

Watershed

BOY, WHAT I'M ABOUT TO tell you I ain't told nobody for a long time and I probably won't tell again, cause them that know it are gone and them that come after don't need to know, for that time is past. It was a time of building up this valley and clearing land. But I want somebody to know these things. It's the war now and all the outlawing and bushwhacking that has remembered them to me. The air has the smell of burning and every patch of woods seems dangerous.

It was the face of that Cherokee girl brings back on me all of a sudden the march and the hollering. She wasn't no bigger than you are now. I was just big enough to carry a gun.

They's things we do we never did plan on or think we could do. Sometimes it's good we don't know what we have inside us, things that are just happens in the heat of the moment you might say. When these outliers started out they didn't mean to be outlaws I would say, most of them. It was just a happen. They never made any decision to be outlaws when they deserted or was wounded and got left behind. My guess is after taking the first chicken they found it easy to take a ham from some unlocked smokehouse, and after that ham a whole pig or cow, and a horse to tote their loot away. They never made a choice, until they later realized a choice had been made. Next they was stealing corn from widow women and slapping little kids to make them tell where the silver was buried. And now they'll kill a man for a pound of shot or an ounce of salt.

Boy, I don't want you to think them are devils that held you against the wall and took your pocket knife and hurt your arm to make you tell them where the powder was hid.

Only people around here's got any shot these days is the Raeburns, and everybody knows the Cherokee told them where the secret lead mine was. You can make powder from charcoal and saltpeter and a little brimstone. But lead can't be manufactured out of nothing but lead, and it just comes out of the ground and has to be melted down.

Guns was long and heavy in them days, and Pappy had just give me my own which he bought when he took some hams down to Greenville. And I'd already done a little hunting, for squirrels and wild turkeys. There was deer then aplenty, and panthers back in the coves, and bears using all around on Olivet and in the Flat Woods.

The Cherokee never lived here much. It had been their land since they took it from the Catawbas, but all their towns was over on the Tuckasegee and Little Tennessee and some down in Georgia and South Carolina. This was their hunting ground where they come through once or twice a year to run deer with fire and to fish. They had trails and camps all up and down the valley, and even a few Old Fields where they must have raised corn to eat when they camped here. You'd see these clearings in the woods when the white people got here that must have been used by the Indians since the beginning of time. And some of the fields they might have played ball in too, for they was like kids playing ball for days without stopping.

But our people poured into this valley after the Revolution like flies going to molasses. The new state didn't recognize it as Indian land and sold it off in big tracks to Col. Davis and such as your great-great-grandpa. Some people, like the Raeburns, who had been Loyalists and was hiding out, had already come and had doings with the Indians and learned

herbs and witchcraft from them, as well as the location of the secret lead mine.

The Cherokee had sent a party to raid the settlements. They's no doubt that's what they come for. They had a camp right up at the head of the river, upper edge of what we call The Abe Jones Flats. And boy I'm telling you them Indians was wild. It was liquor they liked most to steal, but the truth was they'd steal anything, stock out of the woods, chickens out of a henhouse, guns and powder.

They'd been any number of people that lost sheep and hogs to them. They burned the Revis cabin up on Rock Creek, and took Charles MacDowell's girl where they caught her by the spring and ruint her. Nobody knowed where they might show up next.

So word went out—Old Man Bayne was kind of the organizer—for all the men to meet with their rifles up at the ford where Cedar Springs Church is now. They was no church in all the valley then.

I was both hoping and fearing I would get to go. I was about eleven or twelve. That was near the turn of the century.

“No, you can't let David go,” Mama said. “He's my baby boy.”

“He's old enough to carry his own gun, and he can go,” Pappy said.

It was dark when we left home, the clearest night in November. It would have been perfect for coon hunting except the moon was only in its quarter.

I remember saying to myself as we left the milkgap I might never see the place again. It was hogkilling time and Mama give me a hot biscuit with tenderloin to eat on my way out.

It was a strange night. I skipped along gripping my cold gun. We went by lantern light up the river road which was just a track. And they was lights all over the mountains.

