

THE NIGHT SOMETHING IN THE FOREST SPOKE

The Chastaine family had just moved into the Jubal County area, and their first winter couldn't have been any more brutal. None of the settlers in the valley could remember such a dark time. The cold conquered the land and governed all activities with a frigid hand, so much so that the grizzled pioneer veterans spent most of the time gathered around fires longing for summers past and some hint of rescue. Even Granny Prevatte, the oldest citizen around and the local taker of nature's pulse, saw little to show a break in the dark, thick clouds covering their community.

Jesse Chastaine, the middle child of Henry and Maria Chastaine, only knew a few years of life and hadn't yet come to the point of being burdened by such gloomy and worrisome thoughts. He saw unlimited opportunities for fun in the snowy landscape. Other folks' misery became his joy. It was quite common to see the boy outside, seemingly oblivious to the temperature, frolicking in the white blanket covering the earth. Jesse often frequented

the forest bordering the rear of the Chastaine homestead, despite warnings from his momma and daddy about the beasts living there.

Late one afternoon, Jesse took one of his usual strolls down a natural path among the trees. The evergreen tree canopy was so thick overhead that it kept the path relatively snow free for about two hundred feet down its length. The boy suddenly stopped and cupped his left ear. Somewhere from deep inside the forest came a strange sound. Jesse had a gift when it came to sounds, especially critter sounds, and he had heard nothing like this before. The wind blew erratically that day, so he thought at first perhaps the trees, with their load of snow, had just groaned in protest. As Jesse started to walk again, the sound grew louder and scarier. The boy turned and ran, not to flee, but to get his daddy to come and listen.

Carrying a torch and his shotgun, Henry Chastaine went back to the woods with his son, because he knew of his son's gift and if he said that he had heard a strange sound, he should check it out. About halfway down the path, Henry also heard the sound, but was perplexed by its origin. He thought he heard a faint sound of running water,

almost as if in the background to the dominant sound. Henry and his son both ran back to the house to get Mrs. Chastaine. As Henry, Maria, Jesse, and the other children began hurrying back to the woods, their neighbors saw them and, with little else to do, followed them out of curiosity. When they were about halfway down the path, Henry turned to see everyone following them, so he motioned for his neighbors to be quiet and listen. The sound seemed to increase in volume the more people came to hear it, yet nobody could make out where it was coming from.

Granny Prevatte soon spoke up and said, “I recollect my great grandma telling me about something similar many, many years ago. She said if ya listen with ya heart, ya can make it out.”

The people had a great deal of respect for Granny Prevatte and her love of nature, but they looked confused about how you listen with your heart.

“How do you listen with your heart, Granny?” asked Elma Thompson.

“I reckon the closest thing would be to listen as if’n it was your lost child acallin out to you,” answered Granny.

Granny’s words struck home with everyone there, for everyone there had lost a child or two in all the years of hardship endured as settlers in a new uncharted land. The word “change” soon became unmistakable. As the people began to understand it, every limb and every rock in the forest began crying, “Change. Change. Change.” Sometimes the forest spoke reassuringly; sometimes it spoke with a fiery warning. Perhaps the distinction came to each individual hearer, but without question, its message remained constant.

“What does it mean?” asked many in unison.

“Maybe it’s God tellin us that winter is bout to change into spring,” said Jeb Wallace, a husky, bearded man.

“I reckon that surely would be a blessing,” said Mattie Rose. “At last, a rescue from all this cold.”

“What if it’s tellin us that we should change?” asked Zachariah Thomas. “I mean I been watchin this here young’un, Jesse. He’s the only one in this

whole blame village who hasn't been acursin the weather. He's been alivin life to fullest, regardless."

"Yeah, but he's just a boy," yelled out someone from the back of the crowd. "What does he know?"

"Could be he knows a might more than we do," answered Zachariah. "It could be he's alivin like he does cause he's alivin like his Maker told him to, instead always fightin the wrong battles. Doesn't the Good Book say something bout we gotta become like children to enter heaven?"

"Maybe it's both," said Granny Prevatte. "There's always gonna be other winters. If we can figure out how to live during them winters, we know they'll be a spring acomin. Cause that's how the Lord made it, and maybe he's just remindin us of that. Seems like we're always needin remindin bout something. Maybe, like Zachariah said, we need to change what we're adoin too. I think I was wrong when I told ya to listen as if'n it was your lost child acallin out to you. I think we're the lost child and we need to listen as if'n it was our father callin out to us."

Darkness crept into an already gray sky and the wind picked up considerably, blowing the snow into a shroud about the forest. The crowd walked back down the path to their cabins, and the trees and rocks became silent. The sun rose in the morning, like it did every morning, and Jesse Chastaine looked out the cabin window.

“Look, Momma,” the boy cried, as a tiny drop of water fell off the long icicle hanging outside the window.

While nature did indeed begin its change that morning, another more subtle change occurred in Jubal County after that night. The community had suffered for a long time with a litany of diseases that only seemed to afflict people on Sunday mornings. When winter changed to spring, the once empty pews in the local churches overflowed with healed parishioners. The learned men of the cloth never offered a solid explanation, except that maybe the extra cold temperatures had killed whatever germs that were causing the illnesses. At least that’s what they were saying publicly. Maybe they knew differently, but they were just glad to be preaching and singing in a full house again. Granny

Prevatte said she thought it was just a whole lotta people startin to listen with their hearts.