



The
Highest
Hill

Rusty L Savage

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Authors Note: I hope you enjoy reading “The Highest Hill”. The characters in this story have been created so that you will believe this particular version of the reality of folks in those days and times. And, though, there is a Hardin County and surrounding communities in western Kentucky, the truth is that none of it ever actually happened. But it could have...

Dedicated with Love to all my siblings, my parents, my wife, my children and to all my extended family. Special thanks to Gayle for her pinpoint comments and edits.

The Highest Hill

Fiction

by:

Rusty Savage

Chapter One

Dark shadows draped the stillness of the old storeroom as Bobby waited for his eyes to adjust. It was dim and still, broken only by fading daylight beyond the two windows at the end by the front door. One window and a door at the rear had long since been boarded over. No sunlight came through, leaving the back half of the long room in semi-darkness. The bare counters and empty shelves went along both walls and the edges were just peeking out of the shadows. Soft darkness shrouded the curtained doorway in the middle that led to the three adjoining rooms where the Ringo family lived.

Bobby Ringo was crouched on one knee, alert and ready to flee instantly if he had to. He caught another breath as he eased his head around the end of the counter support. Staring intently toward the curtained doorway. Cocking his head to one side, he sat still and silent to listen.

Bobby wasn't scared, he was ready. He was poised to react as he huddled in the shadows with his arms wrapped tightly around one knee. Under the brim of a battered straw hat, tufts of white-blond hair framed a deeply tanned, freckled face. He gazed through deep blue eyes, and watched the curtained doorway with keen interest.

Footsteps sounded from the rooms on his left, coming across the floor toward the doorway. Their cadence slowed as they drew nearer. Abruptly, they stopped. Slowly, the curtains parted.

Watching closely, he could barely see the shape of a face as it pushed through and hung as if suspended in mid air. The face had strong features. Heavy eyebrows, blue eyes and a straight nose were accented by smooth skin, a small mouth and strong chin. The same pattern was repeated in his, although the face in the doorway was somewhat older. He watched as the face made a slow turn and stopped with eyes pointed in his direction.

His heartbeat increased, pounding against the wall of his chest. In spite of the darkness where he was crouched, he felt unbearably exposed. The impulse to run, to get out, coursed through him while at the same time he felt frozen in place. He gripped the edge of the counter so tightly that the rough edge pressed against the bones of his fingers.

The face in the doorway hung in mid-air, unmoving, eyes fixed in his direction, and seemed to be looking straight at him with an intent and purposeful stare. There was in the set of the eyes an impression of ascendancy and keen senses.

He held his breath and imagined himself blending in with his surroundings. Don't move, he told himself. How could she know he was there? She could not have seen him come this way. She couldn't know for sure, he thought. She made no effort to move beyond the doorway, yet there was something in those staring eyes that set off alarm bells in his head. Just don't move. She cannot see you.

Bobby's eyes began to burn from trying to penetrate the dimness surrounding him. He closed them tightly for an instant to relieve the burning sensation. When he looked again, there was nothing but empty space.

The face was gone.

He lowered his forehead against the back of his hand for an instant as he breathed a soft sigh of relief. At the same time his nerves grew hot at the thought that he had to hide from his sister. She had no right to punish him. She had no right to come after him with that old broom either. My goodness, he thought, I broke a plate, so what? It was an accident, he didn't do it on purpose. Yet Hannah had jumped all over him, started screaming just like Pap. That's when he called her "little Pap" and that really set her off. She grabbed the broom and whacked him before he got away from her. His back still hurt where she whacked him, not once but three times, finally knocking him to the ground. Quickly scrambling to his feet he ran as hard as he could. And when he got out of her sight, he ran into the old storeroom to hide.

Bobby felt safe and snug here in the dark. This was his place to get away. When he was younger he made his way into the storeroom whenever Pap was rampaging after Mother or one of the other kids. Maybe that's why Pap wasn't as mean to Bobby because the boy lit out as soon as there was trouble. Pap was mean to everybody else though, especially to Mother. Bobby knew to watch himself around Pap, but he also knew that when his Father was drinking, that you couldn't be careful enough not to set him off. Sometimes Bobby cried, quietly, if Pap was beating Mother, yelling and cursing at her. Those times he often wished he were big and loud so he could smack his Pap down. He would imagine doing it over and over again as he heard his Mothers cries.

But this was his sister Hannah. She was the oldest still at home and she had no right to beat him with a broom. And she had no right to boss him and Jackie around all the time either, or come looking for them every time they wandered out of her sight.

It was possible that she was not even looking for him when she stuck her head through the doorway of the old storeroom. He could have imagined

it. It would not be too surprising, so many things had happened lately that his reactions were somewhat less than normal.

