

## The Mountain Fell Away

Flapjack plodded around the circle, lifting his tail from time to time to spew a stream of steamy gas and partially digested cane into the air. It was my job to fill the wheelbarrow with sawdust and dump a shovelful on the piles and puddles that fell on the old mule's path. Every time he passed he gave me the evil eye, like I was the one that stunk worse than a polecat. I held my nose with one hand and tried to shovel with the other. I didn't last long on the job.

Grandma and Mother and I were at my Uncle Vertis's place in Daniels, a town no more than a wide place in the road, and we'd brought Sissy along. We were going to make molasses. We were promised a picnic supper at the pines after the work was done. It was a magical place, a forest where long-needed pines soared so high they sometimes pierced the pale underbelly of the clouds. Years of fallen needles squelched the life out of most of the saplings and undergrowth that tried to take hold, but wood ferns grew in places, and chartreuse and lavender lichens spread lacy doilies over the trunks of fallen trees. Something drew me to that place. Maybe it was the quiet, which was so deep I felt angels hovering nearby, or fairies. Uncle Vertis said he'd put a swing up there, but that was a couple summers ago and I hadn't seen hide nor hair of one yet.

The molasses making was set up in the front yard, where Flapjack was harnessed to a contraption Uncle Vertis had put together to feed the sorghum cane through. It was attached to a wooden trough that angled into a kettle to catch the squeezings, a thin trickle of juice we boiled down to make molasses.

Uncle Vertis kept the fire going and fed the stalks of cane into the machine, while the women took turns gathering the frothy green scum from the syrup with a long skimmer paddle. The skimmings would go into the hog slop that evening. Once the syrup boiled down, it was cooled and poured into mason jars and sealed. If you boiled the squeezings three times, you got blackstrap, which was darker and not so sweet as the first boilings. Blackstrap was Grandpa's favorite. I pretended I liked it best.

When Uncle Vertis took his shirt off, he exposed a barrel chest furred over with springy black hair. He got that from Grandpa's side, but his hawk nose and high cheekbones made a strong showing of the bronzed Cherokee blood carried from a few generations back on Grandma's side of the family. Put a feather headdress on him and he could have posed as an Indian chief. Uncle Vertis, who knew lots of stuff about West Virginia history, said the Cherokee were all over the mountains around Beckley in years past.

Aunt Nalda said for Uncle Vertis to get a shirt on in front of his mother for goodness' sake, he was raised to know better than going around half naked. He answered, something I didn't quite catch, but he pulled his shirt back on, leaving it partway unbuttoned in protest.

"You better watch your mouth in front of these children or I'll wash it out with soap," Grandma scolded, so she must have heard him cuss, but her words to him never had teeth. I didn't see why, but there was no getting around it. It was the boys in the family Grandma doted on.

When Uncle Vertis walked into the room, her eyes lit up. "Excuse my French," he'd say, but it wouldn't be long before he'd let another cussword rip. Grandma would light into him for taking the Lord's name in vain and he'd say he was sorry and try to be better for a while, but not for long. Vonnie and I called him Uncle Dirty. Grandma didn't like that, but she hoped it would shame him into changing his ways.

I thought he was perfect.

Boo Boudreaux drove into Uncle Vertis's yard, bringing his car and our molasses making to a stop. Uncle Vertis walked over to talk to him out of earshot of Grandma. Slick as quicksilver, Boo slid through the window feet first and loped the few steps back to open the trunk. He wore his black hair tied with a bandana, his pencil mustache and goatee not hiding a thin scar that hooked from the top of his ear through his upper lip. One of the neighbors told Aunt Nalda he was a Cajun from Louisiana, and his given name was Champagne or maybe Champlain. Some thought that was too hifalutin' for a moonshiner, so they'd started calling him Boo. A licorice whip of a man, he didn't seem to be much given to idle talk or foolishness.

Digging under a hodgepodge of newspapers, tools, a dirty doll baby, and a pile of hunting clothes, he unearthed a paper sack with the top twisted closed.

