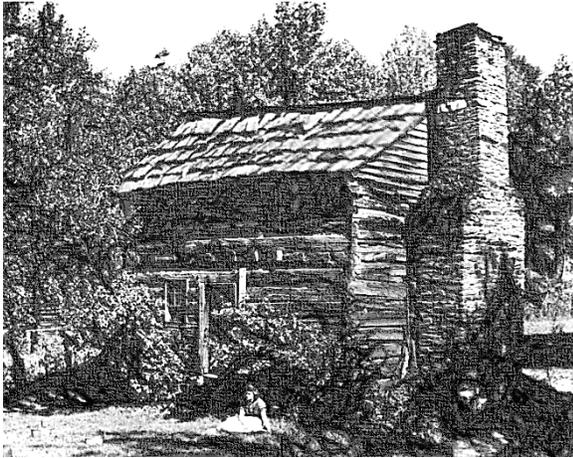


A death in the mountains* © 2019



As I recall, I was fifteen when grandfather Moses Seton died. Sixty years passed. I can still bring back to mind the old man laid out as he was on a trestle table put up in the front room of his mountain cabin. That's how it was with those mountain people. When a death came, the kinfolk would wash the body, shave him, grease his hair and dress him in what whatever good he had. No widow wanted her husband presented in his farm overalls even when it was more likely all he owned. This was all my grandfather owned.

A crowd gathered for the viewing that same day. He looked uncomfortable with a fresh cloth securing his jaw to his head to keep it from gaping, and weights to his eyes should he decide to wink. Most of these people found ways to sit around that bier, even to use the table as the women had laid food around to stimulate conversation, honoring those who came to level their regrets. Moses was a center piece for a clumsy dinner. It was at the cabin never commodious, ill-timed that the old man died. Some said he laid out fine. Grandmother picked at a frayed cuff to undo time and wear.

He died on the porch. He was making a thresh broom of sturdy grass by that name bound to a hickory stick used just in that way for generations. What it was that took him? Folks speculated. It was the heart they said. A couple men drinking corn whiskey mused that bad whiskey can kill a man.

Moses Seton was not known for bad whiskey, just for sipping whiskey pulled from the copper still parked some distance in the woods, near a mountain stream. Might have been a mile.

As a boy of eight, some less or more, I would carry mash to the still. He would mix it with water, add sugar, add yeast. It would sit for days, a tube running off the sealed container into a bucket of water so that he would could watch it off-gas. He would tell me all, but I paid little heed. When he didn't need me to carry water or tend the fire, I would wander the woods near enough to see the trail of smoke for my bearing.

I rolled my own cigarettes. My smoking troubled my mother, but not my father. Mountain people adopted a different view. At fourteen then in the woods, I was considered growed, marrying ready without skills to survive beyond stillin' whiskey and selling it if I could.

Moses Seton had regulars for his moonshine during Prohibition. For the weekly rendezvous with Grandfather, thirsty men would make their way along the mountain roads, not much more than paths worn by deer. He would have upwards forty quarts of double-run, near-on 90 proof. No one drank pure alcohol as it was known to kill you. You had to cut it. Someone might sip on that more powerful fuel, but those who had uncut alcohol used it for lamps as it put off a pure blue light good for night fishin'.

The old man worked his still most days, taking Sundays off for church if a pastor happened to travel a circuit and their church came time. God fearin' meant less fear and more habit. Later I learned they were called social Christians. They took the Christian aspect as known, not discussed, good enough for an "amen", or "praise God", but not so much to debate a verse or labor a message to pull back some lesson from it.

The unadorned old church was a simple frame shack heated by a small wood stove. Locals sat on crude plank benches. The congregants on the benches placed the speaker, preacher or someone without schooling, say, an inspired speaker called to the task in the Quaker fashion. These people were not Quakers or much of anything. Pinning a denomination on the 10 to 20 who came might prove impossible. I never heard of music or communion. Always a picnic with a blessing followed.

The food kept pace for the service. Women took turns exiting the service to fuss with fried chicken, potato salad, boiled parsnips, corn, turnips, collards with fat-back, salted ham... whatever the season dictated for the feast. Late spring proved the hardest as larders emptied and harvests from garden patches had not begun in earnest. Mostly ham and potatoes. Hog slaughter came in the fall. This was the only time they ate fresh pork. Venison was common but not Sunday fare.

