

“Stand back everybody! Wilson RUN! Oh, no! It’s gonna be a big one!”

Betty could hold in the sneeze no longer. She drew in a deep breath. “AAAHHHHCCCHHHOOOOO!” When recovered from being doubled over, she grabbed a small rock and threw it at her brother.

“Ouch! That hurt!” The straps of Nathan’s patched overalls slipped onto his muscular shoulders as the teenager cranked with all his might. One stray curl fell over his forehead. Great effort was needed to bring up the long metal tube filled with water from the well. Betty grinned as the weight of the load in the cylinder almost lifted the teenager right off his feet.

She stood, manning a wooden bucket, awaiting the water. Neither she nor her younger sister Nancy cared one bit about getting their flour sack dresses dirty leaning on the rocks surrounding the well opening. Betty’s little dog danced with excitement.

“Isn’t he handsome?” The Boston Terrier’s pointed ears perked up, as if knowing he was the focus of conversation. “I still can’t believe Wilson is my dog.” Betty knelt to scratch the little dog’s chin.

Nancy put her hands on her hips. “Humph. It’s downright amazing he’s here at all, considering where he came from. The only reason that ugly John Henry Hannigen gave Wilson to you was to get you to go out with him. But even that shouldn’t be enough.” Nancy continued to watch for the cylinder. “That boy is ugly. Inside and outside.”

Betty pictured John Henry. Tall. Lean, even downright skinny. Raggedy blonde hair he wore a bit too long. His smile was worse, the missing front tooth emphasized a rather mean streak. Wrinkling her nose, she sat on a rock.

“Now, Nancy. Be nice. Go out? Even if I wasn’t frightened of the whole idea, Mama won’t let me go out with *any* boy. Besides, I’ve heard a dog is better than a man any day. Ain’t that right?”

She patted her leg for the dog to jump into her lap. “Yes it is, isn’t it, sweetheart? Let me call you sweetheart, I’m in love with you...” Betty held her ear toward the dog’s muzzle. He licked her neck and she laughed.

“Get up here!” Nancy grumbled, “And do your share!”

“Ah, she’s just plain jealous, ain’t she, Wilson?”

“You’re all wet, that’s what you are!” Nancy grabbed the cylinder which had just emerged from the well. She released water directly on Betty’s head. Wilson yelped, jumped away from the cold wetness and began barking. Betty hopped up from her perch on the rock.

“Oh, you’re all wet! Look at you!” Nancy yelled about the dog’s high pitched barking.

“Drat it! I worked hard to get that water!” Nathan seemed angry.

Betty studied his face, and knew right away he was just pretending to be mad.

“Did any go in the bucket?” Nathan asked.

Getting to her feet, Betty watched Wilson shake from head to his stubby little tail.

“I wish I could do that. Here,” she said. “Let me wring out my dress over the bucket. Wouldn’t want all that hard work to be wasted!”

She looked at Nancy. “My lands, little sister, you beat all.” Betty dripped what water she could into the bucket. She then flung her sopping wet hair at Nancy, who dodged the spray and ran toward the house. Wilson chased after her for a bit, then circled around to come back to the well.

“I declare, that girl!” Betty told Nathan. “Send it back down in and I’ll help pull it up this time.” A breeze blew through the trees. “Ooh, that air is kind of cool!”

“It is October, in case you haven’t noticed. A ‘course it’s cool!” Nathan pointed toward the cabin. “Go put on something dry.” He winked. “I’ll bet you a biscuit at supper I can have the water drawn before you can get back!” He said, laughing.

“We shouldn’t be bettin’ but, you’re on. I think Mama’s making fried chicken for Sunday night supper,” she said, walking backward. “That extra biscuit will go good with the gravy!” With that parting shot, Betty ran barefoot through the grass to the house.

The sturdy log cabin and barn with livestock and happy children belied an underlying poverty common to rural West Virginia in 1937. Every day, the Nugen family gave thanks for what they had, for starvation was not among the effects of the Great Depression. But while Robert Nugen’s skill at farming and animal husbandry kept the family fed, there was rarely any extra money, and cash or coin was a rare sight indeed.

Most everything the family needed came from their own fields and animals, or bartering those things for coal oil for lamps and buttons to replace those lost from the shirts and coats of twelve active children. Betty never went to bed hungry. But, at age seventeen, she was hungry for life.

She ached to experience the world beyond Fayetteville, West Virginia after graduating from high school. The more she learned about the land of ten thousand lakes in the state of Minnesota to the white, sandy beaches of Florida, the more she yearned for adventure. Magazines like *Time* and *National Geographic* at the school library took her on fanciful flights of imagination. She especially loved the photos of airplanes and admired the fashions of the day. The images excited the adventurer within the farm girl. But her inherent fear of the unknown kept that excitement in check. That, and Betty’s loyalty, which ran deeper than her desires. The pretty, quiet girl loved her home and family without reservation. She adored her school, her state and the US of A.

