

A large heart painted in red and yellow on a white background, surrounded by paint splatters and brushes. The heart is the central focus, with thick, expressive brushstrokes. The background is white with greyish brushstrokes and scattered red and yellow paint splatters. A paintbrush with a wooden handle is at the top, and a palette with a yellowish-orange paint is at the bottom right.

BURNING GOLD

A NOVEL

Clea Calloway

BURNING GOLD

by Clea Calloway

Jenni Ann

Age Four

As I run way ahead of Pappy and Nana, I hear the warning shouted out to me: "Don't go any farther than the top, Little Nugget! Wait for us there!"

"Okay Pappy!" I shout back, still running. I want to be the first one to see the top. I had heard them talk about how beautiful it is and I am determined to see it first. The rhododendron hangs low - it sometimes slaps my face as I race by. I have to hop up some mossy green rocks to get past the muddy puddle in the middle of the trail. The damp coolness at the trailhead below gives way to warm sunshine and buzzing bees as I run higher and higher up the mountain.

Finally, I can see the railing on my left. It stands there old and rotting, a faded beauty queen, a feeble warning. I get closer peering out onto the vastness that is the North Georgia Mountains. It is as though I have never seen a color before today. The mountain tops are waves in a choppy ten foot sea swell, never-ending, with a bounty of glorious colors, each playing vividly upon the other. My heartbeat is slowing. The scene is calming. I planned calling out, "King of the Hill!" when I got to the top. But I stand there, speechless, mesmerized by the lushness of

the fall colors. A large red tailed hawk sails past in a sweep of brown against the ruby and gold leaves below. They are jewels, these colors.

“Pappy?” I ask when they get there. “Why don’t my crayons look like these colors?”

“Well you see Little Nugget,” he replied. “These here colors, these are real special. These are made by God’s crayons.”

As we look out at the sea of color surrounding us, I repeat out loud in wonder, “God’s crayons.”

~~~

### *Age Twenty*

Driving, driving, speeding fast, the green Miata convertible is taking the curves of the North Georgia mountains well, so much so that car, driver and road act as one. A few leaves place a glancing blow on the windshield. Now a large yellow maple leaf smacks it hard and is quickly ripped away by the wind as I take another curve. As pieces of my hair slip out of the clip holding it back, I slow, but just a bit. My red wool blend scarf has been waving to all who will see as I pass by. This is where I belong.

Fall has no better place to be than with me in these mountains. I take the final turn on a gravel road, slowing, slowing. The old homeplace

is here. Here is where my great-grandparents bought the land, back in 1937, the year my Pappy was born. The simple shack they lived in serves as the garden shed out back now. The homeplace I know, the one that sits before me, is the one my Pappy built. He felled, cut and sanded the knotty heart of pine that makes up each and every one of the ceiling beams. We didn't have any other grandpappy. Or any other grandparents at all that we ever knew. Just the homeplace and Nana and Pappy Gold.

I get waves of warmth just remembering his strong arms lifting me and my sister when we came for a visit. He was a garrulous man, with great height and powerful strength. And the bluest eyes – they sparkled like diamonds bursting out of a deep Aegean sea. Those eyes shone so bright, a beam really, as if no one loved you more and nothing bad could ever happen to you, ever.

My sister, Abby, and I could just about do anything we wanted to up there. For others, he put up with no slack and rewards were few. You were expected to pull your weight and then some if needed. I'll never forget one rainy afternoon when I must have been eight or maybe nine years old. The heavy humid heat had made its way up the piedmont to the North Georgia Mountains from the plateau below. Sweat was

pouring off of Pappy's brow, mixing with the rain so you didn't know which was which.

"Shovel that damn mud out before it slides down the hill!" he was screaming through the waves of the water that were slapping the ground, equaling the force of his voice. I had been included on this ride to bring the goods to market, but we hadn't made it far before a torrential rain sprang up. It was unexpected and violent, leaving the road ahead partially washed out with us stuck on the edge. As I stood, wet and scared on the side of an uphill bank where Pappy put me, I heard the exchange.

"But Mr. Gold Sir, "whined the newly hired hand, "we've been at this for almost an hour and I am so tired!"

"Now look here son," he demanded as he strode over to the other side of the truck, filled with chickens. "There is no time for your belly-aching. Move the hell over and give me that shovel. Turner!" he hollered through the squawking of our merchandise to his long time faithful employee. Turner was straining to keep the front side of the truck wedged with a chock of wood, found fortuitously nearby when the truck started its precarious decent sideways down the muddy roadway.

“Yes Sir!” answered Turner who knew when to mess with Pappy, and this was most definitely not the time.

“Turner, take this rope from me and tie it across the road to that tree. While you’re at it, see if you can get pansy boy here to help you hold it while I dig this wheel out!”

It occurs to Turner that he doesn’t even know this new boy’s name. “No need,” he thinks. “After this he will be gone by dawn. “And indeed, he was right.

Pappy thought the new youth was soft, clumsy, and not hard-working enough. No one worked harder than Pappy did, no one in the whole state – no siree. He was tough and had everything it took to back it up. As tough as he was, he was equally in full and open love with his family. Pappy said he knew when he began working this land, when he was just a teenager himself, that it was where his family would be born and raised. He knew that this is where he wanted to live and die.

Driving up the road, now re-built with a much smoother combination of crushed rock, gravel and dirt, I get a glimpse of the homeplace. I drive all the way up, past the house, down the knoll, to visit my beloved Pappy. Closer to the creek that leads into the pond, under Old Maple, as he used to call the tree, is the headstone for him and my



Nana where they lie. I get out smiling and sweep some of the parched golden leaves away, just enough to see their names.

“Hello Nana and Pappy,” I say aloud. Just their memory brings me the familiar calm I need so much.

Pappy was my mother’s father. She, too, was like him. Hard working, no-nonsense, good-hearted. I work hard too. I am an artist, painting mostly, oil on canvas. I dabbled in sculpture, but it felt like construction work, the wood, the metals, just not for me. No, I was meant for the easel. And the oil. I could paint still life and city scenes but landscapes were where my heart lay.

One of my pieces is a scene scape with craggy rocks and rough-hewn trees, scaling up towards the cliff’s edge, where you see the ghostly outline of a couple, a man and a woman, and a child, a little girl. The man and woman are holding hands with their heads tilted towards each other, the woman’s slightly facing upwards as if smelling the salt coming off the raging ocean below. The girl, holding her mother’s hand, with her head and upper body leaning into her mother’s side, is just balancing on the one left foot, looking down. This is my family.

