

Mantle Rock

Johnny McCloud ran from home, his Aunt Marrie, and the ghost of his father before the start of his senior year in high school; the year of the sleek '49 Fords. Hoped his hitchhiker's thumb would carry him from his small southern Illinois town to San Francisco. The first fifty miles into East St. Louis went well.

East St. Louis is still untamed, Johnny is taken captive by the Indians. Camped, crashed and smoked on Cahokia Mounds, passed down months and the Mississippi to Sequoyah in New Echota. For his troubles, a leather jacket and an Indian motorcycle – a Pony, 500 cc's – his mount for the ride along the Cherokee Trail of Tears. Not half-way there, the only tears his own.

Johnny stands in the morning chill waiting for the engine to purr before pushing it off its stand. He rolls right out of Hopkinsville on Kentucky Route 91. A drizzle greets him outside of Mexico and he's wet and chilled by the time he gets to Joy.

“Johnny-boy, definitely not fun, not a joy at all.” He tells himself he's practicing Indian humor, no harm done.

Thinks back to Aunt Marrie. *She wouldn't recognize me now. My balls must be frozen small like marbles. No use to either of us.*

There's a solitary store by the side of the road looking as if someone made over an old chicken coop at the turn of the century. A faded hand-painted sign, “GROCERIES,” hangs at an angle to the left of a torn screen door. Stooping under a rusted awning, he knocks loudly before entering. Half-empty shelves, gray and dusty, run down two aisles.

Johnny coughs, shouts, “Hi, anyone here; I'm lost.” He jumps in place to shake off the rain.

A middle-aged woman comes from the back. An old winter coat reaches down to her ankles and a tattered shawl is wrapped around her collapsed shoulders.

“We can hear you. So few callers my brother and I decided to finish our hand of cards. Not much to buy here anyhow. Mostly people come for directions or help. We do what we can. So, what can I do for you?”

“I didn’t mean to disturb you, but I’m lost. I’m trying to find Mantle Rock and where they took the Cherokees across by ferry to Golconda. Can you help me?”

“You’re pretty much there already, son. There’s a little road off to the left about two miles north of here called Mantle Rock Road. It doesn’t go much anywhere. You may as well park your bike there and walk into the woods. If it’s the rock you want, stay on the trail straight ahead. The north path goes to the Ohio River. I’ve been told that’s the trail those Indians took back in 1838. I was up there once, couldn’t tell. Berry’s Ferry would have left from somewhere nearby. You should be able to see Golconda across and downriver from where you come out.

“I can make you up a quick cup of tea if you like. I won’t charge you either. If you want a sandwich or soup, let me know. It’ll be ready when you come back. I got to charge you for those though – an honest woman has got to make an honest living. Whole trip shouldn’t take 90 minutes. That natural bridge is pretty, but not on a day like this.”

Johnny hesitates, finally says, “A cup of tea would be nice. I can pay you for it.”

Walking over to the back door, she says in a loud voice, “Jerry, be a dear and put up a cup of tea for our guest. My name is Maddie, Maddie Simpson.”

“I’m Johnny McCloud, grew up northeast of St. Louis. I’m heading to San Francisco and can tell you all about it when I come back. Be quicker if can I leave my duffel bag here since it’s raining.”

Jerry calls from in back, “Tea’s ready.”

Johnny retrieves his duffel from the bike, asks if he could put it in the corner behind the counter. Maddie nods, passes the teacup to him. The handle’s been gone so long Maddie no longer thinks of it as broken. She’s told her brother many times, “The rim ain’t chipped and that’s all that matters.”

Johnny promises to return in 90 minutes or less. “Shouldn’t be many people because of the rain and I’ll probably be able to run in along the trail on my bike, quicker than walking. That soup and sandwich would be nice when I get back from Mantle Rock. I can pay you now if you wish.”

He almost misses the turnoff. The overhanging arch of Mantle Rock is not that large; it’s pretty in spite of the rain. Teacher was correct in saying not many in the Removal party were able to take shelter under the rock. Most likely those hunting or foraging rested under the arch, pausing for a while, hoping to conserve what little energy they had. He’s chilled and the temperature is in the mid-forties, nothing like the December cold back then.

Johnny follows the main trail for a mile to the bank of the Ohio River. Downriver on the opposite bank he sees a small town. He turns around and goes back to Maddie and her brother.

Maddie’s sitting on the chair behind the counter. She stares at the window on the north side of the store as if a ghost was hiding between the wire mesh and thick, old moss covered glass. She turns slowly, blinks, “Hello, Johnny, I thought you’d be back; you know you left your duffel bag here?”

Johnny’s saddened: it’s as if she was waking up in the morning and not sure where she had spent the night. “Don’t you remember, I said I’d be back, have a bowl of soup and a sandwich.”

