

Friends and Neighbors

by Clint "Concolor" McInnes

Life ain't easy.

Pap says that. Some days he says it a lot.

Like back in the spring, when he'd done got the garden in an' there come a big storm an' washed most of it down t' the crick. We just stood there in the door o' the cabin, me with my bonnet in my hands, him leanin' up 'gainst the door, an' watched all that mud slide on by, an' he had his hand on my shoulder an' he squeezed kinda hard. Don't think he knowed he was doin' it, though, so I didn' complain none.

Pap don't complain. Not 'cept when he says life ain't easy. Sometimes he sorta slumps a bit when he says it, like his body thinks so, too. I know he gets tired. Pap works real hard. He's always worked real hard, ever since Mama died.

I was nine an' B'linda was four when she died. Mama was fixin' t' have 'nother baby, an' there was somethin' wrong an' the baby wouldn't come. Pap hitched up our wagon an' got all the blankets we had an' put 'em in the back an' then he put Mama in there. They was fixin' t' take off fer town. There was a doc in town.

Pap talked t' hisself a lot while he was fixin' up the wagon. I follered him around an' helped what ways I could. See, we didn' have much in the way o' neighbors, on account of our house was out in the middle of our parcel. An' the neighbors ... well, they kindly kept t' themselves.

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I 'member when the neighbors started leavin' us pretty much alone all the time. I 'member once when we was goin' t' church an' there was a picnic direc'ly after the service. Pap spread out our quilt, the big one Mama made out o' bits o' calico an' feed sack an' whatnot. I always thought it was awful pretty. Mama was smart like that, always gettin' pretty things out o' next t' nothin'. Pap told me one time, he says, "Molly, ain't we lucky that you got such a smart Ma? She can make frills an' finery from pokes an' pine needles." Pap loved Mama a whole awful lot. I reckon he still does.

But we was s'posed t' have the picnic all together there on the grass behind the church, up under these three big ol' oaks. Pap got us squared, an' Mama started takin' out our lunch, an' three big men walked up. They looked mad, like they had bad news that wanted spreadin'. Pap stood up an' met 'em.

"Afternoon, John, Sam'l." He looked at the other man. "Don't believe we've met. I'm Jake Stoker." An' Pap stuck out his hand.

The other man looked at Pap's hand, but didn't shake it. I thought that right odd. Shakin' hands is what men do when they meet. Pap taught me that.

The one Pap called 'John' said, "This here's Right Reverend Simmons, from over Topeka way. He's gonna be our new parson when ol' Reverend Wright leaves next month. We need to speak to you." He looked over at Mama, who was sittin' on the quilt, movin' our plates an' forks around like she wasn't satisfied with 'em. I didn' know why. She already done 'em set out right. He coughed a touch an' then said, "We ought to speak alone. Privately."

Pap said, "I ain't done nothing needs to be kept quiet. Speak on."

The two men Pap knew both looked at me an' B'linda, an' then back at Mama. John shrugged. "Have it your way, Jake. We come t' tell you that you gotta move."

Pap's voice got real quiet, then. "And why would that be, John?"

That third man, Reverend Somethin', he spoke up then an' said, "I won't have blatant sin marring a gathering of the Lord's people!"

Pap stepped over till he was right up in front o' the Reverend, an' his voice got even lower. "And what sin might that be?"

"Miscegenation!" I scooted right fast over t' Mama on account o' the Reverend was real loud when he said that. I didn' know the word, but it sounded like a bad word comin' out o' his mouth.

That was the first time – an' the *only* time – I ever seen Pap strike another man. Now, Pap ain't a big man. He ain't much bigger than Mama. Course, she's tall fer a woman, Pap says, on account o' her bein' Cherokee. But though Pap might not be tall, he's right strong. I seen him pick up the back end o' the wagon an' set it on a stump t' fix the wheel. So I guess he could hit mighty hard if he felt it was called fer. His fist came up, like from way down by his knees, an' he caught the Reverend smack under the chin an' lifted him a good ways off the ground. The Reverend rolled a bit, an' he didn' get back up. By the time I got my eyes back on Pap, John was holdin' a pistol on him. "Jake, you're gonna have to leave. Now."

Pap said, "Nothing would make me happier." He crooked a hand at Mama an' said, "Elspeth, take the girls to the wagon. I'll be along directly." So I didn' get to hear what he said to John an' Samuel, but he talked to 'em a while. Then he come back with all the picnic things in the quilt over his shoulder. He put it in the wagon, an' we all rode back t' home an' nobody said a word.

We didn' go to church none after that. Pap would read to us from the Good Book on Sundays, an' that was that.

