

The Coal-miner's Son

Life and times of a Kentucky mining family in the 1930's by J S Morey

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The Coal-miner's Son

I live with my Ma and Pa plus two sisters and a brother. They're all younger than me – 'cept Ma and Pa, of course. 'spose you already guessed that. I'm fourteen years old and just about to leave school – such as it was.

School, that is. Or was.

Apart from The Holy Bible and a Charles Dickens book (Pickwick Papers), the only other book we have in our house is the Sears and Roebuck catalog. I liked that as a kid because it had more pictures in it. I'm not sure which of the three books is furthest away from best describing *how* we live. That is to say, we're a God fearing family, but some of the stuff in any of them is either way out of reach of our comprehension, or un-affordable.

"Son," Ma would say, "if you want any more reading, you'd better write it yourself. But ask that city-born school teacher for the paper and pencil. We got no money for that, neither."

We live in Muhlenberg County – in Stom's Landing (named after the settler who first set up here), which folks have started calling *Paradise.* Maybe on account they all have jobs there - courtesy of Peabody's Coal Train and the lumber yard that depends on the Peabody mine.

I was the eldest at the time. I still am come to that, so it's because of me we've all become writers. Some say I inspire people. Quite a feat for a poorly educated kid from a mining family in Paradise, Muhlenberg County. We all had to learn how to spell correctly by ourselves. There was no dictionary, so we used the three books I mentioned earlier – especially 'Sears' if it was a more modern word .

Spelling was a tad confusing sometimes anyway. Still is. When we first moved into the one-room shack near the mine where Pa worked, a mile out of town (and where we live now),

the county was spelled 'Muhlenburgh' with a '*burgh*' at the end - on account of the Scottish people who first settled there from Edin*burgh*. (That's in Scotland, 'cross the ocean.)

Then a bunch of Germans came in, took over most of the jobs – and the houses ('*as well as the wimmin folk*,' said Uncle Bill) – so it became MuhlenBERG. We're from Virginia originally, where the first English settled. We could hardly understand either of them at first anyway – Scottish or German – so we kept ourselves to ourselves. (Saves a lot of arguments, too, if you ask me.)

That's apart from Uncle Bill – my Pa's brother – who moved out here to be close to us and is almost part of the family. He's always raking around some place or other, though, and is no stranger to the odd argument. It's from him where we get all the news, as interesting as *that* is, which is rarely.

I love my Uncle Bill as much as I love Ma and Pa. Some days I love him even more, 'specially when he takes me fishin'. Pa never has time to do that anyway. And if he did have the time after working such long shifts, he'd be too tired.

"Make sure your Ma gets these fish," said Bill last time we were out. He gave me two of the ones *he'd* caught to add to *my* two. He lives on his own and doesn't need a lot. "They should keep you all fed for a couple of days."

He was right. And another reason I love him.

I guess the catfish were only five or six pounds each, but they'd be tastier than the tough old twenty pounders some folks land. I wrote all this down in my notebook, like a diary. Come winter when we'd be kept indoors most days on account of the weather, I would read about what we did in the summer. The schoolteacher has always encouraged me to do that it – '*to inspire others*' she would say.

Usually she's mighty strict with all us kids – having to cope with young 'uns only six years old right up to fourteen, like me

– and often bigger than her, even some of the girls. She came from the big city to teach '*where she's needed most*' she revealed one time. I think the way we live and the fact we can hardly keep a decent pair of boots on our feet right through winter shocked her a bit at first. She soon toughened up though and, despite her being strict most of the time, she always softened up whenever I read to the class. And to her. I tried to please her with what I wrote, mindful that she had little to cheer her otherwise.

She didn't have no man, for a start.

Often I'd read my diary out loud to my brother and sisters – and to Ma if she was in the kitchen, baking. Pa would be down in the mine all day and be too tired to even listen in the evenings after supper. I tried a few times but he always fell asleep beside the stove. Becky said maybe it was *because* I read to him he dozed off. I don't *think* she meant it – not in a bad way. She loves me too much.

She even told me that once.

Becky's a year younger than me. I love her too – like a sister. Then there's *her* younger sister, Annie, followed by Jason, who's nine years old. To hear Ma and Pa talk, there won't be any more 'McAllisters'.

That's my name by the way, *Jamie* McAllister.

