



*Mountain
Girl*

Rose Creasy McMills

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Patrick the Mule



IT WAS PLANTING time, and Elizabeth went up to the north pasture with Grandpa to help out. After he was done plowing, she was going to fill her apron with corn and follow him down the rows, dropping the hard kernels carefully into the waiting earth. In late summer they'd have corn on the cob every day, Grandma said.

For now, Elizabeth made herself comfortable under a shade tree while Grandpa hitched up Patrick the Mule to the rusty old plow.

“Giddyup,” Grandpa said, making a clicking noise with his tongue and slapping the long reins against Patrick’s back.

Patrick didn’t move.

Elizabeth watched with interest. Who would win? Patrick or Grandpa?

Everyone said that mules were stubborn. Mama called Elizabeth stubborn when she refused to drink the last of her milk. *Stubborn* meant you didn’t do what someone else wanted you to do no matter how much they tried to make you. Patrick didn’t feel like plowing the field. He felt like cocking his back hoof, letting his head droop, and closing his eyes.

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Patrick still hadn't moved and Grandpa was getting red in the face. Elizabeth got to her feet.

"Grandpa, what's wrong?" she shouted, cupping her hands around her mouth.

"This durn mule's balking," he called back.

Elizabeth left the coolness of the tree and made her way through the stubble from last year's corn stalks to Grandpa and Patrick.

Grandpa pulled the reins over Patrick's head and handed them to Elizabeth. "You pull and I'll push," he said, going around behind Patrick.

Sometimes animals kicked, and Elizabeth knew you had to be careful going behind them. Grandma always told the story of second-cousin Elmer, who had been kicked in the head by a horse and died. "Sophie's boy," Grandma would say, wiping tears from her soft, crinkly cheeks. "God rest his soul."

But Patrick had never kicked. Grandpa put his back against Patrick's rump and pushed with all his might.

"Now pull!" he yelled up to Elizabeth, short of breath from the effort.

Elizabeth pulled on Patrick's reins with all of her strength. She dug her bare feet into the dirt and leaned back so her pigtails swung free behind her.

Patrick stretched out his long neck with its scraggly mane that stood straight up like a black scrub brush. He extended his long brown muzzle. He opened up his mouth and jutted his lower jaw sideways and showed his big square yellow teeth. He rolled his eyes and showed their whites, and he laid back his ears. He stood like his four legs were tree trunks growing up out of the ground.

Elizabeth leaned back so far that she sat down *pouf* in the dirt.

Grandpa came around from behind Patrick. His shirt was wet and clinging to him. He took off his hat and threw it on the ground. "Dang!" he said.

Patrick the Mule

Elizabeth sat quietly on the ground in front of Patrick. She held onto the reins. Patrick didn't look like he was going to run away, but you just never knew with a mule. She wondered if Grandpa was going to hit Patrick.

Grandpa took out a red bandana handkerchief and wiped the sweat off his neck and face. He took a plug of tobacco out of his pocket and bit off a wad.

Elizabeth's heart began to flutter in her chest like a frightened bird, but she couldn't stop the words.

"Uncle John could help," she said in a rush.

Grandpa glared at her. He took the reins and squatted down next to the mule. Patrick gazed off into the blue distance placidly.

"Go git him," he said finally.

Elizabeth went flying down the hill, bare feet pounding on the grass. Chickens were pecking up grain that Grandma had scattered in front of the granary, but Elizabeth didn't slow down.

"Braaaack!" squawked a rooster in alarm when he saw her coming. Elizabeth ran right through the chickens, and they scattered in all directions, flapping and clucking in terror.

Grandma stuck her head out the granary door. "Elizabeth Rose, sake's alive!"

"Where's Uncle John?" Elizabeth said breathlessly.

"He's in the coal house. What's the matter?"

"Patrick's gone stubborn," Elizabeth called over her shoulder.

The coal house was a small outbuilding behind the main farmhouse but inside the fenced-in yard. Once a month a truck trundled up the hill, backed up carefully to the large, open window on the side, and dumped an avalanche of black, glistening coal into the little building until it seemed about to burst. Elizabeth always ran out to watch the driver shovel the last of the load on top of the pile, his face and clothing covered with coal dust.

Once a day, the big metal coal bucket in the house had to be filled so that it was there to shovel into the fireplace in the living room and into

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the potbellied stove in the upper room to keep them warm. Elizabeth found Uncle John shoveling coal and muttering to himself. He didn't look up. His soft cloth shirt was damp against his back. A lock of dark hair fell across his forehead.

Elizabeth was suddenly shy. The silence between her and Uncle John was broken only by the sound of Uncle John's shovel and Elizabeth's heavy breathing. "It's Patrick," she finally blurted out.

Uncle John carefully finished filling the coal bucket. Then he carried it into the house, staggering under its weight. He came back out, adjusting his suspenders and dusting his hands. He didn't look at her or say anything, just started up the hill to the upper pasture. She ran along behind.

Patrick was dozing in the warm sun. Grandpa had moved over into the shade. He spit sideways and a black stream of tobacco shot out and landed in a little glistening puddle in the grass. Elizabeth joined him.

Uncle John walked softly across the hardened earth straight to Patrick. He stretched his hand out before him, palm up. Patrick looked up with interest and nickered softly. When John began to stroke his neck, the mule curved his head around sideways and snuffled in his pockets. John produced a carrot, and Patrick munched it eagerly.

Now John was murmuring in one of Patrick's long, soft ears.

"What's he saying?" Elizabeth whispered to Grandpa.

"Lord only knows." Grandpa had a hayseed stalk sticking out of his mouth now.

Then John patted Patrick on the shoulder and walked away over the edge of the hill toward the house. Patrick watched him until he was out of sight.

Elizabeth was disappointed. Patrick was still standing like he was rooted to the ground.

Grandpa took a big drink of water from the canteen Uncle Joe had brought him back from the war. His Adam's apple went up and down as he drank, and water trickled down his chin and neck and wet his shirt. He screwed the lid closed and put his hat back on. Then he marched

Patrick the Mule

across the field to Patrick, positioned himself behind the plow, and took up the reins. “Gee up there!” he called to Patrick.

Patrick moved ahead obediently. His long ears were forward, giving him an eager look. The sharp blade of the plow split the brown earth behind him.

Elizabeth stood with her mouth open and watched. She expected Patrick to stop any minute and not move again.

But he didn't.

Maybe it was the carrot, she thought.

But she knew it wasn't the carrot. Grandpa knew it too.