Nell

by Richda McNutt

Was it hope or despair that drove her to walk out the door of the place she had called home for the past twenty years? Did she feel sorrow or relief to leave behind a husband and five children? No one could say it was an easy life, and there was rarely time to concern yourself with whether your life was happy or fulfilled. You simply lived it from day to day and survived until one day you no longer did; and then you were laid in one of the family cemeteries scattered throughout the mountain communities.

The year was 1940, and for a woman to desert her children was unthinkable - a scandal of the highest order. The oldest was seventeen and the youngest was five. When they woke up that morning, their father told them their mother was gone and wouldn't be back and that was the end of it. As if! Even today, almost seventy years later, there's no end. The genes of altered lives have passed down through three and four generations.

There was speculation that there was a man involved - maybe she was pregnant with his child. But honestly! Where would there have been time or opportunity? She got up at the crack of dawn, made breakfast for seven people - no Pop-Tarts or Eggos then - packed lunches for the children who were in school and for the husband who went to work every day, and saw them all out the door and down the road. The youngest was not in school yet, so he was with her all day long as she cleaned the five-room house, drew water from the well and carried it into the kitchen to heat on the stove. When it was hot enough, it went into the wringer washer and the chore of scrubbing dirt and coal dust out of seven people's clothing began. Then the overalls and dresses and underwear had to be hung on the clothes line until they were dry enough to take in and iron. Somewhere in between all that, the vegetable garden required tending. From there, she went back to the kitchen with fresh vegetables for the supper that would be ready not too long after everyone got home from school and work.

Available online at *«http://fictionaut.com/stories/richda-mcnutt/nell»*
Copyright © 2008 Richda McNutt. All rights reserved.

The evenings were devoted to making sure the children did their homework while she washed the supper dishes, again getting water from the well and heating it on the stove. After that, it was time for baths - more water carried and heated. Finally, seven exhausted bodies found rest in two bedrooms. Day after day after day, this was the routine.

An affair would have been quite complicated under these conditions, as well as requiring a reserve of energy she probably didn't have. Nevertheless, rumors persisted that she left with a man from the community. And years later he did reappear with a son. But not with her.

She returned to the area only twice - once to get her letter of membership from her church - and once to attend her sister's funeral. Silence hung heavy as she walked down the aisle of the church. Silence hovered nervously as she walked down the aisle of the funeral home. She had nerve - you had to give her that much.

Years later, when the five-year-old was grown to be a man, he rode his motorcycle to Lumberton, North Carolina. He had heard that was where she was living. He found her house, found her then-husband, but he didn't find her. Oh, she was probably there - but why break her silence after all those years? Did she have to break it for her then-husband? How do you explain a past life - a past person?

Well, they're all dead now. Her, her first husband, her five children, her then-husband, even her maybe-other child. Only the why lingers. And the genes of three and four generations.