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Joni

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Fiction by Shawn Sumrall

JONI

Where we currently stand, the Blue Ridge are a sad group of sputtering hills the locals call a mountain range. In reality, the Blue Ridge Parkway runs like a string 469 miles north to south. But as far as Joni can tell, they expand all the way to the edges of the map. Somewhere in the northern stretch of those little hills, plopped and nestled in between two stray water drops the range had sent splashing when the first waves of creation crashed and sprawled out into the Virginia soil, rested a Montaigne-style home with brown siding, black vinyl shutters, and a white-columned porch. At the top of the driveway, Joni could see the ridges of Rattle Snake Mountain, its two peaks perched to survey the valley below. This is where Joni spent his ninth birthday—amongst packed, half packed, half taped and empty brown moving boxes. Only nine months ago his father's contractor first pressed his weight onto the grass of the frost-covered pasture, crunching the blades under his cold rubber boot. The site was cleared and excavated first. Joni spent many of the colder months with the builder's children, playing in that square dirt hole that would become his family's basement.

For all Joni cared, Paul the builder's son could have been deaf, blind, or limbless. It wouldn't have mattered either way. That's the way it is with bored eight-year-olds looking for something fun to be for the day. So with the innocence of children, the builder's boy and the accountant's son struck up a soldierly camaraderie—moving softly as they could through the little wooded area behind Joni's new neighbor's house. Across the gravel drive, they dashed, stopped short of the small stream that trickled from the culvert and under a dark rotting tree. Beneath the shade of the oak and sumac, Joni and Paul Jr. traipsed, both afraid Paul's older brother

Stephen would jump out and shoot them with Joni's slingshot. But that was ages ago, months even. Now the walls smell fresh with paint and the plywood floors, still waiting to be carpeted, are coarse beneath Joni's soft, white toes.

"Joni? Did you get your tie on?" His mother shouts as she leans over the stove. Joni looks in the bathroom mirror, snaps his suspenders once, and tumbles down the freshly stained stairwell. His mother, standing over the kitchen sink with a crockpot and a chicken, glances around to look at him proudly displaying the paisley Ralph Lauren clip-on, a miniature of the one his father got on sale at Macy's and wears on Easter.

Their house was new, but their church was the same old church—filled up with the same families, the same green polyester chairs, the same ivy bordered baptismal, the same friends. "We just live a little further away now is all," Dad said, "Out of town and into cow country."

This meant more reading Henry and Ribsy, hitting baseballs in the driveway, reenacting medieval battles with plastic swords and rubber arrows, and much more feather collecting. Out in the woods, even in the backyard, Joni could hunt down the feathers of blue jays, robins, goldfinches, bluebirds, pileated woodpeckers, barn owls, and orioles. Once he even found the brown and white-striped primary feather of a red-tail hawk. His mother had a little clock in the dining room with each of these on display. Uncle Mark had mailed him Eyewitness Book's *Bird* for his birthday, a perfect introduction on how to shape his new life with the pastures and woods that had been waiting millions of years just for a bony, brown-haired boy named Joni to discover and investigate them.

From what Joni remembered of his mother's brother, his uncle had been a Tolkien fanatic; a father who would threaten a spanking in front of grandpa but could only bear to pat little Anna gently on the bottom before kissing her forehead and apologizing for being harsh;

an adamant cyclist; an accountant like Joni's father; an amateur ornithologist and feather collector; the kind of man who built his own house from stone and mortar; who felled trees from his property to supply wooden slats for the floors. He was tall and lean, with thin arms and an Indiana Jones fedora. His hair combed over wet and glossy like Bob Jones had taught him—a few drying wisps curling out of place across his forehead—but his flannel shirt unbuttoned as the day had prompted, showing his white belly to the wind and gophers and raccoons that peeped at him from the ditch behind the vegetable garden.

Joni didn't know it yet but, after all the times he spent plucking feathers from the grass, he wanted to be just like Mark. Not just by those feathers from the backyard but by his mild nature so absent in the rest of the family's willfulness. He had written to Joni in the front of a copy of *The Hobbit* that came with the book of birds and read:

Dear Joni,

Mimah and Poppop gave me "The Hobbit" in 1976 when I was eleven years old. It was my favorite book along with The Lord of the Rings Trilogy and I have them in my library to this day. The movie is great, but the books are even better! I look forward to talking to you about them. Read slow and enjoy.

Uncle Mark

Joni took his Uncle's last piece of advice very seriously. Every night he'd stay up past bedtime to read and fantasize about life in Middle Earth or to look up the new feather he'd found that afternoon. Sometimes, before bed, his mother would read from those books or tell stories of her own. One night, she remembered to him the first time she brought Joni's dad home from school in North Carolina.

“He took his coat off and draped it over the green easy chair in the living room,” she started. “You remember the one. You and Freddy used to sit in it just to pop open the footrest and your feet would fly way over your heads. Well, anyways. Your Mimah was in the kitchen cooking dinner when we walked in and Poppop was out back chopping wood for a fire. Uncle Chris must’ve been in Florida visiting Aunt Barb’s family. Mark was home though, hiding in his room probably. Were you old enough to remember the pictures of the scenery with hobbits and wizards he drew on the walls in that room? Poppop may have painted over them before you were born.

