

Charles de LinT



Seven Wild Sisters

Illustrated by Charles Vess

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·Away·

Sarah Jane

I was never much good in school, I don't know why. Grammar, math, geography, none of it meant all that much to me. I liked English for the stories, but I didn't take to all the rules about language. I liked history, too—more stories, only these were true—but I couldn't seem to care about what order they went in. Memorizing dates and names and such sure didn't seem to make them any better or worse than they already were.

I was sixteen and didn't know what I was ever going to do with my life. Laurel and Bess were eighteen now and they had their music. At fifteen, Elsie had her nature studies and art. The younger twins were only thirteen and not of an age where it mattered much yet. That left only Adie, at nineteen, and me, with our futures unaccounted for. I suppose you could say that Adie'd

already taken on the role of the black sheep, though she hadn't done anything particularly colorful in months.

"I don't know what's going to come of you," Mama would say when I brought home another report card and none of it good.

I didn't either. Leastways, not until I met Aunt Lillian and you already know how that came about. But once I understood how there was another way a body could live than the one that seemed to lie afore me, well, I took to it like a kitten chasing a butterfly.

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I guess my story really starts that year I was seventeen, the third year I went harvesting 'sang for Aunt Lillian, and maybe I should have started there. Miss Cook, my English Composition teacher, says that's the way to do it. You start when the story's already underway and fit in whatever background you find yourself needing as you go along.

But I don't think that way. I like to know the long history of a thing, not just where and what it might be now, and since this is my story, I suppose I can tell it any way I like. It's not like Miss Cook's going to mark me on it.

The beginning of September is the start of 'sang season, running through to the first frost. 'Sang's one of the few things Aunt Lillian takes out of the ground that she didn't put in herself, and it's pretty much the only thing she takes to market. Most anything she needs she can grow or collect in the hills around her home, but she needs a little cash for the few items she can't, and that's where the 'sang comes in.

She never takes much, just enough for her own needs and for the few extra dollars she spends in town. I asked her about that the first we went harvesting, me trailing after her like the big-footed, clumsy town girl I still was, her walking with the grace and quiet of a cat, though she was five times my age. And she seemed tireless, too. Like her old bones didn't know the meaning of being old.

I learned to walk like her. I learned pretty much everything I know from her.

"It doesn't pay to be greedy," she told me. "Truth is, I feel a little bad as it is, taking more than I need to pay my bills, but if I wasn't selling 'sang, I'd still be selling something, and the 'sang and me, we've come to an agreement about all of this."

I was kind of surprised when she let me go on my own that morning. It was the first time I can remember that she'd begged off on a ramble. She didn't come right out and say she was feeling too old—"Got a mess of chores to do this morning. You go on ahead, girl."—but I knew that's what it was and my heart near broke. Still I didn't say anything. Aunt Lillian was like us Dillard girls. She had her own mind about things and once it was made up, there was no shifting it. So I wasn't going to argue and say she wasn't too old. But I couldn't help remembering something Mama said earlier in the summer.

"It makes you wonder," she said as we were sitting down to breakfast. "What's she going to do when she can't make it on her own anymore?"

"She's got me," I said.

"I know, sweetheart. But you've got a life to live, too. There's going to come a point when Lily Kindred's going to need full-time care and I hate to think of her in a state-run nursing home."

"She'd die first."

Mama didn't say anything. She just nodded, standing at the stove, her back to me. I didn't say anything about how I was planning to move up to Aunt Lillian's and live there full-time once I was finished with school.

Anyway, I went out on my own that morning, leaving Root with Aunt Lillian. I love that dog but all he's got to do is see me digging and he'd be right in there, helping me out, and two shakes of a stick later the whole patch'd be dug up, and that's not the way to do it.

I had a knapsack on my back and a walking stick in hand and I made good time through the woods, heading for the north slopes where the 'sang grows best under a thick canopy of poplar and beech, maple, dogwood and oak. The ground's stony here and drains well, home to a whole mess of plants, each of them useful or just pretty. I smiled, thinking about that.

"That's got no use except to be pretty," Aunt Lillian told me once when I asked about some flower we came upon during one of our rambles. Then she grinned. "Though I guess pretty's got its own use, seeing how it makes us feel so good just to look on it."

In season, these slopes are home to all the 'sang's companion plants. Blue cohosh, baneberry and maidenhair fern. Jack-in-the-pulpit, yellow ladyslippers and trilliums. Bloodroot, false Solomon's Seal and what some call the "little brother of the 'sang:" goldenseal. You find them and if the conditions are right, you could find yourself some 'sang.