Her clothes were old, but clean and neat. Dark brown curls crowned a beautiful face. Creamy skin covered a beautiful soul. Some of her vast capacity for love was given to the little dog, Wilson. Her father fussed that a Boston Terrier had no place on a farm. But when he petted the black fur, scratched the bat-like ears and admitted the animal wouldn’t eat much, Betty knew Wilson could stay. He walked to school with her and waited patiently under a tree for her return trip home.

With twelve children in the family, nothing was truly owned by one person. Clothes were handed down, repaired and handed down again. The boys often used bits of rope to keep their oversized pants in place.

The youngest, fourteen year old Paul, ran everywhere he went, bare feet carrying him from one adventure to the next. He was tall and thin, a born runner. Everyone had chores: Nathan fetched water, Nancy fed the chickens, Paul fed the hogs, Betty milked the cow while Ethel cooked, washed and even cared for some of her nieces and nephews. Everyone helped when there were peas to shell or beans to snap. There was always work to do for the seven children still living on the farm. Canning produce from the garden in summer, shucking corn and drying apples and making apple butter occurred later in the year. The older brothers and sisters had either married and begun their own families nearby or entered military service.

With an aptitude for arithmetic, Betty helped both Nancy and Paul with their schoolwork. Nancy was an avid reader, always coming home with books from the library which she often read aloud after supper by the light of a coal lamp.

The school and some stores in town had electricity, but the wires hadn't yet reached as far out as the Nugen farm. So while the children knew of such advances in the world as radio, telephone and motor cars, nothing like that existed in their home life. They found joy in simple everyday things, like rowdy games of tag or just sitting on the porch watching fireflies.

Unable to ignore her daughters' raucous entry into the house, Ethel wiped her hands on her apron and turned away from her biscuit dough. Serving as wife and mother to twelve had hardened her a bit. "Great heavenly days, what are you girls up to now? Where's the water?"

"You're getting' *me* all wet!" Nancy shouted.

"That's what you get for getting' me all wet!"

The giggling diminished slightly at the sound of their mother's steps across the wooden floor. They called a truce and walked toward their mother.

"And where, pray tell, is the water I sent you to get?"

The sisters exchanged a quick look. Betty said, "Nathan's drawing more after little miss here wasted a whole bucket full on me," Betty grinned nervously. One never knew how Ethel might react to a bad situation.

"Wasn't wasted, it was worth it to see your face! Don't worry, mama, Nathan's drawing more. I'll help bring it up." Nancy wiped her wet arm on Ethel's apron.

"Stop that! You'll get me all wet. Well, Betty, you should take some soap to wash and set your hair since it's already wet. That nice Mr. Hannigen will be over this evening to take your photograph, remember?"

Nancy threw an elbow into Betty's side. "Oh yeah, our glamor girl is having a photo session."

Betty ignored her sister. "Oh, dear. I forgot all about it. Yes, I'll do that mama." She looked briefly at the floor. "Did...did Mr. Hannigen say anything about a dress? John Henry mentioned they had one. Oh I do hope he doesn't come along with his father. I am nervous enough about all this with him standin' around gawkin'." Betty asked.

“I don’t know about John Henry, but yes, Mr. Hannigen is bringing his wife’s old prom dress. “She caught Betty’s eyes with a stern look. “This is your graduation picture, Betty Irene. We don’t often get the chance to get photographs done. You’d best make it count. And if John Henry does come along, you *will* be nice to him.”

“Yes, mama.” Betty turned to find the soap and find the box of bobby pins and combs for her hair. Nancy pretended to help, as their mother turned back to her dough and began kneading.

“Be nice to him?” Nancy whispered. “I hope it’s worth trading your image on a photograph for...” She glanced at Wilson. “For a *dog*!”

Betty playfully back handed her sister’s arm, then quickly pulled on a sweater and a pair of Paul’s pants. She picked up her wet clothes, the box containing the brush rollers and motioned for Nancy to follow.

“Of course it’s worth it!” Betty exclaimed when they were again outdoors. She hung her dress on the clothes line. As if on cue, the dog ran up to the girls and turned in an excited circle. “Because he’s worth it!

Nancy stooped to pat the dog’s head. She grabbed the hair brush and began smoothing Betty’s wet curls.

“Do you believe the story...that Mr. Hannigen might send some of his photographs to a fancy magazine?” Betty sighed. “Wouldn’t it be something if one of *me* was published?”

“Hummmph. Personally, I think you’d hide under the bed if that happened.”

Nancy had a point. If it happened, that is. “I’ll cross that bridge when I come to it. The pictures are part of the deal for Wilson, so I’ll just have to face it.”

Nancy rolled her eyes, as Nathan approached, carrying the bucket of water. He poured some water into the wash bin the girls were using to rinse Betty’s hair before walking on to the house. He stopped on the porch and called back, “By the way, you owe me a biscuit, missy.”