~~~

Age Five

“Now, Jenni!” my daddy called out to me. He released his grip from the back of my seat cushion. The wheels turn as I steer. I lurch from side to side. The shiny pink tassels sprouting from my handlebars are playfully chasing my every move.

“Now, just pedal,” he coaches.

“You can do it!” he says again, more enthusiastically. I lope left and then a bit too far right before I am able to straighten and pedal.

“You’re doing it Jenni Ann, you’re riding a bike!”

I am five years old. The training wheels are newly removed, and my first big lesson of facing my fears is upon me. But *look at me!* I am riding this bike! It takes a few more tries for me to get started by myself, without Daddy’s help. But I don’t want him to leave. I want him to stay and watch me ride in circles again and again.

I’m not sure who he is more proud of that day, him or me. Earlier, Mom had said, “Trey, you’re going to get her killed. It is too soon for her to ride without her training wheels.” Her green eyes would show fire while the soft creases around them that had begun to form belied her concerns. Mom was always the worrier.

“Lori, honey!” Daddy roars. “Come out here and see your baby now! Come see your baby girl ride that bike! She’s a natural!”

Mom comes out, applauds and smiles broadly. As I am pedaling back towards them both, grinning like a Cheshire cat, I can see Daddy reach up. He takes her chin so lightly and kisses her gently on the lips. I circle around them, almost falling, as they break away from each other and cheer me on—as if I’d just discovered the cure for some dreaded disease. We were so happy.

~ ~ ~

Will Hardy

Age Five

I was sent to the neighbors for another sleepover. My mother was crying again. At first I couldn't understand. But sitting in the living room I overheard Mrs. Crowder telling Mr. Crowder.

"She should just be happy with the one she has!"

"Ummm-hum," mumbled Mr. Crowder.

"I mean, all that bed rest, and still look what happens! I really do feel sorry for her but...I mean...it just keeps her from taking care of her own. That's all."

Mr. Crowder mumbled something again.

"What would she do without our Christian generosity? That's all I'm saying," she said over the clattering of dishes.

"Yes, dear," replied Mr. Crowder.

"William!" she called out. "Dinner's ready. Come get your plate!"

As I sat alone in front of the television eating boiled hot dogs and peas I pondered what she had said. I tiptoed around my house because of mother. Let her rest, Daddy had said. I knew mother wanted a baby. But wasn't I enough? Maybe I wasn't making her happy! I was determined to be a better boy so mother wouldn't be so sad. Maybe then she would play with me again! Maybe she would take me to the

park and she would push me in the swing! And she would laugh as I jumped from my seat tumbling to the ground like a high-flying trapeze artist! Yes, I would be better. And everything would go back to the way it was. Everyone would be happy.

~~~