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So, anyway, once Pap got Mama settled in the wagon, he got me an' B'linda together an' said, "I'm takin' your Ma to town to have the baby. The doctor there can help in ways I can't. Molly, you look after Belinda till I get back. Stay inside unless you have a good reason to be outside, and keep the latch pulled." An' he hugged us real tight, an' then he took off down the road at a good clip.

I done what he told me t' do. I stayed in the house an' looked after B'linda. We played with her doll some, an' I got her t' help me clean up the front room. I kept her by me when I went t' draw water an' when I went t' the barn t' feed our two cows. Pap milked 'em both 'fore he left, but I had t' milk 'em again that night. Gotta be done twice a day. The cows get a right smart upset with you if you don't get to 'em when they need it. They might get sick, an' then they might stop givin' milk altogether.

So I was workin' on the second cow – her name's Millie – when B'linda comes up to me an' says, "Molly, look who I met!"

Now, I knowed there was a snake in the barn. Prob'ly a few of 'em. Pap don't mind none 'cause they keep the rats out o' the hay, so he don't never kill any of 'em. But he kept his distance, all the same.

An' here come B'linda with just about the biggest black racer I ever did see, an' it's all flopped out across her shoulders, just as quiet an' comf'table as if he was sunnin' on a rock. An' she's grinnin' like a cat in a cream pitcher. "Ain't he pretty, Molly?"

Me? I don' like snakes. Don' see no use in 'em. Pap says not t' touch 'em, 'cause even if they ain't poison, like this one, they can still make you sick if they bite you. An' a snake *will* bite you. I know. I been bit. Scared Mama half t' death, but she boiled up some herbs an' put 'em on the bite, an' it took the pain right away an' I never did get sick. Mama was smart.

So I says, "B'linda! Put that thing down! It'll bite you!"

"No, she won't! She's nice! She just wants to be warm, that's all." An' payin' me no more mind than a cricket, she trots off t' the other end o' the barn an' climbs up on the hay.

I didn' have the least idea what t' do. I had to finish milkin' Millie, that's one thing I knew fer sure. So I yelled over at B'linda, "You gotta put that thing down! An' do it careful-like, so he don't bite!"

"It ain't a he! It's a girl snake, an' she's gonna have babies, an' she likes me, an' she wants t' stay with me. An' I like her!"

Honest, I did *not* know what t' do. I got done with the milkin' an' poured it up into the cheese jar like Pap said to do. Then I rinsed out the pail an' hung it on its hook, an' went over t' where my silly nit of a sister was *playin'* with a *snake*.

I didn't get too close. "Come on, B'linda, you know what Pap says. You can't trust a snake. You never know when it'll bite, but they always do 'cause it's in their nature. They always bite."

"Dorrie won't."

"... Dorrie?"

"That's her name."

"B'linda, snakes don't have names!"

She got that real stubborn look on her face that she gets when she thinks she's right an' *ever'body else on this round world* is wrong. "She does, too. I can't say it, but she's got a name, an' I said I'd call her Dorrie, an' she *likes* it. An' she likes *me*."

I watched the snake fer a minute. It sure did look happy. We'd already started the harvest, an' it was gettin' nippy at night, so's me an' B'linda had t' snuggle close under our quilt t' keep warm. I didn't know what snakes did t' stay warm. Mama says they ain't warm-blooded like us, an' need the sun t' stay alive. "B'linda, if Mama an' Pap come back an' find you with that snake, they'll be mad as hornets. You know that."

"No, Mama won't. She likes snakes."

That much, I had t' agree, was true. Mama liked animals, an' she wasn't picky. If it moved, it was her friend. But she kept away from snakes on account o' Pap, 'cause he didn't like 'em much. Didn't trust 'em anyhow.

I tell you what though ... I wasn't gettin' any closer t' that snake than I was right then. "Just you be sure you get shed o' that thing 'fore they get back."

"Okay." She didn't look like she cared much, though. I made good an' fer sure she didn't have the scaly monster with her when we went back in the house. I got my limits.

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Pap was gone fer a whole night an' day, an' when he come back he stopped the wagon down by the first gate an' walked up t' the house. B'linda spotted him when he got t' the porch, an' scooted out an' jumped on him. "Is it a bruvver or a sister?"

I come out then, an' ran t' hug him. But right as I did, I seen how long an' gray his face looked, an' I got worried. He said, "Girls, come in the house. I have somewhat t' say."

So he told us about Mama dyin' an' the baby dyin' an' him not bein' able t' save 'em. The doc was off somewhere when he got there. Some rancher's men got

caught in a stampede an' there was lots of 'em hurt. But there was a midwife in town, too, an' Pap went t' her an' told her about Mama. But she wouldn't look at Mama. Said it wasn't right, an' she wasn't about to bring another half-breed into the world. She shut the door on Pap.

