

Jack Be Nimble

Bower County, West Virginia: 1936

Oak Mountain stands tall and proud amongst the glory of West Virginia's hills, untouched by the destructive hand of the industries that ravaged many of her sisters. For three generations now, the Underwood family has made it their home, and they tend it well, protecting the land from the avarice of loggers and big coal alike. In return, the mountain has helped keep them safe from all manner of potential threats. One thing it can't protect them from is the whims of mother nature herself, and in the winter of 1936, family, mother nature was in a mood.

That winter had been one of the coldest on record in much of North America, and West Virginia had not fared as well as some of its neighbors to the south. Unlike the usual ebb and flow of colder, snowy days relieved by milder temperatures that melted the wintry carpet underfoot, the snowpack persisted, growing icy and treacherous, rendering outside chores a hardship. It was all Tobias Underwood could do to keep enough wood chopped and logs on the fire to keep his Aunt Marigold's rambling old farmhouse reasonably comfortable. On an especially bitter and windy Saturday, the two of them had pulled a pair of rocking chairs close to the hearth, and sat wrapped in quilts, sipping tea sweetened with honey and fortified with a drop or two of bourbon.

It had been a peaceful afternoon passed mostly in companionable silence, broken only by the gentle background click-clack of Granny Underwood's knitting needles. She had promised a pair of baby booties to a nice young couple down at the church, and if her guess was right, they'd be needing 'em anytime now. Tobias was engrossed in Arna Bontemps' new novel, so much so that he didn't notice Marigold's needles had fallen silent until her shadow fell over the page he was reading. He glanced up to find her standing still and quiet, her brow furrowed.

TOBIAS: What is it, Auntie?

GRANNY UNDERWOOD: It would seem we have uninvited guests on the property, Tobias. Fetch my walking stick and your uncle's shotgun out the hall closet.

Tobias Underwood did not hesitate. Strangers on Oak Mountain could mean any number of things, and most of them were trouble. He set his book aside, and did as he was asked. The two

of them bundled up in thick woolen scarves and mittens Granny Underwood had knitted and lined with flannel herself, pulled on their heavy winter coats and boots, and began picking their way carefully across the snow-packed yard. Tobias followed his auntie's lead as she walked into the towering stand of oaks at the back edge of the yard. Granny Underwood followed a trail that wound down the slope of Oak Mountain at a gentle incline, a well-tended path originally plotted by her husband Doc, long ago when they bought the property. Near the foot of the mountain, right at the edge of the property line, they found a small encampment.

A white man, incongruously dressed in a brown suit and matching overcoat — his only concession to the weather a pair of tall overshoes that kept the wet off his shoes and pant legs — sat on fallen log, warming his hands over a tidy little campfire. Just far enough from the flames for safety, a tarp was spread on the frosty ground, on which this interloper had pitched himself a little pup tent. When he caught sight of them, the man jumped to his feet, clapping his hands together as if in delight. Granny Underwood's eyes narrowed in clear displeasure.

JACK: Why, Miz Marigold Underwood! Just the woman I was looking for!

TOBIAS: You know this man, Auntie?

GRANNY UNDERWOOD: Unfortunately, we are acquainted, yes. What you doing on my land, Jack? As I recall, my husband told you a long time ago you're not welcome here.

JACK: Now, now, Miz Underwood, don't be like that. I know Doc and I didn't always see eye to eye, but I thought maybe you would—

GRANNY UNDERWOOD: You thought wrong, Jack.

JACK: Now, Miz Marigold. Can I call you Goldy? That's what Doc always called you when he talked about you back in the day.

Tobias felt the frigid air on the back of his neck warm by several degrees. The look his auntie turned on the man she called Jack would have boiled ice water.

GRANNY UNDERWOOD: Mind your tongue, trickster. You will address me properly or not at all. You might be my elder, but you ain't my better.

JACK: Fine, fine. I was hoping we could just have us a nice chat, like old friends do, but if you insist on the formalities.

JACK: Miz Marigold Underwood, keeper of this land and mistress of the house upon it, I call upon thee to ask for aid and succor. On my honor, I intend you no harm and pledge to conduct myself as a guest whilst I am in your bounds. I come in a time of need and seek wisdom only you might hold. I humble myself to beg of you a favor, a debt I would gladly repay on a day that is yet to come.

Tobias felt the air around him grow charged, as the man's words seemed to invoke a sense of formality and stillness. It was like standing in a room with a breeze blowing in when somebody suddenly shuts the door.