You might have thought was stars except they moved around. And they was a blue light in the hollow above Cabin Creek. We seen lights hovering in the woods on Thunderhead, and lights gliding along over the river. The night was so quiet you could hear somebody stumble way up on the ridge, or a horse shake its bridle half a mile away.

What's that? Sure I was scared, and shivering with excitement at the same time.

There at the ford all the men stood around a fire hardly talking. Some was loading their guns and sharpening long knives. Somebody had a jug of whiskey but Old Man Bayne said, "Stopper that thing up. We ain't gone have no drinking till the job is done. Then you can fill your skin all you please."

It was long before daybreak when we started up the river on the north side. You know how the valley gets narrow there above the Ward place and winds back into the mountains. Sometimes the valley is so pinched the road has to go through water. We sloshed along quiet as we could. I remember Phil Bailey who was my own age was along but he didn't say much either. It was about eight miles from the ford to the headwaters and we didn't want to get there after daylight.

I can still smell the witch hazel blooming along the river. It blooms after the leaves have gone. You've seen the pretty blossoms like parched corn in the November woods, sometimes even blooming after a snow. Something would plop into the river from time to time, but I don't think it was trout feeding at that time of the year. It must have been a muskrat or mink dropping into the water when we scared it. One time we smelled a skunk ahead, but I'm glad it never throwed its juice on us in the dark. You couldn't surprise nobody with polecat fumes all over you.

Boy, what I'm saying is this march felt like something out of the Bible, a mission, a crusade on the orders of the

Lord. When they ruint the MacDowell girl the Indians signed their doom in this valley. I weren't even sure how she was "ruint" but I knowed it was bad. They was a long line of men on the trail and you could feel their fear and determination. Yes, it was mostly fear. In the dark woods they was many a heart running away with itself.

The headwaters of the river is one of my favorite places. Don't you like the way the stream kind of winds and shimmies back into the high mountains, like it was bouncing off one mountain wall and then another. And the voice of the water echoes in the narrow gorge so it sounds like people are calling to you, or drowned people are wailing and talking inside the shoals and trout pools. The tall hemlocks go right down to the water's edge and reach up toward the cliffs. And they's a big rock that one time rolled down the mountain and lodged right by the river which we call The Prayer Rock. The first time I reckon it was called that was when we stoped there and Old Man Bayne took off his hat and prayed.

"Lord aid us in our struggle against the heathen, against the children of darkness," he said. "Guide our hand as it is raised aginst thy foes."

"Amen," the men all said. And I said "Amen" too for the first time.

"We're going to run them out of the watershed," Pappy said when we started out. And all that time we was walking up the river I kept rolling that word on my tongue and around in my mind. You know how it is when a word gets caught on your tongue and you can't stop saying it. I must have heard the word "watershed" a hundred times before that night, but I'd never noticed it before.

First, the word suggested some kind of building, like a spring house or well cover. And I had heard the term "water closet" but knowed it was something different. But

“watershed” sounded like a place where great barrels of water might be stored.

I heard Pappy say a “watershed” was all the region that drained into a river when it rained. It was the big curved and wrinkled bowl of land that fed its runoff into a stream, gathering from the branches and seep springs all the way up to the line of dividing water along the ridge top. That was the words I already knew before that night, “dividing water,” the place where rainfall and runoff was parted and some sent one way all the way to the Atlantic coast while a drop adjoining it goes all the way to the Ohio and down the Mississippi to the Gulf of Mexico. I seen it as the place a decision is made close up in just a matter of a fraction of an inch yet it has such a long-range consequence.

As I walked along the dark trail beyond The Prayer Rock, thrilled by the sound of whitewater, I kept thinking about a drop that might lie right on the very top of the ridge for a while, not able to make up its mind which way to go, until slowly, so slow you wouldn’t notice it, the droplet edged to one side of a leaf and was caught for a long time until others going around it pushed it along. It would be a while, at that elevation, before it was clear what decision had been made, where it was going.

