never finished high school. Never mind that he'd gone on later to college; in her daddy's view, quitting meant a lack of gumption.

"We met at a dance," Eugene blurted. "At the college." Her mama and daddy frowned, exactly alike, and Eugene looked at her as if to ask, What did I say?

"I wasn't dancing," she said quickly. She was looking at her parents, but she heard Eugene's intake of breath, felt the pain in his expression. He was only trying to be helpful, she knew. She imagined him scrambling to remember the list of activities forbidden to hard-shell Baptists . . . drinking, card-playing. She sighed, her heart sinking. Compared to what she'd done now, a naked fandango would hardly seem shocking.

She remembered that night she'd been bored with studying and bored with writing letters to Dwight Davis, who was off in Arkansas on his first revival tour, so she'd gone along with her roommate who was a Methodist and could dance. And she stood watching the dancing feeling not bored now but kind of restless and sad, when this tall boy came up and started talking to her. No, a man, she realized, and from the very first she couldn't keep her eyes away from his. Brown—not light but not dark either, almost with a glint of red. Later he told her he and his buddies from the crew had



come to the dance looking for girls, but soon as he saw her he knew he'd stopped looking. She wanted so bad to make her mama and daddy see how it had happened, how they couldn't help it, but she didn't have the words.

Her mother spoke. "Where is your home, Mr.—?"

"Partridge," he said. "Eugene Partridge." He held out his hand for her to shake, but she did not take it. She was looking at her daughter, who was thinking, in wonder, Partridge. Mrs. Eugene Partridge. That is my new name.

"I don't exactly have a home," her new husband said. At this all eyes flew back to him. He looked despairing, as if he could have bitten his tongue right out of his mouth. "It's my job—you see we move around?" It was sounding worse and worse, and Mary Margaret

knew Eugene realized it. She held her breath. "I was born in Oklahoma," he said. Another glance exchanged between her parents. Not a Texan, she read clearly. And in that case where he was from didn't amount to much. She saw sweat break out on his upper lip.

"And you have family there?" Her mama's voice

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was low and sweet and insistent.

"No," he said. Her mama looked full at him, her eyes widening in question. He took a deep breath and looked at Mary Margaret. "They're all gone," he said. "Dead. At least I think they're dead. The letters stopped coming."

Mary Margaret made a small sound. She knew her mama and daddy could see in her face that she was hearing this for the first time.

"Back during the drought," Gene said. "They went to California, and I stayed behind."

"But that was years ago," her mama said. "How old were you?"

"Fifteen."

Mary Margaret bit her lip to keep back the tears. Why hadn't he told her? Why hadn't she asked? It seemed they had talked for hours in the twenty-one days, no twenty-two, they'd known each other.

Gene ran a hand through his hair. "Look," he said, "it's ancient history." And a history unknown to her, Mary Margaret thought, while hers was on display right here in this room, with its gleaming furniture brought west in covered wagons, its pictures of solemn-faced ancestors in silver frames atop the piano. As if he'd followed her gaze, Eugene said suddenly, his voice

straining for a way out, "That's a beautiful piano. Who plays?"

Her mother gave a little gasp and looked at her daughter as if she couldn't believe her ears. "Lord have mercy," her father said. Mary Margaret blushed furiously. "I do," she said, with a little smile and a sort of defeated shrug.

They stared at each other helplessly—he'd told her he was one-quarter Chickasaw and that he'd named his Ford coupe after the owner of a café in Texarkana, but not that he was an orphan, or good as; she'd recited him a list of all her best friends since first grade and told him how her Cousin Alger taught her to spit, but not that from the age of five up until three weeks ago she'd spent

two hours a day practicing the piano, every day but Sunday, when she played hymns.

Before supper she'd always played the piano for her daddy—"Sugar, come play me a piece," he would say. They were all pieces to him—the Chopin étude that was his very favorite, or the Rachmaninoff concerto she'd memorized for his Christmas present. He called her playing his "balm in Gilead," from the words of the spiritual. When she was a little girl Mary Margaret had thought it said "bomb" in Gilead, and she couldn't figure out how that was supposed to calm anybody down.

This morning she and Eugene had stopped at a café for breakfast. "You must be starving," she'd said to him, feeling wifely and protective. He'd ordered eggs with biscuits and gravy, so she did, too. There was too much pepper in the gravy, but he ate it all, taking one of her biscuits to scrape his plate, while she just pushed food around with her fork and watched him. My husband, she kept thinking.

