



Heaven (Casteel Book 1)

By V.C. Andrews

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Of all the folks in the mountain shacks, the Casteels were the lowest -- the scum of the hills.

Heaven Leigh Casteel was the prettiest, smartest girl in the backwoods, despite her ragged clothes and dirty face...despite a father meaner than ten vipers...despite her weary stepmother, who worked her like a mule. For her brother Tom and the little ones, Heaven clung to her pride and her hopes. Someday they'd get away and show the world that they were decent, fine and talented -- worthy of love and respect.

Then Heaven's stepmother ran off, and her wicked, greedy father had a scheme -- a vicious scheme that threatened to destroy the precious dream of Heaven and the children forever!

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for Virginia Andrews: 'Beautifully written, macabre and thoroughly nasty... it is evocative of the nasty fairy tales like Little Red Riding Hood and The Babes in the Wood, with a bit of Victorian Gothic thrown in. ... What does shine through is her ability to see the world through a child's eyes' Daily Express 'Makes horror irresistible' Glasgow Sunday Mail 'A gruesome saga... the storyline is compelling, many millions have no wish to put this down' Ms London 'There is strength in her books - the bizarre plots matched with the pathos of the entrapped' The Times

About the Author

One of the most popular authors of all time, V.C. Andrews has been a bestselling phenomenon since the publication of *Flowers in the Attic*, first in the renowned Dollanganger family series which includes *Petals on the Wind*, *If There Be Thorns*, *Seeds of Yesterday*, and *Garden of Shadows*. The family saga continues with *Christopher's Diary: Secrets of Foxworth*, *Christopher's Diary: Echoes of Dollanganger*, and *Secret Brother*. V.C. Andrews has written more than seventy novels, which have sold more than 106 million copies worldwide and been translated into twenty five foreign languages. Join the conversation about the world of V.C. Andrews at [Facebook.com/OfficialVCAndrews](https://www.facebook.com/OfficialVCAndrews).

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Prologue

Whenever the summer winds blow I hear the flowers whispering, and the leaves singing in the forest, and I see again the birds on wing, the river fish jumping. I remember, too, the winters; how the bare tree branches made tortured sounds as the cold winds whipped them about, forcing limbs to scrape the shedlike cabin that clung precariously to the steep mountainside of a range called by the West Virginian natives, the Willies.

The wind didn't just blow in the Willies, it howled and shrieked, so everyone living in the Willies had good reason for looking anxiously out their small dirty windows. Living on the mountainsides was enough to give anyone the willies -- especially when the wolves howled like the wind and the bobcats screeched and the wild things of the forests roamed at will. Often small pets would vanish, and once every decade or so an infant disappeared or a toddler wandered off and was never seen again.

With special clarity I remember one particular cold February night that revealed to me my own beginning. It was the eve of my tenth birthday. I lay close to the wood stove on my floor pallet, tossing and turning, hearing the wolves yowl at the moon. I had the unfortunate habit of sleeping lightly, so the slightest movement in the tiny cabin jolted me awake. Every sound was magnified in our isolated cabin. Granny and Grandpa snored. Pa staggered home drunk, bumping into furniture as he stumbled over sleeping bodies on the floor before he crashed down on the squealing springs of his big brass bed, waking up Ma and making her angry again so she raised her voice in shrill complaint because again he'd spent too much time in Winnerrow, in *Shirley's Place*. At that time I didn't even know why *Shirley's Place* was such a bad place, and why Pa's going there caused so much trouble.

Our cabin floor, with half-inch spacings between each crookedly laid board, let in not only cold air but also the snortings of the sleeping pigs, dogs, cats, and whatever else took retreat under it.

Out of the black suddenly came a different kind of noise. Who was moving in the darkness of the dim red

glow near the stove? I strained to see it was Granny, bent over, her long gray hair streaming, making her seem a witch sliding along the rough wooden planks as quietly as possible. It couldn't be the outhouse she was heading for; Granny was the only one of us allowed to use the "hockeypot" when nature called. The rest of us had to trek two hundred yards to the outhouse. Granny was in her mid-fifties. Chronic arthritis and various other undiagnosed aches and pains made life miserable for Granny, and the loss of most of her teeth made her seem twice her age. Once, so I had been told by those old enough to remember, Annie Brandywine had been the beauty queen of the hills.

