

Keep Chopping

by John Riley

"Try it," she said.

I looked from her greasy eyes to the ax in my hand. She shouldn't have looked so scary, standing there with one good leg and me holding an ax. But we both knew I wouldn't move on her. I just didn't have it in me.

The mountain slope behind Bessie, down to the silver string of river, was covered with downed trees, the dying ones turning from green to yellow, the ones finished dying turned yellow all over.

I tried begging a little, hoping some mercy had sprung up inside her. "I'm tired, Bessie. Can't a man take time to gather his thoughts?"

"Chop," she said.

I chopped. You would too. Bessie Bighead is real good at being crazy. It's all the experience she's had. She's been crazy for years, ever since Emperor took her leg.

It was on the first day we were here, right before sun down, when Emperor stood up on his perfectly good legs and said, "I need one of you fine people to give me a leg."

Naturally it took us all a second to figure out he was serious. That he wanted one of us to cut off a leg and give it to him.

There weren't many volunteers at first. But before long you could feel everyone start to soften up a little. Truth is, I even thought about it. It might have been smart to get on Emperor's good side. But I don't have any ambition, never have.

Then Bessie stood up and said, "Please take mine! O' Lordy Lordy, take mine."

What Emperor did with Bessie's leg nobody knows. Some say he ate it, but you won't hear me say that.

Bessie was proud as a rooster for a few days. Emperor had her a shiny wooden leg made and called her his girl. She even smiled once or twice. Then she went to studying on what she'd done and got quieter than a gator. Soon she turned to moaning, moaning day and night, wanting her leg back.

Finally Emperor got tired of listening to her and said, pointing at me, "Take him, Bessie. And go out in the mountains. You got free run of everything you see. Cut down as many trees as you want until you get the perfect wood to make you the perfect leg. One even better than that fine one I already made you. Then," he smiled his private little smile, "bring it to me and I'll make you two."

Now we're chopping on our third mountain and there's no end to mountains around here. We're never going to find a perfect tree. Bessie Bighead is no fool, just crazy. She ain't got no choice but to keep looking for the perfect tree, and I ain't got no choice but to keep chopping.

