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IN TREES THEY BE

Billie Jo Rich

My mother told me the stories when I was still just a little girl. She feared for my safety as all mothers do when their children are out of sight. I think she wanted to scare me a little so I'd stay closer to home. I would go off into the mountains around our house and stay gone for a few hours, or all day, coming home tired and dirty just *after* the point that she had started to panic.

Who could keep track of time in these mountains? There is no "time" in the woods. Only the quality and changing angle of the sunlight slanting through the dense canopy of leaves can give any indication of time. I didn't care about time. I was busy twirling, spinning through the dappled light of the woods. The thin, brown arms of the trees reached for me, welcomed me as one of their own. I was carefree and in my element.

The rasp of leaf against bark, the delicate snapping of dry twigs, and the crunching of leaves underfoot as I trekked through the mountains, inhaling deeply of that mountain air... a sweet undertone, decay but in a good way: the smell of moss and bark that has lain on the moist dark soil for a long time. Rotting wood turning back into soil to be used by the tiny things that scabble about in shadow. These were the things I loved, and I spent every available moment exploring my mountains. Of course they weren't really mine but they were home to generations of my ancestors: the ones who had no concept of ownership.

I would return home from these adventures with aching hands, palms reddened and blistered, sometimes with minute particles of splinters imbedded in my palms from the wild grape vines that dangled throughout the woods. I would have bits of soil and other debris clinging to my clothing and tangled hair. In this mountainous terrain that was mostly uphill, these vines were perfect for swinging wildly out over the valleys, feet flailing and hair flying. At times I would let go mid-air, sailing upward and outward into a large nest of piled leaves and moss from the dry creek beds. Sometimes I overshot my target and took home bruised hindquarters for this failure in calculation.

Sometimes I would take a plastic bucket with a peach or two (stolen from the neighbor's tree) and a cold biscuit containing a piece of fried bologna for a lone picnic lunch beneath the mountain laurels that grew

near winding natural brooks. When I grew thirsty I simply lay on my stomach and sipped straight out of the clear, cool streams, face to face with only myself. After my meal, I would use the empty bucket as a creature habitat, hunting in these streams for lizards, crawfish, minnows, tadpoles, or anything else I could find beneath the mossy stones. If creatures of the water proved in short supply, I would return home with a pail of smooth colorful stones, fluffy tufts of dried moss, snail shells, acorns, or any other small item that caught my interest. Often I'd take a book or two and when I grew tired of walking the steep terrain I would stop and read for a while. Whether I was sprawled in a chair or on a mountainside in a pile of leaves, I relished any chance to curl up and read about wonderful adventures in faraway places. In my little corner of the universe, on a mountainside in rural western North Carolina, a half-breed Cherokee child could escape into the fantasy of Mark Twain or Lewis Carroll, Charles Dickens or even Louisa May Alcott. Any book I snatched up on my way out the door was beloved by me and bore tattered dog-eared pages to prove it.

My mother had brought a mysterious cardboard box in one day and placed it before our small wobbly book case. I peered in at the blue hardback volumes with gold-colored lettering on the spines of each one. They were pretty, a matching set, but after pulling several out for inspection, I noted that there were no pictures on the cover and very few on the pages. I read the titles: *Alice in Wonderland*, *Heidi*, *Tom Sawyer*, *Little Women*, *Treasure Island*, and many others...little did I know then what worlds those books contained! I put the whole set away on a shelf with the exception of one, which I tucked beneath one arm. It seemed an odd purchase for my mother to make.

Even though we were very poor, my mother was still a woman before all else and she wanted pretty things. Having taste that outmatched her sparse income, she was always on the prowl for bargains and hand-me-downs, regularly attending Saturday night auctions in a nearby town. It turned out that my mother had thought she was bidding on a set of slightly chipped tableware, but was actually bidding on a mystery box which turned out to contain the set of books.

