

Heading for the Mountains

My first memories are of living with my great-grandfather and great-grandmother Stone in their home in the Bronx. I have some memories of what happened there, but that's another bunch of stories to tell. The stories I am going to write are about Chilson, as that's where I lived from ages five to sixteen. My childhood was very different from yours. It was a different way of life, long gone. I just thought you might like to know about how it was then, back in the Great Depression of the 1930s.

It's enough to say that Mim, my mother, couldn't stand living with my father any longer, and one morning, Mim told me she was going to Chilson to live and was taking Bubby, my brother, with her. She said I was going to stay with my grandmother and my father until she came back for me in six weeks. She said she couldn't take both of us, so she was taking Bub as he was the youngest. I was five years old. She also said that she wanted me to stay and finish my school year—first grade.

The next day, when I came home from school, Mim and Bub were gone. She hadn't said goodbye. I knew it was because she didn't want me to cry. The next six weeks were the most lonesome, awful time of my life. No one gave me the letters Mim sent. I thought she had forgotten me. I knew my grandmother and my father didn't want me, but they were not going to let Mim have me, just for spite. I knew because I heard them talking about it one night when they thought I was upstairs. I heard my father say, "I told Mary on the phone today that she cannot have Gloria." Was I ever a scared, lonely, unhappy little girl.

A couple of days later, in the afternoon, Mim walked in. She and Uncle Tobe had come after me. What a wonderful feeling of joy! Mim was back, and I was safe again.

She said, "Come on," and we went up to the third floor to the spooky room where I slept. We threw what few things I had into an old suitcase.

My grandmother followed. She threw one of the tantrums she always threw when she wasn't getting her own way. She raved and screamed and told Mim she couldn't take me. Mim said I was going, and we went down the stairs.

Just as we started out the front door, my father walked in. He blocked the doorway and said, "Forget it, you're not taking Gloria anywhere."

Mim put down the suitcase and pulled a gun out of her pocket. She said, "Yada, take your suitcase and go get in the car." Then she said, "Ernest, I mean business." She pointed the gun right at him. My father turned white and stepped away from the door.

I ran out to where Uncle Tobe was, blissfully ignorant, waiting in the car. He put my suitcase, and me, in the backseat. I didn't tell him what was going on inside the house. I don't know what he would have done if he knew.

Finally, Mim came out of the house with her hand in her pocket. The gun was out of sight, but she had it in her hand in case my father followed her. Nothing moved from the house. Mim got in the car and we took off. I don't think Mim ever told Uncle Tobe what she had done.

It's a long way from Crestwood to Chilson. As we rolled along, it got dark, and I lay down on the backseat. I slept some, but woke up often. My head hurt and I felt sicker and sicker.

When early morning came, we were still going. I watched the sun come up over the beautiful mountains.

Mim started singing, "*When it's springtime in the mountains, I'll be coming back to you. Little sweetheart of the mountains, with your bonnie eyes so blue.*" Mim could never sing. She couldn't carry a note, but it was the most beautiful singing I ever heard.

It was one of the happiest moments of my life, rolling along in that car—going to Chilson and farther and farther away from Crestwood. The only thing was, I kept feeling sicker and sicker.

So I lay back down on the seat, and the next thing I knew, Mim said, “Here we are,” and there we were at Aunt Dean’s house in Stoney Lonesome, almost to Chilson.

We walked in and Bubby was there, along with a bunch of cousins I met for the first time. It was great. I kept sneezing a lot, so Mim looked me over good. She said, “My God, she’s got the measles.”

They rushed me upstairs, but it was too late. I had peppered Bub and my cousins good. Of course, they wouldn’t break out with the measles for ten days or so.

In the meantime, sick as I felt, I knew I was in the mountains where I belonged. Nothing else mattered.