"Come, girl," Granny whispered hoarsely, her gnarled hand on my shoulder, "it's time ya stopped cryin out in t'night. I'm hopin maybe ya won't be doin it no more once ya know t'truth bout yerself. So, before yer pa wakes up agin, ya an *me* are goin somewheres, an fore we come back, ya'll have somethin t'cling ta when he glares his eyes an slings his fists." She sighed like the south wind blowing gently, whispering the tendrils of hair around my face to make them tickle like ghosts that were coming -- through her.

"You mean we're going outside? Granny, it's miserably cold out there," I warned even as I got up and pulled on a cast-off pair of Tom's too-big shoes. "You aren't planning on going far, are you?"

"Gotta," said Granny. "Hurts bad t'hear t'words my Luke yells at his own firstborn. Even worse, it makes my blood run cold t'hear ya scream right back when he can strike out an end what ain't hardly begun yet. Girl, why do ya have t'answer back?"

"You know, you know," I whispered. "Pa hates me, Granny, and I don't know why. Why does he hate me so much?"

There was enough moonlight coming through a window to allow me to see her dear old wrinkled face.

"Yes, yes, time ya knew," she mumbled, tossing me a heavy black shawl she'd knitted herself, then wrapping her own narrow, bent shoulders in another just as dark and drab. She led me to the door, swung it open, letting in the cold wind before she shut it again. In their bed beyond the tattered faded red curtain, Ma and Pa grumbled as if the wind half woke them. "We got a trip t'make, ya an me, down t'where we plant our kinfolk. Been atryin t'make it with ya fer many a year. Kin't keep puttin it off. Time runs out, it does. Then it's too late."

So on this cold, snowy, miserable, dark night she and I set off through the black piny woods. A solid sheet of ice lay rippling on the river, and the wolves sounded closer now. "Yep, Annie Brandywine Casteel sure knows how t'keep secrets," Granny said as if to herself. "Not many do, ya know, not many born like me...ya listenin, girl, are ya?"

"Can't help but hear you, Granny. You're shouting directly in my ear."

She had me by the hand, leading me a far way from home. Crazy to be out here, it was. Why, on this freezing winter's night, was she going to give up one of her precious secrets, and to me? Why me? But I loved her enough to assist her down the rough mountain trail. It seemed like miles we traveled in the dark cold of night, that old moon overhead shining down on us with evil intentions.

The treat she had in store for me was a graveyard, stark and eerie in the light of the pale bluish winter moon. The wind blew wild and fierce and snapped her thin white hair and blended it with my own before she spoke again. "Onliest thin I kin give ya, child, onliest thin worth havin, is what I'm gonna tell ya."

"Couldn't you have told me in the cabin?"

"Nah," she scoffed, stubborn as she could sometimes be, set in her ways like an old tree with too many roots. "Ya wouldn't pay no tention iffen I told ya there. *Here*, ya'll always rememba."

She hesitated as her eyes fixed on a slim little tombstone. She raised her arm and pointed her gnarled finger at the granite headstone. I stared at it and tried to read what was engraved there. How very odd for Granny to bring me here during the night, where maybe the ghosts of those who lay here roamed about looking for living bodies to inhabit.

"Ya gotta fergive yer pa fer bein what he is," intoned Granny, huddling close to me for warmth. "He's what he is, and he kin't help it no more than t'sun kin help from risin or settin, no more than t'skunks kin help from makin their stinks, an no more than ya kin help bein what ya are."

Oh, that was an easy thing for Granny to say. Old people didn't remember what it was like to be young and afraid.

"Let's go home," I said, shivering and pulling at Granny. "I've heard and read tales about what goes on in graveyards on nights when the moon is full and the hour is after midnight."

"Know betta than to be skerred of dead thins that kin't move or speak."