Maddie thinks, calls back to her brother, “Jerry, you making any soup, a sandwich?”

Jerry yells, “It’ll take a minute to get it in a bowl. Is there a chair he can use?”

Maddie walks to the door behind the counter, “Yes, Jerry, he can use the one by the register and eat at the counter.”

She turns to Johnny. “That will be 50 cents, thank you.”

Jerry comes out, places the soup and sandwich on the counter. Maddie moves the chair, motioning Johnny to sit.

He sips the soup and asks if there’s a motel between here and the Cave in the Rock ferry. “No fun setting up camp in the rain.”

Jerry and Maddie exchange looks. Jerry answers, “You’re right, can’t be much fun setting up tent in the rain. I don’t know. There may be that old hotel open in Carrsville; else, you’d have to continue along the river on 135 ‘til you get to the ferry crossing to Cave in the Rock. Heard a lot history buffs visit that place – must be motels around. This early in the season there should be a room. Of course, we don’t know about the ferry crossing. Could be closed down for the night by the time you get there. Best idea: you should stay here. Put your bedroll down on the floor in our big room back there. You can use the cushions from our couch to make it comfortable.

“We’d have to charge you five dollars; it isn’t much, you know, and we’d throw in a small breakfast. Those motels, even the cheap ones, charge you twenty. This way you wouldn’t have to go back out in the rain. I heard Follet’s donkey braying while you were at the Mantle, sure sign it’ll be raining all night.”

Johnny considers their offer. They’re a strange pair but most likely harmless. Maddie’s missing something, Jerry too. Decides the Sentinels will provide protection. “Sure. If I buy a can of beans, can you heat it for my supper? Do you know anything about the Cherokees? They passed through here. Maybe you heard something from your grandparents?”

Maddie, smiles weakly, looks at Jerry. “I don’t think that will be any problem. We turn in early but there’re old magazines if you want to stay up and read. We sleep behind the kitchen; that’s our parlor behind this door. It’s got that couch I told you about.”

Jerry scratches his chin, leans against the doorframe. “Sis here and me are the last of the Simpsons. Great grandparents had a lot of acres a hundred years ago. One of these roads was even called Simpson’s Road. Our grandfather was born in 1857, can’t read it on his headstone anymore, but it’s in our family bible. Jeremiah. I was named, Gerald. Pop must have been snippety at the christening.

“Anyway, Grandpa told us when we were kids how this Indian woman birthed his mom. Date is there in the Bible too. December 16, 1838. Scribbled on the side, ‘Maddie birthed by squaw.’ Same name our Maddie has, isn’t it? You can barely read the first ‘Maddie’ in that Bible anymore. Grandpa Jeremiah

would tell us that story again and again. He couldn't find no one else around. Miserable winter that was, back in '38. Snow and rain. Everyone stayed in. Soldiers came to the farm. We had a hundred acres planted in corn, beans, and vegetables, a couple of cows, pigs and chickens. Even had horses to help with the work. Anyway, my grandpa said his grandpa sold that soldier a couple of butchered pigs.

“He told me he and mother had to bring in the cows, ‘Don’t want those soldiers shooting them up calling them wild deer.’ Grandpa would chuckle and say it over and over, ‘Don’t want them soldiers shooting them up, no sir, no sir.’

“It was miserably wet and cold. The cows mooing with their milk must have brought on the labor. As I said, no one was going out much back that winter. Jeremiah said his grandpa saddled up, went to see if the soldiers had them a field doctor could help us in the delivery. Maddie has heard this too as a kid. Best they could find us was this Cherokee squaw, one of their midwives. A trooper came along as she didn't even speak any English, mind you that. She comes into the house, mind-ya, and we give her a little soup. The labor comes on stronger and they let her wash her hands. She goes into the bedroom to do the birthing. It was very cold and she insisted they move grandma into the big room nearer the fire. All that, Grandpa Jeremiah says, was told to him by his own grandfather.

“Hard delivery, took hours, but Granddad says that squaw knew what she was doing. Birthed our great-granny on December 16, 1838. It's in that Bible there in the other room. Don't have to look no more, heard it too many times, kept reading it after everyone was gone. We was told that the squaw brought along herbs to help the mother sleep and bring the belly back down.

“Well, Johnny, this is what Great, Great Grandpa Jeddariah told Grandpa Jeremiah. It was Jeremiah that told us. They said that two days later, this squaw comes back with her little girl. Said she wanted to check up and see how the mother was doing. Really, our mother was doing fine. Finally, that squaw came out and said it, or it was the daughter, prompted by her mother. The daughter could speak a little English. Said she, the daughter, mind-ya, was very weak and would not survive the trek to the Indian

Territories and, please, could she stay here with us? She could help with the baby and by the time she was stronger, someone would come back and get her or she would walk out herself.

