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Receipt at Ogden's Twist

Young Trace Gregson, thin and curly at eleven and generally happy-faced, cringed whenever he saw Dirty Molly Sadow, a scraggly woman who lived in a shack in the woods near his neighborhood. If there was such a thing as a bad witch about in the world, story or no story attached to her, she was it. People who addressed such folks with a mix of disdain all the way to hate, said her toes were black with earth rich as The Hollow, a nearby swamp of sorts, and that she smelled foul as chicken leavings or those of rough and tough over-cooked turkeys.

Now on this particular day, dredged by clouds thick with a deep greyness, Molly walked to the Amicalola River behind her little shack holding a burlap bag in her hand, as if she toted a sack of gold or valuable assets. Her calico dress was rotten with age and stain and gray hair hung thin as tree moss on her shoulders, an image cast of deprivation, loss, possible thievery at the least protected source, the already beaten-down of the world.

The beat of a limp was in her gait. Now and then the bag bumped along the ground as if the weight was too much for her to tote, value making a statement of ownership.

Trace thought he heard muted cries coming from her side of Ogden's Twist, this torturous turn in the Amicalola River, as he hid in the weeds on the side across from where Molly approached the water. One keeper-trout, giving up its final move, flattened its rainbow inside his wicker creel, the soon-to-come taste and odor of that skin rising from a back-yard fire, his parents both off working for the day, him about in his world around the Amicalola, his home away from home on his usual liberty days, as he had named them.

Then it hit him. Molly's bitch of a Golden Retriever, Muscatel, had been full of pups but days before, her body low and slow with the swelling. He remembered her sneaking food from other yards to feed her carried litter, as his father had expressed it: "There's no hurry left in that old girl, my boy."

Trace didn't know if his father was talking about Muscatel or Molly at that point.

The soft cries came to him again, almost like prayers from the front row at church, whispers as thin as shadows hanging loose in between the wooden pews in the front part of the church, and then ugly Molly heaved the bag into the fast part of Ogden's Twist.

The bag hit with a big splash and sank in a swirl of current. And Dirty Molly, an apparent horror of a task completed, walked away from the river without even a single looking back to check her errand at destruction.

Trace, in dungarees and sneakers, leaped into the river as soon as she went behind a mound of trash. The chill of the water hit him with a crushing blow. His breath held for him. On his second drop into the swift water, his hand found the burlap bag and closed on the soft mass of the twirled and wound neck of the burlap. The squirming in it telegraphed up his

Wilderness House Literary Review 16/1

arm. Ashore, gasping for breath, he pulled the old shoelace loose from the twisted neck of the bag and dumped the contents in the tall grass.

His eyes lit up. Life plummeted out! Five Golden Retriever pups spilled onto the grass. A sixth fell out and lay still. Trace felt his own heart bang in his chest.

Leaving the dead pup and his gear on the bank of Ogden's Twist, he rushed off to the most reliable and kindest man he had known in his short life, Uncle Jack Parlee, a retired mailman. Living alone, Jack kept a small garden on the river, this side of Ogden's Twist, a small garage notorious for its collection of old tools, and two old and labored hounds who were bent and slow in their years. Nameless, he simply called them *my old boys*.

As Trace knew it would happen, the salvaged pups were given a new home in a corner of the porch. The sun streamed in there at crazy angles at different parts of the day. Some days, by the rays, he could tell the hour or see his growth pattern on the wall. Trace could always sense the warmth of the porch. Jack promised nothing, but set straight away at continuing the salvage. He patted his nephew on the back of his head. "You got heart, boy. Momma did you good."

Trace's father had died five years earlier in a late-night truck crash on the main highway west of the Amicalola. He and his mother now lived alone in their house.

Trace returned to get his fishing gear and to bury the dead pup. The sun was getting back a piece of his body, touching him reverently. For a brief moment he felt the thanks in it and the quick needles. A lone cloud sailed along at the bright horizon against Storm Mountain. He decided that at any second the cloud and the mountain top would collide. He'd be too far away to hear the crash. Still a long walk from his gear, he heard the howling and abated fury of a dog. For sure, he thought, it was Muscatel trying to reclaim her pups. At the banking of the river, Trace heard Muscatel's baying cry. It sounded like a friend's mother calling home her children just as darkness came filtering over the horizon.

Then Muscatel hove around the trash pile behind Dirty Molly's house. Her nose was bent to the ground and she was howling weirdly. The noise caught up in Trace's chest. It made his heart beat with a new tempo. He felt as if he had just come up from another dive in the cold water.

Muscatel stood at the water's edge; her quandary evident to the sole onlooker. She stood as lonely as Trace Gregson had ever seen loneliness stand. The water moved swiftly, the beautiful Golden Retriever, like a statue, stuck her head into the air above the river. From where he sat in the reeds and tall grass, Trace believed she was measuring distance or possibility, or both. He knew he could not move her from that spot, could not drag her.