Like I said we all write. That's how we amuse ourselves and amuse other people. I hope so, anyway. Becky and Annie sometimes read out loud what they've written, but it's mostly girls stuff, which you'd expect, I guess. Ma listens to them especially hard, though. I suppose because *she* was a girl once.

Ma's name's Doreen. *I think*.

I say 'I think' because it's only Billy who calls her by that name. Occasionally.

Pa calls her 'Ma', same as us. Neighbours call her Mrs McAllister, at least in front of us kids. As for Pa's name, I

simply have no idea what that is. Billy calls him 'Bro'. Ma calls him Pa, same as us. Neighbours call him – *you guessed it – Mister* McAllister.

That's apart from the sheriff, who shorten it to '*McAllister*'.

Pa says the sheriff is always snooping around and we should tell *him* if we see his car parked up in the nearby woods. Pa says it's on account of Billy and what he gets up to. Apart from Ma and Pa, I'm the only one in the family who knows *what* Billy gets up to. But they don't know I know, even though Billy does, but he doesn't know that Ma and Pa don't know that I know. But I'll tell you. *(If you want me to explain that again, I will. Or you can go back and* re-*read it - slowly.)*

It's moon-shining. Billy's got a still out in the back shed – *our* back shed next to where we keep the dogs. Billy's dogs. They don't get out much mainly because they keep guard. *It also keeps them sharp*, Pa reckons. When we go fishing I always ask Billy if we can take them with us. He says, *OK, as long as Jason keeps look-out for the sheriff*. It never occurred to them that, one day, Jason might actually want to know *why* he needs to keep look-out. And for who. *Whom*.

So far, he hasn't asked.

I said Billy lives on his own. That's only partly true. He's not *married* or anything, but sometimes I can see he's had somebody round. By some*body* I mean a woman – female - unless whatever guy he has round leaves a bright red lipstick mark on the liquor glass they've been drinking out of! *From*.

I very much doubt *that,* and I'm pretty sure I know who *she* is. It's the daughter of the guy who runs the bar in town where Billy delivers his moonshine.

She's the only one I've seen who paints herself up. (Ma says it's disgusting and that she's only as good as she ought to be – whatever *that* means.) In fact I *know* I'm right about who she is. The drinking glass with a red stained rim is always left next

to the sink the days *after* Billy delivers his moonshine to the bar in town.

"She don't mean nothin' to me," he said, even though I didn't ask. He just saw the way I looked at the dirty glass.

Billy knows how my mind works, more than Ma, or Pa.

More than me, even.

I know he *did* have someone special, back-along, who *did* mean something. Ma told me after I asked her, "How come Billy lives on his own?"

That's when she told me the whole story.

She was the sister of the guy who ran the sawmills, Ma started. *At least he* said *she was his sister. She was a real looker, but never had a beau – not* one *that anybody knew about, anyway. It was her brother who kept them away. 'Nobody is good enough for her,' he used to say. He was high-born. So was she. Weekends and holidays he would go back to Greenville on his own, where the family had a big house. That's where he had a wife, or so they say.*

Then Ma went on to say how at weekends the sister – Eleanor – would *never* go to Greenville *with* him.

Soon the trouble started.

Without her brother to keep an eye on her she would sneak off to the bar in Paradise, letting her hair down as it were. But word got out to her brother. Ralph was *his* name, the brother.

Billy was a lot younger then, said Ma, *and wild. He could drink, too, and not just moon-shine. The bar was his favourite place and, of course, he was single. Pa stopped going out drinking with him on account of the fights Billy started. But Billy saved his money and bought the land and cabin where he is now, and had taken over the 'Shine' business once old man Newton – the one who had it before - decided to give it all up.*

New responsibility calmed him down some.

Of course, it was all illegal, so he kept a few pigs and goats as a front, disguising what he was really up to. Like a smokescreen. To add to that he took a job at the sawmills. As you can imagine, it was all working out well for Billy. He had Eleanor to himself at weekends when Ralph was in Greenville; then during the week he could sneak around at the sawmill as long as her so-called brother didn't find out. But it didn't last.

That was as much as Ma told me, or wanted me to know. It was Billy himself who opened up to me one day we were out fishing. It was after a weird thing happened that really spooked him. Me too. We had just finished fishing and were about to pack up when he froze.

