

The Lamb and the Trackers

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Will Hubbard and George Brown were half-brothers, but you'd never know it. Everyone around Forks in the Road said they never saw brothers who were as close as those two.

Even though Will and George seemed joined at the hip, there were awful big differences between them. Will was always looking off toward the distant mountains that rose up like blue castles beyond the green fields and forests that surrounded their little farm. He dreamed of big adventures waiting out there somewhere far away. George on the other hand liked nothing more than to be close to home. Their momma liked to say it would take a switching to get him to go more than twenty steps from their log cabin.

The farm, where the boys lived with their parents and their little sister Lucy, was a busy place in the spring time. There were dozens of chores to be done, and everyone—even little Lucy—was expected to help out. The sheep, pigs, and chickens had to be fed. The fields had to be tilled. Wood needed to be carried in for the cookfire, and water had to be hauled from the springhouse.

But everyone took a break when they passed by Blackberry. The lamb was a new born and had the shiniest little black nose and fuzziest black coat. Momma would say, "The first sheering of a lamb makes the softest wool." Then she'd get a dreamy look.

George and Lucy would gather around their momma to hear the story of their baby cap. Will would stand back a little reluctantly like he was getting too old for her stories, but still, he listened as she went on.

"Back at the Old Home Place, when Will was born, I knit him a cap of lamb's wool from the softest lamb you'd ever felt. That cap smelled sweeter than a meadow. Warm as a sunbeam."

All three of the children liked to imagine what that cap must have been like—even Will, although he'd never admit it.

"Was that the same cap I wore when I was a baby?" George asked.

Momma nodded with a smile. "And Lucy, too."

"But didn't moths eat it up?" Lucy asked.

"They did," Momma said. "I never thought I'd knit a baby cap again as fine and soft as that one. But come fall, I reckon Blackberry is going to give us wool even finer, even softer."

"Weren't our caps white?" George said. "Blackberry's got dark wool. It won't be near as nice."

"Of course it will," their Momma said. "It'll be just as soft and warm. You'll see."

"What's it matter?" Will asked. "Are you planning to knit a baby cap for someone?"

"Maybe," Momma said, a faraway sound to her voice.

"For who?" George asked.

But their momma just shooed them away, saying, "Enough stories. Back to your chores."

Will didn't think any more about momma's plans for Blackberry's wool. He was too eager to get through his chores. He worked hard, like the harder he worked, the sooner the day would come when he could set off to see what lay up in those faraway mountains. George was a hard worker, too, but mostly because he loved the farm where he lived more than anywhere in the world.

The next week, their papa set off on a trip to Morganton. A few nights after that there was a fierce storm. Thunder and howling wind kept Will and George up half the night. In the morning, they'd finally gotten into a deep sleep when their momma's voice woke them. "Boys! Come quick!"

Scrambling out from their loft, Will and George were still rubbing the sleep from their eyes when they found their momma out in the yard.

"The sheeps are loose!" she said.

A limb from the pecan tree had fallen on the fence. The pen was open, and all of Blackberry's flock were gone. With the sun not even casting its first ember glows in the treetops, Will and George were dashing around the farm, searching for the missing sheep.

George found the old ram behind the smoke house, and Will found the two ewes out beyond the garden. But by the time the sun was fully up, the lamb Blackberry was nowhere to be found.

Will and George slumped back to the cabin in defeat.

"She's gone, Momma," Will said. "I reckon she got lost in the storm and a varmint took her."

His momma put her hands to her face and burst into tears. The boys blinked in surprise. Their momma never cried when a bobcat took one of the sow's piglets or when their horse Amos died of pigeon fever last summer. Why was she crying over a lamb?

"What's wrong, Momma?" George asked, putting his arms around her.

"It's just. . ." She wiped her eyes. "Your Papa and I were going to tell you when he got back. Boys, there's a new baby on the way. I was just hoping. . ." She shook her head and said no more.

Will and George looked at each other with wide eyes. Momma was having a baby? But now they understood why their momma was so excited about making Blackberry's wool into a cap soft and warm as that one she'd knit for them. She wanted it for the new baby.

"There's chores to be done," their momma said with a shaky voice. "Best you boys get to them. Lucy and I will fix some breakfast for us."

George gave Will a sad look before turning to go to the woodpile.

"Hold on!" Will called to George. "The chores will wait."

George turned back. "They will?"

"They will." Will furrowed his brow. "We're going to find Blackberry for Momma."

"But—" George started.

Will, however, was already setting off across the pasture, eyes searching the ground.

He led them into a thicket that used to be a tobacco field before the soil was used up. All the bracken and weeds made it hard to get through in the best of times. But after last night's storm, the ground was soggy and slick and George was struggling to keep up with his brother as Will marched up the hill, eyes still fixed on the ground.

"How do you even know which way to go?" George asked.

