

It's In The Blood

Jason Lester Atkins

Groundhog Mountain: (P.O)
Floyd Co., VA.
Sept. 10, 1862



Orelena sits quietly alone by the sputtering coal lamp on the kitchen table. She is waiting for daylight to start her working day. The molasses cake baking in the fireplace fills the cabin like a sweet perfume. It's a birthday gift to herself. Today, she is twenty-nine. Never in her life had she ever been so scared and lonely—especially, since what happened to her last week.

The civil war is at its killing height and the news keeps her worried sick about her husband Matt in the confederate army. Her only contact with the world, off her mountain, is the weekly mail. In the dim lamplight, she writes to her niece in Richmond.

Dear “Pookie,”

You asked me to keep on writing you so as to know how your kin are fareing in these mountains. I know the mail is two months coming from Richmond to here but, write me back as best you can. Its lonely here. Most of the menfolk are at the war, you know. I wrote you they came and conscripted Matt. Sent soldiers and a long legged nobody from down in Roanoke to git him. He didn't want to join up. Like most of our kin, his grandpap fought in the revolution and they aint for breaking up the Union and never owned no slaves. He's a blacksmith and strong and able at twenty-nine years so, they needed him to build wagons for the confederacy over at Buena Vista, VA.

Don't want to tell you 'bout that in this letter though. What I want to tell you is about the Snopes family - near here. One of em caused something that scared the puddin out of me - jist last week.

Kind of a long story 'bout them but, let me tell a little understanding 'bout their beginnings here, first. There was a whole passel of them. 'Ol man Buck Snopes, his wife and six children to start with. They came up out of the valley with a mule pulling a tumble cart and scant household goods. They wuz hungry and desperate acting. All of them whining with wild eyes. You've seen them eyes of some folks - kind of rolling all the time - with mostly whites showing. Well anyway - all the families on this mountain knew what it meant to be hungry and need some help to start. 'Ol widow Phillips had a good log barn she wasn't using and outright gave it to em to git them children out of the cold. The menfolk in our community re-chinked the logs - put a front door and window on the barn and put down wide board floors on the first level. All us women folks took some blankets - one extra cooking pot and a bunch of dried fruit and



vegetables - - along with some canned sausage and two big smoked middlins of side meat. They wuz fixed for a while - with the extra varmite they could kill and stew. Old barn was right warm and children slept in hay loft by the chimney - 'bout as good as most of us had then.

Miz Snopes was along about eight months and could hardly move so, us women took turns about once a week to help her along. Anyhow, come spring the menfolk plowed a field and garden for em. They gave em seed and corn for a right fair start. 'Ol man Snopes - he must have been around thirty year old - along with the four boys - jist sit around the fireplace with their hats on - every time we visited to check on em. No spring work going on - no planting - jist sitting. I remember the oldest boy was name "Bo" - jist "Bo." That was 'bout ten year ago - close on. Anyhow, folks started loseing pigs out of the woods. Everybody let pigs run wild till jist 'bout killing time. Notched their ears so as each family could know which was who's pig. They lost chickens at night and corn stolen out of fields. Found one of them notched sows penned up on the Snopes' place. Folks turned 'gainst them by then.



The scary thing I wanted to tell you happened last week. You know most of the young men are conscripted for the war and the women are running things - they tending stock - tending children - and making food crops all by themselves. Well - - last week I came in from the field at mid day. Was sitting eating some hoe cake and fried meat. All of a sudden - three scalawags with rags tied over their heads - eyeholes cut in the rags - grabbed me and tied me up. They run a rope over the rafter log in the ceiling and pulled my arms up - hurting bad. One of em had a pistol with a barrel hole big as a egg - pointing at me. They each had muskets they had stolen and wore confederate uniforms. I had heard 'bout these kind of bushwhacking deserters before. They move through country in woods and back roads - stealing mostly from helpless women whose men at war. They aint no heros - they dangerous - mostly cowards to start with and a coward with a gun is more dangerous than a real man. They looked through everything - all the cans and jars - tore up my bed. I wuz scared they ud shoot me and leave me bleeding and dead. Finally, the tallest one said - "Aunt Ory - I know you got some greenbacks hidden around here - Pap said so - Give em up!" Right then I recognized Bo Snopes. Something happened inside me. I got brave. I said - "Bo Snopes you untie me this minute and let me down. I got six dollars hid. That ud be two dollars a piece. Take em and that hoecake and meat and skedaddle." You wont believe this "Pookie." He said - "Yes um" and took off his head rag. Them other two untied me and took off their head rag. One of em looked about twenty - same as Bo. The other looked about fifteen years old. They had two Army horses - they had stolen - tied outside in a bush. One rode double and they galloped off down the west road.



Well - you must know how feared I wuz and disgusted too. Every family in every hollar along this road got a signal horn. It's a old long headed cow's horn - hollowed out. Even the children learn to blow it as a help signal. Sound carries a long way in these mountains and each family has a kind of code for what harms facing us and what direction it is going. I blowed my horn soon as them scalawags out of sight - and waited for an answer blow from our kin on next farm. I set in chair by the door quietly waiting. In 'bout one half hour I heard shooting off to the west. I know what happened to Bo Snopes and his outlaws. Seems like I heard there is a family like the Snopes - in every valley community. They live off other folks. You cain't help em. Cain't give enough goods or charity. They born bone lazy and stupid and pass it on in the blood for generations. Lord help any woman who marries one of em. Heard they had relatives in Mississippi and be moving on. Hope so.

Guess I close this letter for now. Glad I got to tell you 'bout my scare last week. Write me all the news back and keep sending the old Richmond Sunday papers. Even though, they old news, - we read and pass on through the family. The mail is slow but, would you believe it - we still gitting sale catalogs in the mail. All kinds of gadgets and googaws for sale. Want greenbacks though - wont take confederate. Wouldn't think that kind of commerce go on during the war - with so many boys dying and such hard times. Seems like once you buy something out of catalog - they never let you go. Let us know what 'ol Jeff Davis is saying. How long before our menfolk can come home?

Hope you can read this. I slip-writing frontier talk sometime and not writing talk. Guess you understand it when others caint. Don't feel so bad though - 'bout my writing. They say 'ol Abe Lincoln talks frontier language in the White House all the time but - he knows how to do beautiful writing of words.

Got to close. Take this letter to the store for mailman. He comes by once a week.

All send our Love,

Aunt Ory