“Did you see that?” he asked, suddenly becoming agitated. He pointed out across the lake where the sunset had sent a golden path, ending at the exact spot where were were standing. It was like the path beckoned us or, at least, Billy.

Then he spoke again – but not to me this time - to someone *out there.* He started to walk *into* the water.

“I'm coming,” he said, dropping his fishing rod on the bank.

I thought, '*Who's he talking to?'*

I knew it wasn't me, but I couldn't see anyone else. It was just us two as far as I could tell. By now he’d waded out until he was waist deep, about twenty feet from the bank.

“I'm coming, darlin',” he repeated, but the 'darlin' bit told me he must be seeing *someone*, and that 'someone' was female.

I saw no-one.

“Uncle Billy, stop!”

It was me shouting now and, thank God he was listening because he stopped where he was, waist high. He looked down and a puzzled look came over his face as if he didn't understand how he got there.

Or why.

Which was right, of course.

He turned, “Jamie? That you?” He was looking at *me* now, still looking confused, as if he’d just discovered *for the first time* that I was there. The sun had now dipped below some clouds on the horizon. The path of sunlight had dissolved. It had gotten darker.

“Did you see her too?” he asked.

“See who, Billy?”

“Eleanor. She was there. Walking towards me.”

“On the water? Are we talking about an Eleanor, or whatever her name is? Or Jesus?”

Ma would have given me a slap if she'd heard me refer to Him in such a disrespectful way, but all Billy was interested in was whoever it was he'd seen.

“You should have let me go on,” said Billy. “She's gone now, thanks to you. Why did you stop me? ”

He looked down, woefully sad as he made his way back to the bank. He just sat. *We* just sat. He kept his eyes pointed down at the ground at his feet. As soon as I saw his shoulders shaking I knew it was serious.

Whatever *'it'* was.

I went over and sat next to him, searching his face. But all I could see at first was somebody I didn't know. For the first time in his life he looked lost.

“There was nobody there,” I said.

“She comes for me - sometimes.” He wasn't looking down any more, nor out to the lake, nor at me. He was just vacant. Staring straight ahead.

At nothing.

“But I thought they said she was -”

“- dead?” he said. “No. She just has to keep away, in case they come looking for her.”

“Who are 'they' and why are they looking for her?”

“They think she killed him.”

“Ralph?”

I'd heard he'd been found dead, at the sawmills.

“They'd been arguing. Later Ralph was found face down in the mud outside one of the timber sheds. It had broken his neck – the fall that is. He must have fallen from the loft.”

“An accident, then?” I said.

“Could have been. Then his wife showed up and tried to make out he'd been killed. Murdered she reckoned. Apparently she'd found out about Eleanor. Turns out she – Eleanor - wasn't his sister after all. Some say she was his wife as well.”

“Why didn't they arrest her?”

“Eleanor?”

“Yeah.”

I could see Billy was more agitated just thinking about it.

“They reckon she didn't wait around long enough. Just left before the sheriff could get a warrant.” Billy stood up then, burying his face in his hands. “I didn't mean to do it.”

He was sobbing again, this time uncontrollably. I’d never seen Billy like this before. I did nothing. I just stood there feeling stupid. Several minutes later he straightened up, collecting his fishing gear and catch. So did I.

We began to walk.

“Sorry,” he said as we headed back to his place.

We continued the rest of the way in silence. Apart from the cry of loons on the lake and an occasional buzzard overhead, the only other sound was the swishing of our boots brushing the undergrowth. We carried on through the woods until we could smell the wood smoke from the pot belly stove in his cabin. We knew we were close. Billy seemed calmer. The cabin finally came into view. His two hounds rushed ahead, hoping for some reward.

Food, probably. From Billy.

The catfish weighed heavy in my sack as I said goodbye to Billy, intent on making my way back home, whistling for the hounds to follow.

But not before he could finish his story. Guilt was weighing heavier on his shoulders as the catfish were on mine.

He needed to offload. So I helped. I listened, quietly.

“He just came at me,” said Billy, continuing where he’d left off some half an hour earlier. “He'd seen me and Eleanor together that day, during my break, We weren't doing anything we shouldn't have, but he could tell we had *some*thing. He *knew* we had something. Eleanor and me were up in the loft in one of the timber stores, just talking.

