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FROM THE INTRODUCTION

WHEN I FIRST MET DELLIE NORTON and her adopted son, Junior, Dellie was seventy-six years old and had been widowed for about ten years. Junior was in his early thirties and had lived with Dellie since he was six. When Junior's father, who was Dellie's first cousin, died, and Junior's mother couldn't care for all seven children, Dellie took him in. Informal adoption was common in tight-knit mountain hamlets. In addition to her own five children, Dellie raised her husband's three daughters from a previous marriage, and had numerous other children stay with her for varying amounts of time. Children provided her with company, as well as with an extra pair of hands for the never-ending work around the farm. Junior also received a monthly disability check which was an important part of the family's cash income. So taking in Junior, while clearly an act of kindness, was also a very practical decision.

Electricity and telephones didn't come to Madison County until the 1950s, and there was little money in the community before the federal programs of the 1960s. Throughout her life Dellie worked to fill her family's most basic needs, raising food and canning, maintaining the farmstead, cutting firewood, caring for animals, and planting tobacco to earn money. She knew her land intimately: which field produced the best beans, where to find a stand of locust trees that could be split into fence posts, how to store food through the

long winters without electricity, what time of the year to collect specific herbs that were used as medicines, where the springs were. She seemed proud of this hard-earned knowledge, and her life. As far as I could tell, she harbored no secret wish to live elsewhere or differently. I believe that Dellie knew the land itself was her most valuable asset. Her ability to survive and do well on her land provided her with real security; it was her home place and promised the continuation of her family line.

Burley tobacco was the mainstay of the area, and for most of the twentieth century Madison County was the leading producer of burley in North Carolina. County residents kept cattle and sheep, cultivated gardens and large fields of corn, and grew commercial tomatoes and ornamentals, but tobacco paid the bills. Up until the mid-1980s, most families with a tobacco allotment raised the crop themselves, often trading work with their neighbors on the labor-intensive crop. Tobacco has many problems: it's hard on the soil, susceptible to disease, and the end product is bad for people. Yet cultivating tobacco also promoted a sense of community and a pride in making a living from the land; it provided mountain people with the means to stay on their land and assured the continuation of a rural, agrarian way of life.

While tobacco was the money crop, most families

SODOM LAUREL ALBUM

also found other ways to earn income. Some left for factory jobs elsewhere, as Dellie describes in her stories, but many also found ways to come home and resume their farm life, sometimes with new resources. Dellie and the other old-timers in Madison County had maintained an almost self-sufficient way of life. Dellie was not only self-reliant, she also was very strong from her years of farming and maintaining a household. She didn't get her first electric washing machine until the late 1950s, and it was there on the porch, with its old-fashioned wringer still in working order, when I arrived on the scene.

By the 1970s, Dellie, like most of her neighbors in the small community of Sodom Laurel, had become more firmly connected to the world of modern conveniences, and committed to living in it. She still raised a big garden, milked a cow, grew tobacco, and hunted for ginseng, but she also loved her telephone and TV and the polyester pantsuits she wore whenever she left home, which she did with some frequency. She had oil heat and shelves of prescription medicine in her bathroom. She paid bills, had insurance, and shopped for groceries at the store. She also received disability and social security checks and supplemental food and medical care. While Dellie remembered a time when she had been more self-sufficient, she seemed to like the changes in her life.

DELLIE ALSO SANG BALLADS. Music was one of the few available and affordable forms of entertainment, and most everyone in Sodom Laurel, even the children, sang or played instruments. The community had produced professional musicians with dreams of stardom, but the majority of residents viewed music as part of their daily routine. They sang in church. Dellie sang to pass the day, to keep from feeling lonely. Singing made the hard work in the fields more tolerable and front porch visits with neighbors and relatives more enjoyable. Singing was something people just did. Dellie once told me she never would have believed that she would become famous for her singing. I don't think it occurred to Dellie that she would leave any kind of legacy to the wider world.

The wider world has been aware of the music of the southern mountains for almost a century. The noted British ethnomusicologist Cecil Sharp and his assistant, Maud Karpeles, collected more songs in Madison County in 1916 than in any other single place for their classic volume, *English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians*. One of their singers was Dellie's aunt Zipporah Rice, and although Dellie herself never sang for him, she had a clear memory from her teenage years of the man from "across the water" who collected ballads in the community. Sharp recognized the southern mountains, and Madison County in particular, as being the storehouse of the British-American music

ONE Entering Sodom



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ROB AMBERG

That first night the house was full of visitors, people going to the music festival in Sodom and needing a place to spend the night. I shared the sofa bed with a left-handed guitar player named Grover. During the night, Grover rolled over against me, rubbed my back, and sleepily murmured, “Oh, baby.” I heard the door to Dellie’s room open long before daylight. I lay there quietly as she made her way to the chair next to my bed. She put on her glasses, fiddled with her hair, and gathered herself for the day. Soon, she lifted the box of Bruton’s snuff from the windowsill above her head and put a spoonful in her mouth.

