

A Right Blue Hill



by Ross Carter

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

<i>Elsie</i>	Early twenties
<i>Arville</i>	Late twenties to mid thirties
<i>Ivy</i>	Late thirties to forties
<i>Maw</i>	Forties
<i>Her son</i>	Twenties
<i>Soc</i>	Late twenties to early thirties

PLACE

An Appalachian mountain in North Carolina, near the Tennessee border.

TIME

1928–29.

ACT 1.

SCENE 1.

Setting: ELSIE and ARVILLE CADE's hillside vegetable garden. September 1928.

At rise: ELSIE with a hoe.

ELSIE chops idly with her hoe, smiling, lost in thought. ELSIE is a strong mountain woman in her early twenties. She is rough-hewn and plain, but gentle of voice and expression. She stands with one foot awkwardly turned in. ELSIE stops and looks up and toward the audience.

ELSIE

Thank you. Thank you, Lord. That's all I got to say today.

Sweet taters just keeps a-growing. We got plenty. Thank you.

We're in good health. Me, Arville, and the mule. All three of us works hard. Some ain't doing so well, but you have made us strong. We thank you for that. Arville does, and I do. I can't speak for the mule.

Corn grew so big and fast Arville said he could hear it a-growing. Ears big a round as his arm. Arville says he don't know if it'll all fit in the crib. Says he might have to leave some in shocks. I hope not because the critters get into shocks and eat it up sometimes. But I know they are your creatures and you provide for them in your way, same as you do for us. And we thank you for that, too.

That man's been here again. I don't like to say his name. You remember we had to re-plant half our corn a cause of him scratching it out the ground. I went to gather eggs last evening and he'd throwed them against the paling. Busted every one. I do know you have a purpose for everything but I ask that you see fit to finish up that project as quick as you can. I ain't afeared of him but I am afeared of what he might do.

Arville's gone into Sowersville to pay our taxes. He'll be back late tonight. Please watch over him and keep him safe. He's a good man, Lord.

The voice of IVY is heard from a distance. IVY cries "Hee-hoo" in the mountain way: falsetto, lento, in the tonal cadence of a doorbell. "El-sie" is in the reverse cadence.

IVY

Hee-hoo! Elsie!

ELSIE

That's Ivy hee-hooing me. I got to go now. Amen.

ELSIE turns as lights fade.

SCENE 2.

Setting: Outside the Cade cabin.

At rise: IVY stands and fans herself in the heat.

IVY is a stout mountain woman, about twice Elsie's age.

IVY

Elsie, I brung you a jar of new molasses.

ELSIE enters with her hoe. ELSIE walks with a limp; not the jagged limp of broken bones but the slinging step of bones deformed since early childhood. Her gait is solid and she seems unconscious of it.

ELSIE

Thank you, lady. You-uns have a good stir-off?

IVY

Took every jar I had and then some. Cane grew tall this year. It's this heat. Last year we had frost by this time. Is Arville back from Sowersville?

ELSIE

I expect him late tonight. He left yesterday early. I appreciate the molasses. Arville loves them.

IVY

My boys eats it so fast I think their tongues is going to slap their brains out.

ELSIE

It's near time for them to be starting up school again.

IVY

I reckon they're done. That's what they said. You can't tell younguns nothing. Miss Jenkins came around and said she'd like to school them one day a week like she always does. I don't know.

ELSIE

They got nothing on their minds but courting.

IVY

Well, they's boys.

ELSIE

They come by it honest.

IVY

What you talking about?

ELSIE

Not a thing. It ain't no business of mine if Sylva Black's down there all alone ever day. Watching that mill wheel turn, wishing for somebody to help pass the time.

IVY

Elsie, I don't know what your talking about!

ELSIE

(Laughs) I reckon I don't either.

IVY

Where'd you hear that?

ELSIE

Little bird tweeting round my window. "Twitty-twitty-twitty. Ivy Ivy Ivy. Psst psst psst."