Then again, perhaps he had not.

He took a deep breath and tried to relax. In the silent semidarkness of the old store room the anxiety he had battled only moments before diminished somewhat and hostility grew in its place. He sat on the floor, leaned his back against the end of the counter and swallowed hard to quell the anger he felt boiling up inside and growing.

Hannah was his sister, not his mother. She had no right to act like she was anything else either. Just because Mother was working and their oldest brother, Harlan, was not at home anymore, Hannah thought she was the boss of him and Jackie. It seemed she was always telling them what to do. Like where they could go or not go and hollering at them when they did something she didn't like. She was getting more like Pap every day. Well, he would not stand for it any longer. He didn't need Hannah around giving him orders all the time and watching everything he did. And he was going to tell his mother as soon as she came home.

Bobby was nine years old and the youngest of the four Ringo children. His birthday was only four months away and he was big enough and old enough to make his own decisions. If Hannah thought she could tell him what to do, she had another thought coming. His mother would set Hannah straight, as soon as she came home, which would be in another hour or so. At least he thought so, as he looked through the windows on the far end and saw that the light of day falling away. It was nearly dark and it would be completely dark before very much longer. His mother would not be home until around eight o'clock. He would have to stay away from Hannah, though, until she got there. Then, his mother would protect him.

Bobby's mother, Rachel Ringo, worked in the laundry at Fort Knox. She traveled eighty miles a day to get there and back. She left home at four

o'clock in the morning and didn't get back until eight o'clock at night, sometimes later. It made her day even longer after working twelve hours in a steaming hot laundry. He worried about his mother.

She had been working now, for a while. She got the job when they lived in old Tommy Thompson's farmhouse. That's when things began to change for the better in their lives, in all kinds of ways. Good changes like curtains on the windows and new linoleum on the kitchen floor and they never ran out of coal oil for the lamps after that. They could even buy the fifteen-cent lunch at the school lunchroom once in a while. Now he and Jackie didn't have to wear patched and faded bib overalls to school all the time. Hannah didn't come home crying anymore because other kids made fun of her old dresses. It always seemed they were worn out or too big for her because they were hand-me-downs from older cousins.

With his mother working, they had a little money coming in these days. She could even buy new clothes once in a while when the old peddler came through, making his rounds over the countryside in his old panel truck. The last time the old guy came through Bobby got a new sweater, two pair of blue jeans, and new shoes too. It was amazing how much stuff that old man could haul around in the back of that truck. He practically had a general store in the back of that thing. Bobby's mother bought all of their school clothes from old Mr. Monford. Bobby always looked forward to seeing him when he came around.

So Bobby was well aware of how things changed in their lives when they lived at the old Thompson place because now his mother went to work every day and they had a little money coming in on a regular basis. He was not about to forget it either. Bobby Ringo never forgot anything he didn't want to forget.

His mother didn't make but twenty-seven cents an hour to start, which made her paycheck thirteen dollars and fifty cents for a fifty-hour work

week. But they had money for new clothes, and even got a little something for their birthdays and for Christmas too. Last year, Bobby got a three bladed Barlow pocketknife on his birthday, and one time he got a Red Ryder BB gun. Last Christmas, he and Jack both got brand-new baseball gloves.

That's when he found out who Santa Claus really was. He'd had an idea before but when he found the ball gloves hidden away a few days before Christmas and then found them again under the tree on Christmas morning, he knew that his mother was the real Santa Claus. It was a big shock to him at first, but he got over it when he realized it was all part of growing up.

Old Mr. Thompson's house didn't have electricity. It was too far off the main road and the Ringos just rented the place anyway. It was not up to them to put electricity in that old house when it belonged to somebody else. It would have cost a lot of money to have the poles put in and the wiring run for lights, a lot of money. The old house was nearly falling down anyway. But that didn't keep his mother from trying to buy the place when Mr. Thompson put it up for sale a while back. She would have bought it too, but couldn't get enough money to make the down payment.

Bobby's father was a day worker at the Blue Ball rock quarry back then. He only made a dollar a day, when he worked, which was not more than one or two days a week. But he spent most of what he made on whiskey or moonshine at one of the local stills or bootleggers, which were plentiful in that part of Hardin County, Kentucky, in 1943. Johnny Ringo was a mean drunk and was well known in those parts. Bobby and Jackie called him Pap when they were out of earshot. Pap wasn't really a big part of the Ringo home life. Not in any good way that is. Since Bobby could remember, Pap was a fearsome figure in the Ringo household, life around the house was a constant kerfuffle whenever Pap was home and if he was drinking, it was unbearable.