Mom toiled hard in the little garden patch that helped feed the eight of us, but she really put her heart into the flowerbeds that bordered our tattered and leaning front porch. She was equally dedicated to her odd assortment of cactuses, succulents, and other houseplants. She had a green thumb; everything seemed to flourish under her care. I marvelled at her vigilance in keeping pests off her tender plants. She even battled the fat

green caterpillars that loved to eat her roses, flicking them aside with a stick as tiny trickles of sweat wound down the side of her face toward the corner of her mouth and the cigarette that was always clenched there while she worked. Just by watching, one would never guess that she was terrified of all kinds of caterpillars and worms.

She was tolerant of my mountain roaming to an extent, though she seemed perplexed by my solitary ways. She seemed puzzled by my love of books. I would sometimes look up from the pages open before me and see her watching me. There was something there that looked like a question she could not quite frame to ask, a small wrinkle of her forehead, some struggle to understand this strange youngest child of hers.

One evening when I finally came trudging back from one of my mountain explorations, with leaves in my hair and little burs sticking all over my clothing, my mother decided to lay down the law. As I glowered over the cold supper saved for me on a chipped plate, she told me that eight-year-old girls had “no business” going out and traipsing all about in those mountains; I was going to end up being bitten by a snake or eaten by a bear, and no one would ever know where I was- what would I do then? Through a mouthful of cold sochan (a wild green), I tried explaining that I had never seen either in the woods while I had been out alone. It didn’t put her mind at ease, though. She rapped me a good one across the knuckles with her wooden spoon and told me not to talk with food in my mouth.

After I finished my supper, I ran a steaming bath for myself. I did like exploring the woods and I had no problem with getting dirty, but with mom always wanting everything to be clean in the house (including me), it was a condition of my wildness that I always scrub myself down upon my return home. I even had to use *soap*. As I swished about in my dingy bathwater, I thought about what mom had said. What *would* I do if I got eaten by a bear? I lay back in the soothing water, with my hair floating about my head, and stared up at the ceiling. I was sure it would probably hurt to get eaten; it burned like fire the time that my cat had accidentally bitten me trying to get some food I’d held out, and bears were a lot bigger than cats. But would it hurt to be in the bear’s stomach?

Later, as my mother combed gently through the snarls in my towel-dried hair, I asked her if she liked going into the woods when she was a little girl. I had a hard time picturing it. Though she was born and raised in the mountains, she was the type of woman who always had her hair styled, nails polished. She was tough in her own way, yet she was very feminine.

I couldn't imagine that she ever ran through the woods like an animal as I loved so much to do. She told me that she didn't really go far from her house when she was a girl because she had no time for things like that. She had to do a lot of cooking and cleaning when she was still very young.

I digested that for a moment. My sisters did a lot of that stuff in our house, too. They helped cook and clean, while my brothers cut grass, weeded the garden, carried wood for our smoky old woodheater in the winter. I was lucky to escape being assigned much in the way of chores because everyone seemed to get their own chores finished a lot quicker and easier without me around. Rather than having me constantly underfoot, they liked it a lot better when I just stayed out of the way. It was fine with me, also.

I asked mom if she would braid my hair in tiny braids all over my head. I liked sleeping with my hair in braids because when I woke up and took the braids out, the hair would fluff upward and outward on both sides of my head in a way that I thought to be quite fetching. In my eight-year-old mind, wearing my hair in such a way made me feel very stylish, like one of Charlie's Angels. At least I did until one of my brothers kindly informed me that I looked like the Bride of Frankenstein, or possibly Bozo the Clown. After careful scrutiny in the mirror, from all angles, I continued to wear it that way, for the 'do now had an entirely new appeal to me.

While she began sectioning my hair with a comb, my mother grew thoughtful. I recognized that look on her face that meant she was going to tell me something, maybe a story, as soon as she finished arranging it in her mind. I knew to be quiet and just wait for it. Occasionally she would get that look on her face that she got from remembering: her eyes would soften like clear pools of mountain water, with brown stones shimmering beneath the surface, and she would share something from her childhood- usually a funny story, or sometimes a scary one.

