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The Well Witcher

Bill was born in Brooklyn. Anne was from Long Island. Neither of them had ever seen a tractor. Meat came from the store. They took subways, and their water came from tap. But it was the tumultuous Sixties. Kennedy was dead, and the hustle and bustle and madness of the City that Never Sleeps didn't seem like the place to raise a family. Bill decided they need to move somewhere quiet. Backwoods of Tennessee quiet.

The house they ended up at was forty-five minutes from the nearest grocery store, two hours from the nearest department store, and forget about it from any restaurant worth eating at. They were Catholic and down in the Bible Belt, the only Catholic church to be found was out in the sticks, as far from town as possible. The congregation grew to seven, counting Bill, Anne, and, eventually to ten, with the arrival of their three daughters. There was no city water. Anne hated it. She cried and said her friends would laugh if they could see it now. But Bill was elated. Now they were living! Alone, without thousands of people above and below them. They'd live off the land, and they'd make it. He was sure.

If there was anything that made Bill doubt their chances, it was water. The property had a small well on it, but the water was so rusty that clothes were more stained after being washed than they were before. It may have been enough water for just two people, but it was not nearly enough for five and an ever-growing menagerie. In order for there to be enough water, there had to be a thirty-minute break between any two people's showers. In the shower, one had to get wet,

turn the water off and soap up, then turn it back on to rinse. Bill told the girls that “Yellow is mellow and brown goes down,” because there wasn’t enough water to flush every time.

For the second well, Bill hired two men who spent a week digging and all the while lived in a trailer by their hole without bathing. After a week they charged him for sixty feet of digging, disappeared and got drunk for a month, and returned to finish the well. It was as useless as the first.

If they were going to live in the boondocks, they were going to need a consistent supply of water. This crazy Yankee with his outrageous accent had no idea what he was doing, and he greatly amused the locals who had been in the sticks for eons. They laughed at him, but the man who had built the house recommended that Bill talk to Alf, the best well witcher in the state.

Witching is an old well finding method. Bill didn’t believe in magic. But digging a well without a witch hadn’t worked so might as well try with one. Alf, every bit of eighty years old with no teeth, arrived on a bareback donkey with a Y-stick. Bill figured he’d made a mistake; this was nonsense. But Alf got down off his donkey and held his stick high. He paced the yard, then, as if possessed, he jerked the stick to the ground and said to dig seventy-five feet and there would be rust-free water and plenty of it. Bill marked the spot and waited a while. He still wasn’t sure he believed there was water there. But you can only fill a toilet tank with snow water so many times before you’ll try anything, so he dug and hit water in seventy-two feet.

The well witcher’s well was the best they had by a long shot. It was fifty yards away from the house and up a hill, and, though they had water, the Yankee still had a lot to learn. He once ran a hose from the house back up near the well to water the horse. After he filled the trough, he left the hose and went back to the house, only to look out and see Promise, the horse, pawing the ground, anxious for water. Befuddled, Bill went back up and found that the trough

had emptied, all the water and run back down the hill through the hose. Alf had helped, but it would still take a lot of trial and error before they figured out how to do everything. Only in America.