Yet she drew me tighter into her embrace and forced me to stare again at the narrow sunken grave. "Ya jus listen an don't say nothin till I'm finished. I got a tale t'tell that's gonna make ya feel betta. There's a good reason why yer pa speaks mean when he looks at ya. He don't really hate ya. In my mind I done put t'pieces togetha, an when my Luke looks at ya he sees *not* ya but someone else...an, chile, he really is a lovin man. A good man underneath it all. Why, he had a first wife he loved so much he near died when she did. He met her down in Atlanta. He was seventeen an she was only fourteen an three days, so she tole me lata," Her thin voice dropped an octave. "Beautiful as an angel, she was, an oh, yer pa did love her so. Why, he swept her offen her feet, when she was runnin away from home. Headin fer Texas, she was. Runnin from Boston. Had a fancy suitcase with her, full of clothes t'likes of what ya've neva seen. All kinds of pretty stuff in that suitcase, suits an silky thins, silvery brush, comb an a silver mirror, an rings fer her fingas, an jewels fer her ears, an she come here t'live, cause she went an made t'mistake of marryin up with a man not her kind...cause she loved him."

"Granny, I've never heard of Pa having a first wife. I thought Ma was his first and only wife."

"Didn't I tell ya t'stay quiet? Ya let me finish tellin this in my own way...She was from a rich Boston family. Come t'live with Luke an Toby an me. I didn't want her when she come. Didn't like her at first. Knew she wouldn't last, right from t'first, knew that. Too good fer t'likes of us, an t'hills, an t'hardships. Thought we had bathrooms, she did. Shocked her when she knew she'd have t'trek ta t'outhouse, an sit on a board with two holes. Then durn if Luke didn't go an build her a pretty lil outhouse all her own, painted it white, he did, an she put in it fancy rolled paper on a spindle, an even offered t'let me use her pink store-bought paper. Her *bathroom*, she called it. She hugged an kissed Luke fer doin that fer her."

"You mean Pa wasn't mean to her like he is to Ma?"

"Shut up, girt. Yer makin me lose track...She came, she stole my heart, maybe Toby's, too. She tried so hard t'do her best. Helpin out with t'cookin. Tryin t'make our cabin pretty. An Toby an me, we gave em our bed,

so they could start their babies in t'right way an not on t'floor. She'd have slept on t'floor, she woulda, but wouldn't let her. All Casteels are made in beds...I'm ahopin an prayin anyways that's true. Well...one day she's laughin an happy cause she's gonna have a baby. My Luke's baby. An I feel so sorry, so blessed sorry. Was always ahopin she'd go back t'where she come from fore t'hills took her, t'way they do delicate folks. But she made him happy when she was here. Made him happier than he's been since." Granny stopped talking abruptly.

"How did she die, Granny? Is this her grave?"

She sighed before she continued. "Yer pa was only eighteen when she passed on, an she was still only fourteen when he had t'bury her in this cold ground an walk away an leave her alone in t'night. He knew she hated t'cold nights without him. Why, chile, he laid on her grave all t'first night t'keep her warm, an it was February...an that's my tale of her who came as an angel t'the hills, t'live an love yer pa, an make happier than he's eva been, an likely he'll neva be that happy agin, from t'looks of it."

"But why did you have to bring me out here to tell me all of this, Granny? You could have told me in the cabin. Even if it is a sad and kind of a sweet story...still, Pa's meaner than hell, and she must have taken all the best of him into the grave with her, and left only the worst for the rest of us. Why didn't she teach him how to love others? Granny, I wish she'd never come! Not ever come! Then Pa would love Ma, and he'd love me, and not her so much."

"Oh," said Granny, appearing stunned. "What's wrong with ya, girl, what's wrong? Ain't ya done guessed? That girl that yer pa called his angel, she was *yer ma!* She's the one who birthed ya, an by t'time ya come, she could hardly speak...an she named ya Heaven Leigh, she did. An ya kin't truly say, kin ya, that ya ain't proud of that name that everybody says suits ya jus fine, jus fine."