The cloud and the mountain went their way, silent and distant. The water of the Amicalola and Ogden's Twist, here and there turbulent, continued on its rush to the sea miles away.

Butterflies, though silent as smoke, punctuated the air against a deep green background of leafy trees, and the hum of bees and birds came as softly as a new engine.

Wilderness House Literary Review 16/1

The parallels slowly came to Trace Gregson in the days that followed.

"Them pups sure is pretty, Trace. Bet they grow like weeds from now on. Hate to have them loose in my beans and corn. They'd grow me under." His Uncle Jack sat on the rocker on the porch. "You keep an eye on that hag of a woman, that dog of hers, too, she ever leaves her watch. And if she gets fat again, you got more swimming to do."

And for weeks on end he saw Muscatel standing at the river, no longer baying out over the water, but watching, distance and possibility still crowding the air. Trace fished every day on his side of the river and thought about the widow's peaks his uncle had told him about that he had seen in parts of Maine and in New Bedford.

"Lookout women waiting for their husbands' ships. 'Bout as patient as you can get," he said, "but needing a sure view of what was going on, what might happen. They plain last saw their man there, hoping to see him again at the same place." He thought the hapless mother would never leave her *peak*. Uncle Jack made no suggestions to that consideration.

It was months later, the pup's sturdy as rocks, thick in the chest, bearing names he and Uncle Jack had conjured up out of a big collection of books, Trace saw the swelling again as it rounded Muscatel's frame. Soon after, he began a new vigil at the river. Every day he dug worms for the morning, saw Dirty Molly come evenings from the chicken farm where she worked, saw her off on the weekday mornings.

Rain had cooled the night. Morning was bright and leafy and green all the way to the mountain top. It was Saturday, his fly line floated down into the bubbling water of the river. Something in the air hit him broadside. It was the sound he had heard before, the near muted cries, the sense of loss or doom. Dirty Molly was making the same trip. On his belly, he slipped quietly through the weeds, his eye on her. Another burlap bag was in her hands. Again, it bounced on the ground. Again, it was heaved into the water. Again, she turned away and did not look back.

The cold water hit him again. His breath hung on again, but he felt a sudden panic this time. Nothing came to hand on the first or second dive. He dove a third time, his dungaree pockets now loaded with water, his sneakers heavy, his chest ready to burst. Uncle Jack would be on the porch with the dogs. The sun would be pouring down on them, sort of holy and secret and full of goodness.

He reached through the cold darkness, now desperate.

The bag touched his hands and seemed to loop away. He dove again and found it. Dirty Molly had wound a wire loop about the knotted neck. A point of wire pricked his thumb. The jackknife was in his dungaree pocket. He scrambled ashore, the bag instantly whipped out of water, the liquid film still crowding its surface, the whole bag sealed against breathing.

The knife was sharp and cut the bag easily and five more pups, spitting water, legs still at torment, spilled from the bag. As before, he put them in his creel and hurried off to sanctuary. He wondered how many of these trips he had missed in Muscatel's life, or in the life of any other dog that Molly might have kept.

Wilderness House Literary Review 16/1

Muscatel, as before, came again for days on end to the edge of Ogden's Twist. Trace watched her in secret as she sniffed the ground, sniffed the air itself, his own heart always in riot and commotion.

"Someday, girl, you'll have your day."

The two batches of kindred pups looped their harmony. Jack kept them in the yard, now with a fence around it. Though the garden was smaller, the dogs were bigger. One of *his old boys* had passed on and was buried at the edge of Ogden's Twist.

Some nights the porch for Trace was a piece of heaven.

Then one night, as the sheriff told it, someone had slipped into Dirty Molly's shack to steal the horde of money it was said she had hidden away. Molly supposedly caught him at it and died of a heart attack. There were no bruises on her.

But Muscatel was on her own.

One morning, his fishing pole over his shoulder and his creel braced with a pair of trout, Trace and Muscatel came together on Trace's side of Ogden's Twist, that adventurous spin in the Amicalola.

Trace had not seen her for weeks.

"C'mon, girl," he said, "we got some catching up to do." The two apparent strangers walked down the narrow road leading away from the river. The occasional trees overhead were umbrellas and loaded with warm sounds.

Trace Gregson knew the sun beating down on Muscatel and him was holy and full of grace. The back of his neck was warm. The warmth flooded his body. His hands felt it, and it went scurrying the length of his arms. He whistled. Muscatel, somewhat heavy-footed, trotted along beside him as if she were a long-time fishing pal.

Jack saw them coming, reparation at hand.

The folks at Ogden's Twist still say such a joyous howling ensued that day that stories could be written of it.