"Get caught up with what I owe you next time," Uncle Vertis said, taking the sack.

"Ain't gonna be no next time until you do," Boo told him, nodding his respect to the women in the yard as he swung back through the car window.

Boo jammed the gearshift into reverse and stomped on the gas. The tires dug deep into the soft ground before the wheels caught and the car backed out, taking off like it was running from the law.

It probably was.

Uncle Vertis whistled under his breath as Boo fishtailed down the road. "That boy's got hisself on the growling end," he said to nobody in particular. "Looks like he's not scared of it neither."

He watched Boo disappear in a cloud of dust and smoke.

Although Uncle Vertis was one of the smartest people I knew, he never seemed to get ahead. He worked in the mines here and there, off and on, just managing to make enough to keep the lights on and do what he wanted—and that was to have enough in his pocket to buy junked cars and junked parts to fix them up, with enough change left over for a jar of moonshine every now and then.

Uncle Vertis had uncommon ability when it came to machines. He made some money at it, fixing people's broke-down cars and trucks and tractors and selling others he bought cheap and got going again. He'd got hold of a sprayer somewhere and made more money painting those same cars and trucks and tractors.

He'd once driven up to our house in a many-colored automobile he'd put together from scraps from the junkyard. When Grandma asked what kind of car it was, he laughed and said it was a genuine one of a kind Calesmobile, calling it after his own last name. Grandma said she didn't know that she wanted it tagged with the Cales name, but she was looking it over like she was proud.

We begged and carried on until Grandma let Uncle Vertis take us for a ride, us sitting in the rumble seat and her craning her neck from the front to make sure we weren't flung to our deaths on the sharp red dog covering the road. When Grandma wasn't hollering at us to hold on, she was hollering at him to slow down before he got the whole bunch of us killed.

Uncle Vertis looked at her and grinned.

Then he speeded up.

Although it wasn't much to look at, the two-room house Uncle Vertis and Aunt Nalda lived in was built solid enough. The living-room-bedroom didn't have room for a couch, but there were a couple of rump-sprung chairs if you had a mind to sit down in there. Most people didn't. The biggest part of visiting went on around the kitchen table where folks sat on mismatched chairs, each one painted a different color with dregs of paint Uncle Vertis brought home from the dump.

The house didn't have running water, but there was a well in the yard, one that looked like the wishing wells in story books, with a bucket tied on a rope to lower into the water. A pail of that water sat on the sink, a long-handled dipper hooked over the side. Everybody drank from the same dipper and I never heard of anybody dying from it, but they might not have told me if somebody did.

Butter and milk and eggs were kept cold in a springhouse that straddled the icy creek burbling along at the foot of the mountain. If you'd had good hunting, the meat, kept chilled in the springhouse, was breaded in crumbs or dipped in egg and milk and flour and fried up in a greased iron skillet for supper, and what wasn't eaten was stored by salting or smoking or canning it.

The outhouse, situated downstream, was wallpapered with pictures of flowers Aunt Nalda cut from seed catalogs. Teasel and jewelweed and lobelia and phlox faded and withered on winter walls, only to be replaced by a new crop of fuchsia, dahlias, forsythia, and begonias from next spring's catalogs. A bucket of lime with a tin cup sat in the corner, and a cup or two sprinkled into the hole kept the stench down and the flies away. If money and toilet paper ran out at the same time, a page or two of the Sears, Roebuck came in handy.

When Vonnie and I got to stay with Uncle Vertis and Aunt Nalda for a week or so in the summer, we slept on a featherbed pallet on the kitchen floor and took our baths outdoors in a galvanized tub with water heated lukewarm by the sun. Aunt Nalda made picnics for us, serving our breakfast of oatmeal and brown sugar on the bridge that spanned the creek, and our midday dinner of tomato sandwiches and hardboiled eggs in the back of Uncle Vertis's truck or on the flat rock near the garden—first making us find the eggs she'd hidden in unlikely places in the yard.

