

# Lettie in the Ozarks

*by* Jane Hammons

After the government mowed their houses under along with shriveled stalks of corn, everybody went to California to pick things she'd never heard of.

Artichokes and avocados.

Or tasted.

Limes and grapefruits.

So she followed the old ones to their house in the mountains because it was in the opposite direction of California, a place too far from home.

But the old people's house in the Ozarks is just something made of skins hung over planks nailed together at the front of a cave. For food, they cook leaves and berries in steamy pots of nothing, strip pieces and parts from carcasses piled like cordwood at the back of the cave. Everything smells like blood dried up and underground. A wisp of smoke threads the air. The old ones wrap Lettie in animal hides. Where the paws have been cut off, the skin flaps like useless little wings. Every morning the old man nudges her and puts a sticky bowl of something by her pallet. The old woman peers into Lettie's green eyes and growls like a big cat.

There is not a book to read or one pretty thing to look at except for the piece of teacup she took out of Mama's hand. It broke when Pa shot her. He said it was better for them to die together than to starve to death one by one. Lettie wanted to stay with them, but when he pointed his rifle at her, she couldn't help but run away.

In her pocket she keeps the broken cup decorated with Texas

---

Available online at «<http://fictionaut.com/stories/jane-hammons/lettie-in-the-ozarks>»

Copyright © 2011 Jane Hammons. All rights reserved.

Bluebells like the ones Mama planted in front of their house even though they lived in Oklahoma. At night she holds the rim between her pointer and thumb, sticks out her pinkie like a lady, and wishes she'd let Pa kill her the way he wanted to.

Once her grandma told her that when you are dead and buried your hair keeps growing and fills up the coffin. Mama got mad and said *Don't scare her*. Back then Lettie wasn't afraid of anything. Now when she sleeps, Mama's sweet face unfolds like a valentine in her dreams. She sees her mother's pretty red hair curling around tree trunks and covering rocks like moss. Underneath the ground it grabs on to roots and ties up the whole world.

When Lettie decides to leave, she walks to the door and lifts the skin flap. The old people watch her go. She finds a riverbed and follows it because rivers used to have water and lead somewhere.

Back when there was school, her teacher, Miss Jenkins, had a conch shell on her shelf of special things, and she said if you held it to your ear, you could hear the ocean. The only thing Lettie heard was the wind that howled and blew all the crops away. In music class they sang counting songs like This Old Man, reels and rhymes to dance to, Jimmy Crack Corn and Skip to My Lou.

Lettie picks wild grapes from the vines that twist between thorny bushes. If she's really hungry she eats dirt and all the things that live in it. There are other raggedy girls in the woods, but she never talks to them because they are all her and only crazy people talk to themselves. To keep herself happy she sings *Jimmy crack corn and I don't care Jimmy crack corn and I don't care Jimmy crack corn* and with every step she drops words like breadcrumbs along a trail to an old story she's forgetting but it doesn't matter because it can't take her home and nobody is looking for her anyway.