I forgot the wind. I forgot my hair snapping around my face. Forgot everything in the wonder of finding out just what and who I was.

When the moon slipped from behind a dark cloud, a random beam of light shone for an instant on the engraved name:

Angel

Beloved wife of Thomas Luke Casteel

Strange how it made me feel to see that grave. "But where did Pa find Sarah? And how did he do it so quick?"

Granny, as if eager to spill it all out while she had the chance, began to talk faster. "Well, yer pa needed a wife t'fill his empty bed. He hated his lonely nights, an men gets cravins, chile, *physical* cravins yer gonna find out bout one day when yer old enough. He wanted a wife t'give him what his angel had, an she tried, give Sarah credit fer that. She made ya a good motha, treated ya like ya were her own. Nursed ya, loved ya. An Sarah gave Luke her body willingly enough, but she had nothin of his angel's spirit t'give him, an that leaves him still yearnin fer t'girl who would have made him a betta man. He *was* betta then, chile Heaven -- even if ya don't believe it. Why, in t'days when yer angel ma were alive he'd set out fer work early each mornin, drivin his old pickup truck down t'Winnerrow where he was learnin all about carpentry an how t'build houses an such. He used t'come home full of nice talk about buildin us all a new house down in t'valley, an when he had that house, he were gonna work t'land, raise cows, pigs, an horses...yer pa, he's

always had a keenin fer animals. Loves em, he does, like ya do, chile Heaven. Ya get that from him."

Odd how I felt when Granny took me back to the cabin, and from beneath a clutter of old junk, and many old cartons in which we kept our pitifully few clothes, she dragged out something wrapped about in an old quilt. From that she extracted an elegant suitcase, the kind mountain folks like us could never afford. "Yers," she whispered so the others wouldn't wake up and intrude on this most private moment. "Belonged t'yer ma. Promised her I'd give it t'ya when t'time were right. Figure it's as right as it'll eva be t'night, now...so look, girl, look. See what kind of ma ya had."

As if a dead mother could be compressed and put into a fancy, expensive suitcase!

But when I looked, I gasped.

There before me in the dim firelit room were the most beautiful clothes I'd ever seen. Such delicate lacy things I hadn't dreamed existed...and at the very bottom I found something long, and carefully wrapped in dozens of sheets of tissue paper. I could tell from Granny's expression she was tense, watching me closely, as if to savor my reaction.

In the dim glow of the woodfire burning I stared at a doll. A doll? What I'd expected least to find. I gazed and gazed at the doll with the silvery-gold hair bound up in a fancy way. She wore a wedding veil, the filmy mist flowing out from a tiny jeweled cap. Her face was exceptionally pretty, with beautifully shaped bowed lips, the upper cleft ridge fitting so precisely into the bottom center indentation. Her long dress was made of white lace, lavishly embroidered with tiny pearls and sparkling beads. A bride doll...veil and everything. Even her white shoes were lace and white satin, with sheer stockings fastened to a tiny garter belt, as I saw when I took a peak under the skirts and veil.

"It's her. Yer ma. Luke's angel that was named Leigh," whispered Granny, "jus t'way yer ma looked when she came here afta she married up with yer pa. Last thin she said before she died was, 'Give what I brought with me to my little girl...'An now I have."

Yes, now she had.

And in so doing, she'd changed the course of my life.

Chapter 1: The Way It Used To Be

If Jesus died almost two thousand years ago to save us all from the worst we had in us, he'd failed in our area, except on Sundays between the hours of ten A.M. and noon. At least in my opinion.

But what was my opinion? Worthy as onion peelings, I thought, as I pondered how Pa had married Sarah two months after my mother died in childbirth -- and he'd loved his "angel" so much. And four months after I was born and my mother was buried, Sarah gave birth to the son Pa had so wanted when I came along and ended my mother's brief stay on earth.

I was too young to remember the birth of this first son, who was christened Thomas Luke Casteel the Second, and they put him, so I've been told, in the cradle with me, and like twins we were rocked, nursed, held, but not equally loved. No one had to tell me that.