And it wasn't even Easter.

Aunt Nalda helped us make paper dolls that looked like Grandma and Grandpa and Mother and everybody else in our family, with a whole wardrobe for each one. Sometimes she'd do silly things like put Grandpa's paper pants on the grandma and Grandma's bonnet on the grandpa.

She cut lengths of an old clothesline to use as jumping ropes and held one end while we learned to jump with first one, then two ropes at a time. She knew where to find teaberries and the first johnnie-jump-ups. She melted slivers of soap and water into a slimy mixture and showed us how to blow giant bubbles through a coat hanger twisted into a circle.

She pinched off pieces of the slippery yellow clay that streaked along the creek bank to make heads for dolls, poking the top of a cross made of sticks up the neck of each grinning skull before lining them up to bake their brainless heads in the sun. We fashioned crepe-paper clothes for the one-legged dolls—shawls and sashes and turbans to wear with gypsy skirts of many layers and colors, stretched to flounce at the hem to hide their infirmities.



Sissy and I sat on the logs that bridged the creek behind Uncle Vertis's house, dangling our feet above the icy water, fishing with strings and safety pins baited with scraps of fatback rind. There were minnows, of course, and trout if we were lucky, and there were other silvery little fish we called ghosts because we never caught any. We didn't this time either, nothing but a crawdad or two.

We weren't catching anything and were bored, so we asked Mother if we could walk up the road to the backside of the mountain, which at least had a chance of leading to something interesting. Mother said we could, but not before she gave us a list of don't do thisses and don't do thats.

Uncle Vertis caught up with us, well out of sight of the women back at the house. They would have had a conniption if they had known what he was up to, ever last one of them. He handed me the bag Boo had brought the moonshine in. A ragged shoelace was tied around the top with a double knot so I couldn't open it, although I did try.

"Now there's no need to get your grandma all worked up, so keep this little bit of business between you and me and Missy," Uncle Vertis said, after asking me to drop the bag off at Boo's place.

"It's Sissy," I told him. "Her name's Sissy."

"Just as well not mention it to any of the womenfolk back at the house," he said again, like he didn't think I understood him the first time. "If they get their dander up, feathers are likely to fly," he said, tucking his hands under his armpits and flapping his elbows like wings. He folded my hand around a quarter he'd dug out of his pocket.

I knew it was a bribe.

I took it anyway.

"You go and buy you and Missy a bottle of soda pop or one of them ice creams." Uncle Vertis turned to head back toward the house.

"Her name's Sissy," I hollered after him.

Uncle Vertis flapped his wings.

"Turn around before you get to the Galway Place," Mother had said. So we did, three times for good measure. "And don't be writing your name on anybody's car," she'd added. We didn't. Instead we wrote *KILROY WAS HERE* in the dust on cars parked close enough to the road that we wouldn't get caught.

Narrower and less tended the higher it went, the road dead-ended at the top of the mountain. Just stopped sudden, like there was no place past that particular point anybody would ever have the need to go. Boo Boudreaux lived at the end of that road. To get there we had to pass the old Galway place, empty for years. Although we'd never worked up the nerve to go inside, we were somehow drawn to the idea of ghosts or dead bodies. Uncle Vertis claimed he'd seen strange lights inside many a night. "Galway's ghost most likely," he'd said, making his black eyes big and scary.

Grandma told him there was no such thing as ghosts and he was to stop filling our heads with such foolishness because she was getting awful tired of having to cut the lights on before we went upstairs to bed every night and make no mistake about it he was squarely to blame for putting that fear in us and here he was a grown man and ought to be ashamed of himself scaring little children out of their wits.

Uncle Vertis listened to every word, nodding like he agreed. Then he'd made his hands into monster claws and chased us halfway to Sunday.

Grandma just shook her head.

