The Miner’s Wife

A Short Story

By Maryanne Peters

Day One

Milky McGann found the boy on the trail and thought that he was dead. It seemed that his eyes were open and just staring at the dull grey sky like that of a dead man. He was lying in a pool of blood - perhaps there had been less lost than it seemed. But the face was white as if in shock rather than the slate color of death.

“If’n you’re hurt I had better roll you over and see if’n you can’t be patched up,” said Milky, only half expecting a reply.

“Leave me. Death can’t be far away.” The voice was shrill. That of a much younger boy than his size might suggest.

“The buzzards’ll be closer, and they will take you eyes first, and you won’t like that. Let me look, Kid.”

“Please don’t,” the young man said. A tear rolled down from one eye scoring a pink track in the dirt on his face.

“Sadly I’m a bit deaf,” said Milky. “Excuse me for misunderstanding by that sounds like a call for help.” He had other things to do, and saving people who don’t want it would need to be done quickly, if at all.

The boy winced as Milky rolled him over. His pants were pulled down and Milky could see the bruising on the buttocks and the blood between them. He had seen the signs before. There are some men in the world who are that close to wild animals that they need to be shot like ‘em.

That blood was dried, but below the blood was fresh. The boys scrotum appeared crudely wrapped in a dirty bandana. It was wet with blood, but it seems that it was clotting.

“You ain’t going to die here,” said Milky. “It seems to me that if you want to find a mountain to throw yourself off of, you need recover a bit first.

Milky pulled up the kid’s pants as roughly as he could. There would be some pain but it would be as nothing compared to what this young man had been through.

“In the meantime I have some meat and grits in my shack and enough for sharing,” said Milky. I would prefer to offer you a shoulder rather than carry you.”

Milky understood the injury to the boy, and it was not physical. Being buggered with violence by more than one man can draw blood but it is everything else that it takes out of a man that is so much worse.

He pulled the boy to his feet and realized that carrying him would have been not too great a burden. He had carried sacks of gold that weighed more. But he needed to walk. It was not far, but the route was well concealed. He had happened on to a good gully. The workings down the valley were empty, and the miners had followed the stream up looking for the source, but a glacier had pushed gravel across his gully closing it off and concealing it. A small climb and there it was, with a small lake at the bottom draining into the moraine wall.

The shack was humble but warm in the winter. It was stone up to 2 feet and the back wall, and log above that as was the roof. He had brought 2 windows up from the town the year before, and more kerosene. He had a nanny goat for milk – that being the drink he was famous for. And when she was on heat at least one buck would always appear and there would be meat.

But his home was of no real concern. All his effort went into the sluice. To make it run even in these summer months he had made a cistern which he filled from the pond and from which he could control the flow over the bottom gravels he tipped in. A miner’s comforts shine yellow in the riffle and are not to be found in a soft bed.

“The water that comes down the rocks is cool and clean, and we can dress that wound if’n you like?” said Milky, although he treasured that water.

The boy could not sit. He lay awkwardly on the bed of mountain moss near the door to the shack. His look was tragic. Milky was not without feeling in the heart even though the hands were leather. He took a bucket and went to the stream feeding the sluice.

The boy was inspecting his groin when Milky returned. He could see the damage.”

“The sack curls up like a porcupine,” said Milky. “It helps the bleeding to stop. It will mend, but your balls are gone. Some of us have not much need of them anyways.”

The boy looked up. Milky was not smiling at his expense. He was stating a fact. What use are they out here? The boy looked at the hills and rocky crags around him.

“Did you say you have some food?” the boy asked.

“Yup. Made a mess a few days ago. I eat my way through the pot all week”.

It was tasty enough but only because the boy was starving and his body craved iron for new blood. He could do better even with what he saw in the gully. There was chickweed, amaranth and curled dock growing there, and wild sage and some other herbs. There was soil that Milky had scraped aside to expose the rock that he wanted, and was cast aside into mounds covered in greenery that could be made productive.

The boy looked at the other provisions. Dried grits and cornmeal and some salt, sugar and coffee. No flour or dried fruit.

Then in the back of the shack the boy found a large trunk. It was full of women’s clothes and a few personal items.

“My wife Geraldine died a few years ago,” said Milky, with a sad look the boy had not seen before. “Just memories in that box.”

“It reminds me that if I am going to live I had better find a change of clothes,” the young man said, but it was clear the small and wiry frame of Milky McGann could offer him nothing. “Would you allow me to borrow one of your wife’s smocks until I can get my clothes clean?”