That night I heard Old Man Bayne talking to Pappy and the others, saying things like, “The rascals is camped almost right on the watershed,” and it occurred to me the word could mean the very line of dividing water itself, not just the area that drained into a river. And I thought if they was camped right at the lip of the watershed it might be like we could just tip them over, tilt them a little, and they would run down the other side into the French Broad valley and go all the way to Tennessee. Maybe it would take just a little nudge to make them vanish over the rim of the mountains and never come back.

The long rifle seemed to weigh a hundred pounds in my arms by the time we got halfway up the river. I carried it in my hands and I carried it in the crook of my arm and then I toted it on my shoulder.

“Don’t point that thing at me,” the Jones boy behind me said. I think he must have had something to drink because he kept stumbling over every rock and root and turn in the path. My gun was loaded and I knowed his was too. If he stumbled and hit the hammer he could fire right into my back. It was me that should be worried.

What’s that? No, I’d never seen an Indian except once or twice. By then they was mostly gone from the river valley. We seen one down at the store at Crossroads when we went to trade eggs for some cloth. Ma said, “Look, there’s one of them red devils,” and I expected to see a tall man with feathers on his head. But it was a man dressed pretty much like us except he had long hair. He had a pistol in his hand and looked like he had been drinking. Preacher Jarrett was there at the store and he said, “Halfmoon, you go on home now. Ain’t nobody gone bother you. Go on home.”

But the Indian had a grin. I don’t know if he was a normal Indian or not, or if maybe he was just drunk. But he had that grin that scared me because there was no reason for it. I think he was afflicted somehow.

But the other time was when I was out looking for ginseng. There was plenty of it there on the ridge at the jump-off into South Carolina and way back in some of the coves. You have to dig it when the leaves is on, otherwise you can’t find it. And that meant if you did any digging, if you did any digging at all, it had to be after the corn was laid-by in July and before fodder pulling time in August and early September. That’s why revival meetings was held then, and baptizings, when there was a preacher come through, which wasn’t too often back then. But if you

waited till after fodder pulling time, say into squirrel season, you risked a frost coming and the leaves falling off, and you couldn't find any sang to save your soul.

So I was out in the Dog Days, in the snake crawling time and the spider web time, when I was scared every jarfly I heard was a rattler and every twig a sting worm. You couldn't see far in the woods with all the leaves so you felt closed in.

I was going along looking at the ground, looking for sang, maybe looking for bear tracks too. They was bears using upper edge of South Carolina. And I was swatting at bugs and knocking cobwebs out of the way when I looked up along the ridge and there was this Indian standing among the trees so still you couldn't tell if he was there or not. I figured it was an Indian cause I could see this braid down the side of his face and he didn't have no shirt on. He stood there and I thought it might be the stump of an old tree or something I just dreamed.

But he was looking at me, like an owl when you see him is already looking at you. I froze to my tracks like I'd seen a rattler. The sweat was coming down into my eyes and I had to brush it away. My temples was sweating and I thought my heart was going to leap out of my chest. Maybe I could start running down the mountain and beat him back to the settlements. My eyes distorted with the sweat in them, like when you've been crying and the world bulges and blurs, or is kind of magnified like you're looking under water. I had to wipe away the sweat that was stinging my eyes, and when I looked again the Indian was gone. That was the scariest part of it all. One instant he was looking at me and then the next he was gone just like that. I looked all up and down the line of the ridge and there was nothing but trees, and no tree big enough for him to hide behind. I run up to the top and looked down, and they was a little slick of laurel bushes a hundred yards down and he could have

been hiding in the laurels. But I didn't even see any kicked up leaves where he run down there. The trash on the ground looked undisturbed.

It was like he had been a ghost that just flitted away. I've often thought the woods was haunted by the Indians. Every ridge and creek was named by them. "Green River" itself is the English of whatever they called the stream. And they've buried so many dead in the ground you're might nigh afraid of turning up a bone when you dig in it. Everytime you hear a waterfall or shoals you think you can hear an Indian talking in it. The mist coming up out of hollows of an evening looks like smoke from their fires. In fall everything seems touched with warpaint.

Walking along that night every time we passed a shoals I thought I could hear Cherokees talking. I wondered if the other men was scared as I was. Surely the Indians would hear us coming. Maybe we was walking right into their trap. Maybe they was watching us from behind rocks and laurel clumps.