I loved Tom with his fire-red hair inherited from Sarah, and his flashing green eyes, also inherited from his

mother. There was nothing in him at all to remind me of Pa, except later he did grow very tall.

After hearing Granny's tale of my true mother on the eve of my tenth birthday, I determined never, so help me God, never would I tell my brother Tom any different from what he already believed, that Heaven Leigh Casteel was his own true whole-blood sister. I wanted to keep that special something that made us almost one person. His thoughts and my thoughts were very much alike because we'd shared the same cradle, and had communicated silently soon after we were born, and that had to make us special. Being special was of great importance to both of us, I guess because we feared so much we weren't.

Sarah stood six feet tall without shoes. An Amazon mate very suitable for a man as tall and powerful as Pa. Sarah was never sick. According to Granny (whom Tom sometimes jokingly called Wisdom Mouth), the birth of Tom gave Sarah a mature bustline, so full it appeared matronly when she was still fourteen.

"An," informed Granny, "even afta givin birth, Sarah would get up soon as it was ova, pick up what chore she'd left unfinished, jus as if she hadn't undergone t'most awful ordeal we women have t'suffa through without complaint. Why, Sarah could cook while tryin t'encourage a newborn baby t'suckle." Yeah, thought I, her robust good health must be her main attraction for Pa. He didn't seem to admire Sarah's type of beauty much, but at least she wasn't likely to die in childbirth and leave him in a pit of black despair.

One year after Tom came Fanny, with her jet-black hair like Pa's, her dark blue eyes turning almost black before she was a year old. An Indian girl was our Fanny, browner than a berry, but very seldom happy about anything.

Four years after Fanny came Keith, named after Sarah's long-dead father. Keith had the sweetest pale auburn hair, you just had to love him right from the beginning -- especially when he turned out to be very quiet, hardly any bother at all, not wailing, screaming, and demanding all the time as Fanny had -- and still did. Eventually Keith's blue eyes turned topaz, his skin rivaled the peaches-and-cream complexion lots of people said I had, though I didn't truly know since I wasn't given much to peering into our cracked and poorly reflecting mirror.

Keith grew to be an exceptionally good little boy who appreciated beauty so much that when a new baby came along the year after he was born, he would sit for hours and hours just gazing at the delicate little girl who was sickly from the very beginning. Pretty as a tiny doll was this new little sister that Sarah allowed me to name, and Jane she became, since at that time I'd seen a Jane on a magazine cover, too pretty to believe.

Jane had soft wisps of pale golden-red hair, huge aqua eyes, long dark curling lashes that she'd flutter as she lay discontentedly in the cradle gazing at Keith. Occasionally Keith would reach to rock the cradle, and that would make her smile, a smile of such disarming sweetness you'd do anything just to see that smile come out like sunshine after the rain.

After Jane was born she began to dominate our lives. To bring a smile to Jane's angelic face became the loving and dutiful obligation of all of us. To make her laugh instead of wail was my own special delight. Time to rejoice when Jane could smile instead of whine from mysterious aches and pains she couldn't name. And in this, as in everything else, what I enjoyed doing was what Fanny had to spoil.

"Ya give her t'me!" screamed Fanny, running with her long, skinny legs to kick my shins before she darted away and called from a safe place in our dirt yard, "She's *our* Jane -- not yers! Not Tom's! Not Keith's! OURS! Everythin here is *OURS*, not yers alone! Heaven Leigh Casteel!"

From then on Jane became *Our Jane*, and was called that until eventually all of us forgot that once upon a time our youngest, sweetest, frailest, had only one name.

I knew about names and what they could do.

My own name was both a blessing and a curse. I tried to make myself believe such a "spiritual" name had to be a blessing -- why, who else in the whole wide world had a name like Heaven Leigh? No one, no one, whispered the little bluebird of happiness who lived now and then in my brain, singing me to sleep and telling me that everything, in the long run, would work out just fine...just fine. Trouble was, I had an old black crow roosting in my brain as well, telling me such a name tempted fate to do its worst.

