MOUNTAIN MEDICINE

By Rosemary Wells

WHEN MAMMA SEES four men carrying Pa home with his leg crushed, she screams. The men try to make Mamma sit down. One of them tells me, "There's a horse doctor with a bone saw down in Krypton. We'll send him up to take the leg off."

Mamma makes me fetch Biddy, the granny woman who takes care of our mountain people.

Biddy is over a hundred years old but she can still rip the bark off a whole willow tree. She boils the willow bark until it softens up like collard greens. She cools it and packs it over Pa's leg. Then she puts an ax, blade up, under the bed to cut the fever. She leaves Mamma a folded paper of easing powder and goes away down the hollow to somebody else.

The easing powder doesn't do a speck of good, so Mamma gives Pa drops of turpentine against blood poisoning, and sips of white lightning against the pain.

"They're going to take his leg off, John," Mamma tells me. "Pa is never going to work again, and we have only those dimes in the mason jar."

If Pa can't work, we will have to move in with Mamma's sister Sally and Jip Cox. I'll have to sleep three to a bed with my big cousin Judah Cox and the baby. Supper time means eating their leftovers.

"Wait until the doctor comes," I say. "Wait until he comes." But both of us know the doctor got his license by sending away five dollars and a matchbook cover.

We wait a night and a day and another night and a day. Then I hear someone. A horse coming up Beech Fork makes a rushing noise in the deep gravel along the water's edge.

"Doctor's here!" I tell Mamma. But it isn't the doctor at all. It is a lady. She rides up the steep riverbank, shirtfront moon-white against our blue mountain evening.

When she comes to our door, a line of bats skims over her head but she doesn't pay them any mind, so I know she isn't a mincy city lady.

Right off she asks me my name, and I tell her it's John Hawkins.

"Well, my name is Mary Breckinridge. I'm a nurse," she says back.

Her voice has a softness to it. She takes off her jacket, and hangs it on a towel hook. Then she goes to Pa.

Shivers of bone show through Pa's leg. I can't look longer than an eye blink.

"How did this happen?" she asks.

But Mamma can't answer.

"I need you to help me," Mary tells my ma. "We're going to try and save this leg. We have to clean it up and splint it, and then in the morning we'll get him down the mountain to a hospital."

I run to the cool darkness of the woodshed to tend Mary's horse. That way I don't have to hear my pa cry out, or smell those nursey smells from what's inside Mary's saddlebags.

But I can't keep away. I go back and peek in the window of the cabin. Mary is holding a needle up to the light of the oil lamp. The silvery gleam of the point gives me the all-overs. She jabs it into a rubber-lidded bottle, then *spang* into Pa's arm.

I fall away from the window, sick as if I had soap suds in my belly. Bats circle me like swimming black handkerchiefs. I breathe in the smell of horse sweat and young corn until I get steady.

When I get back into the cabin, my mamma and my pa are both asleep. On the table I see Mary's saddlebags stuffed with evil-looking scissors and bottles.

"You've got your eye on that needle, haven't you, John?" Mary asks me, her blue eyes on my every move and a smile kicking at the corners of her mouth. She brings out sandwiches and offers me one. I have never tasted anything like chicken salad.

I wake up when voices and sunlight fill the house.

After breakfast Mary asks me, "How did your pa get hurt, John?"

"Ridin' the tides," I say.

"Tides?" says Mary. "Tell me what that means."

"Well," I say, "you know in the winter there's timber-cutting teams? They clear cut the big trees on the top of the mountain. Then the river men ride the logs down the chutes."

"Chutes?" asks Mary.

"Yes, ma'am. Chutes is where the water froths up mean and wild. Tides is when the water's real high and floody in the springtime. A river man rides a tree all the way from the top to the bottom of the mountain two days without stoppin'. My pa's a river man. He's good. The lumber company pays him extra. He didn't expect no accidents."

"No one ever does," says Mary.

From up the mountain Jip Cox and his brothers come to help. Two broom handles are run through the sleeves of two old coats and this makes a stretcher for Pa. My mamma's sister Sally is right behind the men, telling them what to do. No matter how I beg, Mamma won't let me go with them.

Four men carry the stretcher ends. They walk herky-jerky, trying not to jiggle Pa, and disappear into the shadows of a deer path alongside of Beech Fork. Pa's face is the color of a tallow candle.