It was getting light when we stopped at the forks just below the Abe Jones Flats. The river had been broken into so many branches by that time it was just a little creek anyway. There one branch goes off into Sister Mountain, and the other, the main branch, goes right up through the flats toward the first spring this side of the divide where Blue Ridge Church is now. We gathered by the forks there in the first light, and it was hard to believe such a little stream could be the same as Green River. It was just a little fist of water knocking around on the rocks, the clear muscle rippling and foaming like lace around wrists of clear water. I could almost step across it. It seemed like a toy river, for a kid to play in, somehow shrunk down and made clearer.

"Sh-h-h-h," Old Man Bayne said. "We're going to surprise them in their huts."

“What if they’s already up?” Jody McBane said.

“They won’t be,” Old Man Bayne said. “Indians is lazy.”

“Let’s burn them out,” John Maddox said.

“No we’ll shoot first, shoot all we can,” Old Man Bayne said. “Then we’ll burn their huts out later.”

He didn’t pray again, and we started off, going quiet as we could. A mist was rising off the stream in the cold air. The poplars and chestnut trees had shed all their leaves and the wet leaves was quiet as long as nobody kicked them. We circled along the edge of the Flats. The Old Field there had grown up in briars and hogweed, but you could still see a few rotten corn stalks where the Indian women had farmed it at one time. I followed Pappy, and we stayed crouched down behind the hazel bushes. I must have been scared then, but I was too busy to think, now that we was there.

For the longest time I couldn’t see a thing. There was just bushes, and mist rising off the branch. Then Pappy tapped me on the shoulder and pointed. And I seen at the end of his finger a cloth hung on a bush like it had been put out today. And there was a hut. It was more like a shack or lean-to, just propped up on poles and covered with bark. It looked like they had heaped leaves over it to make it hard to see. But you never seen such a crude thing for people to live in. It looked like it would smash down if a breeze come up. We stooped down there in the bushes trying to see how many they was.

There was a smolder where the fire must have been the night before. And then all at once we seen the girl. It looked like she was tied to a birch tree. Her feet and hands was bound and she was tethered to that tree. She was covered all over with dirt, like she had been rolling in a struggle.

Everybody thought the same thing at first, that it was a white girl they had captured and tied up there to hold for

ransom. You couldn't really tell much about her she was so dirty and covered with leaves.

"Kill every one of them," Old Man Bayne whispered. And we commenced firing into the huts. What happened next is like it's been magnified over the years. In the still morning it sounded like a thousand cannon started firing as the echoes bounced off the mountains and rattled around. We run across the branch and shot into the huts, then stopped to reload in the field.

It didn't take more than two seconds for the yard to be full of Indians crawling out in the clearing and waving knives. One old man who had a pistol wheeled around and aimed at me, and I felt this hot itch on my shoulder. There was blood running down my arm and on my trigger finger. But I had reloaded and was running toward the tree where the girl was tied. There was firing and screams all around me, and so much smoke it was hard to see.

The girl had crawled around and was shivering against the birch tree, her legs drawn up. It was the first time I had seen a woman's private parts. She couldn't have been no age at all because her hair down there was just flossy. She was bound up so she couldn't run or defend herself.

Looking back through the years I still don't know if she was being punished or if she had been captured. But she was an Indian girl all right. And the chance is she might have been afflicted in her mind, or had tried to kill herself, and they had tied her up for her own good.

I must have just stood there and looked at her. She was about my age and she had dust and dirt all over her. There was the old dirt that looked black and gray on her skin and there was the new dirt stuck like flour where she had rolled over and crawled away from the shooting. She was dressed in rags so that even her little titties was showing.

But the look on her face I won't ever forget no matter if I live to be a hundred. It was the look I still saw when it

was all over and the camp just a smolder of sticks and trash and bodies laying around in the brush along the branch where they tried to run. It was the face I seen after the Indians was all buried in the Old Field below the head spring.