"Aren't you paying attention?" Will called back.

"To what?"

"We've been following their tracks from the pen."

George looked down at his feet. A path of cloven prints were pressed into the mud.

Will said, "I reckon when that limb broke the fence and the flock got loose, they panicked with all that thunder. Didn't know where to go. So they come out here to this thicket to take shelter. Look—they scattered from one another right around here."

George could see how the tracks began to spread out in a wide swath across the overgrown hilltop. "They must have been awful spooked."

Will nodded. "I suspect Blackberry got lost in all the rain and darkness and noise. The rest of the flock made their way back, but she must have gone the wrong direction. See if you can find her tracks. They'd be teenier than the rest."

The boys searched the thicket, but the prints were harder to find when they weren't all in a line. But soon, Will called George's name from the far side of the hill. When George reached him, Will was picking a bit of fleece from a briar. "Blackberry went this way. Into those woods over yonder."

George grinned. "You're like some Cherokee tracker."

Will smiled back. "The Colonel said the same thing, when I found his old hound dog."

Colonel Waugh was the richest man in Forks in the Road. He owned gristmills and a whole bunch of general stores. Just last year, he'd even opened a store for the Indians out in the Cherokee lands. Ever

since the Colonel gave him a shiny half-dime for bringing home his lost hound, Will was always talking about how he wanted to work in the Colonel's Cherokee store when he got older.

George's smile faded a little at the mention of the Colonel. He never said it, but he didn't like when Will talked about moving up in the mountains with the Indians. He didn't want his brother to ever leave them.

"Come on, scout," George said, giving Will a slug in the shoulder. "Track us to Blackberry."

The boys entered the forest. Once you left the farmsteads and fields of Fork in the Road, it turned into a wild, shadowy place fast. And George didn't like it much.

"You reckon there's wolves out here, Will?" He was walking close to his brother.

"I've seen signs of them before," Will said. "And Aunt Lizzy said a whole pack come snarling up at her door over winter."

George stumbled into Will trying to get closer.

Will slung an arm around George and laughed. "But I suspect Aunt Lizzy was just fooling. You know how she is."

George gave a nervous laugh. "Yeah, I remember."

George had only met Aunt Lizzy once. She wasn't his aunt. She was sister to Will's daddy, Joel Hubbard. Will's daddy had died the year Will was born. And their momma had married George's daddy, Ben Brown, two years later, moving her and Will into her new husband's log cabin, where a year later George had been born.

Will had no memory of his daddy. Papa Ben was the only daddy he'd ever known. But his people, like Aunt Lizzy and all the other Hubbards, had been born and raised at the Old Home Place. It was one of the first farms in Wilkes County, going way back to the days before President Washington had been elected.

Will and George stopped at a creek that they guessed must be the Gin Branch. It was swollen with rain from the night before. Will ran a hand through his mop of hair. "I lost Blackberry's tracks."

George looked around at the dark forest. "You really think she's still out here?"

"I don't know."

"Come on, Will," George said. "She's lost for good. If she didn't get swept away in this creek, wolves or some varmint sure took her. We tried. But we won't find her."

The boys hadn't a bite of anything to eat since last night. Their stomachs were growling. Chores were waiting for them back home. And they hadn't even told their mamma where they were going.

"Let's get on back," George urged.

Will scowled, looking around in frustration. "A Cherokee scout don't quit."

"You're no Cherokee scout," George said irritably. "Quit pretending. You're just a Hubbard."

"Well, a Hubbard don't quit neither."

The boys glared at one another. Things might have come to blows. The boys sometimes got into fights over less, even though they knew it would mean a switching from their papa. But just then, George's gaze caught on something over Will's shoulder. A pinch of black fuzz hung in a bramble next to the creek.

He ran over and pulled it out. Will took it from him. "Blackberry," he said.

The boys set off in a hurry along the creek, calling the lamb's name. They found her tracks again in the soft mud and knew they were headed in the right direction. But it wasn't long before they found another print on the banks of the creek. It wasn't the pair of wedges of a sheep's hoof, but a big oval topped by four smaller ovals.

"What you reckon made that?" George said. "Fox?"

"Too big." Will touched a finger to the impression.

"Wolf?" George's voice had a nervous tilt.

“See that heel pad,” Will said pointing to the bigger oval. “A wolf’s pad draws up to a point. This one has two points by the toes.”

“What makes that?”

Will looked George in the eye reluctantly. “A panther.”

George swallowed hard. “You’re pulling an Aunt Lizzy on me. Say you are.”

Will shook his head.

The boys stood up quickly, looking around.

“We should’ve brung papa’s rifle,” George murmured.

Something rustled in the leaves up the hill. The boys took off like a pair of deer, tearing through the brush and slipping in the mud along the creek. They both knew anyone in Forks in the Road would tell you, you weren’t supposed to run if you’d been seen by a bear or a panther or anything dangerous like that. But they hadn’t actually seen anything yet. And they didn’t plan to.