Then there was Pa.

In my secret and putaway heart there were times when I wanted more than anything in the world to love the lonely father who sat so often staring sullenly into space, looking as if life had cheated him. He had ebony-dark hair, inherited from a true Indian ancestor who'd stolen a white girl and mated with her. His eyes were as black as his hair, and his skin kept a deep bronze color winter and summer; his beard didn't show through shadowy dark the way most beards did on men with such dark hair. His shoulders were wonderfully wide. Why, you could watch him in the yard swinging an ax, chopping wood, and see the most complicated display of, muscles all big and strong, so that Sarah, bending over a washtub, would look up and stare at him with such love and yearning in her eyes it would almost break my heart to know he never seemed to care whether or not she admired and loved him, or cried every time he didn't come home until early morning.

Sometimes his moody, melancholy air made me doubt my mean thoughts. I watched him the spring when I was thirteen, knowing about my own true mother, and saw him sitting slouched in a chair, staring into space, as if dreaming of something; I, in the shadows, longed to reach out and touch his cheek, wondering if it would be bristly -- I'd never touched his face. What would he do if I dared? Slap *my* face? Yell, shout, no doubt that's exactly what he'd do -- and yet, yet, there was in me a deep need to love him and be loved by him. At the time that aching need was there, waiting to ignite and burst into a bonfire of love and affection.

If only he'd see me, do or say one thing to encourage me to believe he did love me at least a little.

But he never even looked at me. He never spoke to me. He treated me as if I weren't there.

But when Fanny came flying up the rickety steps of the porch and hurled herself onto his lap, shouting out how glad she was to see him, he kissed *her*. My heart pained to see the way he cuddled her close so he could stroke her long, shiny dark hair. "How ya been, Fanny girl?"

"Missin ya, Pa! Hate it when ya don't come home. Ain't good here without ya! Please, Pa, this time stay!"

"Sweet," he murmured, "nice t'be missed -- maybe that's why I stay away."

Oh, the pain my father delivered when he stroked Fanny's hair and ignored mine. Worse than the pain he gave from slaps and ugly words when once in a while I made him see me, and forced him to respond to me. Deliberately I strode forward, coming out of the shadows into the light, carrying balanced on my hips a huge basket of clothes I'd just taken from the rope lines and folded. Fanny smirked my way. Pa didn't move his eyes to indicate he knew how hard I worked, though a muscle near his lips twitched. I didn't speak but passed on by, as if he hadn't been gone two weeks and I'd seen him only minutes ago. It did shrivel me some to be ignored, even as I ignored him.

Fanny never did any work. Sarah and I did that. Granny did the talking; Grandpa whittled; and Pa came and went as he pleased, selling booze for the moonshiners, and sometimes helping them make it, but it was outwitting the Feds that gave Pa his greatest pleasure, and made him his biggest money -- according to Sarah, who was terrified he'd be caught and thrown in jail, because the professional liquor brewers didn't care for the competition overproof alcohol gave them. Often he'd go and stay a week or two, and when he was gone Sarah allowed her hair to go dirty, and her meals were worse than usual. But when Pa walked in the door and threw her a careless smile or word, she came alive, to hurry and bathe, to put on the best she had (a choice of three dresses, none really good). It was her fervent desire to have makeup to wear when Pa was home, and a green silk dress to match the color of her eyes. Oh, it was easy to see that Sarah had all her hopes and dreams pinned on that day when real cosmetics and a green silk dress came into her life and made Pa love her as much as he'd loved that poor dead girl who'd been my mother.

Our cabin near the sky was made of old wood full of knotholes to let in the cold and heat, or let out our cold or heat, whichever would make us most miserable. It had never known paint, and never would. Our roof was made of tin that had turned rusty long before I was born, and had wept a million tears to stain the old silvery wood. We had drainpipes and rain barrels to catch the water in which we took baths and washed our hair once we had heated it on the cast-iron stove we nicknamed Ole Smokey. It belched and spat out so much vile smoke we were always half crying and coughing when we were shut up in there with the windows down and the only door to the outside closed.