Pap done the best he knowed how. He tried turnin' the baby, tried ever'thin' he could think of, but it didn' do no good. The baby never did come, an' Mama died anyway. After that, Pap went back t' the midwife an' called her t' the door an' cursed her, *right to her face*. He told her she would burn in Hell fer murder, but she didn' say nothin'. She just slammed her door on him.

After that a long time went by 'fore Pap had much more t' say t' either one of us.

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It was next spring 'fore I got my second taste o' what sort o' strange goin's-on B'linda was fixin' t' get up to. We had the garden in, an' Pap had us out there ever' day, pullin' weeds. Mama taught us real careful-like what was a weed an' what wasn't, an' we paid close attention, 'cause now Mama could see us all the time on account o' she'd died an' was in Heaven. When he buried her an' spoke over her grave, he said she'd be watchin' over us from now on. So I'm careful t' be good as I can. Most days.

It was just after we'd headed in fer lunch, an' I heard Pap yellin' mighty loud. Me an' B'linda ran t' the door t' see what was the matter, an' I seen two deer high-tailin' it fer the edge o' the woods. Pap stomped back in. He didn' say nothin', but he got down his rifle an' bullets an' powder an' laid 'em by the door. B'linda asked him why he did that, an' he says it was on account o' he was fixin' t' kill him a deer the next time he saw one eatin' out o' his garden. B'linda looked scared an' asked him why he had t' do that, an' he says it was 'cause they were takin' food off his table an' he was damned if he was gonna see his girls starve. Pap don't curse much 'cause he says that don't show folks nothin' but what you can't think o' the right word t' say. But he was riled, so I reckon the Lord ought t' overlook that'n.

Shootin' the deer sounded good t' me. I didn' want t' starve, an' venison is mighty tasty. But B'linda got that stubborn look again an' said he better not shoot 'em, 'cause killin' was wrong. "It says so in the Good Book. You read it to us last Sunday, an' it says, 'Thou shalt not kill.' Don't it say that, Pap?"

"Child, that means not t' kill another man. Killing animals is different. We got t' do that t' live. It's the way of nature."

She didn' say nothin', just got all teary an' ran away. Honest, I don't know what gets into that girl.

Later, maybe a half-hour 'fore dusk, I was carryin' in a pail o' water when I seen her sneakin' off t' the woods. She was too far away to call to, an' I didn' want Pap to see her 'cause he'd tan her hide good if he caught her disobeyin' like that. He warned us away from the woods, 'cause there's dangerous beasts in there, an' he don' want us gettin' hurt, or maybe et. I put the pail in the kitchen an' ran out after her. Pap was workin' over t'other side o' the house. I could hear him beatin' somethin' on the anvil.

I seen where she went into the woods an' struck off fer that spot. When I got there I stopped an' looked in, tryin' t' see her or hear her. I did hear a couple o' *snap-snap* sounds, like somebody walkin', an' follered that. An' in no time I saw her. An' I stopped right there. Don' think I coulda moved if my feet was on fire. There she stood, bold as brass, face t' face with two does. I mean they were standin' right there in front o' her. She coulda reached over an' touched 'em both. I didn' have no idea at all what t' do. So I did nothin'.

They stared at one another fer what seemed like hours. I knew it wasn't, but it sure felt like it. Then the two does backed up a few steps, an' this *great big buck* with antlers like a tree walks up between 'em. He looks at B'linda an' lowers his head till they get t' near 'bout breathin' the same air. An' she puts up her brown little hands an' pats him on the head, an' he blows a couple times an' then the three deer walk away.

I was back in the house an' busy with other things when B'linda showed up later. I never did say nothin' about it, an' neither did she. But we didn' have no more deer eatin' in the garden. Not even once.

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B'linda always was the quiet one of us. I can talk the ears off a stuffed moose. Pap said so once, so I guess it must be true. But B'linda can go a whole day an' not say a word. I've seen her do it.

Things got a lot harder after Mama died. There was way more work fer all of us, an' precious little time t' worry about anythin' else. We'd work all day, fixin' the meals, an' keepin' the house clean an' the animals tended an' the clothes mended. Pap worked outside, breakin' the new ground an' puttin' in corn. I like cornbread an awful lot, an' Pap says if we get a good harvest off the twenty acres he planted, we ought t' be able t' grind up enough t' make a winter's worth o' meal. We got eggs from the chickens an' milk from the cows, an' Pap got us a stock o' bakin' soda an' a barrel o' oil when he went after salt an' sugar an' tea an' tobacco back in July. He got us some dried apples, too, so I can make apple corn fritters, like Mama showed me. I do all the cookin' now, on account o' Mama taught me, an' Pap don't have the least idea how t' start. He's too busy t' cook anyhow.