“But close. Too close for Ralph.

“He'd have none of that. We argued and all kinds of stuff came out. *Bad* stuff. In a jealous rage he just ran at me waving one of those log splitters. I went cold with fear.

“All I did was just step aside, but he carried on – right past me as I dodged out the way. He went through the loft opening. We must have been over fifteen foot up, the loft was high enough so that stuff could be easily loaded onto carts below.

“Landing on his head didn't help. He wouldn't have felt a thing.”

“But Uncle Billy, what *could* you have done? It was either you or him!”

“Stayed, is what I should have done,” he said, “instead of running. People heard his scream as he fell. They ran over to the barn where we were. They soon gathered round - arrived before either of us could think. She told me to run out back, that she'd take care of it. She was looking down at Ralph’s motionless body as they looked up at her. They didn’t see me so they turned on her. Accusing her of pushing him.”

“Then what happened?”

“Someone said to call the sheriff. That's when - or so they told me afterwards - she turned and ran too. Before he could come with a warrant.”

Billy was now shaking, barely able to make the words as he recalled those last tragic moments.

“I never saw her again. Ma said she heard she’d died jumping into the Green River and drowning, trying to get away from the bloodhounds.”

“That's what I heard, too,” he said, “ but nobody saw her actually jump. Or fall. The hounds just took the sheriff's men to the water's edge where the scent ended. They couldn't pick it up from there. Her body was never found.”

That was seven years ago.

Chapter Two

I’m now going on twenty one years old – nearly a man (!) - and working in The Greenville Leader as a trainee reporter. That's on account of me turning up one day and seeing the editor guy with my portfolio of writing. He liked what I was writing but, most of all, he liked the way I got through to see him. He said I had perseverance and hired me on the spot.

I've been here nearly twelve months.

Pa was disappointed that I didn't go down the mine to feed Peabody's Coal Train (!) alongside him, but Ma was pleased. She saw what Black Lung had done to Pa. Barely forty and he looked sixty – worn out.

And that cough of his didn't sound too special.

Only Billy's moonshine seemed to help.

I suppose that's why I always turned to his brother, Billy, because he loved the outdoors even more than I did.

There's no way I'm going down that hole, he said, meaning the mine. A lot of the time, though, they stripped the *surface* of the land for their coal, taking out trees and anything else that got in their way.

That's how Billy always managed to find work.

In the timber yards.

Because I had a job now it cut down my fishing trips with Billy, but we still got away some evenings, and at weekends during the winter. But I still couldn't forget how he told me about Eleanor after his vision on the lake that one occasion.

He told me it wasn't the first time he'd seen her again after that day Ralph was killed and she had disappeared. But she always vanished soon after she appeared. She seemed more ghost than real person and, because some said she *was* dead, he took her to be her spirit reaching out to him.

But from where?

My first job at The Leader, apart from opening the post and acting as a 'Gopher' in the office, was copy-editing – reading the whole edition before it went to print, picking out spelling mistakes and other errors. I had become quite good at it so I carried on doing it. Not only did it mean I knew all that was going on in the world, but I knew all that was for sale and who was who - all through the advertisements.

Doing what I do every day – reading the newspaper – means I get to notice recurring stories.

A favourite one, it seems, is the appearance of Bigfoot, Goatman, or some other mythical or mystical being. These sightings, true or false, always seem to be made out in the woods, or on deserted country lanes. They come in clusters. One report is usually followed by several soon after. Always they are of some monster or giant or animal-like shape-shifter. The one I am about to tell you about was different.

It was a woman.

Now that rarely happens. The other thing that caught my interest was that, although the precise locations of the sightings varied, they remained in roughly the same area. None of them were actually *in* Paradise, but they were in the general area *outside* of the town, and usually not far from the Green River.

Sometimes there were noises and disturbances at night around remote cabins or settlements. Or from backpackers camping overnight. The next morning people would wake up to discover clothing they'd left outside, gone, or the hen house raided with eggs taken or – on occasions – even the hens themselves.

But never money or valuable possessions.