They laugh.

IVY

Go on, you! You talk! I'll just help myself to some of your cold water. Go on, you!

IVY exits as lights fade.

SCENE 3.

Setting: Inside the Cade cabin, just after dark.

At rise: ELSIE sits by the fireplace, slowly stirrring a pot hung over the coals.

The cabin is a single room. The floor is wide boards with gaps between. A stone fireplace at right, a bed at left. A small table, with one chair. ELSIE sits in the other chair near the fireplace, cooking over a small set of coals. A shelf high on the wall holds a basket or wooden box. The room is lit only by the fire; there are no candles or lamps.

ELSIE

Arville, you better get home soon. I ain't aiming to keep this hot for you all night long. You should a-been home by now. I ain't the kind to worry, though. It don't make—

ELSIE starts. She has heard a noise.

ELSIE

Arville, you home? I done fed everything. You come on in.

ELSIE goes to the door, opens it, and looks out into the darkness. She turns back into the room and closes the door.

ELSIE

Elsie Cade, you're turning into an old woman, scared of her shadow.

ELSIE returns to her cookpot. The voice of ARVILLE is heard off.

ARVILLE

Elsie! Elsie come open the door for me!

ELSIE, relieved, crosses to the door and opens it. ARVILLE enters. He carries a burlap sack in one hand and a small galvanized can in the other. THEY embrace. ARVILLE places his burdens on the table.

ELSIE

What you brung me?

ARVILLE

Coffee, salt, kitchen matches. Muslin, thread, pack of needles. Everything you asked me to.

ELSIE

I mean that can! What's in it?

ARVILLE

Coal oil.

ELSIE

What! Coal oil! What in tarnation do we need with coal oil?

ARVILLE

It's your birthday present.

ELSIE

Arville have you lost your mind? What use have I got for coal oil!

ARVILLE

That's your present, take it or leave it. It's what I brung you.

ELSIE

You're up to something.

ARVILLE

I ain't up to nothing. Oh, there's one more thing. I left it on the porch.

ARVILLE crosses to the door and returns with a kerosene lamp.

ARVILLE

Now I reckon you can use that coal oil.

ELSIE

Arville!

ARVILLE

I carried this lamp all the way up the mountain without breaking it. Let's be careful with it. Best not handle it unless you're standing over the bed!

ELSIE

It's beautiful! Our own oil lamp! It's got a round wick. Arville, it's a Aladdin lamp!

ARVILLE

Brand new for 1928. Aladdin Model 12. That's what the man said. Said it puts out the brightest light he's ever seen.

ELSIE

We've got a Aladdin lamp!

ARVILLE

It's yourn, Elsie. I know how you like to read by the fire. I seen you squinting and rubbing your eyeballs. I don't aim for my wife to ruin her eyes a-reading.

ELSIE

You're too good to me.

ARVILLE

They's one more thing.

ARVILLE pulls a book from his pocket.

ELSIE

Oh, what is it? Let me see! The Mysterious Rider. Reckon what it's about?

ARVILLE

See, it's got a gal riding a horse on the cover.

ELSIE

Oh, Arville!

ELSIE throws her arms around ARVILLE.

ELSIE

Thank you for remembering my birthday.

ARVILLE

That ain't all.

ELSIE

What! What's got into you! You got something else out there?

ARVILLE

No. I done some looking though. Once we get the corn in, I believe we'll have enough to sell. I found a man asking a fair price for a horse. I aim to go back and

buy it for you. These steep hillsides is no place you to have walk everywhere. I aim for you to ride down into town whenever you feel like it.

ELSIE embraces ARVILLE again.

ARVILLE

Can I get something to eat first? I can't tell my belly from my backbone.

ELSIE

I kept it hot for you.

ARVILLE

What you been burning in the fire?

ELSIE

White oak kindling.

ARVILLE

Don't smell like it. Smells like—I don't know. Whatever. I got to get these shoes off.