GRANNY UNDERWOOD: I see you, Jack, called Fields by some and other things by those who know you better. I'll hear your plea, but know that this is a cold house to your kind. Your deeds here are not forgotten, nor are they forgiven. You stand outside my wards and knock, and I have come to the threshold. Speak true or begone.

If someone had closed a door when Jack spoke, Tobias' auntie's voice closed all the damn windows and nailed them shut. The wind stilled. The intermittent flurries of snow that drifted languidly from above ceased. It was as if they were encased in a snow globe, insulated from the world outside.

JACK: Well, now. If we're going to do this according to the old ways, I should know all the parties in attendance. Who's this bright young man?

Jack eyed Tobias shrewdly, taking in his handsome face, his thick beard and warm eyes.

JACK: If I had to guess, you'd be the son of Roger Underwood — Miz Underwood's nephew by marriage, blood of her late husband Lee. Am I right? Might I have your name, son?

Tobias looked to his auntie, who eyed him keenly and nodded, her look a clear signal, reminding him what she'd taught him about names. His hands gripped the shotgun tight as he answered in measured tones.

TOBIAS: I ain't no son of yours, mister. You can call me Tobias, as my auntie does, and naught else.

JACK: Oh, well done, Miz Marigold! You've schooled this boy right and proper. Don't worry, young'un, I ain't some faerie out here trying to steal your name or a devil come to bargain for your soul. Not today, anyway. Well then, Mr. Tobias, I'm right pleased to meet you. Any kin of Doc Underwood is a friend of mine. J.T. Fields, but you can call me Jack.

Jack stuck out his long, pale hand to shake, but Tobias did not reach for it.

TOBIAS: So just Jack, is it?

JACK: Most commonly. Though as I understand it, the giantfolk have a name for me that's a... little bit less flattering.

TOBIAS: Giants...? Auntie, does he mean—

GRANNY UNDERWOOD: I believe we've satisfied your request for introductions, Jack. What is it you want that's worth coming all the way out here in this snow to bother me about?

JACK: That's what I've always loved about you, Miz Underwood — right to the point. Well, it seems that the last time Doc and I um... collaborated on an endeavor... he ended up with a piece of my property that he shouldn't have. Now I'm not implying he stole anything. Doc Underwood was as honest as the day was long. But I believe he may have got it mixed up with his share of the spoils, so to speak, from that little adventure.

GRANNY UNDERWOOD: If my Lee kept anything from you Jack, you know damn well it wasn't something he mistook. So I'mma ask you once: are you calling my husband a thief?

Tobias knew the look in his auntie's eyes, and thought to himself that this man better step mighty careful with his answer. But then he got the feeling that was the only way this feller knew how to step.

JACK: Marigold, I done told you I wasn't saying Doc stole anything. He just ended up with this one piddly old item of mine when we sorted out what we acquired during our work together. I didn't even notice it was missing til just recently, but I have need of it.

GRANNY UNDERWOOD: And pray tell, what "piddly old item" is it that you're looking for?

JACK: A candlestick.

TOBIAS: A what now?

JACK: A candlestick! You know, what sits on a table and holds a candlestick up—

TOBIAS: I know what a candlestick is. So you're Jack, from the stories. So does that mean you mean to be, uh... nimble? How's about quick? Do you mean—

JACK: Yes, young Tobias, I plan to jump over said candlestick. It's an old tradition at weddings. It brings good fortune to the newlyweds if the founder of their feast can leap over this particular candlestick without extinguishing the flame. One of my employees is soon to be wed, and I would like nothing more than to bless their union. I believe Doc would have kept in that old steamer trunk with the other mementos of his younger, wilder days. You know the one, don't you, Miz Underwood?

Marigold was indeed familiar with the steamer trunk in question. For some years, it had sat in a back corner of the cellar, untouched and locked up tight. Her Lee had had a whole life before he courted and married her, a life that at times veered into some dangerous territory. Doc had sealed that life away when they bought the land on Oak Mountain and settled down.

GRANNY UNDERWOOD: I do know. Tobias, go back up to the house and—

TOBIAS: Oh, hell no. With all due respect, Auntie, ain't no way I'm leaving you here alone with the likes of him.

GRANNY UNDERWOOD: Tobias! Language!

JACK: I'd be happy to just follow y'all up to the house, Miz Underwood. If you'd just lower your wards—

GRANNY UNDERWOOD: OH *HELL* NO. I'd sooner invite the devil himself to Sunday dinner as have you in my house, you old snake.