So we stayed busy that summer an' fall. Apart from rest on Sunday – an' Pap was real partic'lar about that – we didn' do nothin' but work. Keepin' busy meant we didn' have time to pine fer Mama. I guess I would've done that most o' the time, if I thought about it. I missed her terrible bad. Reckon Pap missed her worse.

But B'linda acted like she was doin' ... well, 'fine' might not be the right word. 'Steady', maybe. She was real steady. Like she knew what life had out in front of her an' she wasn't worried. Howsomever, she did what work I asked her t' do an' never complained.

Somethin' else I noticed that summer, that I never did tell Pap, was that somethin' was keepin' the mice out of our stores. I 'member the summer before, that first summer after we moved to Kansas, we lost all kinds o' meal an' dried fruit an' leather breeches t' mice. They ate near 'bout as much as we did. But not this year. I couldn' find where they'd got in at all. So I figured, maybe, that there black racer what B'linda made friends with was helpin' keep 'em out. Or maybe she made a deal with the mice, like what she did with the deer. I didn' know ... an' after thinkin' about it, I decided I didn' *want* t' know. I was just glad I didn' have t' mess with sewin' up feed sacks an' siftin' mouse turds out o' the flour. That'll spoil a biscuit in a hurry, let me tell you.

We had a long fall an' a good harvest all around. I dried vegetables an' fruit till I ran out o' places to hang 'em, an' canned ever'thin' else till I ran out o' jars. An' then, boy, did we ever eat good then! Beans an' squash an' corn an' taters an' turnips an' 'maters an' carrots all the time, an' a nice fat rabbit whenever Pap took a notion to hunt. They was all over the place ... except around the house an' in the garden. But I didn' let myself think about that.

Anyhow ... what I mean t' say is, we had us a bumper crop. We headed into the winter with way more food put up than we could eat, an' four cords o' wood stacked up against the back o' the house. The roof was in good shape. Pap worked it over good, an' fixed a lot o' rotten shingles. We had feed fer the horse an' cows an' chickens. An' we had time t' relax.

Thing is, we didn' really *want* t' relax. I'd been 'doing' fer so long I didn't know any other way t' act any more. Pap was in the same fix. We got real fidgety if we weren't busy.

I guess it was B'linda that brought us around. She was fixin' t' turn six that winter, an' started talkin' about havin' a party. Don't know where she got that notion. Maybe it was somethin' Mama said to her one time. Anyhow, she pestered me to fix up one o' her old dresses with some lace an' ribbon, an' once I had that done she started in on wantin' a cake.

Like I had *any idea* how t' do a cake? Not a cake like what she was talkin' about. I'd seen 'em, o' course, a few times, but what went into frosting stumped me. Sugar? Yes, prob'ly. What else? Eggs? Egg whites? Did you cook it or use it

fresh? Flour? It didn't seem like you would, but ... maybe just a little? Or not? What about shortnin'? If so, how much? An' believe me, I knew better than t' ask Pap about cookin'.

But she wouldn't leave it be, so I started tryin' out some ideas. Pap called it 'experimenting' an' wished me luck.

She kept after him, too, wantin' him t' teach her as many games as he knew. I hoped that would be good fer him. Sometimes at night, after B'linda was asleep an' Pap figgered I was, I could hear him cryin'. I'd pull the quilt up over my head, 'cause I didn't want t' listen, 'cause I felt so bad fer Pap, but I couldn't help it. It always made me cry, too, but it's okay fer girls t' cry. Mama said sometimes a good cry would make the sky a little less gray. I didn't know what she meant then. Now I do.

I don't care. It's no shame fer a man t' cry. Pap's a good man. He can cry if he wants to.

So her birthday come, an' we had us a little party, an' my cake wasn't half bad. Don't know if it tasted like the ones I seen in that shop that time, but I didn't get no complaints from Pap or B'linda. An' I ain't studyin' anybody *else's* judgment on my cookin'.

So the winter went by, an' it wasn't near as sad an' dull as it might've been because B'linda wouldn't let us grieve too much. Don't mistake, though. We did grieve. You can't *not* grieve over something as wrong as what happened t' Mama. But we didn't die of it, an' it might have been a lot worse'n it was.

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O' course, *worse* was bound t' come along anyhow, an' it did right at the spring thaw. That's how we ended up here in Colorado.