Across the front of our mountain cabin was the obligatory front porch. Each spring saw Granny and Grandpa leave the cabin, to decorate our sagging, dilapidated porch with their twin rockers. Granny knitting, crocheting, weaving, making braided rugs, as Grandpa whittled. Sometimes Grandpa fiddled for the barn dances held once a week, but the older Grandpa grew the less he liked to fiddle and the more he liked to whittle.

Inside were two small rooms, with a tattered curtain to form a kind of flimsy door for the "bedroom." Our stove not only heated our place but also cooked our food, baked our biscuits, heated our bathwater. Once a week before we went to church on Sundays, we took baths and washed our hair.

Next to Ole Smokey sat an ancient kitchen cabinet outfitted with metal bins for flour, sugar, coffee, and tea. We couldn't afford real sugar, coffee, or tea, but we did use gallon cans of lard for our gravy and biscuits. When we were extraordinarily lucky we had honey enough for our wild berries. When we were blessed beyond belief we had a cow to give us milk, and always there were chickens, ducks, and geese to supply us with eggs, and fresh meat on Sundays. Hogs and pigs roamed at will, to snuggle down under our house and keep us awake with all *their* bad dreams. Inside, Pa's hunting hounds had the run of our home, since all mountain folk knew dogs were darn important when it came to supplying a steady flow of meat other than domestic fowl.

Animals we had aplenty when you counted the stray cats and dogs who came to give us hundreds of kittens and puppies. Why, our dirt yard was full of wandering animals, and anything else that could stand the clutter and noise of living with Casteels -- the scum of the hills.

In what we called our bedroom was one big brass bed with a saggy old stained mattress over coiled springs that squeaked and squealed whenever there was activity on that bed. Sometimes what went on in there was embarrassingly close and loud; the curtain did little to muffle sound.

In town and in school they called us hill scum, hill filth, and scumbags. Hillbillies was the nicest thing they ever called us. Of all the folks in the mountain shacks, there wasn't one family more despised than ours, the

Casteels, the worst of the lot. Despised not only by valley folk but by our own kind, for some reason I never understood. But...we were the family with five Casteel sons in prison for major and minor crimes. No wonder Granny cried at night; all her sons had been so disappointing. She had only her youngest left, Pa, and if he gave her joy I never knew of it. On him she'd placed all her expectations, waiting for that wonderful someday when he proved to the world that Casteels *were not* the worst scum of the hills.

Now, I've heard tell, though it's hard to believe, that there are kids in the world who hate school, but Tom and I couldn't wait for Mondays to roll around, just so we could escape the confines of our small mountain cabin with its smelly, cramped two rooms, its far walk to the stinking old outhouse.

Our school was made of red brick and sat smack in the heart of Winnerrow, the nearest valley village, set deep in the Willies. We walked seven miles to and seven miles fro as if they were nothing, always with Tom close at my side, Fanny tagging along behind, meaner than ten vipers, with Pa's black eyes and Pa's own temper. She was pretty as a picture, but mad at the world because her family was so "stinking rotten poor," as Fanny succinctly put it.

"...an we don't live in a pretty painted house like they do in Winnerrow, where they got real bathrooms," Fanny shrilled, always complaining about things the rest of us accepted lest we be miserable. "Inside bathrooms -- kin ya imagine? Heard tell some houses got two, *THREE* -- each with hot an cold runnin water, kin ya believe such as that?"

"Kin believe most anythin bout Winnerrow," answered Tom, skipping a pebble over the river water that was our bathing hole in the summers. Without that river running we'd have been much dirtier than we were. The river and its little ponds, pools, and freshwater springs made life better in a thousand ways, making up some for all that would have been intolerable but for cool, tasty spring water, and a swimming hole as good as any city pool.

"Heaven, ya ain't listenin!" yelled Fanny, who had to have center stage all of the time. "An what's more, they got kitchen sinks in Winnerrow. *Double* sinks! Central heating...Tom, what's central heating?"

"Fanny, we got t'same thin in Ole Smokey that sets clean smack in t'middle of our cabin."