Jack's eyes flashed at the insult. The air grew warm, almost humid, as Jack's anger swelled. Tobias actually began to sweat under his winter layers as the scent of copperheads and twining, poisonous vines rose on the air.

JACK: I did not come here to be insulted by the likes of you, Marigold Underwood!

GRANNY UNDERWOOD: Oh! The likes of me, is it? You come to *my* home, drag me out into the snow, disturb my peace, and for what? Because *you* need something from *me*. So you'll keep a civil tongue in your head, Jack, until our business is concluded, and then you will leave and never darken my door again.

The ground began to steam as the snow melted beneath their feet. Shoots of fresh, bright spring grass unfurled from the frozen West Virginia soil as Marigold Underwood's gift called to the primal fires deep within the earth. While she and Jack continued rattling sabers at one another across the wards of Oak Mountain, Tobias heard the sound of something large moving slowly towards them through the frozen woods. The smell hit him next — the pungent musk of something wild and powerful moving through the ice kissed trees, breaking branches and almost shaking the earth with its stride. Tobias' hands trembled as he fumbled to raise his uncle's shotgun.

TOBIAS: Uh, Auntie? Auntie! AUNTIE!

GRANNY UNDERWOOD: Not now, Tobias! I—

TOBIAS: I'm sorry, Auntie, but we got company.

All three of them turned to see the shadow of a massive bear pushing through the undergrowth on the west side of Oak Mountain, a bestial shape that moved closer and closer until it suddenly resolved into the shape of a tall, dark skinned man emerging from the trees. The power that radiated from him made Jack take a step back. Truth be told, the old trickster had to fight the impulse to take a knee. Granny Underwood's hands flew to her mouth and Tobias could have sworn she blushed, like a schoolgirl caught smoking behind the barn. She lowered her eyes and glanced up again, her grin spreading behind her fingers. Tobias' eyes welled with tears, and he felt the shotgun slip from his numb fingers.

Somehow, without introduction, Tobias Underwood felt deep in his bones that he stood in the presence of an avatar of the Green and his heart was full of awe. A distant, rational part of his brain also noted that the man carried a large steamer trunk in his muscled arms.

BROTHER BARTHOLOMEW: I think we would all do well to take a breath and remember our manners, don't you folks?

GRANNY UNDERWOOD: Brother Bartholomew! Oh! I am embarrassed. I'm so sorry, brother. I beg your pardon. I let my temper get the better of me. It is so good to see you, old friend.

Brother Bartholomew's answering smile lit the scene like a fallen star as he set the heavy trunk at his feet and reached out to clasp her hand.

BROTHER BARTHOLOMEW: It is good to see you too, Marigold Jasmine, Daughter of Judith, O Fire of The Mountain.

The big man turned his attention to Tobias, who was still struck dumb, staring at the green made flesh, a man who could have been his uncle or his cousin — a man who looked like *him* — wearing a mantle of more power than he had ever seen in any form. Tears spilled down his cheeks. The big man inclined his head and stepped forward, taking Tobias' hand in a firm grip.

BROTHER BARTHOLOMEW: Why, what's wrong, Tobias James, Son of Roger, Grandson of Sterling, Mender of Bones and Child of the Healing River?

Remembering his manners, Tobias grinned as he returned the man's handshake.

TOBIAS: I... It's... good to meet you, sir.

BROTHER BARTHOLOMEW: And you, little brother. And you as well.

Brother Bartholomew turned his gaze on the man in the plain brown suit — who returned the look with an expression that spoke of both hesitation and calculation — and nodded briefly.

BROTHER BARTHOLOMEW : Jack.

JACK: Oh, come on now, big fella, you can do better than that. Don't I get some flowery title after my name? No "the Giant Killer"? No "of the Beanstalk"? Not even simple old "of the Green"?

BROTHER BARTHOLOMEW: The names I speak are given to those who bear them by their blood and by the Green. As you have none of the former and no association with the latter, I can only call you by who and what you are. You are Jack and that is all.

Without another word, the big man opened the steamer trunk and rummaged around for a moment before producing a simple but sturdy candlestick. He inclined his head to Marigold as he stood.

BROTHER BARTHOLOMEW: I apologize for entering your home without asking, Sister Underwood, but it is best we put these matters to rest and move on.

GRANNY UNDERWOOD: No offense taken, old friend. You are always welcome in our home.

BROTHER BARTHOLOMEW: Is this the item you requested, Jack?