I was born in Tennessee. So was B'linda, but we moved right after that. We had t' leave on account of all o' Pap's relatives bein' so dead set against him marryin' Mama. It never did make no sense t' me. They loved each other t' distraction, an' she was awful pretty. Anybody with two eyes could see it. But because she was Cherokee, Pap's father told him we weren't welcome in their home. I was too little at the time t' understand, but Pap explained it t' me later. Mama never did talk about it. I don't think I would either, if I was her. It was a big insult, an' she got her revenge by pretendin' nothin' was wrong whenever they was around his folks. Pap told me later that she said if anybody was gonna get et up by ill feelings, it wouldn't be her. Mama was a good lady.

But trouble won't leave decent folks alone, I reckon. Along 'bout March Pap went out t' check the fence line, t' make sure it was good an' sound so we could turn the cows out. He wasn't gone too long, an' when he come back, he was bleedin'. I

helped him in an' looked at his arm, figurin' he'd got cut on the barb wire. But it weren't no cut. It was a hole. A bullet hole.

There was bad men around then, men who hated the Red Man an' wanted t' kill all of 'em. I heard one of 'em talkin' one time when we was in town, talkin' t' another man about killin' a Delaware, 'cause he left the Reservation in Oklahoma an' tried t' move back t' Kansas. He said it wasn't like you was killin' a man. He didn' think no more on it than he would squashin' a bug. I got B'linda, an' we hid till he left.

Well, they found out about us, an' they come after Pap, on account o' he married Mama. I didn' know any o' that right then. All I knowed then was that somebody had shot my Pap, tried t' *kill* my Pap. An' I got mad.

Pap was smarter than me, though. He knowed what was 'bout t' happen. He knowed that as soon as somebody found out that those two men hadn' killed Pap, but had got killed instead, that there'd be a lynch mob out our way quicker'n a squirrel up a tree. So once I got him patched up, Pap went back to where they'd ambushed him an' dragged 'em off into the woods an' stuffed 'em under a big rock. Then he got all our things that we could pack on the wagon – an' that ended up being a whole lot less than what we *wanted* to take – an' he balanced a crate o' chickens on top, an' hitched up the cows t' the back, an' we lit out fer parts west.

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So that's how we got t' our little patch here in south Colorado. I'll have t' say it's a whole lot prettier than Kansas. Colder in the winter, though, an' the growin' season ain't quite as long. But we make do. Good place fer cabbage an' rutabagas an' onions.

I watched B'linda real close when we got settled, 'cause I'd seen her do a few o' those ... *odd things* ... on our trip out. Pap never did see any of it. Maybe it was luck, or maybe she's just careful. He was asleep when she talked a pack o' wolves into givin' us a pass. He never noticed when we were stopped at a water hole an' a big lizard walked up to her an' whispered somethin' in her ear, an' all o' sudden she "noticed" a dead bird near by that got Pap t' studyin' on it. He figured out 'fore too long that the water was bad. We would've died, if we drunk it. There was others, too. More than I want t' think about.

But we did get here, t' this little valley tucked in close t' some god-awful big mountains. We got three springs an' better'n a hundred acres o' high grass, an' good timber on the north side, an' about a million jack-rabbits. I reckon we can live off those if we don't get much from the garden. What we might not, 'cause o' the storm. Anyhow, Pap got us a cabin throwed up real quick, an' a decent little stall fer the stock at one end o' the corral. It's a good thing he got a new axe last fall. His old one's 'bout worn down to a nub.

B'linda fit right in here, acted more like somebody *comin'* home than leavin' one. Maybe she was, if you think on it kind o' sideways. I watched her right close after we got settled, an' sure enough she took up with this great ol' big – an' I mean *eeenormous* – deer thing. Pap talked about what kinds o' game there might be, an' he said 'elk' an' 'antelope' more'n once, so I reckon it musta been one o' them. His antlers was spread way wider'n I am tall. Wider'n *Pap* is tall. An' he was bigger'n our horse, I just know. B'linda didn' look like no more'n a kitten standin' in front of 'im, but she just put her hand out like she done before an' that big ol' thing reached down an' licked it. Just like that. Then he ambled off back into the woods. I don' think Pap would shoot him, though. There'd be way more meat than we could eat in three months, an' he hates fer things t' go spoil.

An' we did fine that first season, mostly. The garden got washed out, but Pap had enough seed t' replant, an' we did, so even though our crop was a mite late, we did get a crop. Good thing, too. There wasn't much o' what you'd call 'fall', just one day the grass started t' turn, an' three weeks later we got our first snow.