Before they knew it, they burst from the treeline into a sunny meadow. Will stopped short and George plowed into him, knocking them both to the ground. They panted for breath.

“You hear anything following us?” George asked.

Will tilted his head. “I don’t hear nothing.” He grinned at George. “You were scared.”

George slugged him in the arm. “Like you weren’t. Where are we anyway?”

Will helped his brother to his feet and gazed at the clapboard house lying down the hill. He caught his breath.

“That’s. . .” George looked at Will. “Isn’t that your people’s Old Home Place? This is where you were born.”

Will nodded. His eyes drank in the old farmstead. Down beyond the house was the road that Papa would be coming back down any day from Morganton. Will had passed the Old Home Place many

times on that road, but he'd never seen it from this vantage—coming out from the woods, out from the wilderness.

The Old Home Place looked different to him somehow. Not like the sad place his Momma didn't like to talk about because it reminded her of those years after his daddy Joel Hubbard had died and left her here a widow with a newborn baby. Back before she'd married Papa Ben. Now Will saw it not as it was, but as it could be.

"What are you thinking on?" George asked him.

Will shook away the thoughts. "Nothing. Come on." He started down the hill toward the road. "I guess we best get on back to Momma."

George gave a sigh. "I feel like we let her down. And the new baby, too. He won't get nothing but a scratchy old cap now."

They were halfway to the house when a bleat sounded. The boys froze.

"You hear that?" Will said.

"Yeah!" George said, starting into a trot.

"Where'd it come from?"

"Over here!"

George pointed to a double-sided corn crib under some flowering apple trees. A shiny black nose poked out from the doorway.

"Blackberry!" George cried.

The boys dropped to their knees before the trembling lamb.

"You all right?" George said, rubbing her soft fuzzy face. "You must have been awful scared."

"She don't look injured none. Just a little muddy."

"That's a long way for a little lamb to go, but we'll get you back home. Your momma will be so happy to see you."

Will grinned at George. "Our momma, too."

He picked up Blackberry, hoisting her across his shoulders to carry her home. The boys were so happy they couldn't help but laugh all the way out to the road.

When they were almost to the bend, Will stopped and looked back once more at the Old Home Place.

"You know what, George?" he said.

"What's that?"

"My daddy left all this to me," Will said. "One day, I reckon I'm going to fix it up."

"Yeah, I could help you," George said.

"Sure. We'll build a barn out there past that corn crib. Put up a big fence all around those apple trees to keep sheep."

"Maybe Blackberry's lamb or her lamb's lamb will be part of your flock."

"Maybe," Will said, liking these thoughts.

"So," George said. "Does that mean you're not planning to run off to join the Cherokee up at the Colonel's store?"

Will shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe I'll do that first. Have some adventures and such. But then, I'll come back home to settle down."

"Good," George said. He gave his brother a playful slug in the arm.

Blackberry bleated at him from Will's shoulder.

"All right, we're going," George said to the lamb. "Come on, Will. Race you back."

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Early in the fall when the first green apples were starting to show, their momma had a boy. Papa named him Rufus, and all the neighbors in Forks in the Road came around with pies and dishes of good food. Will and George worked extra hard around the farm so their momma could rest and didn't have to worry about the chores.

A week after Rufus was born, their papa gave Blackberry her first shearing. Momma showed Lucy how to wash the wool and brush it into strands for spinning into twists of yarn on the spinning wheel. In the evenings, as the weather turned cool and the crickets chirped outside under the first fallen leaves, Will and George sat with their family after supper in the lantern light and watched their momma knit Rufus's cap. Papa sat in his rocking chair, bobbing Rufus on his knee, while Lucy played peek-a-boo with him.

The cap was finished before the first frost. Momma gave Will and George the honor of being the first to place it on Rufus's head. "I'm proud of you, my courageous, determined boys," she said. "It's all because of you that your brother's got such a fine hat to keep him snug all winter."

Rufus was sleeping as Will and George rolled the little woolen cap together down over their baby brother's ears.

George smiled. "It's soft, Momma. Just like you said."

"Softest thing I ever felt," Will said. He leaned down and sniffed. "And smells good. Sweet as a meadow," he added, remembering what their momma had said about the cap she'd made for him.

"Warm as a sunbeam," their momma said proudly.

Just like home, Will thought. Just like home.

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In 1842, at the age of 18, Will Hubbard moved to Valley River, North Carolina, to work in Col. William Waugh's general store—although by this time most of the Cherokee people had been forcibly removed from their tribal lands as part of the "Trail of Tears." Two years later, Will returned to Forks in the Road and moved to the Old Home Place where he lived the rest of his life just a few miles from his parents and his brother George.