“No one here could believe an Indian would ask that. Well, Grandpa Jeremiah said his grandpa told him that he told those Indians in no uncertain terms, ‘No, that can’t be. President Jackson said we’d have to remove all you Indians. Got to uphold the law.’ Not that any of us Simpsons are ungrateful. Great, Great, Grandpa found a couple of apples and a half loaf of bread. Gave it to them. Wished them good luck too.

“So, Johnny, that’s the Simpsons’ meeting with them Cherokees. If they hadn’t have been there probably me and Maddie wouldn’t be here. But I guess those Indians got to the Territories okay. We never heard from them ever again.”

Johnny finishes his soup and sandwich. The bread was toasted on a griddle. He clears his throat and says, “I’m glad that midwife was around otherwise you wouldn’t be here. It’s certainly miserable out there. You’d think it’s December not April. No one would want to be camping.”

They stand, listen to the rain on the tin roof. Night falls and the store becomes depressingly dark. Neither Maddie nor Jerry pulls the light-string hanging over the counter. Johnny worries about staying with the brother and sister, unsure where he could go if he left. Finally, he reaches into his pocket and finds a five-dollar bill and four quarters which he puts on the counter.

“Here’s money for my lunch and bedding tonight. All that talking has made me hungry again. I bet it’s close to suppertime. Let me find a couple of cans on the shelves for supper. Whenever you wish, I’d be happy to eat again. Ma always complained how much I ate.”

Johnny finds a soup can, hopes it’s different from the last, and a can of pork and beans. “Here, let me know what these come to and I’ll add to the six dollars on the counter. I’ll get my own skillet, you can throw them together. That’s how I’d do it around a fire.”

Jerry looks at the unmarked cans. “Add a dollar and we’ll make you an egg, toast and coffee for breakfast. If you want, you can get your stuff and bring it on back. We’ll close up the store as it’s already late. Back in the kitchen, stove fire’s keeping things warm.”

Johnny retrieves his bedroll and skillet. Jerry locks the door behind him. In the parlor Maddie warms her hands over the stove. A lamp on a crate to one side of a threadbare couch throws a weak light about the room. He’s disappointed by the poor light – one of the great chefs was about to be killed in his Nero Wolfe mystery.

Heat radiates from the old woodstove; split wood’s stacked against an outside wall. Johnny places his skillet on the stove by the draw pipe which leads at a strange angle to a sloping roof. Jerry indicates he should bring over one of the wooden kitchen chairs.

“Warm enough close to the stove. Time enough to tell us where you’re from and where you’re heading. Don’t get out much, few customers stopping. Store is all us Simpsons got left. Not much money left to take us to Europe or even over to Paducah.”

Johnny fetches the chair. His mind’s racing. He’s reluctant to talk about the Cherokees and the Trail of Tears. Thinking quickly, not wanting to lie, he modifies the truth.

“Kind of you putting me up. There's not much to tell. I grew up outside of East St. Louis. Ma’s family in Nashville. She said I should say goodbye before moving to San Francisco. I’m going to stop home first.”

Maddie shakes her head, goes over to the stove, peering down at it. “Never too early to start cooking. Cook longer, flavors blend better.” She walks to the old grey sink and comes back with a rusty can-opener. “You open those cans, pour them into your pot. Fire hottest in that right corner. I’ll start something for Jerry and me later.”

Johnny thanks her, struggles to open the cans enough to empty into the skillet. He watches Maddie remove a slab of fatback bacon from a small icebox. Two pieces cut – one, half the size of the other go into her old pot. She chops an onion, a few small potatoes, carrot and a strange looking green

vegetable and when she hears the bacon sizzling, adds them to the pot. She stirs infrequently and advises, “Trick here is to make sure they all get a chance to know each other. Later you add a little water.”

Jerry volunteers, “Maddie grows all those vegetable in back, jars some, like tomatoes. Others keep this way in their dirt. Time was when Grandpa Jeremiah had land enough to grow vegetables for a small army.”

Maddie adds water, ignoring Jerry’s remark. “Next trick is to add a can of that mushroom soup. It’s my secret ingredient. Don’t you tell anyone. I’ll go back get us one. Jerry likes this evening meal. Tells me he could eat it every night of the week. I told him, important to vary your diet. Sometimes I’ll use tomato soup, or that celery one, but Jerry says the celery one’s too strong for him.”

They watch the stove; no one talks.

Maddie gets two unmatched plates from the drainer. “They’re ready.”

They eat silently at a Formica-topped table with wobbly legs.

When they finish Maddie says, “You’re our guest. You wash up first. We don’t have hot running water. If you’d be needing some, let us know and I’ll put a pot on the stove. It’s easy enough to work the pump in back.”

Jerry coughs, points to a pile of old newsprint by the back door. “The out-back’s also out back.”

