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Memo: A LOVE STORY

RAY & ROSA

THEY MET ON BEECH MOUNTAIN, A BOY AND A GIRL, AND THERE THEY'VE LIVED FOR 50 YEARS. THEY NEVER HAD MUCH BUT EACH OTHER.

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Ray Hicks had pins and needles in his heart, the pains of love gone wrong.

Girls kept throwing him aside for no good reason at all.

One day when he was feeling pretty low, he walked up the mountain with friends.

“Which of you boys has got a nickel?” one said. “They's an old woman up yander, she'll tell all our fortunes for a nickel to get a little snuff.”

Ray patted the pockets of his overalls and came up with his last 5-cent piece.

The old woman read coffee grounds. She stared into the cup and said to Ray, “Gawd, young man, you's a-havin' some trouble.”

Yes'm, he said.

The old woman peered harder into her cup.

“I see an old house,” she said, “a little old rough house. They're like you - poor people. They's a girl, she's young. You cain't get married 'til she's old enough, but then you'll be put with God.”

Ray looked into the cup and saw nothing but sodden grounds.

“You sure that's right?” he asked.

The old woman said she was.

Ray was 26. He settled down at home with his mother and, just like a married man, never went anywhere. He let his beard grow out. He didn't bother polishing his harmonica.

One Saturday in the fall of the year he was sitting on the porch when a voice came to him: “Ray, put some clothes on and shave and go to the church that's out there at Bethel.”

Ray did. He was barely in his pew when he saw the black-haired girl on the front row.

“Ray,” the voice said, “thar's ye wife.”

He learned her name was Rosa Harmon and began trying to find out where she lived. Her place wasn't two miles from his own family's farm on the rugged backside of Beech Mountain, but by the winding paths and thickets of Watauga County two miles was a hard, far piece. Ray climbed the hills and walked through shaded woodlands where cougars hid in trees. He dodged the rockstorm of boys who didn't appreciate outsiders courting their girls.

Ray found the house the old fortune teller had described, and it could have been any other shack in Appalachia except for one thing.

This one had the black-haired girl named Rosa.

Ray wouldn't talk much at first for fear of scaring her off. Mountain girls had rabbit blood in 'em; they'd run. So he talked to her papa and grandpa and brothers. He brought candy when he came.

He polished his harmonica.

Rosa wouldn't let him walk with her at first so Ray followed, kicking up dust and playing his harp. Sometimes he sang. Rosa wouldn't say so, but she had a favorite:

I gambled down in Wash'ton, I gambled down in Spain;
With a deck of cards I lie my money down.
I had not been in Wash'ton many more weeks than three
'Til I fell in love with a pretty little girl and she fell in love with me.
She took me in the parlor, she cooled me with a fan,
She whispered low in her mother's ear, I love that gamblin' man . . .

Rosa liked Ray better than any boy she knew. Her papa and grandpa liked him, too. No matter how cold it was, they'd leave the front door wide open until Ray showed up. Rosa's sisters told her Ray was wealthy, that if she married him she'd wear earrings and necklaces and get to paint her face.

Ray farmed, fixed cars, worked in the sawmill, cut wheat; he scavenged the woods for the velvety moss florists liked to buy. He'd been working since age 6 at whatever fell to him, working especially hard since the day his daddy tied one last eight-knot and hung himself along the road to Banner Elk.

Rosa knew the feel of a farm hoe herself. She sharecropped cabbage with her papa and sisters and sold galax and wildflowers to the Mast General Store.

She and Ray had some things in common, but she couldn't help thinking about their differences, too. She was 17, he 26. She was 5 feet 3, light as a bird; he was 6-7, bony as a broomstick. Her people used snuff, his didn't. But what bothered Rosa the most was that she was Primitive Baptist and Ray was Presbyterian.

She went to her father, like she always did when something worried her.

"Papa," she said, "where is the right church?"