"Tom," I said, "I don't think that's really what central heating means."

"As fer as I'm concerned, that's exactly what I want it t'mean."

If I seldom agreed with Fanny about anything else, I did agree that it would be paradise unlimited to live in a painted house with four or five rooms, to have all the hot and cold water at one's will just by turning on a faucet -- and a toilet that flushed.

Oh, gosh, to think of central heating, double sinks, and flushing toilets made me realize just how poor we really were. I didn't like to think about it, to feel sorry for myself, to be inundated with worries about Keith and Our Jane. Now, if Fanny would only wash her clothes, that would help a little. But Fanny never would do anything, not even sweep the front porch, though she was pretty crazy about sweeping the dirt yard free of leaves. Because it was a fun thing to do, was my sour reasoning. Out there she could watch Tom playing ball with his buddies, while Sarah and I did the real work, and Granny did the talking.

Granny had good reasons for not working as hard as Sarah. Granny had her own problems getting up once she was down, and getting down once she was up. The time it took for her to get from here to there seemed

an eternity as she held on to what furniture we had. There just wasn't enough furniture to take Granny everywhere she wanted to go easily.

Sarah taught me when I was old enough, and Granny was too feeble to help (and Fanny flatly refused to do anything even when she was three, four, or five), how to diaper babies, how to feed them, give them baths in a small metal washtub. Sarah taught me a thousand things. By the time I was eight I knew how to make biscuits, melt the lard for the gravy, add the flour with water before I blended it into the hot grease. She taught me how to clean windows and scrub floors and use the washboard to force dirt out of filthy clothes. She also taught Tom to do as much as he could to help me, even if other boys did call him a sissy for doing "women's work." If Tom had not loved me so much, he might have objected more.

A week came when Pa was home every night. Sarah was happy as a bluebird, humming under her breath and shyly glancing at Pa often, as if he'd come courting and wasn't just a husband tired of running moonshine. Maybe somewhere out on a lonely highway a Federal revenue man was waiting for Luke Casteel, ready to pitch him into jail along with his brothers.

Out in the yard I scrubbed away on dirty clothes, as usual, while Fanny skipped rope and Pa pitched the ball for Tom to swing at with his one and only plaything, a ballbat left over from Pa's childhood. Keith and Our Jane hung around me, wanting to hang up the washed clothes -- neither one could reach the rope lines.

"Fanny, why don't you help Heavenly?" yelled Tom, throwing me a worried glance.

"Don't want to!" was Fanny's answer.

"Pa, why don't you make Fanny help Heavenly?"

Pa hurled the ball so hard it almost hit Tom, who took a wild swing and, off balance, fell to the ground. "Don't ever pay attention to women's work," said Pa with a gruff laugh. He turned toward the house, in time to hear Sarah bellow our evening meal was ready: "Come an git it!"

Painfully Granny rose from her porch rocker. Grandpa struggled to rise from his. "Gettin old is worse than I thought it would be," groaned Granny once she was on her feet and trying to make it to the table before all the food was gone. Our Jane ran to her to be led by the hand, for Granny could do that if not much else. She groaned again. "Makes me think that dyin ain't so bad after all."

"Stop saying that!" stormed Pa. "I'm home to enjoy myself, not to hear talk about death and dying!" And in no time at all, almost before Granny and Grandpa were comfortable in their chairs at the table, he got up, finished with the meal that had taken Sarah hours to prepare, and out into the yard he went, jumping into his pickup truck to head to God knows where.

Sarah, wearing a dress she'd ripped apart, then sewn back together in a different fashion, with new sleeves and pockets added from her bag of scrap fabrics, stood in the doorway staring out, softly crying. Her freshly washed hair scented with the last of her lilac water shone rich and red in the moonlight, and all for nothing when those girls in *Shirley's Place* wore real French perfume, and real makeup, not just the rice powder that Sarah used to take the shine from her nose.

I determined I was not going to be another Sarah -- or another angel found in Atlanta. Not me. Not ever me.

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Users Review

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