JACK: It looks like it. Hand it here so I can verify its authenticity.

Jack pulled a pair of gold rimmed spectacles from the pocket of his vest, placing them on his nose and reaching for the candlestick, but Brother Bartholomew shook his head and held it back.

BROTHER BARTHOLOMEW: You can see it well enough from there. I ask again. Is this the item you seek?

JACK: Yes, yes, I suppose so. I believe I see the maker's mark near the bottom there.

BROTHER BARTHOLOMEW: It happens that this particular candlestick is known to many within the service of the green. It is an artifact of some power. With a candle made of the finest beeswax, it could bless a newlywed couple with good fortune. Burn a candle made with tallow, and some say you can see portents of the future. There are those who practice darker arts that say burning a candle crafted from the flesh of a murdered man would allow you to call forth the dead. But one of its most overlooked properties is that it can detect lies.

JACK: Say what now?

BROTHER BARTHOLOMEW: Lies, Jack. Untruths. Falsehoods. Deception practiced for one's own gain.

Brother Bartholomew reached into the pocket of his coat and produced a pure white candle and a short-bladed knife. He handed both to Granny Underwood. Sister, I believe you know the proper carvings for such a test?

GRANNY UNDERWOOD: Why yes. I believe I do, Brother.

JACK: Now hold on a minute.

BROTHER BARTHOLOMEW: Quiet, Jack. You will have your turn.

After a minute or so of careful etching, Marigold Underwood handed the candle back to Brother Bartholomew, who twisted it onto the candlestick and lit the wick. He didn't use a match or any

source of man-made flame that Tobias could see. Brother Bartholomew took a few steps forward and placed the flaming candlestick on a level piece of ground, waving Jack towards it.

BROTHER BARTHOLOMEW: As the tradition dictates, Jack, you will leap over yon candle however you wish. If the flame stays lit when you pass over it, then your words reflect the truth of your intent. Should the candle be snuffed out, however... Well, then we will know that you speak falsely. By the bonds of the old compact, you will have broken your word. Such a breach of hospitality would bring about... consequences.

Brother Bartholomew smiled. Jack did not. He looked into the face of this man who was not a man, nor a bear, nor any mere mortal being, and felt the enormity of its power. He looked at the candle. He looked at the Underwoods. Marigold gave him a little wave and a bright smile. He returned his gaze to Brother Bartholomew and cleared his throat.

JACK: Ahem. Well. You see, um... I don't have my running and jumping shoes on at the moment, old feller. Let me run just back to the car and fetch them, and we'll get right on with the proceedings. Y'all just wait right here. My vehicle's just a little ways back through the trees there and...

The man known as Jack Fields backed slowly away from the three of them, before turning toward wherever he might have left his vehicle. And then he vanished. With a soft *pop* of air, the sense of separation from the natural world that had settled over them when Marigold and Jack began their parlay vanished as well, and a cold wind cut through the clearing like a farewell kiss.

TOBIAS: He ain't coming back, is he?

GRANNY UNDERWOOD: I'd say not. That ole boy ain't always the sharpest knife in the drawer, but he'd never let himself get caught breaking the rules if there was any chance he might actually be held accountable.

Marigold turned to address Brother Bartholomew, but found that the tall man in the dark suit, with the even darker beard, was also gone, vanished back into the green without a word.

GRANNY UNDERWOOD: Oh... well, I guess his work here was done. I sure would have liked to have offered him a cup of coffee or something, though. Whew! It's getting cold out here. We'd best get back, Tobias. Hand me Doc's shotgun. You'll have to haul that trunk back up to the house.

Tobias hefted his uncle's old steamer trunk, and the two began to make their way back through the frost-rimed trees toward his auntie's house. As they stepped through the trees at the edge of the back yard, Tobias finally gave voice to the question that had been nagging him throughout the walk back.

TOBIAS: So... Auntie... that thing he said about the giants? There aren't really—

GRANNY UNDERWOOD: And you best hope you never meet one, Tobias Underwood. Nasty folks. Ill-tempered at the best of times. Just like I'm gonna be if we don't get out of this snow. C'mon now.

[Instrumentals by Landon Blood]

Today's story was written by Steve Shell and Cam Collins. The voice of Marigold Underwood was Stephanie Hickling Beckman. The voice of Tobias Underwood was DJ Rogers, and the voice of Brother Bartholomew was Dr. Ray Christian. Talk to you soon, family. Talk to you real soon.

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