When it got particular bad, and if there were a lot of reports, locals would get together and go on a search. They always came back empty handed, not having seen any stranger, or being, or animal. The only exception was when they would come across an abandoned cabin or a shelter used by trappers, or hunters for an over-night camp – where there was evidence of someone living there. There were a few of these scattered around the woods, often places where wood-cutters had lived, or charcoal-burners who provided fuel for iron smelting before coal took over, and they left.

I told Billy about this. I had a funny feeling about it.

What if? I thought. *What if Eleanor hadn't died after all, but had survived and stayed close to the places she knew?*

He agreed it was possible so we decided to do some exploring of our own that weekend. We'd take off Friday night and stay overnight – camping out – until Sunday. We took heart that it could be her when some of the sightings talked about a woman with long red hair, but they had seen little else to identify her.

Eleanor had red hair.

I'd look across at her sometimes when we were out and, Billy said, *if the sun was behind her, the light shining through her hair made it look as though it was on fire.*

There were a few redheads in the area, mainly due to the Scottish coming over and settling in Airdrie Hill, but over the decades red or auburn hair became rare due to inter-marriages.

Billy and me set out early that Friday evening. It was June, so there was plenty of light left and it was warm. We didn't bother packing much more than a bedroll each, intending to camp out under the stars or under the trees, seeing as how there was little chance of rain. We weren't short of wood, either, so we could keep a fire burning for most of the night. If that wasn't enough to keep us warm, Billy had brought along supplies of moonshine.

Our first instinct was to head for the river. You always need water. By the second day we'd covered probably twenty miles without any sign of the unusual, male or female. That evening we did happen upon one of those cabins I was talking about. It was derelict but still in reasonable shape, least ways the roof was. Best of all it had a stove.

"Shall we make this our next camp?" I asked. "It'll be dark in an hour anyway."

Billy agreed.

We lit the stove, took out the night's provisions, then sat. Talking. I'd taken along a few newspaper clippings to show Billy. All he had to go on were the stories I'd told. We figured we would keep a lamp burning, even through the night. If there *was* someone in the woods, curiosity would get the better of them and they would check out who these strange visitors – *who we* – were.

We talked some, but soon the effect of Billy's moonshine, together with tiredness, got the better of us. I've no idea whether it was Billy or me who dropped off first. All I recall

was Billy shaking me gently, at the same time whispering for me to keep my voice down and my movements soft.

There was someone outside.

The occasional hoot of an owl or the scream of its prey - if it had caught some unfortunate victim - were the only sounds. The rest of the time – *most* of the time – it was quiet.

Even the breeze had dropped.

The leaves hardly stirred.

But *something* did. You could just *sens*e it.

Was it a bear? Black bears were common and favourites for scavenging waste bins. Unlike grizzlies, they rarely attacked unless startled. They had excellent noses for left-over scraps.

But we'd left no food outside.

Coyotes were also a nuisance, often a noisy nuisance, but only food would attract them. There were no wolves, and cougars tended to keep away from humans. The odds were that the intruder – if they *were* intent on intruding – was human.

Hopefully there was only one of them.

There were two windows either side the door and a bright moon that night. It peaked shyly through the canopy of leaves overhead. Billy took one window, me the other, peering carefully from the edge of each pane so we couldn't be seen from the outside. There was a clearing just a few yards in front of the cabin. It was lit by the moon.

"Shhh," said Billy. "What's that over there?" he pointed to the edge of the clearing. I could see a bush moving, but only slightly as if they were conscious of being watched.

The dog that skipped out from the undergrowth had heard us and ran towards the cabin. Its sharp bark outvoted by its wagging tail. At least it was friendly

A small figure followed soon after.

“Jake, come here!” whispered a voice. It was a girl, a young girl perhaps six years old. The dog ignored her so she had to run after it, grabbing hold of it before slipping a piece of rope through its collar.

“Stay here!” hissed Billy - but not before I could open the door to the cabin. I was gone and he was too late. As soon as the girl saw me she stopped in her tracks, thinking about her next move.

“Don't be scared,” I said, but softly, anticipating that she was wondering whether to run or, if her curiosity got the better of her, to stay to find out 'who was this stranger in her woods'?

I stepped off the porch onto the grass of the clearing. She stopped, hesitating then turning to face me. I knelt down to be the same height as she was. Her dog continued to wag his tail.

She was being brave but she *looked* scared.

“I won't hurt you.” I reached out to her with my open hand.