I slip away after them, telling only Sister Sally, who has stayed to keep Mamma company. Sister Sally tries grabbing me by the wrist. "No, you don't go nowhere, John Hawkins!" she says. "Not nowhere!" But Sister doesn't want to spill the pail of shuck beans in her lap, and I am too quick for her.

I follow them down like a fox, stepping on no twigs, making no sound.

I don't show myself until noon when I get hungry. "Too late to send me back, ain't it?" I say.

Only Mary smiles. She pulls me up on her horse.

"I thought you might would give me a lickin'," I tell her.

"Once I had a little boy like you," says Mary. "I never was angry at him."

"What happened to him?" I ask her.

"I have no doubt he is sitting in God's lap in heaven this very minute, looking right down on us," she tells me.

We cross into Middle Fork. "Did you leave a note telling your mamma where you are, so she doesn't worry about you?" Mary asks.

"I told Sister Sally," I answer.

"Can you read and write, John?" asks Mary.

"No, ma'am," I answer. "Not a bit."

I feel Mary sigh in and out behind me. "How much does the lumber company pay a man for riding a fifty-foot tree trunk down a raging river for two days?" she asks me.

"Real good. Six dollars, Pa says."

Mary takes my hands. "Count out six fingers," she says.

But I only can do two and five. I hang my head. Her arm circles me like Mamma's when I get a bee sting. Down the mountain we go. All the time I feel her arm around me.

"John," she says, "what are you going to be when you grow up?"

"River man like my pa," I say proudly.

I am afraid she'll say back, *Oh, why do you want to get crushed in the river?* She doesn't. She says, "You can be anything you want to be and so can I."

"But. . . but you already are," I say back.

"Not yet," says Mary.

"Well, what then are you going to be more?" I ask.

I feel her thinking behind me.

Then she says, "I've been riding all over this mountain country, John. Everybody here is very poor. But poor as they are, they share their bread with me and give me a place to sleep as if I were their own kin. Many of them need help. I intend to bring doctors and nurses and good medicine to the mountain people. I intend to build a hospital here if I have to brick and mortar it with my own hands."

Then she doesn't say more. But hearing her I feel the same as I did the night I sat on my pa's lap and we watched a shooting star from beginning to end across the sky.

At the bottom of the mountain Pa is taken to the Hyden Railway Station in a mule cart. He is bound for the hospital in Lexington. When he says good-bye, I kiss his face and hands. He is as hot as a chimney. We go back to Mary's big house at Wendover.

I don't ask after Pa for days on end. Quiet as a mouse I hoe weeds in the Wendover garden and collect eggs every morning. Will they fix my pa's leg? Will we have to live with Sister Sally? Big Judah haunts my sleep.

Miss Peacock and Miss Texas are Mary's other nurses. They feed me wonderful victuals. But Nurse Peacock sees me pick at my supper when I worry at night.

"John," says she one day, "the doctor sent word to say your pa's doing fine. Says he's going to keep his leg."

Big Judah goes on home from my dreams.

In the library Nurse Texas shows me how to write my name and read some out of a book. Nurse Peacock teaches me the dominos and I learn to count up all the numbers.

One evening Mary draws some careful squares on paper at the card table.

"What is that?" I ask.

"It's my plan for an outpost clinic at Beech Fork," she answers. She shows me how the lines on paper really mean rooms with doors and windows. She shows me how twelve inches make a foot. She tells me the clinic will be thirty feet by thirty feet. "There's a closet right here," she explains. "There's a kitchen and a sterilizer and a refrigerator. There's a waiting room for patients and a dispensary, where the nurses give out medicine. Morning sunshine comes in all the windows."

Mary gives me the ruler to keep. I study her plan. I put Mary's picture of it, number by number, line by line, into my head.

In August Pa comes back from Lexington walking on both legs. Mary takes us to Camp Creek where Jip Cox and two mules meet us. My pa is not a good talker to women. Staring at the ground, he thanks Mary while he turns his hat in his hands.

I can see Mary in the eye of my memory. She eases out her reins and lets her horse eat from a patch of weeds. "Someday," she says, "I will need your help."

When I get home, I choose a flat pasture above Beech Fork. I collect up a barrelful of white stones. Then I lay out the plan for Mary's clinic, placing her ruler end over end in the grass. Thirty feet by thirty feet. Kitchen, waiting room, dispensary. My stones are large as goose eggs. They wait for her in the cornflowers, measured out just right for when she comes to build here.

If you were a hawk flying over, you could see them from the air.