This is how she started out:

"One time when I was little, I ra-member hearin' Dad talkin' ta uncle Wade when they came back from huntin' mushrooms. I wasn't sposed ta be listenin', but I always liked ta hear the stories they told, so I pretended ta be workin' nearby so I could hear 'em.

Wade, he was always one'a them that liked ta be up in the mountains doin' stuff, huntin' squirrels or mushrooms, or lizards ta sell at the baitshop down Bryson. Anyways, Dad was up 'roun Tow String, near Tolley's cabin- b'lieve James was with 'im that time- when they set down ta eat lunch. They was just settin' there for a minute after they got finished, restin' up. Gettin' ready ta take off again.

Then they heard this big loud crashin' sound, crunchin', like sticks n tree limbs breakin'. They both jumped up n looked aroun', thinkin' it might be a bear comin' through. But they didn't see nothin'. They couldn't see nothin' when they looked aroun' but the noise got louder, like somethin' was comin' closer n closer. They perked up their ears n it seemed ta them that the noise was comin' from above their heads, maybe a raccoon comin' down outa the tree? Wonderin' what it was, they kinda snuck over where it was the loudest, tryin' ta see up the tree 'thout bein' straight under it, case it was mad.

Well I guess James musta seen what it was first, or realized what it was first, cause he let out a yell n took off like a bat outa hell. An this is what yer granddaddy told me, told me his self, that he seen.

Lookin' up through the tree, it was kinda hard ta see with the leaves an all bein' full on the trees still. I guess kinda hard ta see cause'a the shade they made too. Plus, sometimes, I think the brain don't wanna admit what the eye is seein'. Anyway, what he seen comin' down through them tree limbs, breakin' some and makin' a great big racket rustlin' leaves and all, looked like'a big ole worm of some kind. I think he said its what some paople call a stickworm, whatever that is. But it sure didn't look like no stick. From what he could tell from the short time he looked at it, it looked ta be 'bout as big around as a man and 'bout that long too. Said it looked 'bout big as he was, and he was a good-sized feller, yer granddaddy.

Well anyway, a'course he didn't stick around either and hauled his ass back down the mountain. And this was somethin', comin' from yer granddaddy, cause he wasn't hardly scared of nothin'. But, tell ya what, he showed back up home pale, tremblin' an shakin', had hisself a couple swigs o' homebrew before he could tell momma what happened. And a'course she didn't believe him, thought he'd already had a nip or two a'that homebrew up tha mountain with James. He didn't try ta argue with 'er, but I don't thank he slept too good the next coupla' nights. For the next week or so, he walked aroun' lookin' all tarred, with big ole dark shadows under his eyes."

I sat silently pondering all of this with a thrill in my stomach. My scalp was starting to burn like fire from mom's diligence with my tangled hair. But I knew better than to voice complaint. Besides, I wanted to hear more. After a moment or two, she continued.

"A big ole worm is what they said it was. He didn't talk to momma no more 'bout it, but I heard him an James settin' on the porch one night when we was 'spose-ta been asleep. Some kinda big nasty worm. James said he'd heard talk about strange thangs way back in the mountains where nobody don't

hardly ever go. Said he woulda never believed it though. Said he didn't wanna tell nobody bout what they seen cause nobody would believe it. Daddy said he was prob'ly right. They got quiet for a long time. Then James said he couldn't eat no more. Said ever time he got ready to eat he'd think 'bout the way that thang's skin looked. An he couldn't eat, if he did anyway he'd end up just sicking it back up later on. After a little bit, Daddy said he couldn't sleep 'cause ever time he'd start ta drift off he'd hear somethin' that sounded like rustlin' and made him ra-member the sound of that thang comin' down that tree. Said he didn't even like ta be under tha trees no more, either. Just couldn't."

She had finished with my hair by then, and gave me a gentle nudge at my shoulder to get off her lap. I resettled myself reluctantly on the floor near her feet while she sipped her coffee. Not wanting our little story time to end, I asked, "When was it that Wade dis-peared?"