I've tried to make sense of things, boy, by talking to preachers when things troubled me. And I've tried to find out from the Bible what portents was listed and events foretold. And most times it seemed to work. Like when I was courting your grandma over on Willow and it bothered me was I doing the right thing. How was I to know what to decide? My ma didn't want no daughter-in-law from over that side of the mountain. She'd never be happy living away from her folks over here. Ma said a girl needs to talk to her ma. Pappy said he'd never been too sure of anybody with Nicholson blood. It was a line that was dangerous, going back to Severance Nicholson that killed two men in duels back in the early days of the county. You never knowed when the crazy or fittified streak might show up a again. I worried about this and studied it for months. Cause I had my heart already on that gal from Willow. But the preacher wasn't no help. And I opened the Bible just anywheres looking for a verse that would guide me. Nothing I put my finger on seemed to fit.

So it come this Sunday when I had to make up my mind. She was a popular girl your Grandma was. And she was a healthy girl that wanted a family.

"You make up your mind," she said. "Cause my mind is made up." She knowed how much I cared for her but time was wasting and a girl is more concerned than a man about days slipping away. That was the awfullest week of my life. I knowed if I didn't go back by Sunday she'd know it was off and might marry one of the boys over there. They was lots would have been happy to have her.

Every night I'd lay there thinking about what to do. And I knowed the rest of my life would depend on what I choosed. Even while I was milking and while I was stripping tanbark and going through the motions of eating I meditated on the decision. I fell off so bad Ma said I looked like a whippoorwill. Victuals didn't interest me. There's nothing as painful as being in love. Hate is almost peaceful compared to love.

One evening, it must have been a Friday, I was coming in from the barn and seen how red the sky was in the west. And I thought, I'll go by the signs. If it's rainy on Sunday the Lord means me not to go over on Willow to marry the Nicholson girl. And if it's clear weather, he means me to go and I'll go no matter what my folks say or the preacher says. I felt better then cause it was decided, it was out of my hands. But the next day it was raining, and it rained all day. And when I milked and put up the stock it was still raining and foggy in the river valley. I didn't sleep a bit all that night thinking how I'd live my life without that girl. But when I tried to think about marrying another one, somebody from Green River, I knowed I couldn't. So I said I'll go marry her whatever it's doing. But soon after daylight the mist on the valley begun to rise up in rags and the sun cut through. I put on my best suit of clothes and walked over the mountain to get my girl and bring her back.

As we run into the little clearing where the Indian camp was you could smell the stink of the place. I don't mean it was some awful smell like carrion, but it had a peculiar odor, the way I think of Indians smelling, like smoke and old grease and sour milk. And they had a bunch of hides stretched out on pegs in the ground, and meat drying on a rack of limbs.

I don't think nobody fired from his shoulder except for the first round. After we reloaded and run forward it was

mostly firing from the hip at Indians on the run, or right into the chest of a brave or old woman if they stood to put up a fight. Out of the corner of my eye I seen the Jones boy run after one woman until she got almost into the pines. She was a fat woman and couldn't run fast. And she was carrying something like a bundle of sticks, but it must have been, now that I think about it, some skins or rolls of cloth which was her most valuable possession. She run to the trees with the Jones boy right after her and he wouldn't fire at her back. He was waiting for her to turn around. And just before she got to the pines she did turn around like she was maybe going to surrender. She had long gray hair that flung around over her face. I thought for a second she was just going to glare at her attacker, defying him to kill her. But she hurled the bundle in his face and he shot her down.

"Don't just stand there like a fool," Pappy called as he kicked and hacked at a bark hut, until a boy run out. Pappy shot him in the head and the body kept running for a few steps until it stumbled in a heap against a pole. Then Pappy kicked that miserable shed down to make sure nobody else was hiding in it.

The girl on the ground looked at me like a dog that has been cornered. She kicked at me with her tied feet and she would have hit or bit me if she had got loose. I wondered for a second if the thing to do was to cut her loose and let her run for it, or fight for it. Maybe I could take her prisoner. I couldn't hardly bring myself to just shoot her there against the tree. That wasn't what we had come to do: we had come to run them out.

My hands was trembling so I could hardly point the gun at her. She kept rolling around in the dust, getting out of the way of my aim.