Plates, pots rinsed, they sit again in silence.

Jerry makes an occasional remark.

“Maddie’s got lots of wood stacked under a tarp in back.”

Later adds, “She says the chopping’s not all that bad: section, wait at least two years. That’s the trick, second year freeze sets up the cracks, makes the splitting easy.”

An hour into the last silence he turns towards Johnny, asks, “You do much splitting when you camp?”

“Nope, my ax’s too small for that. Use what I find, odd pieces laying around. Branch too big, I find a pair of trees, two or three feet apart, put one end between them and walk in a circle until the other end snaps off. Usually there’s a nice loud crack.”

Jerry approves, “Uh huh.”

Maddie moves to the table-lamp next to the couch. “Mother’s lamp. Cleaning it last Christmas, the shade fell apart. Mother would have been upset. Said she went into Hopkinsville to get it. Antique, must be sixty years old.”

Silence.

Johnny stands. “Most people don’t realize it’s hard work riding a motorcycle, especially in this kind of weather. If you’ll excuse me, I’ll get ready for bed.” He points to the back door. “Will I be able to see the out-back?”

Jerry answers. “Easy enough, look a little bit right from the bottom step.”

Out and back in five minutes. “I’m going to lie down, read a bit while my sleeping bag warms up. Thank you again for everything. If it’s not raining, I wouldn’t mind an early start.”

Jerry predicts. “It won’t be raining else the Follet donkey be braying.”

Johnny puts the couch cushions on the floor, not noticing Maddie and Jerry moving off through a door to the left. He crawls into his sleeping bag and reads about the murders in the West Virginia spa. Nero Wolfe’s upset about the missing ingredients in a sauce. *I could write Archie. Nero could come on a camping trip with me if he really wants him to lose weight.*

Coyotes start to howl after midnight. Johnny dreams they surround the Cherokee encampment at Mantle Rock. He sees an officer bringing a squaw to the Simpson farmhouse. She gives herbs to the farmwife in labor and gently guides the baby through the birth canal.

A week passes slowly. The cold and rain keep the Cherokees company while they wait for the ice to break so Berry can run his ferry run across the Ohio River. The morning they are to depart the squaw is unable to wake her daughter, the old blanket fails to provide protection from the cold.

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The staff sergeant says the ground's too hard to dig even a shallow grave. "We need to get moving if we're ever going to get to the Territories. We'll drop her in the river wrapped as she is."

No pleading helped. The tiny girl's taken to the ferry. Berry is told to tie rocks to her ankles. "You can keep the blanket if you've a use for it." He's given fifty cents for this final ferrying. Normal crossing's twelve cents for white men.

Johnny dreams again. This time the Cherokees are camping across from Cape Girardeau. The squaw now looks like a withered old grandmother. Large chunks of ice hit the boat in the crossing. She's standing at the railing and a big bump topples her overboard. She waves goodbye, catches up with her daughter in Cairo.

Her husband, waiting in Cape, is told of the death of his wife, daughter, and of the farmers by Mantle Rock. He raises his spear towards the winter sky and keens, "What I have lost in weeks, these people will lose in years and not know why." He stamps his spear three times in the frozen ground to establish the curse.

Johnny wakes to find the sun shining and mist rising off the fields. The dreams fade away and he knows not to question the Simpsons. He dresses and goes to the out-back.

Maddie's at the stove when he returns. Johnny watches her crack three eggs into her skillet. Two thin slices of bread are on a corner of the old cast-iron stove toasting. A faint smell of weak coffee rises from a pot to one side.

Jerry enters and adds two small pieces of wood to the fire. He asks Johnny, "I trust you slept well. Hear the screech owls?"

"Thanks, I slept well. Didn't hear any owl." Suddenly he remembers his dreams and the squaw crying when her dead daughter is taken from her. He knows enough not to say anything.

Maddie asks Johnny if he has a plate in his duffel. "Jerry and me, the two of us, never have company. Don't need more than these two dishes." A piece of toast is set on one of their plates. She slides a single egg on it for her brother. Johnny takes the hint gets his own plate and fork.

“Waste not, want not.’ That’s what mother used to say. Jerry will tell you.

“Johnny, you’re a big boy. Why don’t you help yourself to what’s left in the fry pan and don’t let your toast burn.”

The eggs were small to begin with and there’s hardly any white surrounding the copper-colored yoke that’s left. He has no appetite, but forces himself to eat.

He finishes quickly and thanks his hosts, saying he would be sure to stop if he ever came back this way again. He returns the cushions to the couch, feeling four eyes on his back. He gathers up his duffel, sleeping bag, skillet and plate and goes through the store to his bike in front. Weak hands secure everything to the motorcycle.

Johnny plays with the choke. No one waves as he leaves.

[Adapted from a novel in progress: Little Johnny Running Cloud.]