He didn't disappear, she informed me. He had gone 'missin.' This was, in fact, one of the true mysteries of our little community. It remains unsolved to this day. My uncle Wade, a mountain man in the very truest sense, had gone up into the mountains with a burlap sack to hunt mushrooms one day and had never returned. Countless search parties had scoured our mountain area and no-one had ever been able to find any trace of him. Even bloodhounds lost his scent and brayed their disappointment into the empty hills and mountains. After a couple of years everyone gave up. I believe it was probably about twenty years later that some hunters finally turned up a few bones that were later proven to be Wade's, but it was all that was ever found and nobody really knows for sure what happened. I guess we will never know.

By now her cigarette was just a stub and her coffee cup was empty so she shooshed me off to bed for the night. I snuggled down under the faded heavy quilt between my two sisters who already snored gently. They had both fallen asleep early, leaving the old radio playing rock and roll oldies quietly in the darkness. The space was already warm and I felt safe in the middle, but that night I had terrible, fearful dreams that I could not remember and woke up cold and afraid before dawn. I lay in bed for a while, watching the steady rising of the patchwork mountains that surrounded me. When I heard the quiet clink of mom's old metal coffee maker, I slid from the creaky bed and padded silently into the cold dark kitchen to join her.

It was my custom on most mornings to perch on my "stool" to watch breakfast being prepared. It wasn't so much a stool as just an old wooden

chair with the back broken off. I would drag it over to the counter so I could watch the food being prepared. I knelt atop the seat and watched as mom made biscuit-bread (a pone that looked like a large biscuit- we would break off pieces with our hands), tomato gravy, and fried potatoes. Sometimes we had scrambled eggs, and I would watch fascinated as the liquid eggs cooked in our large cast-iron skillet, going quickly from orange and gooey into fluffy and yellow. The warm kitchen filled with the smells of coffee and cooking food made my stomach rumble and my mouth water. Sometimes she would give me a tiny piece of bread and a dollop of gravy on a small saucer while she finished placing the food into serving dishes. She would then call my brothers and sisters for breakfast. There was usually a large piece of bread left over which would be covered and saved for later. There was nothing like a cold piece of biscuit-bread and some homemade jelly slathered on top for an afternoon meal. It was usually a piece of that bread that I took with me on my journeys up the mountainside.

One morning I awoke to the beginnings of a glorious day. It was the kind of morning where the sunshine fell early through the leaves in great splashes of light, and a balmy breeze blew my hair out of my face as I squinted up through the trees. The sky was already a clear, deep blue with no clouds in sight. After breakfast I grabbed my bucket and threw in a chunk of bread, a pop-top can of beanie weenies, and my battered copy of Tom Sawyer and set out up the side of the mountain.

Once I reached the top of the ridge I followed it around to the east, crunching leaves and twigs, listening to the sounds of my footsteps and the scurrying of the small creatures who fled my company. I walked until the sun was higher and finally stopped to rest for a while at a tree that had a low branch that I could sit on. I broke my piece of bread in half and sat nibbling and looking around, swinging my feet while I ate. Birds and squirrels chattered high in the branches above me, made bold by my distance from them. Far away I could hear the faint cries of a hawk. "Squirrels better watch out," I thought. When I had eaten all of my bread I moved on, stopping at a small spring that trickled slowly up from the ground to drink my fill of the clear icy water.

A good while later I finally came to a small clearing on the side of the mountain. I looked up through the tall old trees and saw a tiny circle of blue that seemed to be far away. The trees were so thick here that the area was noticeably cooler from the heavy shade. I picked up a small limb that had fallen to the ground and used it to scrape leaves into a cushiony pile

I could sit on. I plopped down into the leaves. Ravenous by this time, I devoured my can of beanie weenies and what remained of the bread. I fell backward into the leaves and sighed. I opened the book and read for a while, laughing out loud at the chapter where Tom gives the cat a dose of medicine. It was one of my favorite parts of the book. I read several more chapters and dozed off.