Winter wasn't no fun. No sir. Pap didn' know how much wood it'd take t' keep us warm, so he cut what he figured we'd need if we was still back in Kansas. That started gettin' low in a big hurry. He spent most o' his time goin' after wood that winter, an' we spent most of our time wrapped in four quilts an' tryin' not t' freeze t' death. I was glad I had the job o' cookin', 'cause that meant I had t' hunch over the fire, an' that was just about the only time my hands was ever warm.

We didn' know when Christmas come, but Pap made a guess an' he went huntin'. He come back near 'bout froze solid, but he had a couple o' big, fat birds. I cleaned 'em, an' rubbed 'em with oil an' some o' the little bit o' spice we had, an' then I set 'em up over the fire on a stick an' roasted 'em. I stuck turnips an' taters an' onions in the coals, too. It was near 'bouts the best meal we'd had since we left Kansas. After dinner he read us a story out o' the Good Book. He read how the angel Gabriel come t' Mary an' told her she was gonna be the mother o' the son o' God, an' how she give herself t' the will o' God, an' then how she went t' visit her cousin, who was a real old lady but she was fixin' t' have a baby, too. An' then he told us o' Mary an' Joseph tryin' t' find somewhere t' stay so's she could have her baby. An' they went t' Bethlehem ...

An' then Pap didn' read no more. He said it was time fer bed, an' his voice sounded funny. I reckon he was thinkin' 'bout Mama. I cried that night again, 'cause I was missin' Mama bad. I'd not done it in a while, an' B'linda hadn' either, an' when I started cryin', she snuggled over an' patted my shoulder an' told me it would get better.

Lord, I hoped so. I really did.

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Springtime come on sudden-like, too. One day these little flowers just started t' pop out o' the snow, an' in a few days' time, half the snow was gone. All three cricks swelled up an' climbed out o' their beds, an' the songbirds got so dadburned thick you couldn' hear yourself think. We got to breakin' ground an' plantin' right away. Pap had tomato seeds he didn't use from the year before, an' we picked a sunny spot fer 'em not too far from the front door. Then, just as soon as we got the first crop goin' good, Pap took the horse an' the wagon an' lit out fer the woods at the end o' the valley, lookin' fer firewood. We done used what there was close enough t' the house t' get to, but Pap said it was all softwood and burned up too quick. He wanted some hardwood, an' he said he'd have t' go t' the other woods t' get it.

He come back right at dusk, tired an' hungry. I had supper waitin', 'cause I figured he'd need it, an' he was that grateful. "Molly," he says, "you done your Ma proud. You'll be a fine woman one day." I *was* mighty proud then. Pap always said what he thought, an' if he told you somethin', you could believe it. I was to be a fine woman. Pap said so.

He showed us the wood he found across the valley, an' I reckon it was good fer firewood. Heavy, it was, an' hard. Pap said it dulled his axe pretty quick, an' he allowed as how he'd need t' get himself some new files 'fore too much longer. He said he was pretty sure there was a town called Pueblo t' the north, an' he'd see about us taking a trip some time when the ground dried out good. He give us a wink an' said he thought they might have some calico there, too. B'linda jumped an' clapped her hands. She didn' much like my hand-me-downs, an' that's all she had t' wear.

Well, the ground dried out, an' he was as good as his word. We got dressed in the best clothes we had – what wasn't all that good, the cloth bein' wore down t' where it 'bout only had one side – an' we headed north. We had t' camp fer two days 'fore we got there, an' had t' foller a man from a loggin' camp fer a piece, but we did get there. It was a big place, but real dirty. Pap kept us off the main street. We went around outside till we came t' a place we could bed the horse. Then me an' Pap an' B'linda, all holdin' hands, went t' find us a store.

Us girls was both tired by the end o' the day, but happier'n we'd been in a long time.

Real long time.

Pap got us enough calico an' gingham that I could make two dresses apiece, an' some broadcloth fer him a couple new shirts. He got some leather an' salt an' sugar an' tobacco an' another axe head, an' found a place that sold lead fer bullets an' powder like he needed fer his rifle. Any more, not too many men use muzzle-loaders. Most bullets was sold with the powder stuck right there on the end, in a metal tube. An' they were little things, too, not like the big bullets Pap made.

An' then Pap said we was out o' money an' we'd have t' figure out somethin' about makin' some 'fore we come back again.

That afternoon, though, when we was comin' out o' the general store, there was a man watchin' us. Soon as he seen I'd laid eyes on him, he quick turned away an' walked off. But it made me nervous. I didn' like folks watchin' me. I told Pap about it later, an' he got a sort o' worried look on his face fer a spell, but then he blowed a big sigh an' said, "Molly, you're growin' up. Won't be long, you'll be fourteen, an' startin' t' think about what you want t' look fer in a husband."

Now that scared me, I got t' say. I never did give it no thought at all, but there it was, bigger'n a bear in a outhouse.