Now there's a right and a wrong way to harvest 'sang.

The wrong way's to go in and just start in digging up plants with no never you mind. Stripping the area, or harvesting the first plants. You do any of that, it rankles the spirits and when you come back you won't find nothing growing but memories.

The right way's complicated, but it ensures that the spirits understand your respect for them and the patch'll keep growing. You've got to come with humility in your heart and offer up prayers before you even start in considering to dig.

I remember thinking it was funny the first time I saw Aunt Lillian doing it, this old woman making her offerings of words and smoke and tobacco to invisible presences that I wasn't entirely convinced were even there. But then she had me do it with her, the two of us saying the words, waving our smudgesticks, laying our tobacco offerings on the ground as we went through it all, once for each of the four directions, and I'll be damned if I didn't feel something.

I can't explain exactly what. A stir in the air. A warm feeling in my chest. The sure knowing that we weren't alone in that old patch, that there *were* invisible presences all around us who accepted our offerings and in return, would allow us to take some of the bounty of this place.

I looked at Aunt Lillian with big wide eyes and she just grinned.

"Start in a-digging, girl," she said. "We've got our permission. Only mind you don't take a plant until it's at least six years old."

"How can you tell?"

You ever see 'sang, growing in the wild? Ginseng I guess some folks calls it. It doesn't grow much above a foot, a foot and a half in these hills, and has a stiff stalk holding up a pair of leaves, each leaf divided in five like the fingers on your hand and looking a bit like those you'd find on a chestnut. The little cluster of yellow-green flowers turns to red berries that drop off around the end of August. It takes a couple of years to come up from seed, slow-growing and long-lived if left alone. The roots are what gets used for medicine, but there's some that use the leaves for tea.

"See these prongs?" Aunt Lillian asked me. "Where the leaves are growing?"

I nodded.

"You only want to dig these here, with four or five prongs. They stay at a two-prong for at least two or three years, then grow into a three-prong and finally a four, if they stand long enough. We don't want to take them too young. The roots won't be that big, you see? But if we leave them stand, we can harvest them in a year or two. This is an old patch that the poachers haven't found, so the ones we're going to take could be anywhere from six or seven years old to twenty-five."

"Where did you learn all of this?" I asked.

"Some I got from Aunt Em," she told me. "But most of this I learned from John Creek. That's his grandson Oliver I told you about before, camps up in the woods behind my place in the summer and comes down from time to time to lend me a hand with the heavy work when it's needed." She shook her head and smiled. "He was a busy man, John was. Had him sixteen daughters, plus another from his wife's first marriage."

I remember thinking then that I couldn't imagine sharing a bathroom with that many sisters, and nothing's changed since.

After harvesting, Aunt Lillian carefully washed those "green" roots and air dried them under a shaded lean-to by the barn that she kept just for that purpose. It took maybe a month for them to dry. If you tried to heat them or dry them in the sun, they lost their potency. Once the roots were dried, Aunt Lillian boxed them up and took them into town to sell, though she always kept a few for her own tinctures and medicines.

When I got to the patch, I set down my walking stick and took off my knapsack. First thing I did was have me a long swallow of water, then I pulled out the things I'd need before I could start digging. It wasn't much. Smudgestick and matches. Dried tobacco leaves, rolled up and tied with red thread.

I was a little nervous, this being the first time I'd done this on my own, but by the time I was facing the last compass point, I was feeling, not so much confidence, but at peace. Everything seemed real quiet in the woods around me and I could sense a pressure in the air, pushing at me. Not like a wind, more like the air was leaning against me on all sides.

I laid down the last of the tobacco and picked up the smudgestick. Waving it slowly back and forth in front of me, I spoke through the smoke, talking to the spirits, honoring them the way Aunt Lillian taught me.

When I was done, I stuck the end of the smudgestick back into the ground and sat on my heels, drinking in the sensation that the prayers had left with me, this comforting feeling of being a part of something bigger than myself. I was still me, but whatever haunted this 'sang patch letting me feel part of it as well.

Finally I reached over to my knapsack to get out the little wooden trowel I'd brought.

And froze.

I hadn't given much consideration to the little pile of sticks and moss and leaves that I'd set my knapsack down beside. But it was gone now and in its place was the strangest little creature I'd ever seen. It was a little man, I guess, if you can imagine a man that small, with roots for arms and legs, and mossy hair, skin brown as the dirt and wrinkled like cedar bark. He was maybe a foot long, dressed in some kind of mottled green and brown shirt that looked like it was made of leaves and belted at the waist. His head was heartshaped, his features all sharp edges and angles.

