

RUTH WHITE

Belle
Prater's
Boy



One

Around 5:00 a.m. on a warm Sunday morning in October 1953, my Aunt Belle left her bed and vanished from the face of the earth.

“When I heard her get up, I figgered she was going outside to the toilet,” her husband, my Uncle Everett, told the sheriff. “So I dozed off back to sleep. When I came awake again, I’d say maybe a half hour had passed, and she wadn’t back, so I says to myself, ‘Reckon I better go check on Belle, see if she’s okay.’ So I did.”

Uncle Everett, a coal miner, and Aunt Belle, along with their boy, Woodrow, lived way far in the head of a long, isolated holler called Crooked Ridge, near

the town of Coal Station, Virginia, where the Appalachians are steep and rugged. In those days the roads were narrow and rocky, barely passable in bad weather. They had an old Ford, and that morning it was parked on the slope with the key in the ignition like always. Their nearest neighbors, the Sloans, who lived almost a mile down the road, told the sheriff they hadn't seen or heard a thing out of the ordinary.

According to Uncle Everett, Aunt Belle was barefooted and wearing only a thin nightgown. Her two pairs of shoes and all her clothes were still in their rightful places. There was no evidence of foul play and no indication that she went traipsing off to somewhere else. Besides, there was no place to traipse unless she went over those wild hills in her night clothes, barefooted. And in that case, somebody surely would've noticed her on the other side. There were no fresh footprints anywhere, not even in that marshy place by the gate, no unusual sound heard by Uncle Everett, or Woodrow, who was sleeping in the loft.

Never before had anything like this happened in our county, and once the word got out, folks were fairly jolted out of their ruts.

"Why, whoever heard tell of a body vanishing into thin air?" they said.

"If the truth be known," some said, "there's a corpse to be found in them woods somewheres."

Others said, "There musta been somebody waiting

down the road a piece in a car, and she rode off with him."

"But folks would've seen or heard a car up the holler that morning, wouldn't they?"

"Seems like they would."

And the speculation went on.

My mama, Love Ball Dotson, speech and drama teacher at Coal Station High School and sister to the missing person, was plenty upset. In a *Mountain Echo* interview she said it wasn't bad enough having your sister disappear like that without a trace, oh no, people had to go running their mouths and making an already tragic situation worse. It was just too much, she said, too much. Granny and Grandpa Ball, Mama's and Aunt Belle's parents, wanted to take Woodrow to live with them, but Uncle Everett wouldn't hear of it.

The days and weeks passed with nothing new coming to light. When the weeks turned into months, the hill folks settled back into their humdrum lives and Belle Prater became a kind of folk heroine, like Rose Conley in the song "Down in the Willow Gardens." In fact, somebody did write a song about Aunt Belle, and it was sung in Coal Station's main honky-tonk—the Busy Bee—accompanied by a bluegrass band, but Mama double-dared anybody ever to sing it in her presence. There were insinuations in it, she said.

When Aunt Belle had been gone for six months, it

When Belle Prater disappears, Belle's boy, Woodrow, comes to live with his grandparents in Coal Station, Virginia. Woodrow's cousin Gypsy lives next door and is as curious as the rest of the town about Belle's disappearance. Woodrow is cross-eyed and wears hand-me-downs, but Gypsy is impressed by his charm and his witty stories. The cousins find they have a lot in common, and they become best friends during their sixth-grade year.

Gypsy is the town beauty, but she has hidden sorrows of her own. She wonders how Woodrow can accept his mother's disappearance, when she's never gotten over her father's death. Then Woodrow tells Gypsy the secret about his mother.

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US \$6.50 / \$8.99 CAN

ISBN 978-0-440-41372-1



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A Yearling Book

New York

RL: 4.7

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Cover art © 2007 by Marc Yankus

COVER PRINTED IN THE USA