ARVILLE sits and removes his brogan shoes.

ARVILLE

It's that last mile that gets me ever time. Elsie, what *are* you burning in there?

ELSIE

I told you.

ARVILLE

You don't reckon—

ARVILLE crosses to the door and looks out.

ARVILLE

Elsie! Elsie! The crib's a-burning!

ARVILLE exits as ELSIE crosses to the door. ARVILLE's voice is heard off.

ARVILLE

Elsie! Grab something to fetch water in! Hurry!

ELSIE

Arville!

ARVILLE

The flames is too high! I can't get close!

ELSIE looks around the cabin, grabs the cookpot, and exits.

Mingled voices of Elsie and Arville are heard off.

ARVILLE AND ELSIE

Elsie! Elsie! Arville! Arville! It's too big! More water, Elsie! It's burning this end too! Over here! God help us! Arville! We got to save the cabin! Elsie! It's spreading across the roof! Arville! Elsie! I can't! You'll get burnt! I'll fetch the blanket! Elsie! It's too late! Elsie!

Lights fade.

SCENE 4.

Setting: Inside the Cade cabin. A cold midday in early November.

At rise: ARVILLE and ELSIE are seated at the table, weary and forlorn. The kerosene lamp sits on the high shelf.

ELSIE

I wish we'd got just a little more.

ARVILLE

I ain't no good at dickering. I done the best I could.

ELSIE

I know you did. I know you did.

ARVILLE

They's folks as takes advantage of them that's in a poor way.

ELSIE

I hated to see it skin and bones.

ARVILLE

That's a cold wind. When the leaves is gone the wind purely whistles up here.

ELSIE

It was a good mule.

ARVILLE

I wish somebody was wanting to buy field mice. We got the fattest field mice in three counties.

ELSIE

It just goes to show it don't pay to get attached to things.

ARVILLE

And squirrels. Fattest squirrels. Too fat. All greasy.

A quiet moment passes.

ARVILLE

It was my fault. I shouldn't of left those shucks. I should have cleaned them out and burned them. If I hadn't of been so blame foolish.

ELSIE

Stop it. I don't reckon you heard nothing? Did you inquire of the sheriff?

ARVILLE

Nothing. They can't find him. They say he's cleared out. That's what they say.

ELSIE

Ain't been no other fires?

ARVILLE

No.

ELSIE

They don't believe me.

ARVILLE

They believe you, Elsie.

ELSIE

They don't believe that I know it was him.

ARVILLE

They believe you. He's just lit out.

Another quiet moment.

ELSIE

They was a man come around while you was gone. He wanted to talk with you concerning the election.

ARVILLE

What did he want with me?

ELSIE

He was a vote buyer. He didn't say so, but I know he was up here looking to buy votes. It's the time for them to be out. Election next week.

ARVILLE

How much did he offer?

ELSIE

I sent him away. Don't think on it, Arville.

ARVILLE

I'm just asking.

ELSIE

Don't you think on it.

The voice of IVY is heard off.

IVY

Hee-hoo! Elsie! Elsie! Elsie I got some news for you!

ELSIE opens the door. IVY enters.

IVY

Elsie, they found Tom Fugate dead! Right down here on Dry Fork Branch! Horse threwed him and drug him. Drug him all over them sharp rocks. He was a bloody mess, they say.

This news has a profound effect on ELSIE and ARVILLE.

ELSIE

Are you sure?

IVY

Elsie honey, it was him and he's dead. I run straight here to tell you.

ELSIE

Who told you?

IVY

I heard it from Sylva Black. He saw them bring the body down to the road and load it on a wagon. He never saw a body beat up so. He must of got drug up and down, up and down. They said his foot was still hung in the stirrup, all broke and twisted.

ELSIE

Thank you, Ivy.

IVY

Elsie honey, I run off so fast I forgot to grab up something to bring you-uns. I'm sorry.

