

# The Old Man

by Scott Sharpe

Rust-orange scales litter the ground beneath the pine – sign of the squirrel’s search for the sweet seeds found tucked beneath the cone’s thorny lobes. The scales fall like heavy snowflakes, twirling and seesawing to the forest floor. As I raise my eyes to the bushy-tail sitting astride a pine limb, I’m thankful he’s ignorant of my presence and his certain death. He’ll feel no pain, for I don’t miss.

Not anymore.

God’s truth, I haven’t wasted a shot since I was seven and the old man’s hard fist dropped me to the dirt. “Missed. That was my damn supper, boy.” He’d said it as if he were commenting on a gnat flitting about his face. I reckon that’s how he thought of me, a nuisance to swat aside, a trifling irritation.

I’d spit blood into the dirt. Risen.

True, that was the last time I’d missed, but it wasn’t the last time he had to straighten me out – or the first for that matter. It was as natural to him as breathing or drinking.

Now and again he had to straighten out my mama too. He’d take a willow cane to her backside with us watching. Mama didn’t say much, just cried a bit, real quiet-like. One evening, while he was out drinking and tomcatting about, she packed up and left – Greenville or Spartanburg most likely. Anywhere but here. She just looked at my sister and me then walked out the house, screen door slamming, her disappearing into the gloaming. I don’t blame her for hightailing, not truly.

The old man never mentioned her again.

With my mama gone, he mostly just straightened me out because I was there. Didn’t need much of a cause. By the time I was fourteen or thereabouts, it wasn’t nothing to me anymore, same as working a plow or splitting kindling. A chore. Long as he let Callie be, he could beat hell out of me much as he pleased.

My sister cooked and cleaned for him, all the while trying to make herself small so he wouldn’t notice her.

He’d come in the door like a storm. “Where’s my supper? Damn stupid girl.”

After supper one evening, Callie was clearing the table. She was taking up his plate of gnawed squirrel bones, just staring straight ahead, like she wasn’t looking at nothing at all. No light left in her eyes. I looked down and saw his hand slide down her leg from beneath her skirt. She just stacked the dishes in the washtub. Walked to her room. The old man followed.

Sun’s just rising over the pine tops when I step out of the woods, the squirrel swinging at my belt. I stop behind the old hog pen, next to the unmarked grave with no stone, no cross, no epitaph. Untying the bushy-tail from my belt, I drop it onto the pile of rotting and rotted carcasses heaped atop the grave.

“Here’s your supper, old man. I didn’t miss.”