Now soon he'd figure out she knew far more about scales and arpeggios than pots and pans. What other surprises did they have in store?

When her daddy spoke at last it sounded like the voice of God. "How do you support yourself?"

"Eugene's in the oil business," Mary Margaret said

brightly, with a proud little nod.

Her daddy's eyebrows rose just a fraction. "I'm on the exploration end," Eugene said. Her daddy's eyebrows sank back into a frown. Not the money end, Mary Margaret imagined him thinking.

"Tell them how you do it," Mary Margaret said. "How you find the oil. Daddy used to teach science so I know he'll find it fascinating." Her voice sounded so eager and pathetic, like a hostess at a dying party.

"First they dig these holes in the ground, right? And then they put in dynamite and blow it up."

"Land sakes," her mother said.

"Oh, it's not dangerous," Mary Margaret said quickly. "Not one bit—is it, darlin'?"

He blushed as if she'd kissed him right in front of God and everybody. "We take precautions," he said. Her daddy shook his head with a disgusted expression. Then both her parents looked at her, not at her face, but at her middle, and at first she didn't understand. Then her hands flew to her head, which was hot, pounding with blood. "It's not like that, she wanted to cry out, but the words would not come. How could she make them understand?"

On the night they met she'd asked him about his job. He said, "I'm a doodlebugger," and she burst out laughing. Then she was embarrassed, but he didn't seem to mind—he just began to explain it to her, so slow and careful, but not like he thought she was dumb, or anything. And his voice had this sureness about it.

"Tell them the part about unlocking the secrets," she said.

Eugene looked at her. "Maybe we've had about enough secrets for one day," he said softly.

Her daddy cleared his throat, as if the words came with difficulty. "We'd like to hear." It was more a challenge than a polite invitation.

"Unlocking the secrets is what my friend Jud calls it," Eugene said. Mary Margaret's heart lifted just a bit. This was a part of Eugene's background she did know—he'd told her how Jud took him under his wing, taught him about the work—not the science part, because Jud never finished college. But what the work meant. His face always lit up when he talked about Jud, and now she clung to that. She smiled at her husband.

"Tell us," she said.

Eugene squared his shoulders and looked right at her daddy. "What we do exactly," he said, "is map the subsurface." He told how the dynamite creates sound waves that speed downward through deep layers of the earth. And how these sound waves bounce back from ancient structures, way down deep.

How intense Eugene's expression as he explained all this, how eloquent the movement of his hands. Mary Margaret had never noticed before the beauty of those hands. Last night in the car, as he'd touched her, she'd felt waves, way down deep, folding and unfolding.

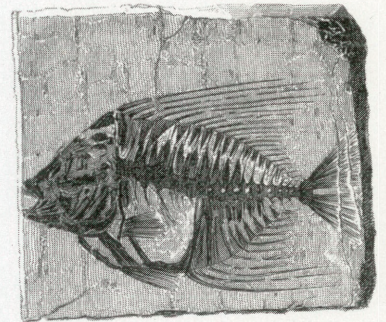
The returning waves, Eugene was saying, cause less vibration on the surface than a human footstep. Had Eugene known when it happened? The shock and surprise had struck her

very still, her breath caught in her throat. Had the pulsing deep inside vibrated clear through her skin?

This vibration is received, he said, by sensitive instruments called seismometers, which convert the infinitesimal about of energy into electrical impulses which are then amplified hundreds of thousands of times.

It was like the pleasure was amplified hundreds of thousands of times, she thought. No one had told her this was part of the act of love, which near as she could tell, they hadn't even completed. But Eugene's hands had unlocked this deepest secret of her body.

The impulses, Eugene explained, are recorded on photographic paper in the form of a seismogram. "A doodlebugger like me reads those wavy lines and draws a map. And that's how we locate the oil, hidden in folds of the earth, laid down who knows how many eons ago." He paused to look at her parents, who were staring down at the floor as if it would give them answers. "It's all pretty simple," he said. His voice had that confident tone it always got when he talked about his work, and



Mary Margaret felt proud.

Her daddy's head turned suddenly, his eyes snapping into focus. "We know how old the earth is," he said, tight-lipped. "There's no doubt whatsoever about that."

Mary Margaret watched the flicker in Eugene's eyes. Dear Jesus, she prayed, don't let him say anything.

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"How old, exactly, do you think?" Eugene asked. Lord, she thought, doesn't he see it coming?

"Not quite six thousand years," her daddy said.

"It's what the Bible says," her mama affirmed.