Everyone left later in the day, and that night the place felt deserted. No music or long conversations. I talked with Dellie and Junior, but I didn’t know what questions to ask or thoughts to pursue. I didn’t yet understand the significance of their stories or their lives. We watched TV with terrible reception, even with the trio of antennas perched on the hill behind the house, each pointing in a different direction. We ate cookies, drank a glass of milk, and went to bed early.

I was given my own room with a double bed covered by a homemade quilt, a nightstand, and a reading lamp. An open window provided air, and a look out to an old shed and a tree-covered mountain. It was calming, but I was anxious and didn’t sleep well. Branches scraped the tin roof of the house. Dogs barked throughout the night. A car revved its engine close by. It was still dark when I heard Dellie yell, “Junior, bring me some stove wood.”

He did, grumbling. Biscuits and gravy were his reward. After breakfast, I helped Dellie wash the dishes in two tin pans placed on the kitchen table. One for washing, the other for rinsing. Then, Junior and I did chores. Split and hauled in stove wood. Fed the animals. Hoed the tobacco. Later, he showed me the place: the spring, garden, and barn. We took a short walk to an adjoining cove that Junior called the Teat Holler. There were the remains of an old house where Dellie’s son lived before he was killed.

Dellie talked on the phone, watched the soap operas on TV. It was a slow, monotonous day. I was bored, restless. I shot film, but the pictures felt staged and static. And Dellie and her farm didn’t fit my image of mountain life. She wasn’t romantic or historic in her look, but somewhat rough and coarse. The place was going downhill. Fences needed mending. It was being overtaken with weeds. Junior bothered me in some undefinable way. He was loud, with an opinion about everything. But he was also fearful and insecure. When it was time to leave, I said I would come back, but did I mean it? Dellie looked me directly in the eye and said, “You’ll be welcome as the flowers in May.”



DELLIE NORTON

My grandparents moved here in a covered wagon. I think now that old John Chandler and Andy Chandler—they was my great-grandparents—they come from close to the ocean. They come in a covered wagon when they first moved in here. I've heard old people talk about it.

Now my mother was married before she married my daddy. She had three boys and a girl. I got one half-sister and three half-brothers. They died when they was very little.

My grandmother had fifty acres of land and she give my mammy's brother Baliff twenty-five acres and she give my mammy twenty-five acres. We lived up there in the Ben Cove when I was little bitty. I was born up there. I was delivered by a midwife. I was trying to think of her name. Can't do it though. Sometimes they paid them with different things. If they had any money they paid them with money, but if they didn't, they'd take any kind of food. Dried apples. Dried peaches. Or brush beans. Or anything like that. And meat.

One year we had it real tough. Daddy couldn't get no work around close and he had to go to his sister's in Pennsylvania. He went and stayed two years that I never seed him. He worked at making these bathtubs. That's what he made. I was just little and I didn't even know him when he got back. I'd never seed him with a suit of clothes and a tie on before. Me and Branscum was just little bitty things. I guess Branscum wouldn't have been two years old. There ain't but two years between us. We was out up there playing, and this man come down and come to us. He knowed us. But we didn't know him. We was afeared of him.

My mammy knew he'd be back. He sent money back, but he saved a lot he brought in. We had plenty to eat and things like that. My mother made the awfulest crop that year you ever seed. She worked just like a man. She'd plow. Plowed the ground, laid it off, and planted it. The other children was bigger than me—three of them—and they'd help. I wouldn't be much hand to work because I was just very little. They finally got to logging on Spillcorn, and they'd walk and go to that job. But that was maybe fifteen years after he come back from Pennsylvania. There didn't used to be no work around here to do.

We had two log houses when I was growing up, but they didn't set together. There was a big yard between them. The kitchen was in one house, and the living room and the bedrooms was all together in one log house. We didn't have no flooring in the kitchen, where we did the cooking. We had a dirt floor. The living room and bedrooms was all together and it was big. It was big enough to hold four beds and plenty of room with a big fireplace. It was warm, but if it was snowy you had to wade the snow to get down to the kitchen to eat and to cook.

We cooked with one of these old kind of step stoves. Back then you couldn't get one of these big, good stoves like you get now. It had four eyes on top and a little apron out in front. And just a place where you put your bread in. And really, it was very small, but you could cook good on them. There was a door there at the little apron where you put your wood in. You don't ever see none of them no more.