"Let's go," Old Man Bayne hollered at me when he seen me pausing. He didn't mean let's leave, but let's get on with it. Hurry up and get the job done. Just then an Indian

come up behind him with an ax and I seen the blade split right down through his hat and face. The face sliced like a piece of pine wood and blood poured out.

I turned just a little and shot that Indian so he fell almost on top of Old Man Bayne, both of them not more than twenty feet away.

So there I was unloaded. And the Indian girl thrashed around like a dead chicken twisting her tether. She was sweating and picked up more dirt and pieces of leaves as she rolled. She tried to kick the gun out of my hand as I started to reload. I had to back out of her range.

I had a knife and could have cut her throat, or cut her loose. And there was the ax nearby sunk in Old Man Bayne's face. But I kept reloading while the furor continued around me. My hands shook so powder spilled on the ground and on my wrists. I dropped at least one shot on the ground trying to place it in the barrel. Then the ramrod just seemed to not go in the mouth of the barrel. I backed further away and it must have took me two minutes to get the thing reloaded and cocked.

By then so many Indians had run out of the clearing and our men had followed to hunt them the place was about deserted except for bodies. I edged back up to the girl still wondering what to do with her. Her dress had got torn worse and her breasts were sticking out and covered with dust. I was like somebody fascinated and unable to move. I stepped closer and reached out a hand and she heaved up at me and spit on my leg. I wondered if she had been bit by a maddog and that was the reason she was tied up. I couldn't see any wounds on her, though with all that dirt and trash stuck to her legs it was hard to tell. She looked at me with eyes like she might be in a fever. They had a glassy look you see in a cow's eyes when she's got milk fever. I thought there must be some way to let her go. Maybe I could just walk

away and leave her. But then somebody else would shoot her and call me coward.

Just then an old man Indian come back into the clearing. He crossed the branch like he had escaped from his pursuer and wanted to see about his folks, or find out if we was still there. First thing I seen, besides his long white hair going down to his shoulders, was this musket he was carrying. I seen it all in just a smidgeon of a second. He raised the musket and I dodged sideways as a ball hit me in the thigh. It burned like a redhot iron going through the leg. Just at the same time Pappy returned and hollered at me to watch out as he shot the old man in the back soon as he had pulled the trigger on me.

It happened so fast just as I meant to untie the afflicted girl. It was like I was following through my intentions of going to her. But as I got near her, the awful pain in my thigh, with Pappy calling as he run forward, I found myself aiming at her chest. Her eyes was neither defiant nor surrendering. She didn't exactly laugh at me, but she panted like somebody trying to laugh and nodding their head. I tell you she was a loony.

"Hey boy," Pappy called. And I shot her.

"We got them," Pappy said. "I think we got them all." But I didn't feel nothing but pain in my shoulder and in my thigh as the others returned and combed through the ruins. It was like the day had got dim. Pappy made me a kind of crutch from a maple fork and they cut a couple of poles to carry Old Man Bayne's body on.

Maybe it was overcast. It was still so early in the morning we'd get back to the settlements by dinner time. Everybody went through the wrecked huts to see what they could find. But them people didn't have a thing but some corn and dried meat. They had some cloth that had been stole from the Bayne house, and a few pots and baskets. But I don't guess they was ten musket balls between them all. I brought back

a boy's bow and arrows that smelled smokey. I had them for years, but your Daddy must have lost them when he was a little boy.

As we walked back down the river we seemed to go faster than we had come up, even though they had to carry me part of the way. I was hurting bad by the time we got to the ford, and Pappy bound my leg with a piece of buckskin. The river got bigger and wider, and several times Pappy give me a drink of cold water. I was glad to see tenced land again.

You could see clear and far that morning, though the light was dimmer. It was November weather. The houses and barns and picked cornfields stood out sharp as we went on and groups broke off at their places or the mouths of hollows. It must have been the pain that made everything stand out sharp.

There seemed more cabins and clearings along the river than had been the night before. We come to one after another. I don't reckon any had been built during the night, but it seemed they was more cleared ground and trails. The houses and barns had multiplied. □