"Rosie," he said, "they's good people in all churches."

On March 29, 1948, a Monday clear and bright, Rosa put on a blue striped dress and Ray wore his only suit. He'd bought the suit secondhand; it was too short and wide. His mother let out the cuffs and darted the waistband, and when Ray put it on he felt like a rich man. He looked like one, too.

He and Rosa walked up the main street of Boone, asking where they could find a preacher. One fellow took a look at Ray's suit and said, "I can marry you."

The man was a magistrate. He took Ray and Rosa to his house, had his wife and children stand in as witnesses, then married them short and sweet, his hopes on $20.

Ray gave the man $3, about all he had, and took Rosa home to Beech Mountain.

The old Hicks place stood on a craggy slope overlooking a rich, lavender sweep of the Blue Ridge range. Ray's daddy built the house in 1914, and by the time Ray brought his young bride home, the hemlock planks and tin roof were well seasoned, but sound.

“Me and Rosa's married and Monroe Harmon and them's comin' over,” Ray told his mother.

She went out to the cellar and the canning shed and gathered up enough for a wedding feast. Potatoes, cabbage, beans, sweet corn . . . they ate by the light of kerosene lanterns, and then Ray took Rosa upstairs.

At daybreak, Ray went back to clearing land for a cornfield. Rosa started learning her way around another woman's house.

She didn't know what to call her mother-in-law. “Mrs. Hicks” sounded like something a town lady would say. “Mama” wasn't right either; Rosa had a mother of her own. Rosa decided on Grandma, which fit well when the babies started coming.

Leonard, Dorothy Jean, Ted, Kathy and Nita, they became the first generation born not in the back room but in town. Rosa delivered them beneath the bright lights of a hospital ward, then brought them to the rough-hewn house on Beech.

They drew water from the spring, cooked on the wood stove and bathed from a washtub or in the creek. Ray and Rosa got electricity in 1950 but still no phone or running water or modern stove. The outhouse stood out back, near the garden.

The farm work began at 4 in the morning and ended after dark. Sometimes the rocky earth gave and sometimes it didn't. In decent times Ray could afford to get Rosa something nice. He bought her a watch once. She'd never had one. She wouldn't hardly wear it for fear of ruining it.

One winter they got down to nothing left to eat, nothing at all. Ray went to Rosa.

“If you want to part with that watch I can take it to the store and get half price for it,”he said, “get us somethin' to eat.”

Rosa took it off and gave it to him. “I'm bad on a watch anyway.”

They couldn't afford toys for the children so Ray and Rosa made them: corn husk cows, trucks made with spools. They played games with corn kernels and clever words. They spent winter-bound nights around the wood stove and summer evenings on the porch, entertaining themselves with songs and riddles and stories.

Ray knew some good stories. Stories about magic circles, haunted forests, witches, bears, bats, thieves, and suitors risking a beheading to kiss a farmer's beautiful wife. Ray had learned the stories from his granddaddy, who had learned them from his own daddy, and so on, eight generations back and all the way to Europe. Jack Tales, some of the stories were called, because they involved a poor and virtuous boy named Jack who survived by his cunning and managed to win the riches, fame or maiden.

Long into the night Ray would tell stories in the accent he'd inherited, the loping cadence of his Scottish and English ancestors. He told the stories, too, with his eyebrows and hands, his blue eyes round as marbles when he bulged them for effect. He knew to pause at the funny parts and scoot to the edge of his chair at moments of suspense; he knew just where to whisper or where to come out with it plain, and all of it worked together, words and arms and whispers and eyebrows until he had everyone around him hooked. Ray Hicks could tell a story.

People outside the mountains started hearing about Ray. Strangers found their way down the steep dirt road to Ray and Rosa's farm: folklorists and linguists and professors talking about folk-tale typology and cantefables. One put Ray's stories on a record album.