Most days you could hear the retort of a rifle anticipating wild game. Might be a turkey or rabbit although wild turkey was considered a poor choice as the birds were skinny, bony, with game flavor that required a slow

roast and generous seasoning.

These mountain people were ingenious and grew most everything they needed outside of flour, corn meal, sugar, salt and pepper. They were frugal by necessity. Men had one set of work pants, two or three shirts, work boots, a change of underwear. Women made their flour sack dresses using a trundle sewing machine, often passing it from log home to log home. It was always in use by someone. Conversations invariably gave way to using the church as a community center to share sewing, quilting, or tearing rags for braided rugs. This never came to pass.

I say now that it seemed like a better time inasmuch as folks looked after their neighbors, placed their values on raising kids and caring for each other during hard times. Lot of nonsense, surely. It was a hard life, a life with risks and constant fatigue. A bad cold could kill you. A man reaching 60 was considered old. Something kept them there. A tie to the land perhaps. My father would say it was ignorance born stubborn. But you know, each of the men claimed a knowledge tainted by anecdotes. Women were experts on the behavior of others.

We left that place early in my life to return as the need arose, or longing pulled. That was often enough such that our arrival took no one by surprise. It was not as if my father had phone calls, except when his father died, and someone made the twenty-mile ride through the mountains to the provision-store (as it was known) to make the call.

My father took the news as if he had been expecting it. Perhaps he had. We left within the hour as he said, the dead don't wait. Warm weather demanded getting the old man settled in quick order.

I was asked to help dig the grave, no small chore with pick and shovel in dirt mostly stone. These stones, my job, were moved to a fenced perimeter around the graveyard. A stone wall mounted each by the hands of a boy. It was a good three-foot-tall when my chore beckoned. It coursed the burial place up from the church, maybe 50-feet to a length. I did not add a noticeable height to it, yet marveled at the size of it, attesting to one stone at a time mounted by boys like me over a hundred years.

Burials might be on top of older graves. It was considered a blessing to lay a descendent with his or her people long after neighbors buried the older, and no more. But it wasn't the economy of real estate motivating them. I concluded fewer stones.

Graves were marked with a board bearing witness, but unattended they disappeared. Ground hogs burrowed the graves for the soft soil. I was given the task one summer—seems I was 12 or so and full of myself with attitude and ruddy disposition—of shooting a particularly industrious ground hog, or whistle pig such as was called. I perched on that stone wall most of the morning. It finally made itself known, taking scent. The last of him.

Some folks eat whistle pigs. One old wallie took my catch. He set straight away to skinning it, gutting it to the fat. He would rinse it well in brine to pull the blood, rub it with salt and wrap it in an oil cloth to keep the insects and dogs away. I watched him for some time. He took no note of me until the salting. He said it needed to rest in salt to pull the wild out of it.

The fat old man came back to me at my Grandfather's wake. I was out in the yard smoking. He ambled toward me using a cane to brace his step. He wore a seer-sucker suit at least two sizes too small, or he two sizes too big. It needed pressing.

He said, "You the Seton boy? The boy that killed that rodent?"

I cupped the cigarette and held it behind my back. No good reason other than my mother objected without relief, or any more relief than her nagging eased her temper. "That's right."

He was a few paces fronting me. "You near 15 or 16, I suppose. You work the grave?"

I nodded.

He chuckled, then coughed, spitting to his side. "Done my share of rock and pick up there. You'd think we would just cremate them. Whistle pigs work 'em anyway."

I raised an eyebrow. "Not until they are well composted. No whistle pig is burrowing around a fresh grave."

He leaned against his cane, considering what I said. "No, suspect you are clear on that. You ever eaten one?"

"Not knowingly."

He laughed hard enough to raise another chunk of phlegm from his throat. He rolled it around his mouth to fashion it, picked a target and let loose. "Your grandfather made the best whiskey. I hear you carried mash and such. Who gets the still?"

I hadn't thought about anything in my grandfather's life I wanted. "Can't say. Suspect it will be sold for some cash."

He frowned, shifting his weight from one leg to the other. "What's to come of your grandmother? Your father moving back to care for her or taking her to the valley?"

I turned to look at the house. Two men came to the porch. I didn't know them. "I apologize but I have forgotten your name."

He started. "George Wilkins." He paused to consider his name, recollecting whether it was accurate, or had he used another name. "Yes, George Wilkins. Grew up next mountain over. My late wife owned a patch here." He glanced over his shoulder as if I could follow his gaze. "We lived with her parents until they passed. Then she took up after them. She never could cut loose those people, even to the grave they dug her down."