The next thing I knew, I was waking up, curled on my side with the book under my face. I must not have slept for long because the light did not look significantly different, though the trees were so thick it was hard to tell. I stood and stretched, and gathered my things to head back home. Ordinarily I would have stayed for the rest of the day, but for some reason I didn't like this place anymore. Maybe it was because the trees were so thick they blocked most of the light. Maybe it was just too quiet here. No birds or squirrels chattering here, and nothing seemed to move, not even the wind. Only the sound of my own breathing.

As I started out of the clearing, the empty tin can suddenly shifted and rolled across the bottom of my bucket. It sounded too loud in the silent clearing and I jumped. I was embarrassed by my own nervousness and laughed out loud even though my heart was pounding. Then I realized my bucket was a little too empty and turned back to my nest where I spied my book, half covered with leaves, still lying where I had left it. I scooped it up along with a leaf or two and tossed it into my bucket. Relaxed once more I turned to go.

When I did, I heard a twig snap high above me. At once the tiny hairs on the back of my neck stood up. I didn't just feel like I was being watched; I *knew* it. Suddenly I heard more twigs breaking, and some of them sounded big. Smaller tree branches and leaves sprinkled down to the ground around me. Then I heard a sound that reminded of the time my class had taken a trip to the zoo- we had laughed at the walruses and sea lions, but they had made such an odd sound when they dragged themselves across the cement floor of their enclosure. Now it sounded like something large was dragging itself through the tree, maybe even down the tree. There was a horribly sly scraping sound, and small bits of debris fell down out of the tree. I remembered the story my mother told me. I threw my bucket as hard as I could, favorite book and all, and ran.

By the time I got back to the bottom of the mountain, the sun had set and the sky was starting to get dark. I was gasping for breath and I felt as if my heart would burst from my chest. Usually when I returned home from my wanderings, I would leap over the small stream at the edge of the yard.

Today it was all I could do to stagger across it, leaving tracks of mud as I stumbled up the front steps and burst through the door.

My mother sat with her feet propped up, smoking a cigarette. The house smelled strongly of bleach. She had been cleaning. She gave me a once-over as she slowly blew a cloud of smoke in my direction. Muddy feet, wild eyes staring from beneath a shock of wild hair, leaves and twigs clinging to my clothes, still gasping for breath. Chest heaving, I stared at her for a moment then flung myself against her, burying my face in her side.

"Whatsa matter?" she demanded.

I burst into tears and sobbed wildly. "I heard it! I heard it! I didn't wanna look 'cause I was scared I'd see it too!" I blubbered.

"What tha hell are ya talkin' about?"

"That big 'ole worm you tole me about!" I was shaking from head toe. She put one arm around me and was thoughtful for a moment. I trembled against her while smoke swirled lazily around our heads.

"Well ya know that was just a story. But then agin' ya don't never know what ta ba-lieve an what not ta. Ma Daddy use-ta tell me some thangs ah wisht ah'd never heard. Bout skillies an other stuff. Ah thank he just wanted me to be careful bout people n places, n thangs that was out there. Mosta tha time ah ditten ba-lieve any of it. Sometimes it's true an sometimes it ain't. Guess that ole worm is still up there on tha mountain. Up high in tha trees is where they be. Stay down lower here on out."

She ran a warm bath for me. When I got out she wrapped me in the thick old patchwork quilt from the bed I shared with my sisters and sat me on my "stool" for a cup of warm milk with a little bit of sugar in it. I sat clutching the warm mug with both hands and by the time I finished the milk I was barely awake. My mother led me gently to bed. I slept deeply that night and mercifully had no dreams.

As more and more days passed, that memory began to fade as they tend to, and after a time that day seemed like maybe just a dream. There are things in this world that may be more than the mind can accept as reality. These things are better forgotten, for the sake of one's truest self. It is a gift that children are so resilient. They are able to focus on the positive, so that as adults we may look back in rosy nostalgia, forgetting old childhood terrors. If we do remember them, they don't seem as bad.

I still played outside and in the woods close to home. But I never again wandered so far up the mountain, and I certainly didn't go alone.

Sometimes the old stories are just old stories. Aren't they?