“Well, anyways. We hauled our bags upstairs and Mimah called us back down for dinner pretty quick, probably thinking she’d keep us from being on a separate floor alone too long. We all helped set the dinner table and sat down to eat. I think it was pork and sauerkraut and as you can imagine Daddy didn’t eat much. Yes, I remember because, oh, I felt so bad because Poppop—you know how blunt your grandfather can be—well he stood at the end of dinner when we were all getting ready to clean up, looked at your father and said, ‘What’s the matter? You don’t do pork and sauerkraut?’ Of course, your Daddy didn’t know what to say, this being his first meal with us, so he sort of sat there in shock while Mimah cleared dishes. I think he decided it ‘Must not be a southern thing’ and didn’t think much of it after that. He didn’t mean anything by it, but it sure made your Daddy squirm. I remember him telling me later he didn’t think Poppop liked him. But I knew that wasn’t true.

“The weekend flew by after that and before you knew it we were packing up to head back to school. I was waiting on my last load of laundry when Mark poked his head into my room. ‘Sorry I haven’t been around much this week.’ He said it like he didn’t have a girlfriend of his own he’d been missing. ‘You really like this guy, huh?’ he said. I of course told him I did, that I thought I might even love him.

“I had always been closer with Mark than Chris. Chris would tease me and call me dumb names like Tijuana-fathead. Just to kinda aggravate me, you know. But Mark was different. He always let me hang out in their room while he was reading and Chris was gone. We’d just sit there, sometimes for hours. He’d play dolls with me and learned their names and spoke in funny proper English accents; he’d brush my hair in the mornings sometimes when Mimah was busy getting our lunches together; he rode his bicycle around the neighborhood with me when I was still wobbly on my two-wheeler. Of course we drifted apart some after high school but even then he’d check in to make sure I was getting along with the other kids in middle school. I loved my brother very much Joni, as much as you love Freddy and little Piper. Well, anyways.

“He sat down on the bed in my room and rested a hand on my suitcase and said, ‘You know you don’t need any kind of approval from me or anything. You don’t need it from Dad either. Though I’m sure you’ll ask him anyway.’ He paused and picked at a string on the bedspread, ‘But just tell me this so I’ll know you’ll be happy. Is he a real person?’ That struck me as funny at first but I thought about it some. That’s something Mark was always good at, getting me to really think. I knew your father was kind. He visited me in the hospital before we dated. Actually, I had just told him I needed some space before that. But he came just the same. Drove his parent’s Honda Prelude to see me. Well, anyways. He dressed like an accountant—all oxfords and polos and paisley ties. But then, we were at Bob Jones so most of the boys dressed that way. He liked baseball and soccer and could sing pretty good. His friends were all nice and loved him. But what was it that made him real? I sure didn’t know. What does it mean to be a ‘real person’? Your uncle was a bit off sometimes. But I didn’t want him to worry any so I told him yes. That seemed to set him at ease.”

—

Joni shrugged his shoulders against the sheets. He was already thinking about stacks of pancakes and Hungry Jack dripping warm and stringy from out of the slurping syrup bottle. He'd watch cartoons tomorrow morning before going back out to continue the hunt for feathers. He knew there was another Red-tail out there somewhere. Uncle Mark liked peregrine falcons the most because they could dive-bomb up to 200 miles-per-hour. He had given Joni a mantle feather from one to add to the wood display he had carved for Joni last Christmas. The feather was sharp and gray like the bits of slate that broke off Mimi and Papa's patio. But Joni liked the Red-tails best because he could see them from the car, perched on top of a tall tree or a telephone pole, hunting for field mice.

I met Joni in the dorm bathroom freshman year. We were both brushing our teeth before bed and made foamy toothpaste faces in the mirror when the paste got too thick in our cheeks to speak. That night, and every so often after that, he told me stories. He told me about his uncle, about the feathers and *The Hobbit* and his big stone house in Doylestown, Pennsylvania. He told me about the other stories his mother would tell about her two brothers when they were wild like Joni, about their cat Speedy that grandpa used to push into their above ground pool. He told me his own stories too, about the time his brother Freddy dangled from the Brown's swing set by his belt loop and cried and cried until he couldn't cry and so he started laughing instead; about when his dad accidentally sent a 5-year-old Piper sledding across their frozen pond; about how one summer he'd hit a wiffle ball into the same pond and watched as Cody Smith flipped backward over the fence and into the water trying to catch it.

Where we're standing now, burrowed in the little pocket-sized valley in the midst of sporadic hills and smooth-rolling pastures, the spot at the top of the drive—where Joni first saw the empty lot that would soon bear the weight of the little Montaigne house—looks so steep it could fold over the rest of the neighborhood to touch the lips of Rattle Snake.