ELSIE

Thank you, Ivy.

IVY

Lord forgive me for saying it, but I purt near danced a jig. I hope he felt ever knock and cut. I hope he screamed his guts out while his hide was ripped off'n him. If ever they was a man who deserved a suffering death, it was Tom Fugate. Devil take his soul. I best be going.

IVY exits.

ARVILLE

I have wondered what I would do if ever I did run into him.

ELSIE

I know what I'd a done. I'd a swung my hoe and buried the blade in his skull.

Lights fade.

SCENE 5.

Setting: The cabin of an Appalachian hillside farm, North Carolina, 1929.

Lights up: SOC is talking to the landowner. SOC is a handsome man in his late twenties or early thirties. He speaks with the ease of a born salesman. He is perhaps seated at a rustic table. SOC is the only actor onstage; he addresses the audience as if he were talking to the landowner.

SOC

Thank you, Mrs. Ritchie. Thank you for that fine dinner. I do appreciate it. And I appreciate you and Mr. Ritchie letting me sit down with you and explain all these goings-on. I know you've heard a lot of stories, some of them worrisome, some of them outright falsehoods. So let's start out with the truth. I am a sworn agent of the state of North Carolina and I'm bound to tell the truth. It wouldn't do me any good to come up here and tell you all something that wasn't the gospel truth. It wouldn't help anybody.

Now. You know that the states of Tennessee and North Carolina are buying up all the land along the state line. You know that? Good. And when all the land is bought up, the two states are going to turn it over to the federal government for the creation of a national park. A national park! Just think about that. A national park here in the eastern United States. A Smoky Mountain National Park. There's only two national parks east of the Mississippi; and this new park is going to be twice as big as both of them put together!

Mr. Ritchie, this park is going to happen. The money is there. And that money is going to go to landowners like you whose land is going to be part of this new park. And I'm here to make sure you get an honest price for your land. The government is going to give you a square shake, you can count on that. Now I've looked over your farm. I can see all the work you and your family have put into it. I think you'll agree with me that a hillside farm like this one is not worth as much as a valley farm with good bottom land. But it's a good, valuable parcel, and you are good valuable folks, so I've decided to offer you the maximum rate on your farm. The state will pay you twenty dollars an acre. Now that's as fair a price as anybody could ask for these days. You think a lumber company would give you anything like that? Why, they wouldn't give half that much, and they'd clear cut and ruin the land for generations. We've seen it happen.

Twenty dollars an acre. And I'll tell you what, Mr. Ritchie. There's no better time than now for a man to get a new start somewhere. Here we are in 1929, Mr. Hoover's only been in office a few months, and already this country is booming. You've heard about all the money average folks are making in the stock market. I've never seen anything like it. But the smart folks are headed west, Mr. Ritchie. That's where the fortunes are going to be made. America's breadbasket. Now I know a smart man like you is going to be careful where he invests a big chunk of money like we're talking about. And I believe you're going to make a wise choice. This offer couldn't come at a better time for a man like you. Twenty dollars an acre! Think what you can do with that!

What's that? What happens if you don't accept? Now, you heard me say that this park is a done deal. It's going to happen. There will be a few landowners who don't accept the government's offer, even if it's a good offer like I made to you. In these few cases, the government will file a condemnation lawsuit. The judge will set the sale price and the land will be transferred, no question. My personal opinion is the judge will set the price around seventeen, maybe eighteen dollars. But even if he goes crazy and sets it at twenty or twenty-one, you've still got all the court costs, lawyer costs, survey costs, and the ruling comes down, you've to leave right then. How long will that take? I'd say it will all be done by the end of next year. But if you agree to the offer I am making today, I will put in the contract that you have two years to turn over the property. I will do that for you. I haven't done it for everybody. You've been honest and fair with me and I'm going to be honest and fair with you. I've got the papers right here but first let's go over your deed and make sure it gives you a clear title.

Lights fade.