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My mother's brother lived right on down below us in a log house and he had five younguns. I'd go down there a lot and play with them, and they'd come to play with me. And then there was another house on down, and sometimes we'd go down there. And they had twelve children. There was bunches of children and they all lived pretty close. Younguns couldn't get toys back in them days like they do now. They generally made them a rag doll. When I was little I had rag dolls to play with that my older sisters would make.

I had two dresses when I begin to go to school. Two checked cotton dresses. I wore one to school and one of a Sunday. When I wore that one a week to school, I'd put my Sunday dress on for my mother to wash my school dress.

My mother was a good sewer. She could make any kind of dresses, pants. She could weave and card. She'd make us yarn jackets to wear. Knit gloves and stockings. I had shoes. I mighta not of had none when I was very small, but when I went to go to school I had shoes. But they was different to what shoes is now. They called them button shoes, high-topped button shoes. You had to have a hook to button them up with.

You didn't get out unless you walked or went in a wagon or rode a horse back in them days. You had money if you wanted to get out and go to these foreign stores and places. If you hadn't had the money you couldn't get out and get nothing.

You had to ride a horse though if you went to Marshall, or walk. That's twenty-two miles from here. You generally didn't go too often. I guess I'd sometimes go to Marshall once a week. Maybe out to Walnut. I'd trade out at Walnut—at the old station they called it. John Ramsey had a big store there. I'd go over there every Easter to get my Easter outfit. Every Easter. I'd walk out there and walk back the same day. I'd walk through the mountains, and it ain't so far—maybe eight or ten miles. I loved to walk back then. I could walk. Sometimes there were people out there that I knew and I'd stop in and see them.

You couldn't get a car back in here. Not in them days. You could take a wagon, but people just didn't have no cars. I guess they could've come so far, but they couldn't have come on up I don't guess. That road used to go right on up through the branch. Right up the branch.

I rode a mule to the top of the mountain with a sack of fertilize. Right in front of me. I had a saddle on the mule. You couldn't put it behind you. It would've went off. You had to put it in front of you. They made two-hundred-pound sacks back then. That was the reason they would clear them big new grounds on top of the mountain. You could raise all kinds of stuff. Taters. Did raise some baccar up there once I think. The land was better. It would make better stuff. The land was richer.

Back in them days we'd have workings. Everybody around nearly would come and help. They

didn't charge you nothing. In a day or two they'd clear an acre, all but ready to burn it off. Have it all piled high, big brush piles—a sight. They didn't have no power saws. They'd saw those trees down with a crosscut saw. You didn't have to dig those roots from the trees unless you wanted to. You just let the stumps stand and rot out and plant around them. You had to grub the little things. Most of the time you'd lay it off and plant your stuff. You didn't have to plow it up unless you wanted to. You'd come back later and hoe it. We had two acres on this big steep hill and we never did plow it. Hoed it without plowing it.

You'd take you a hoe and make you a hole and drop your stuff in it where it was steep that way. Sometimes, back then in some places, you didn't use fertilize. The ground was rich and would make good stuff unless it was baccar. Now the baccar, when they first got to raising it, they'd put just a teaspoon of fertilize with each hill. They didn't plant it like they do now. Make a little hill around that fertilize, cover it over, and stick your baccar in there.

Things don't grow enough to make stuff as good as they used to. Lord, I've seen one cabbage cut up fill a dishpan full. And big ears of corn. I don't think it grows as well now. You can't grow nothing now unless you've got the fertilize. But used to, you didn't have to have it.

You'd save your seed. You'd plant a cabbage and it would make seeds. Plant a beet, and it would

make seeds. You'd save your seeds, and my mother was a person that would sure save them. Plenty of seeds of every kind. I do that yet. I save my mater seeds and cucumber seeds and watermelon seeds. Bean seeds. You'd save enough of it. It wouldn't take too much. A bushel of seed would plant two or three acres.

We'd save our corn seed right on the cob. I've seed mammy sack it up and hang it on a tier pole in the barn to keep the rats or anything from bothering it. We'd shell it to feed to the hogs. When we first moved up in here hogs, and cows too, just ran wild in the mountains. They'd eat chestnuts. There used to be the awfulest sight of chestnuts. Hogs would get fat on them. When we first moved, before Daddy bought that place up there, we had the awfulest bunch of hogs ever was. There was a fence above the house and my mammy had a dog trained. It knowed our hogs from our neighbors' and wouldn't let those other hogs in the slop at all. It ran them off.

I reckon it did save money—if you had to pay for seeds then like you do now. I don't think back then there was no place to go to get no seeds. You had to save them or do without. If I didn't have them, I'd buy them, or beg them from somebody else. Somebody always had them some. But I always tried to save me some. I didn't have to beg.