The old timer grinned. “Well, it might be kinda’ nice to have a woman around the place.”

Day Four Hundred

She was up before him which was something that would have shamed Milky were he not feeling like shit. She came in from the chicken coop with a basket full of eggs. He watched her from their bed – the big one that he had lugged up there a year before. He still slept on a board on his side, but she liked a bed to be soft.

She walked in front of the new window with the early rays of the sun catching her fair hair pinned up in a cottage loaf bun. He loved to watch that hair fall and feel it upon his face. Here was something gold of much greater value than the metal he had spent a lifetime seeking.

“Are you feeling any better today?” she asked, coming over to him. Even though it was just the two of them she still wore a little kohl in her eyes and rouge on her lips and cheeks just as she had done on that first trip into town.

He remembered that day so clearly. People wondered who she was – the tall young woman with Milky McGann. Nobody knew her secret. It was her idea. The only clothes that fit her were his late wife’s and as she said – “Clothes like these need an outing”.

But she needed better. He knew that. He had cash. His buyer was sworn to secrecy. He held the claim to his gully, but he wanted no new gold rush in the empty valleys below. He just needed enough money to buy what she needed, and a huge wagon to take it all back. Materials to extend the shack, a tank for domestic water, seed for her plants, a cage and chickens, and a cow – because Milky did like his milk.

“Maybe a little better,” he said. “But I know things ain’t right in my guts. I think that my days are numbered, Sweetheart. I just need to make sure that you are looked after.”

“Hush now,” she kissed his weathered brow. “I will make you some eggs.”

He reached up to stroke her face with leathery hand. They could still feel how soft and smooth that skin was. With every hair plucked from her body and without any maleness in her system her body had grown soft and even showed some womanly curves that she promoted with corsetry on their trips into town.

If the townsfolk had been curious on her first promenade together, people were now enthralled, and the whisper would start the moment their wagon was sighted.

“It’s Milky McGann and his young lady,” they would whisper. “She goes by the name of Marigold. Such a pretty thing. What is she doing with that gnarly old man?”

Hank Graves had wondered that too. He had been buying gold from Milky for years and had respected his request to keep the volume quiet, but even then Hank suspected that Milky was sitting on sacks of gold and more in the ground. Still, what with his wife dead his children had kept him away from working the dirt. They were all at school now so maybe he could look for something nearby?

Milky got out of bed and sat at the table by the breakfast window she had demanded. He ate a little, but it seemed that he was just feeding whatever monster was growing inside him.

“We have to face facts, Marigold,” he said. “I ain’t long for this world. I need to provide for you. The first thing I want to do is to get us hitched. As my wife this all belongs to you – the stash, the workings and this home you have made for us. And then we need to think about the future. There is more gold here. A few more years at least. Your pretty hands weren’t made to work it, so we will need to find you somebody who can.”

“You are too tough to die on me,” she teased.

“I am serious, Woman,” Milky displayed his occasional temper. “Will you marry me, or won’t you?”

“Have you forgotten what lies under these skirts?” she said, with a trace of sadness that it did.

“Never noticed it,” he said, honestly. “A chaste woman should never even think of discussing such things.”

“Yes, I will marry you Milky McGann,” she said. “We will need to go into town to formalize things so you had better dress up, and I will go out and pick some flowers for a bouquet.”

“What do you think of that fellow Hank Graves,” said Milky. “I have done business with him for years. He has never crossed me and kept all my secrets. He knows mining and could work out what is left of this claim, if you as owner would allow it. And he is a good looking man. And he has children. You deserve to be a mother.”

With the mention of Hank’s name and the vision of his smile, that part of her that had seen her reborn in pain now twitched in anticipation. Milky had tried on occasions but she found that she craved what he could not provide. For everything else she owed him beyond measure. She would proudly be his wife for as long as he lived, but they both knew that would not be long.

“Don’t get ahead of yourself,” she scolded him. “He seems nice enough, but first I need to be Marigold McGann before I think about another miner husband.”

The End

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*Erin’s Seed: A hermit miner takes in a boy who has been terribly mistreated - raped by desperadoes. The boy seems willing to take the female role in living with the miner - not the miner's idea, it's the boy’s. The dead wife's stuff is there to help things along….. Finally the old man is dying and says if they can get to town, he'll marry the new girl so she can inherit his claim. But then, she'll need someone to work it won't she?*