The Bible didn't say, exactly, Mary Margaret thought, but please, Eugene, don't point that out. They'd just say you could figure it out from prophecy, from signs and wonders. Please, Daddy, don't start on signs and wonders.

"You don't believe that, do you?" her daddy challenged.

Gene stared back at him. "The fossil record—" he began.

"The fossil record is nothing but a cruel hoax thought up by the devil—planted in the earth to confuse and beguile."

Eugene looked at Mary Margaret. Help me, his eyes pleaded. Tell me what to say. I can't, her eyes said back. And I'm so scared.

"That's what we believe," her daddy said. "And Mary Margaret believes it, too." He hadn't called her by her full name since she could remember. "Don't you, Mary Margaret?" he insisted.

Mary Margaret was still looking at Eugene. What did he expect? Did he want her to lie? "Yes, Daddy, I

believe it." Her voice was small but certain. It was Eugene who broke their gaze.

Mary Margaret didn't understand how she could believe with all her heart what she'd been taught from the cradle, and yet believe Eugene, too. She thought of that verse in the Bible, Choose ye this day whom ye will serve. And she heard it in her daddy's voice—she couldn't be certain he hadn't said it out loud. She looked at her daddy and then she looked at Eugene. She felt like a crack in the earth was opening beneath her feet, and she had to jump to one side or the other.

"I have to believe the evidence," Eugene said.

"The word of the Lord is evidence enough," her daddy answered.

With a tremor of pure despair Mary Margaret felt the crack widen past healing. "Don't do this," she wanted to scream at them both. What difference does it make how old the earth is? But to her daddy and to Eugene it made a world of difference. And she had to choose. What should she go by, her whole life before, or the past three weeks? Or just last night, and the wondrous shock waves that made her say, I can't go back now? What if that feeling was a trick of the devil, a cruel hoax planted deep inside her body to confuse and beguile? She looked at her mama. Why didn't you tell me? she asked silently. Had her mama ever felt it? Was it real? Her mama just stared back.

Now Mary Margaret had the strongest desire to play for her daddy again. She moved toward the piano, but her mama stepped quickly in front of her and shut the piano lid so hard the keys jangled.

Mary Margaret thought the sound would never stop, but when it did the silence was worse. She made herself look at her mama. Her eyes were like ice. She turned to her daddy—his eyes, too, were hard and cold. Then she turned to look at Eugene, whose eyes were blazing with the heat of his conviction, and she crossed the gulf of hooked rug to his side.

"I have to believe what the earth tells me," Eugene

said, with his wife's hand on his shoulder like a blessing. Mary Margaret felt the vibration of her husband's voice, strong and sure, and for now that had to be enough.

After a while, her daddy said, "Well," in this kind of strange, hushed voice. Mary Margaret saw him and Mama look at each other, and then Mama pressed her

but she righted herself and walked carefully the rest of the way down. Her parents were standing there in the front hall. Eugene reached to take the clothes from her; in a split second she imagined herself, arms free, hugging her mama and daddy, afraid she'd cry if they held her tight, more afraid they might refuse her embrace.

She said, with a strange little laugh, "No, I've got it—if I turn loose they'll all spill." They all stood there awkwardly, and finally Eugene said, "I'll take good care of her." Neither one of them answered, and so Eugene and his bride turned and started down the walk.

The car's trunk seemed to swallow up her few belongings. When Eugene slammed the lid it did not echo like the

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lips together tight and looked away, but not at her. And even though it was getting on toward supertime nobody said anything about staying to eat.

"I'll go upstairs and pack a few things," Mary Margaret said.

She didn't have much to pick from in her closet, since most of her clothes were in her dorm room, with her luggage. She moved the few dresses back and forth on the rod, not really seeing any of them, and in her mind was running a little refrain: the Bible tells me so. What the earth tells me, Eugene said. The earth had never said anything to her, not that she knew of. But her body had. Was that the same thing?

Eugene was standing on the porch when she came back down the stairs with a pile of clothes on hangers over her arm. She was hurrying so she nearly stumbled, and he yanked open the screen door to try to catch her,

piano. They looked back toward the house where her parents stood on the porch, their faces still impassive but now wet with tears. An involuntary cry came from Mary Margaret's throat, and Eugene took her chin in his hands and turned his face towards hers, searching, as if asking silently, Can you do this? Mary Margaret closed her eyes and looked into her future, saw it yawning open like the trunk of this car. All she knew to do was to go on choosing. She opened her eyes. "Yes," she said.

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