

# A POSSIBLE PIEDMONT

## Mother Mary



The year is 2025.

Mary is making the long drive home with Elena from a visit to the doctor. Mary used to know all her neighbors, but now that she is 76 years old, most of her friends have moved away, leaving her lonely and isolated. She turned to Elena for help.

Elena is from Guatemala and helps Mary run errands one day a week. Despite their differences in age and nationality, Elena and Mary have become friends, not easy in these days of rising tension between immigrants and Piedmont natives. They enjoy many of the same things and Mary admires Elena's work ethic. Mary is glad that she can offer Elena a little extra money a week and, besides, Mary needs all the help she can get since she lives alone and her children do not live nearby. She is homebound because of her failing vision and tries to do all of her outside activities on the days Elena is with her.

Elena and her husband, Manuel, moved as legal immigrants to the Piedmont ten years ago to work the tobacco fields. Now, that those fields are gone, Manuel works in a chicken processing plant. They live with Elena's mother and sister, along with Elena and Manuel's two children. They don't have a car of their own. Manuel rides with others to his work. Elena was thrilled when she passed the driving test and got her license so that she could drive Mary's Buick for those errands.

Mary lives in the house built by her parents in 1950, a modest ranch on the farm her father worked on their 100 acres. She stayed because of her love for the land but now she can't find a buyer for the house and remaining acres. She sold off 90 acres to developers when her husband died and kept only ten. When those 90 acres were clear-cut to build houses, the unintended consequence was disastrous for Mary. Run-off caused her lake to silt up.

She sighs as she looks out her window, leaning her silvery head on the cool glass. She sees the once wide-open spaces now covered with mostly single-family houses that rise up from the landscape like specters. She remembers the tobacco crops that dominated the rolling hills, and she misses the rhythm of tending the fields and the scent of the drying tobacco leaves. She also misses the once thriving manufacturing plant where her brother and both of her uncles worked, along with generations of Piedmont families.

Back in Mary's youth, the plant employed 1,600 people and unemployment was unimaginable at only 3-4% for decades.

The drive has been a long one, with traffic all along the way. The trip takes much longer than it did even ten years ago because of the congestion. As she and Elena turn into the driveway, they listen to local mayors on the radio bickering about which of their towns is most deserving of this new employer supposedly coming to the region. If only the elected leaders 20 years ago had learned to cooperate on these issues and provided the opportunity for people to retool for the technology-driven economy.

Mary strains to pull herself out of the car and stays worn out from the commutes she must make to perform simple tasks, like going to the grocery and hardware stores. It takes over half an hour just to find fresh food. Mary fumbles around in her pocketbook looking for her door key, which makes her angry. She never used to lock her door, but now her family insists that she must lock up tight because of the strangers who live around her. Her sons tell her that the city is spreading out to her and that big cities mean crime. Mary doesn't agree with her family, but she doesn't have the energy to argue with them anymore.

Mary misses her children, who wanted to stay nearby, but couldn't find jobs to support their growing families. Mary's saddest time, besides missing her husband, was when her two sons moved away from her. The last insult to injury was when her best friend from church had her home taken away from her by foreclosure. The world began to feel pretty hostile to Mary after that.

Her first born, Norman, served as a corpsman in the army, and hoped to pursue his education, but there were no opportunities in his hometown. The local community college had all but closed due to lack of funding and offerings. So, he worked in a mill that had been prosperous enough to hang on despite recessions and changing technologies. Finally, the mill owners had to close the doors and shutter the windows, still shuttered these 15 years later. Norman, his wife, Carolina, and their twins, Ned and Cindy, moved to Charlotte, where he retooled himself for a high-tech company that relocated from New York. Sure, she sees them on holidays, but they miss the daily richness of living close together.

Her baby boy, John, was proud to be a teacher in his small hometown. He had worked his way through UNC Greensboro, and Mary remembers his graduation day with such pride. Hometown boy made good, the first one to go to college in both families. At first, John enjoyed his work, even though he seldom had enough classroom materials, but he

didn't mind filling in as he could afford. Despite loyal teachers like John, the school went downhill fast. The surrounding area was increasingly impoverished with families working two jobs just to make ends meet. No wonder the parents couldn't participate in school programs or help their kids with homework. Because the economy of the town was drying up due to lack of jobs and the closing of manufacturing plants, there was little money locally for schools. Eventually the school had to close and the students were bussed to distant places, increasing the cycle of little family participation in school life.

John witnessed this decline with disillusionment. He recognized that he and his wife could no longer provide for their three children, either financially or through adequate public education. Absenteeism became a critical problem for teachers and students because the schools were providing fewer busses and parents couldn't afford to provide daily transportation. Also, more kids seemed to be suffering breathing-related illnesses, like asthma, due to the worsening air quality. So, he found a job at a private school, over two hours from Mary, but where his children had better opportunities. John had to face that the lack of investment in public schools had created this impossible situation for him. His children's welfare had to come first.

Mary has high blood pressure and diabetes and should see her doctor more regularly. She would take the bus if she could, but none comes out her way. They seem to only operate in the cities. She used to go to a doctor in her small town, but now has to go all the way to the city for even a simple check-up. The short drive to her sweet little town down the road is no longer a pleasure anyway. The town has spread almost all the way to her farm with more single-family houses chewing up the green fields. And those fun stores on Main Street, owned by her friends, closed up years ago because people started shopping at the big chain stores near the interstate.

Her doctor tells her that she should get more exercise, but there is nowhere to walk and nowhere to walk to - not a store, not a school, not a church, just a lot of houses. The one local park has closed due to lack of maintenance, and now safety problems.

The bright spot in Mary's life is Elena. Mary enjoys learning about her Guatemalan culture. The children have brains like sponges and their English is fluent. Elena lives in a worn rental property, but it is all they could afford, and she makes the most of the little kitchen with her delicious meat pies. Mary wishes that people could see Elena the way she does, and that they had a way to buy her delicious food. Mary knows about selling food because she used to have a thriving business selling her famous apple pies at a local farmers' market. But no farms means no farmers' markets.

Her granddaughter encouraged Mary to sell her pies on the Internet. Selling through electronic space? Mary decided that she would try to join this high-tech revolution, but she couldn't find any classes to learn how or any shipping sites close to home. The roads are in such bad condition that she is not surprised that shipping is a barrier for her. Her dial-up service is too slow, anyway, and broadband doesn't ever seem to come to where she lives.

Mary used to have a well, with cold, delicious spring water. A few years ago, men from the county came by and told her that it was no longer safe to drink because chemicals had leached into it from a closed manufacturing plant. In fact, Mary has seen the lake on what's left of her farm become unusable. The stream that feeds the lake has turned brown, and the lake has filled up with sediment and algae blooms. Along with water level changes as a part of the cycle of drought, the lake can no longer support fish life. She used to make money when people would fish her lake, but that resource no longer exists for her.

Mary wants to sell her house and the remaining ten acres because she can't mow it or keep up the fences, plus she wants to get closer to her children, but nobody's buying and the house has dropped significantly in value, all while her taxes have gone up. Elected leaders explain that the tax burden has shifted to property owners because there are so few employers left in the area.

Mary shakes her head and tries to clear it of these hard thoughts. She sighs as she picks up the phone. She will call Elena and see if she has any of those little meat pies. That always makes her feel better.