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Hesper

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Appalachian Heritage, Volume 37, Number 2, Spring 2009, pp. 15-18  
(Article)

Published by The University of North Carolina Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/aph.0.0129>



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# HESPER

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Pamela Duncan

This love story starts the way a lot of them does—springtime, sap's a-rising, boy and a girl don't know no better. Starts with Daddy bringing home this boy from town. I knowed C. L. Edwards from school but hadn't seen him since I quit sixth grade. That durn teacher, she wouldn't let me alone, always after me to raise my hand and answer, got onto me if I was the last one in and left the door standing open. Last time I done that, she said, "Hesper Penland, was you born in a barn?" Well, I tell you, that fired me up good. I looked that old heifer dead in the eye and I said, "Yes, ma'am. That's why ever time I hear a jackass bray I get homesick. So that's where I'm a-going now. Home!" C. L., he set in the back with the older boys, and I remember him a-grinning at me like I just done the funniest thing. I wasn't in no mood to be laughing, though, me not knowing how Daddy'd take it. But he didn't make me go back. Said six years was enough for anybody, especially a girl.

I didn't know who it was Daddy had fetched up the mountain that day, even after he rode Hercules right up to the porch where I could see the boy's face good. Daddy hadn't said a word before he left but what he usually said: "Going to town."

"This is C. L. Edwards," Daddy said. "He's going to help out."

You talk about mad. Daddy'd been saying he needed help, in spite of the fact I worked good as any boy, but I never expected that. If looks could kill, C. L. would've been wounded, the way I stared him down. I knowed better'n to say anything, though.

C. L. appeared to have growed some because when they got down off that mule, he stood a good head taller than Daddy. I could tell he'd been a-working outside a lot because even though it was only April his face and arms was brown. His real name was Clingman, named after a mountain. Made me wonder who picked that, and why. Looked like I'd have time to find out. He didn't say a word, just followed Daddy to the barn.

C. L. slept in the little room off the barn where we kept tools and saddles and all. When Daddy put him in there, I knowed he wouldn't be around but for the summer. Wasn't no stove out there and would've been too cold for any mortal after September.

So C. L. took my place in the fields with Daddy, and I kept to the house and the garden. Let me tell you, I didn't like it ary bit. I'd worked outside all my life and didn't see no reason to quit. I liked being out from under a roof. But Daddy, he said it was time for me to start acting like a woman and doing womanly things. I argued wasn't no reason I couldn't do both, but he would not back down.

C. L. was a good worker, didn't eat too much, so Daddy was happy with him. On Saturday nights C. L. would go home so he could go to church Sunday morning. His family was Methodists. Me and Daddy, we never took to church. I believe Mama used to get him to go, but he wouldn't talk about it, and I can't remember. Most Sunday mornings I'd go up the mountain till dinner time so as not to shame Daddy. He thought I didn't know about the drinking on Saturday nights. The woods, that's as close to church as I ever come. Anywhere under some trees has always felt holy to me. Up here, there's more trees than people, which is as it ought to be. Daddy, he kept a-clearing ground, trying to take this mountain away from itself, and the mountain just kept a-taking it back. Daddy ought to have known he couldn't beat no mountain. I reckon that's what caused his heart troubles, missing Mama and fighting nature.

He didn't know I knew about his heart troubles neither. But I found the medicine he kept hid under the mattress, and one day I went to town and talked to that doctor. He said Daddy had a lot of good years if he'd take better care of hisself, but appeared Daddy'd done had more years than he could stand. I don't reckon you ever get over missing people, but a body can give up a fight it knows it'll never win. That was a fight I didn't have no stake in. That mountain was the only mama I ever knowed, and I wanted it left wild, the way it was when my great-grandsir come over from Tennessee, back in the days before all the creatures got gone—panthers, buffalo, wolves, who knows what all. Hit tore me up—still tears me up—to think of all the living things that has been killed off or run off, all the waste. Least I got this mountain in my name, most of it anyhow, and long as I got breath hit'll stay just like it is, just like it was always meant to be.

Now that C. L., I could tell he didn't care nothing about no mountain. Only use he'd ever had for trees was feeding them to a saw. I was terrible unkind to him at first. After having the place to ourselves for so long, me and Daddy, I couldn't get used to a stranger, even one I knowed. Seemed everywhere I turned, there he'd be. Even when I'd go off by myself, it got to where I'd think I heard him a-coming up behind me. Sometimes I'd even see him when I closed my eyes. He had a way about him, being so still and quiet, and at the same time letting you know he had you in his sights, like a cat fixing on a mouse.

One day, along about the first of June, I was in the house a-fixing dinner. It was so hot in there, nary bit of wind to cool things off. Still I had to fire up the stove to make the bread. Daddy hadn't come in yet, but C. L., he was out on the back porch washing his hands in the pan of water I set out. When he got done, he come in the kitchen and seemed like the whole room just shrunk. Every time I turned around to fetch a plate or set the beans off the stove, there he'd be. Finally at last I hollered at him, "If you don't get from here, I'm fixing to rip your arm off and beat you to death with the bloody end!" He stared for a minute and then busted out laughing. Well, I never have been able to stand being laughed at. Before I knowed what I was about, my hand shot out and smacked his big laughing face. That shut him up quick. His cheeks got blood red, and he stomped out of the kitchen, down them porch steps, down the hill to the spring house. He didn't come eat neither, not even after Daddy come in and I rung the bell again. Daddy just sat down and started eating, didn't say a word.

Later on that day I was working in the garden and seen C. L. up in the top field hoeing corn and got to feeling bad. He'd not had a bite since before the sun come up. Then feeling bad made me mad, so I went in the house and wrapped up a hunk of cornbread and a big piece of ham meat and a old cold tater in a clean dish rag. I got him a jar of water too. By the time I got up there, I had to stop and catch my breath before I could talk. He kept on a-hoeing that corn, didn't even turn his head my way.

"Look a-here," I said. "You needn't think I'll be bringing your meals like this again." I set that food and water down behind him in the row, next to that new corn, and run down the hill fast as I could go.

Suppertime, he come in the kitchen, set that empty jar and that dish rag on the table. Must've been something interesting on the floor because that's the only thing he looked at. But then he went back out on the porch, and, once he got on the other side of that screen door, he turned around and looked at me finally. Right then felt like the only thing left in the world was our eyes and what was between them.

From then on, seemed like we was all the time bumping into one another, or reaching for the same thing at the same time so our fingers got tangled. By the time the corn was high as my head, we'd took to walking out together of an evening, in the gloaming time. I wanted to take him and show him all the places I loved on the mountain, but he wouldn't go, not with it coming on dark. There was always too much work of a day time to go. So we'd just walk down the road and back, a little further every time. Once we got out of sight of the house, we'd grab hands. First time he kissed me was in the shade of a dogwood that leaned over the road. When it happened I wished it was spring instead of summer, I wished that tree was white with blossoms like a bridal veil. I wanted to swallow him whole, latch onto him like mistletoe and never let go.

By the time the corn was high as his head, I got him up in the woods finally. It was a Saturday, and Daddy left early to go to town. Somehow I knowed C. L. wouldn't be walking down with him like he usually done. I took my time, got washed up, put on a clean dress, brushed out my hair and left it loose. C. L., he was out by the barn, mending a harness. He felt me watching and turned around, that handful of leather dangling by his leg. Real slow I started backing off, not letting my eyes off him, pulling him to me. Quick as he dropped the harness and started towards me, I turned and run. Didn't let him catch me till we was way up the mountain at my place, in the chestnut ring. That's where I took him, made him mine.

An excerpt from Duncan's forthcoming novel, *The Wilder Place*.