Another asked him to come over the mountain to Jonesboro, Tenn., to help start a festival of storytelling. The festival kept going, year after year. Ray always got invited. Rosa went, too, the little black-haired woman patiently at his side, making sure he stopped talking long enough to eat now and then.

In 1983, Ray was called to Washington to be declared a national treasure. Rosa went along and they felt lost together. They returned to Beech Mountain with $5,000, the most money they'd ever seen at one time.

From then on, Ray earned a little here and there telling stories at Jonesboro and to schoolchildren and visitors, who slipped him a little cash as they left. He and Rosa couldn't imagine people paying them for something so ordinary, but they gladly took it. They needed every little bit.

All around them, Beech Mountain was changing. Developers were stripping the land and putting in ski resorts and lodges. The price of everything rose more each year while mountain wages didn't. Hardly anyone could count on farming anymore.

Every now and then, wealthy men showed up at Ray and Rosa's to admire the spectacular valley view and inquire about their 49 acres. Ray and Rosa said money be damned, we'll never sell.

They learned to live with the unexpected knock at the door.

Newspaper reporters came, and magazine writers, and film companies wanting to make documentaries. They came from New York and England and Holland, from all over.

If it was winter, Ray kicked back in the sitting room, by the wood stove; in summer, they went on the porch. He told his stories through the sweet smoke of his home-rolled cigarettes, a tin of Prince Albert tobacco and a spit bucket at his side. While Ray talked - and talked and talked - Rosa quietly mopped or washed windows or dried apples, appearing only to make Ray come eat his dinner or to fill in the gaps of his memory.

“What's that game we used to play?” he would say. “Bread and cheese –”

“Bread and cheese,” Rosa would answer. “Whar my part? In the woods. Whar the woods?”

“Far burned it.”

“Whar the far?”

“Water squeenched it.”

“Whar the water?”

“Ox drunk it.”

“Whar the ox?”

“Rope hung it.”

“Whar the rope?”

“Rat gnawed it.”

“Whar the rat?”

“Cat caught it.”

“Whar the cat?”

“Hammer kilt it.”

“Whar the hammer?”

"Behind the door crackin' hick'ry nuts . . ."

Ray and Rosa slap their knee and laugh together, like they're the only two people in the room.

The other day, a fellow asked Ray how long he and Rosa have been married.

"Fifty years March."

"Gawd," the guy said, "that's too long to stay with one. You got to hunt a new duck now and then."

Ray said, "Naw, I want to stick it out with the one I got."

His hair is white now. Black-haired Rosa has faded to gray. They have never tied a knot with their tongue, as her mama used to say, that they couldn't untie with their teeth.

They still live without a phone or running water. By the time they could afford modern conveniences, they didn't want them. Never did want them, really.

Little has changed but the look of the sitting room, which their daughters got the notion to feather-paint recently, peach and beige over a flat coat of slate blue.

Ray and Rosa sleep in this room, he in the bed nearest the door, she in the one nearest the kitchen, just as they have for 23 years. The woodpile is in one corner, a couch along one wall. Between the beds is a TV tray crowded with rubbing alcohol, hydrogen peroxide, Vicks salve, Ex-Lax . . . and above that are the framed photos of their four grandchildren.

Rosa gets up first, when morning falls in weak ribbons across the raw plank floor. She builds a fire in the wood stove, then in the cook stove.

She puts the kettles on and goes to the window to see what she can see. A deer maybe, or a pair of Carolina wrens.

When the water is warm she bathes from a wash pan, then starts the oatmeal and biscuits and ham. If Ray is up, they eat together.

She makes the beds, sweeps the floor. He sits by the wood stove and cuts white pine into kindling.

If Ray's back hurts, as it often does now, Rosa rubs medicine on it. She brushes his teeth, trims his hair, cuts his toenails. She washes his feet.

If Rosa needs some firewood brought in, Ray goes to get it for her. He makes her kindling, and tells her stories. He keeps his harmonica polished.

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