He said, "You got your Ma's build an' my yellow hair, an' I guess I ought'n be surprised that men notice you." He smoothed my hair down, an' smiled, kindly sad-like. "I'll miss you when you're married off. You saved my life, you know." He reached over and pulled B'linda onto his lap an' hugged her, an' then he hugged me. "You both did. You have no idea."

Yep. It was a good day.

##

We was about halfway back home, 'long toward sundown, when things started t' get ... odd. B'linda an' me was sittin' on the back o' the wagon, hangin' our feet off an' lettin' the high grass brush our shoes. We was countin' the birds we saw an' tryin' t' name 'em. Or, leastways, I was. B'linda kept tellin' me I was wrong. She said every bird had a different name, an' just cause there was two birds that was both blue jays, that didn' mean their name was 'blue jay.' "All right, smartypants," I says, "what's that bird's name?" An' I pointed up t' where this big ol' hawk was just lazin' in the wind.

She looked up at him, an' then she got still, an' real quiet. Then she stood up on the back o' the wagon and stared off the way we come. She didn' answer me fer a long time, an' then she said, "He's comin'."

All them little hairs on the back o' my neck stood up plumb straight. "Who?" I asked.

She didn' say anythin' fer *another* while, an' I thought she didn' hear me, so I tugged on her dress. "Who? Who's comin'?"

She shook her head an' sat back on the tail o' the wagon. "Don't worry." She patted my arm, like she done when I was sad back in the winter. "It'll be all right."

She says that t' me now an' then. I wish I knew what she meant.

##

We made camp right up under this great, tall piece o' rock that stuck out the side o' the mountain. There was trees all around, an' a little bitty spring at the bottom o' the rock. It made a little pool, not even big as our wagon. An' a *tee-ninesy* stream that didn' hardly deserve t' be called one ran off into the woods an' disappeared. But it was pretty an' there was a good place t' put the wagon where Pap could build a fire out o' the wind.

I went off t' get some firewood, but it looked t' me like folks'd been here before, 'cause there sure wasn't much. I brought back the pitiful armload I found, but it was mostly rotten an' I knew it wouldn' burn good. "Pap, I gotta get some more. It might take a bit. Scarce pickin's around here."

"That's fine, Molly. I'll just get the horse fed an' put away. There's plenty o' time t' cook."

B'linda come up just as I was leavin' an' took hold o' my hand. "Molly, don't worry."

"Worry? About what?"

She pressed her lips together and gave her head a little shake. "Just don't worry. Okay? Promise?"

My neck hairs were doin' that stiff thing again. I mashed 'em back down. "Um. Hum. Okay. You gonna tell me what this is about?"

"Later. I promise." And she watched me walk away. I could feel her eyes on me.

The trees here were tall an' old, an' right there close t' the rock it was pretty dark. I had t' squint some t' see any pieces o' wood layin' around. I managed t' get another armload, though, an' it was better'n the first one. Oughta be able t' make a decent cook fire off it, anyhow. I headed on back t' the camp. Just about got there, too, 'fore this man stepped out from behind a tree an' grabbed me by the arm.

I near 'bout jumped out my skin, an' I screamed somethin' awful. Pap hopped up an' ran over. The man yanked a long knife out his boot an' laid it against my throat, an' Pap pulled up short. "Who are you?" he yelled. "What do you want?"

The man was dirty, an' he stank o' whiskey t' where it 'bout took my breath. He said, "You Jake Stoker?"

"I am! What of it?"

The man didn' say nothin' right away. Then he spit at Pap. "You murdered my brothers. I aim t' git blood fer it."

"What? I never murdered nobody!"

"That ain't what I hear. I hear you ambushed an' killt two men at yore farm south o' Topeka."

“Liar! They shot me first! If the one’s gun hadn’t jammed, I’d be dead! But I was able to get my knife out and stick them bushwhackers ‘fore they done me in, thank a merciful God.”

The man spat again. “Reckon I like my story better.” He jerked my head over t’ the side an’ raised his knife. “An’ I reckon I’ll start with her, seein’ as how she’s kin t’ you.”

“No, wait, take me first!” An’ Pap took a step toward us, but then his jaw dropped an’ his hands come up in front of him.

There musta been somethin’ in Pap’s face that got through all the whiskey an’ got the man’s attention, cause he didn’t stab me. He looked at Pap an’ seen that he wasn’t lookin’ *at* him – he was lookin’ *past* him. O’ course I didn’t know that at the time. I was too busy being scared half t’ death. But that’s what was happenin’ anyhow. Then somethin’ slammed into the man from behind, an’ we both got knocked down. The man let me go an’ I rolled an’ scooted an’ crawled away as fast as I could. When I looked back ...