He made a little moan and I started, suddenly aware that I hadn't been breathing. His eyes fluttered open, then closed again, huge saucer-shaped eyes as dark as blackberries.

It was obvious that there was something wrong with him and it wasn't hard to see what. He looked like he'd lost an argument



with a porcupine as there were hundreds of little quills sticking out of his skin. I leaned closer to look at them and realized they were arrows. Tiny arrows.

I looked quickly around, expecting at any minute to be ambushed myself by a horde of little creatures with bows and arrows, but the 'sang patch was still. The little rootman and I had it to ourselves.

His eyes fluttered open again. This time they stayed open and I didn't flinch back.

"Are...are you okay?" I asked. Stupid question. Of course he wasn't okay. "Is there anything I can do to help you?"

"Arrows," he said.

His voice was husky and lower in timbre than I was expecting from a man the size of a small raccoon.

"Lots of them," I agreed.

"Need...out..."

I gave a slow nod. I could do that.

"Is it going to hurt you?" I asked.

"Not...as much as dying...from their venom..."

Great. Tiny *poisoned* arrows.

I pulled my knapsack over to me and took out the little pair of pliers I kept in it for when Root got himself a mouthful of porcupine quills. I hesitated for a moment, my hand hovering over a nearby twig, waiting for it to turn into a snake or who knows what. But it didn't, so I picked it up and held it near his mouth.

"Bite on this," I told him. "It'll help with the pain."

He made no response except to open his mouth. I swallowed quickly as I caught a glimpse of wicked looking teeth. When I put the stick in his mouth, I heard the wood crunch as he bit down on it.

I moved closer and put two fingers on either side of one of the tiny arrows, grasped its shaft with the pliers and pulled. He grunted and I heard the wood crunch again. I held the arrow up for a closer look. At least it wasn't barbed, but the tiny heads were still going to hurt as I pulled them out.

He passed out again by the time I'd gotten a dozen or so out. I felt horrible for him, but at least it let me work more quickly.

I didn't have to wince in sympathy every time I pulled one out and saw the pain it caused him.

I counted the arrows as I got each one out and dropped them in a little pile on the ground by my knee. There were a hundred and thirty-seven in total.

Sitting back on my ankles, I reached forward and brushed some of the mossy hair from the little man's brow.

"What can I do now?" I asked him. "Is there someplace I can take you?"

There was no response. He was still alive—I could tell that much by the faint rise and fall of his chest—but that was it.

I didn't know what to do.

I assumed he had friends or family nearby, but though I called out for awhile, no one answered. I soaked a bit of my sleeve with water from my drinking bottle and washed his brow.

I knew I couldn't just leave him here.

"Hello! Hello!" I tried one last time.

Finally I made an envelope from a folded up piece of paper torn from the journal Elsie was trying to get me to keep and carefully scooped the arrows into it, using a twig and the little wooden trowel I'd brought along to dig up the 'sang roots. I put it and everything else in my knapsack and slipped my arms into the straps. Then leaning my walking stick up against a beech where I'd be able to easily find it when I came back to actually harvest some 'sang, I carefully picked up the little man and started back to Aunt Lillian's.

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It was a good two hours' hike from the 'sang patch to Aunt Lillian's. The return journey should have been quicker because it was more downhill, but because of the little man, it ended up taking me a lot longer. I felt I had to be careful not to jostle him too much so I went slower than I normally would. Root would have gone mad at my pace. Every once in a while I stopped to make sure he was still breathing, then off I'd go again, wishing I was a crow and could fly straight back instead of tramping up one steep hill and down the other.

All in all, it was a disconcerting trip. I kept expecting an attack by whatever it was that had turned the little rootman into a pin-cushion. No matter how much I argued against it with myself, it made too much sense that his enemies would still be out here in the woods with us somewhere.

That was nerve-wracking all on its own, as you can imagine, but then from time to time, the little man would suddenly become nothing more than a heap of sticks and roots and whatnot in my arms. The first time it happened I pretty near dropped him. The bundle of twigs and leaves cried out—more at my tightening grip than the sudden movement, I guess—and then he returned, the bird's nest of debris in my arms changing back into a little rootman.

"I'm sorry," I said, but he'd already drifted off on me again.

It was kind of funny, if you think about it. For three years I'd been desperate to see one of the fairy people from those stories Aunt Lillian was always telling me. But now that I had, I couldn't wait to get back to her house and be done with it. I just hoped she could figure a way out of this mess I'd found myself in, because I sensed that my troubles had just begun.