I didn't quite know how to tag his comment. "How long you been a widower?"

He smiled. "Not so long. Married one of her sisters. She was too fat and ugly to set herself up proper. But she does what she needs to do without expectin' much. Now we just get by. People 'round look after their own. That's all I can say on that."

He had said enough. I could see he was considering his next move. He eyed the men smoking from the porch where they had pulled up a couple straight backs. "You know those men there, smoking?"

"Not so much. Who are they?"

"The fellow on the right, wearing that store-bought suit is Frank Winker. He comes up from the valley to check on things. Got a government job. They're buying up ridge land for a road. One of those scenic things I suppose. The other fellow is Charles Rutger. He lives down the ridge trail, maybe five miles, but works in the valley at a lumber mill. They're clearing the oak and maple off federal land. Used to be a thing no man would do, but he's takin' to it."

"Still lives here? More than would tempt me to stay."

Wilkins reddened. He scratched at his crotch without noting audience. "How's that? Folks here took some offense when your father left then married down in the valley."

I was irritated. "To stay and live off a garden, find day work when he could? My father thought better of himself."

He huffed. "S'pect our conversation's run its course." He turned toward the house, raising his right arm to get attention before setting it back to brace against the cane. Winker nodded, then toasted Wilkins.

I strolled the path cinching house to house. A girl about my age lounged in the yard of another cabin. She saw me. I waved. "Afternoon June. Mind if I cross over?"

She swung her legs such that she now sat on them. She straightened the dress over her knees. "You're Barker Seton."

I was pretty sure I was. "June. You tendin' the yard?"

"Pickin' ticks is more like it. Good crop of the little blood suckers this year."

It was always a good year for brown ticks. "You haven't gone over to the wake?"

"No disrespect to your grandfather. Dead people creep me out. Sitting through my grandparents was enough. Four days passed before my grandfather was put in the ground. It was disgusting. Makes you glad they're buried. My friend Carol Lee sat with her grandfather after they pulled him out of the woods. He been lost a week until some turkey buzzards led the search party to him. He was already past viewing by days. The folks here are ignorant and set in their ways. Carol Lee was recruited to wash the body, undress him, the like." "I would never do that for anyone, any reason." She shook her head in revulsion at the imagery. I clearly saw her mind teasing the memories into focus.

"Not like any of us escape the grave." I sat down next to her. She was pretty, thin. Her long brown hair was tied back in a ponytail. I could see the floral print of her dress stained from the yard or use. "What grade you in now?"

"Ninth, more or less, like you. That right?"

We never attended school together. Most of these kids were irregular as no school bus could make its way up the mountains and getting a ride down to the county road involved a tractor pulling a wagon with all the kids, some eight of varying ages. Education was haphazard if at the hearth. But they could read and do numbers. I nodded.

She asked, "You have a girlfriend?"

"Nope. You?"

She blushed. "I shouldn't say, but I used to think about marrying you. Isn't that funny?"

I smiled, tilting my head away, plucking some grass to distract my rising desires. My thoughts returned to this girl, the prettiest girl I ever recalled seeing much less close enough to brush her arm. I eased an inch closer.

She sensed my warmth and eased to rest her thigh against my leg. My thoughts shifted entirely to her proximity. I calculated a strategy on how to place my pawn on our board game without sacrificing it.

The thoughts returned as if she was not quite settled on the conversation. "Girlfriend?" She laughed, laying her hand on my leg as if to reassure me. "I told you."

I could smell the grass from her dress. A tick navigated her shoulder. To stall the insect, I laid a hand over it. Unbeknownst to her, my hand cautioned her next move and she turned to kiss me. The tick earned a furlough.

June asked me to walk with her into the woods. I wanted to. I really did. My mind worked the possibilities, convincing me that my time had come to end fantasies, to give them an anchor. Now what seemed likely in that moment never came to proof. To this day I have my share of regrets. Most of my regrets settle like dust as life takes the rapid river course leaving memories in its trail. In time we are past regrets, past the rapids our boat traverses.

Now thinking back on this girl, I wonder what happened to her. Was she still in those mountains? If I had reason I could travel back. There was a paved road across the scenic ridge, with lookouts carved from the rock for travelers to stall, to take pictures of their families as if they had trekked those valleys to earn a picnic or rest.

I kissed her again. The tick slipped my mind until later. Might have been a reason to return to her that night. I knew it would not be the same.