“If you *do* hurt her, if you so much as *touch* her, it'll be the last thing you do, pretty boy.”

The voice cut through the darkness, coming from beyond the clearing. It was a woman – educated by the sound of her, but all I could see was a rifle barrel. Pointing right at me. I wasn't in the mood to argue, so I froze. She crept slowly forward out of the shadows and into the moonlight.

The little girl ran up to her.

“Mamma,” she cried, “I only wanted to look.”

“That's OK,” said the woman. The little girl hid behind her long coat. “Just stay close. OK baby girl?”

The girl nodded.

“I just wanted to...” I began.

“All I hear is *want*! Nobody's interested in what *you* want, pretty boy. I just need to know why you're here.” She was armed, but the nervousness in her voice belayed her fear.

It was matching mine.

I was still crouched, even lower now. She came forward towards me, still a safe distance away until she stood looking down over me. That's when I saw what Billy had described earlier. The moon was above us both now, the woman and me, its light shining through her hair from behind – through her *red* hair – creating a halo.

"Eleanor?"

Billy took *that* word right out of my mouth. He'd stayed inside the cabin, watching the scene as it unfolded. Now he was on the front porch. He had a clearer view of the woman than I did. The woman, or at least her hair, was still bathed in an aura of light, from a pale yellow on the edges to a rich auburn as it framed her face. She was indeed the beauty she'd been made out to be.

Still I didn't move, the rifle remained trained on me.

"Is that you, Billy?"

The once hard tone of her voice softened as she recognised first the voice – then the figure - on the porch. Much to my relief she lowered the rifle.

The little girl remained close to her.

"I thought you were dead," he replied. "They told me..." His voice trailed off. He stayed on the porch, unmoving, stunned, not believing the vision standing before him, finally.

After being lost to him for so long.

She hesitated.

"I was," she eventually whispered. "I *am*, to the world anyway. Dead, that is." She peered into the shadow cast by the overhang to the porch where Billy still stood, straining to search his face for more of his familiar features.

"How've you been, Billy?"

"Lousy." He spoke with no emotion, apart from maybe a hint of despair. Relief, maybe?

Finally he made his way – slowly – to where she and the little girl stood. Enshrouded in the discovery of each other they remained oblivious to everything and everyone around them. He reached out to take her free hand. She dropped the rifle so he could take the other.

For a while, they just stared at each other.

Meanwhile I was getting cramp.

“Can I move now?” I asked.

“Do just as you like, pretty boy.”

But it was Billy who spoke this time, picking up on Eleanor's new name for me. She made the next move, taking his grizzled face in her hands before drawing him close.

“Hold me.”

It was all she said.

Billy didn't need asking twice. The seven years that had passed without her - without knowing she was alive - had been the longest years of his life. They held each other, the years they’d been apart gradually melting away.

Until it was the little girl who spoke.

“Who's this man, Mamma?”

“This is your... Billy,” she said, loosening her hold to wipe away a tear before the little girl noticed.

“*My* Billy?” she questioned. “he looks more like *your* Billy,” said the little girl. “You mean we got to *share* Billy?”

“She's got your wacky sense of humour,” said Eleanor without any explanation. Billy was coming up with answers in his head to his own imagined questions, ones he hadn't even asked yet. And he would soon find many to ask.

“Shall we go inside?” I suggested, seeing my chance. “It's getting a tad chilly out here.”

We made our way into the cabin; me, Billy and Eleanor arm in arm, followed by the little girl.

And, finally, Jake.

“Is that the smell of coffee? *Real* coffee?” asked Eleanor as the warmth of the cabin greeted us. “It's been all too long.”

We were later to learn what she meant, living as she had as a virtual hermit.

“You don't look any different,” said Billy.

“Apart from the Daniel Boone outfit, you mean?”

She was dressed in buckskin, coat and pants, with leather boots and a narrow brimmed hat.

A Bowie knife was slung from her belt.

“I wasn't going to mention that part, but...” said Billy.

His attention then turned to the little girl who, as far as he could make out, was no more than six or seven years old, dressed in a similar ‘just put together’ fashion. Or lack of it. The dungarees over her grey shirt were a tad to big for her, but came to just above her boots. They seemed to fit OK, but otherwise she seemed to be in had-me-downs - or maybe they were stolen.