When I looked back I seen the catamount. He was a big un, an’ he was on top o’ the man, an’ he had a-holt o’ the man’s neck, an’ he give it a twist an’ I heard a big crunch. The man stopped movin’ then.

Pap hollered over at me, “Don’t take your eyes off him! They attack from behind. He’s already got a kill an’ if we don’t bother him, he might just leave us alone long enough fer me t’ get my rifle. Just hold still an’ watch him.” An’ Pap eased on back toward the wagon.

The big cat didn’t move. He just watched us, first me, then Pap, then me. He had great big yaller eyes that seemed like they was lit up inside, an’ he looked at me just like I looked at a big plate o’ fried chicken I seen back in town.

Pap got his rifle an’ his powder, an’ was tampin’ it down when he heard B’linda say, “No, Pap! Don’t shoot him.” She walked out o’ the woods and over t’ where the catamount stood guard over his kill.

“Girl! Get away! He’ll kill you!”

“No, Pap. He won’t.” And she just walked right up to him, just like she did with the deer. An’ she reached out an’ she scratched him on top o’ the head, an’ he kindly leaned into it an’ closed his eyes. B’linda looked at us an’ said, “His name’s Khyeer. I promised him he could keep the kill. But he wants t’ know if you’ll take the clothes off first. They get in the way an’ they taste bad.”

“G-girl ... please ... get away from him.”

“Oh, Pap, he’s fine. He likes me. An’ I like him.” An’ she wrapped her little brown arms around the big cat’s neck an’ nuzzled him. An’ I swear t’ you, as God is my witness, as sure as I sit here tonight, that cat purred. Then he took one o’

those pie-pan-sized paws an' rolled the man over. He looked at Pap, then at me, an' then he ambled over under the trees, patted himself a flat place, an' flopped right down.

Pap said, real low an' under his breath sorta, "I do not believe this."

B'linda said, "Hope you don' need any help gettin' his clothes off. I don' really want t' see him nekkid."

"... No. No, I don't ... don't think I need any help." He never took his eyes off the catamount, what had put his head down 'tween his paws an' closed his eyes. "Don't really think I believe this is really happenin' ... but no, I don't need any help." He laid the rifle against the wagon an' watched the cat. The cat flicked an ear at a fly an' then yawned.

It didn' take Pap long to shuck that body out o' his clothes. He carried 'em off t' the other side o' the wagon, an just as soon as he was away from the body, the catamount padded over an' got a good grip on one arm. An' then he dragged him off into the woods. An' that was that.

##

B'linda had lots o' 'splainin' t' do after that, but Pap listened an' was patient. When the whole story come out an' he had some time t' think on it, he decided he wasn't all that surprised. He said Mama's father was a medicine man in their tribe, an' come from a line o' medicine men. He said he'd heard tell o' the old man havin' dreams that would come true, an' that he could put his hands on your head an' tell you what important sorts o' things would happen to you. So Pap just put it all down t' good breedin' an' didn' worry about it none. Besides, that stinky ol' man had a little bag o' gold dust on him, and a bigger bag o' silver. So you might say we got paid fer our trouble.

We got the farm whipped into shape pretty good that summer, what was last year. Pap added on t' the cabin, an' I think he's fixin' t' do some more. A few o' the neighbors – an' we do have a few, even if we don't see much of 'em – come by in early fall an' we had us a old-fashioned barn-raisin'. It ain't a real big barn, but it suits us fer now.

While that was goin' on, there was a ruckus out by where the horses were tied. Couple of 'em just rarin' an' snortin' t' beat the band. It looked like they was fixin' t' fight. But B'linda walked over to 'em an' said somethin' an' they calmed right down. She petted their noses an' left, but the man what owned one o' the horses seen her do it an' he went an' talked to her. Then he went an' talked t' Pap. An' B'linda ended up spending a week over at the man's ranch, helpin' him break a couple bad mustangs. Only, the way she told it, they weren't broke. They just decided, after she talked to 'em, that bein' easy t' get along with was better. But she got the man t' promise 'em both an apple apiece ever' day they was in season.

She gentled a ornery ol' bull while she was there, too. So now there's been a few more men by to talk to her just this week.

One o' the young men that come t' the barn raisin' seemed like he was underfoot most o' the time he was here. He's been back a few times, bringin' sheet tin an' a horse blanket an' a few other things. I done baked him a apple pie with some o' the dried apples he carried in last time. I 'spect he'll be out this afternoon some time. An' it's funny, but I ain't a bit scared.

No, like Pap said, life ain't easy.

But it's a might easier when you got friends.