Strolling back to my Grandfather, I leisurely smoked another rolled cigarette. The men took leave of the porch. My father replaced them. He was sipping whiskey, taking in the air.

"Where you been off to?" he asked, checking his measure.

"Walking." Mentally I replayed my rush.

"You're as red as summer sunset." He left it dangle. "Get yourself a plate before the food gets cleared. We'll be moving Dad to the church in the hour."

I went inside. It was dim, close. The mingled smells of food and body odor seized me. My grandmother eased to my side. Extending a clasped hand, she passed a coin to me.

She said, "Your grandfather saved this Morgan for you. He said, 'A man should always have a dollar in his pocket.'" I studied the coin. It was worn. Old. Heavy. I still have that dollar and will give it to my son with the same admonition. He knows more of me than my father's father ever did.

"I'll keep it always." I shoved it deep into my jean's pocket then patted it through the cloth to assure myself. Later I would put thirty-two one-dollar bills in a sock in the bureau that held all their clothes and linen.

"Now fix yourself a plate. That potato salad at your grandfather's foot is good. You'll want that. And a piece of chicken." The chicken rested near his right hand as if he might take a drumstick before heading to the church.

Gathering a plate of what I thought I could eat, I eased myself out of the room. My mother did not pay heed. A dozen to twenty crowded the room, so close I could not easily breath without feeling I was stealing the breath reserved for another mourner, although no one, including my grandmother, struck me as mourning. Just bored.

As yet my father's whiskey rested unfinished. I offered to get him another.

"After the burying. The men will expect a drink after they move the dirt."

I saddled next to him, leaning on the porch rail as he did. I felt I give and eased my dependence on it. "Is

Grandmother Seton going to live with us?"

My father turned to me, but I kept my eye on the yard. "Where did you get that notion?"

"Mr. Wilkins suggested it."

"That old sow needs to mind his speculating." Father paused to let his blood settle.

"He was just spellin', no more."

"Maybe so." He took a few seconds to shape his thoughts. "If she did move into our place, would that be suitable?"

I shrugged. "I suppose. It would take some getting around her ways. I don't see her doing it. She gets more life up here as a widow than in our place as your mother."

He turned his back to the yard then finished the drink. "I expect you understand the situation. We'll see to it that she has what she needs. You'll come up a few times to fill her wood shed."

I groaned.

We stood that porch for the edge on thirty minutes. At length he said, "Let's get Dad to the church. You carry a table leg." The two trestle table legs were x-fashioned and stood on their own as the table was not more than planks secured with cross boards. "We'll lash him to the table to keep him in place. Once we get to the burying ground, you and the other boy set those legs back up so we can have him off the ground."

Back inside, the food was moved back to a large bureau top. Grandmother Seton and one of her sisters straightened Grandfather's shirt. He had not moved much. Then my father and another man laid a blanket over him before cinching the ropes for the last journey to the church burial grounds. They fashioned rope handles off the loops, three to a side.

Six men lifted the table top. They left the cabin. My grandmother, mother and the remaining visitors trailed. I was last. June drifted back to me and placed a hand inside my back pocket. She leaned in and bit my ear lobe, jarring me.

Grandfather came close to having only one end of that table off the ground. As we neared the dirt, June relaxed her intentions and took her place next to her parents. I suspected they were calculating a wedding day in months.

No preacher. I was educated later. The oldest man would normally say the words. Wilkins could only slur. He had left the house earlier to ease a weak back, to steady his wobbly knees. The old whistle pig gourmand's gaze drifted, and he settled to rest against the stone wall for support. Grandmother asked my Dad to speak words over the remains.

I don't recall much of what he said. "Good father. Good husband. Good neighbor." I thought damn good distiller. That side of the old man would be missed. My grandmother covered his face with a handkerchief, touching a cold cheek as she did so. When silence enveloped those gathered, my father loosened the ropes and the men shifted the corpse into the hole.

Several men back shoveled dirt. Rocks were placed to mark it until someone fashioned a board.

I must confess I took the passing with stoicism. Everything about that day needed time to settle, just like that dirt. True of life, our time slips away. Later I visualized the opportunities with June, but others filled the unknown. They eclipsed my teenage passion.

So it goes.

Photo credit: Sketch by author based on photograph of a West Virginia mountain cabin by Earl Palmer (1905-1996). The Palmer photographs are housed at Virginia Polytechnic Institute, Special Collections. I knew him well. He gave me many photographs since donated to the library.