The Ringos lived in the small community of Ventessa, in an area called Rough Creek country, down in the southwestern part of Hardin County. Certainly, it was one of the roughest and poorest areas in the state. Farming was the only source of income for most families and that didn't provide much of a living for any of them. But the Ringos didn't own a farm or anything else for that matter. They rented the old Thompson place and the thirty-seven acres that went with it, but they didn't own a horse or a plow. The Ringos' couldn't have farmed the land even if they had wanted to, and then the place was sold out from under them anyway.

Mr. Thompson wanted nine hundred dollars for the place, but he had to have five hundred down, he said. It was a reasonable price for a thirty-seven acre farm, bordered on one side by Rough Creek. But the Ringos were not farmers, never had been, and never would be.

They had a milk cow that provided all the milk and butter they could use and hogs they raised for their own meat. They had a few chickens to keep them in fresh eggs and an old mule they used to tend garden but they never tried to grow any farm crops. One time, when Harlan, was still at home, they tried to put in a little patch of tobacco, but it never amounted to much. It hardly paid for the starter plants they had to buy. That one tobacco patch made Bobby realize that he'd never make much of a farmer. He didn't like the idea of walking behind an old mule pulling a plow. He just wasn't cut out to keep a straight furrow going in rocky creek bottom dirt too barren to grow anything anyway. Jack didn't do much better with that old mule and plow either.

Old Tommy Thompson finally sold the place though, and the Ringos had to move. That's when they moved into the old Pauley store building. It was on the side of the hill a short distance from the old Thompson place, and down the hill a few yards from the big white Pauley house that set on

top of the hill. It hadn't been an operating store since Milt Pauley died, and his widow, Ida, or "Miss Idy" as everybody called her, closed it down.

The old store building had two apartments on one side, one on top of the other, that nobody lived in, and three small rooms built onto the other side. The Ringos moved into those three small rooms and used the old storeroom for storage. Now, they had electric lights and his mother didn't have to pay for putting them in either.

Bobby straightened and gave a slight shake of his head to dislodge the thoughts rolling through his mind. He didn't want to think about it anymore. He raised himself off the floor and stood up. Making no attempt to conceal himself further, he looked all around to make sure Hannah was nowhere in sight. Feeling safe, he moved toward the front door. His movements were assured, even in the now darkening room. He had played in and around the old storeroom for nearly two months. It was so familiar to him that he could find his way through it on the darkest of nights. He knew the exact location of every bench, every counter, and everything his mother had stored in the big room.

He opened the front door and stepped down onto the concrete steps. He went down the three steps and sat on the last one. He would sit in the shadows and wait for his mother to come home. The work bus should be along before to long.

It was cool in the shadows under the big sycamore with its leaf filled branches obscuring the light from the moon and stars above that were just beginning to make their appearance in the evening sky. Looking around to his right and up the hill, he saw the light from the big white Pauley house rushing out like a bright sun. It spilled from the windows and fell upon the lawn and spread across the grass, splattered on the steps and sidewalk. He stood in front of the porch along the side of the old store building.

Watching the big house as if mesmerized, Bobby shivered and rubbed his arms with his hands. The chill came, he thought, from inside, for it was plenty warm on that August evening. His mind was filled with envy for Charlie and Gladys Donner, who lived in the big house now, since "Miss Idy" died. They had settled the Pauley estate, selling off the house and seven acres, leaving the old store to be sold separately. The Pauleys, at one time owned the entire hill. But after Mr. Pauley died, "Miss Idy" sold off parts until the house and seven acres, and the old store building were all she had left. Then she died too. Bobby missed "Miss Idy." He missed her something terrible. She was the best friend he had in the whole wide world. He missed her awful bad.

Charlie and Gladys bought the house and seven acres when the estate was settled, but they didn't move in until two weeks after the Ringos had moved into the old store. Bobby and Jackie helped them move in that day and that's when Bobby found out that Charlie had been hired to teach school at the one-room school house at Laurel Ridge over on the Salt River Road about a mile and a half from the big house. Bobby had liked Charlie from the start, but he didn't think much of Gladys at all. She seemed a little "uppity" to him.

Bobby couldn't imagine Charlie coming all the way from Louisville to take a job teaching school at a tiny schoolhouse. Heck, most of them were closing down anyway now that the county had built the consolidated high school at Valley View and they had all twelve grades in one school building. The school at Laurel Ridge only went through the eighth grade and didn't have more than a half dozen kids going to school there any more. Bobby figured that Charlie would be lucky if his job lasted more than a year or so. Charlie might end up, Bobby thought, having to sell that big white house.

Bobby had dreamed about living in that big house for as long as he could remember. It was the biggest and best house in that part of Hardin