They certainly weren’t ‘chosen’ off the rail.

I poured coffee for the three of us; juice for the girl.

Eleanor went on to fill us in on the last seven years of her life. Apparently she’d nearly drowned trying to cross the Green River to escape the hounds. She hadn't swum far before tiredness dragged her downstream where she landed on the shore on the very same side from which she’d started.

By that time, the bloodhounds had lost her scent.

It was there, unconscious through exhaustion, that an old Cherokee woman found her and took her in. She was a throwback from when the Indian Nation populated Kentucky, but she’d avoided being relocated to a reservation.

She was a young girl then. Now she was ancient, having survived on backwoodsman skills and Cherokee upbringing. She lived on her own deep in the woods. Nobody ever bothered her, and she never bothered anybody else.

But that day she *did* bother. She helped Eleanor back to her shelter – a reclaimed charcoal-burner's cabin. It was there she helped Eleanor with the birth of her little girl, Awanita.

It meant 'fawn' in Cherokee. They shortened it to 'Nita'.

The Cherokee woman delivered the baby after showing Eleanor the 'Indian ways' of childbirth. What she'd not already learned from the women of her tribe before she was parted from them, she developed as her own skills in natural medicines, herbs and, through necessity, surviving on what she could catch, forage, or grow.

She passed her knowledge onto Eleanor.

Eleanor knew there would still be a warrant out for her so she also decided to stay away from normal civilisation for as long as it took. She explained everything to the Cherokee woman, who had no love for the American (or English, German or Scottish, as it were) - white people.

Eleanor learned how to survive from her host, and the three lived together for a further five years until the Cherokee woman died, quietly, of old age.

She and Nita were now on their own.

"Nita and me have been on our own now for over a year," said Eleanor. "We get by the best we can, but Nita needs schooling, other people. She needs kids her own age."

"You can come back with us," said Billy.

"T'wouldn't be fair on you. If I get caught you'd go to jail. But you could take Nita. Bring her up as your own."

"I'm not leaving again without you," said Billy.

They both fell silent. I said nothing. Nita – and Jake – were both fast asleep in front of the stove. Soon it would be light and the dawn chorus was beginning.

Eventually Eleanor spoke. "I meant it when I said you could bring her up as your own. She *is* 'your own' anyway.

She's your daughter. Have you forgotten what the argument was about when...”

She didn't finish the sentence. She meant when Ralph took a swallow dive out of the loft.

“... how could I forget?” Billy said.

“They would both be safe at your place, Billy,” I said. “Nobody ever goes out to see *you*.”

“'cept you,” smiled Billy.

I was about to cross the line now, but I didn't care. “It's not just about you two any more,” I said. “You have to think about Nita. She deserves a future. A normal upbringing.”

Billy and Eleanor looked at each other. I knew I was right. So did they. “The boy's got a point,” Billy said.

“Not just a pretty face,” she replied. “Just depends what you mean by ‘normal’.”

They both laughed but nobody said another word. We made what was left of our breakfast provisions make do for four. Eleanor drained the last of the coffee pot.

“Are you any good with a still?” Billy asked, turning to Eleanor.

“Where d'you think I got this red hair from?”

That's how Billy got himself a wife and family. We packed up our gear and struck out for Paradise.

And home.

The four of us together. And Jake.

~ THE (HAPPY) END ~

Further reading of the works by J S Morey

Read My Shorts: from which The Coal-Miner's Son is taken, together with a collection of stories in prose and verse.
The Black Hound of Dartmoor - and other short stories

The Sign of the Rose: Book 1 of the historical romantic, Romani saga - a journey from Ireland to England, late 1800's
The Black Rose of Blaby: Book 2, in a Leicestershire village where historical facts blur with mystical events
Rose: The Missing Years and Finding Rose: two novels; one story; told from two perspectives - Books 3 & 4 in the saga

Those Italian Girls: a murder/mystery/romance set in the Tuscan wine-rowing town of Volterra
Love Can Be the Death of You - if it follows you around

Wild Hearts Roam Free: modern-day 1960's pioneers seek a new life, and find themselves, in the grasslands of Wyoming
Wild Heart Come Home: celebrating the life and times of those sharing Lakota heritage and a one-ness of spirit
Wild Hearts Bright Stars - Book 3 in the trilogy

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