The Galway place went out of its way to make you believe it was haunted. Weeds and brush had taken over most of the yard, and the outhouse had been tipped over, probably by kids some long-ago Halloween. The house sat at the end of a dirt lane that was barely passable. We picked our way through the bramble as far as the falling-down porch. Morning glories, their purple trumpets blaring silently into the sun, threaded around and through the broken porch rail and sagging shutters. I pulled one of the plants out by the roots to give to Aunt Nalda, wrapping it in damp leaves to keep it alive like I'd seen her do.

We stopped at the porch. Even though Sissy dared me and called me a scaredy-cat, I refused to go inside.

"You go," I said, calling her bluff.

"I will if you will," she said.

We both chickened out.

We started around the house, her in the lead. It's what we always ended up doing, hoping bigger hoodlums than us had torn the boards off a window so we could stand on our tiptoes and look inside, but nobody had, at least not yet.

Sissy stopped, turning to shush me. She pointed to a contraption of pipes and kettles almost hidden by the forest. Although busted-up stills were scattered all over these mountains, I'd never seen one that looked ready to run. We were turning to leave when we heard the sound of something clanging against metal over and over again.

Hunched over, Sissy and I backtracked out of there, sneaking looks over our shoulders to make sure nobody was after us with a double-barrel shotgun that could take both of us down with one scattered blast. When we got to the road, we took off running and didn't let up until we both got a stitch and had to catch our breath, bending over like hunchbacks to clutch at the sharp pain in our sides. As soon as we could straighten up, we ran the rest of the way to Boo's house. His wife, dark and sharp-featured like him, was sitting on the porch nursing a baby that looked to be two or three years old. She was singing a song.

Just as we got to the porch Boo pulled up in his car. I noticed the door handle was missing. I'd heard somebody say, Uncle Vertis maybe, that moonshiners took the handles off to make it hard for the law to get in. It was a dead giveaway somebody was a real moonshiner, not just running an occasional batch of shine for his family and friends.

Boo walked over, swinging a ball-peen hammer in his hand. "Where in tarnation y'all pick up all them beggar-lice?"

He seemed a little too interested to me. But then again, that could have been my nerves working on me. I looked down. The daisy-flowered pedal pushers Grandma had made from feed sacks were covered with the flat sticky seeds that grew in a pod almost like a green pea. I swiped at them a couple of times, but it did little good. Beggar-lice had to be picked off one-by-one-by-one. Sissy had them all over her pants too.

So did Boo Boudreaux.

The hair on my arms prickled up. I was scared Boo had seen us back at the Galway place, and here I was standing in front of him sweating and out of breath and covered up to my waist in beggar-lice. Oh, I had guilty written all over me. And Sissy just stood there saying nothing, like her face didn't even have a mouth on it.

"My Uncle Vertis asked me to give you this," I handed Boo the sack without answering about the beggar-lice.

Boo pulled a switchblade out of his pants and snapped it open. Around the hilt was a dark rusty color that could have been dried-up squirrel or rabbit blood or even rust for all I knew. On the other hand, it could have been from whatever fight caused that slope of scar on his face. He ran a callused finger along the edge of the knife. Judging it sharp enough, he slashed the shoestring the bag was tied with, shaking a couple bills and some change into his hand.

Picking out a quarter, he handed it to me. "You girls look like you could use a pop. It's hotter than a hound in heat today."

Of course I knew the right thing to do.

Instead, I took the money.

With his black hair, bandana, and that knife glinting in the sun, Boo looked like a pirate. His wife started singing "Power in the Blood," the baby still nursing at her breast. "*There is power, wonder working power, in the blood of the Lamb,*" her voice softly keening. "*Power, power, wonder working power, in the precious blood of the lamb,*" she sang, never once looking up or saying a word to any of us. The child unlatched from her breast and yawned, showing a full set of baby teeth. Milk dribbled down its chin.

"You tell your uncle it's a pleasure doing business with him," Boo said. "And tell him I'll be returning that hammer of his next time I come down."