

BILLAI

BILLAI SHOT A PHEASANT, picked corn, and beat up on her son's wife all on a sunny afternoon. That's what folks were talking about at Jed Lewis' store sometime ago.

Miss Rosie said, "That Billai's meaner'n a snake."

The preacher's wife said in a near whisper, "Ain't it awful the way that boy left his wife and youngins with that mean o'l lady?"

Billai's daughter in law, Maribell, strolled quietly down the aisles, picking up this and that, and everyone followed her with bulging eyes. She gave Mr. Lewis her food stamps, and every one watched her walk out of the store to a truck outside where Billai was waiting, looking all too anxious for Maribell to come.

BILLAI DROPPED A BRIGHT RED COTTON DRESS over her head and pulled the hem of the skirt around her legs. It was hot, and this would cool her nude body. The three little girls had caught the school bus an hour before. Billai packed up her rifle and headed toward the back of the house. She saw a male pheasant race past her, then hid behind a cement slab under the floor of the house. Billai walked slowly toward him, pushing the rifle to her shoulder, shot once, and he fell dead.

Maribell went to the porch, grabbed up an armful of clothes and sorted them on the bed, sniffing each item first to see if it was clean.

"Maribell!" A slow, husky voice behind her called. It was Billai.

"I got a pheasant here and I want ya to clean it for supper tonight ya hear?" She started for the door. "I gotta go lay the corn by 'afore it rains."

The screen door slammed behind her as Maribell watched Billai walk to the cornfield. the corn stretched six feet into a bright blue sky then it seemed to bow reverently as Billai disappeared into it.

"I won't do it!" Maribell said aloud, with no one listening but a couple of chickens. "I hate this place. I hate this heat." She looked out toward the corn "Yeah, an' sometimes I even hate you!"

Maribell cleaned the pheasant after all and made a fan out of its tail. She put a couple of feathers in her hair and giggled at her

reflection in the mirror. She left the laundry half done and took her fan out to a big oak tree draped with moss and sat, dropping her skirt between her knees. The tree branches bounced, and the leaves danced in rhythm, fanning Maribell.

Billie laid an armful of corn on the ground next to a stack of boxes. Mr. Lewis was going to give them a hundred and fifty dollars and a hog for all this corn. Perspiration squeezed from her pores and ran in streaks down her weathered face. She lifted the skirt of her dress and wiped her face, allowing the cool breeze to ramble through the graying curls between her thin legs.

"Maribell!"

Maribell held her head up and let cool air under her chin as she sat under the tree.

Maribell looked out at the corn and watched her mother in law walk slowly toward her. Billai's red dress waved and the corn bowed.

"Maribell, go in and fetch us some supper now."

Maribell held her head up and pushed out her lower lip as if she were a fine southern lady, and pretended she didn't hear. Rusty dirt swirled tiny leaves around her. Then Billai stood right over Maribell, and said in the meanest voice ever, "I said you better get in thar' and fetch us some supper!"

Maribell just sat there fanning herself with the pheasant feathers. Billai's hot, swollen left hand grabbed Maribell up by her long brown hair, and when Billai got Maribell's face up near hers, she hauled off and slugged her in the stomach with her right hand. Maribell grabbed Billai's arm and bit into it as if it was a piece of pork fat.

Billai punched Maribell, Maribell punched Billai, and all that could be seen from the road was a lot of dust flying. Mr. Lewis and Miss Rosie watched the whole thing. Miss Rosie was driving her school bus, and Mr. Lewis was riding by in his truck. The three small girls ran from the bus to the house. The oldest stopped long enough to blush from sheer embarrassment. Mr. Lewis leaned up against his truck, his eyes evil with delight, snuff dribbling from the corners of his grinning mouth. Miss Rosie just sat up there in her bus and kept saying, "I'll be, well I'll be."

NOW MR. LEWIS WAS SAYING some of the best fights he'd ever seen were ones Billai was in. Miss Rosie was saying that Maribell was downright gutsy fighting back like that. Then Miss Rosie turned to the preacher's wife and with one hand half covering her mouth,

said, "Well, now I hear they get down right cozy with each other when night falls. They say that's why the boy left."

The preacher's wife's eyes got real big, and she bit hard on her lower lip. Mr. Lewis stared out the window and snuff drooled down his chin.

IT WAS MANY DAYS LATER, and Mr. Lewis never did tell anyone about the buckshot he got from Billai after he was caught peeking through her window one night. People were crowding into the aisles of the store with gossip. Some shook from excitement when they talked about Billai and how immoral she was. Every now and again someone would raise hands to heaven, wave in prayer, and moan, "Oh, sweet Jesus!" People hissed and groaned and talked of snakes in the garden of Eden. Then like a bunch of hungry alligators in a hot pond they lit torches and headed for Billai's.

Billai stood on the porch and sighed like she'd been expecting them. Her rifle hung over one shoulder, and she spit hard into the dirt. Maribell stood beside her pointing a rifle toward the torches, and the three little girls in long white nightgowns peered through a window.

"Billai!" Mr. Lewis shouted, "We wanna talk to you!"

"Start talkin'," Billai said in her husky voice. Mr. Lewis shuffled his feet, and hung his head. The others backed off a little. It was the preacher's wife who spoke next, "Them children oughten be with you, Billai."

Others yelled out, "Y'all livin' in sin of the worst kind!"

"Y'all know what the Bible says?" "Amen Amen Amen." "Lord knows how that boy could have a mother like you!"

Now Billai stood real quiet and narrowed her eyes focusing on the crowd in front of her. "Miss Rosie," she called out sweetly.

"Um...., yeah, Billai," Miss Rosie answered, stepping up closer the porch.

Billai threw her head back and laughed, then pointed, "I know that boy you been running off into the woods with is still a teenager!" Miss Rosie ran like she was being chased by lightning.

Billai folded her arms and pointed to Mr. Lewis. "Jed, you said y'all wanted to talk, an' you ain't said nothin' yet!" Mr. Lewis got into his truck and left.

Billai looked then at the preacher's wife, "I believe that be the little wife of our preacher does he still let you step out when he's not lookin', ma'am?" The preacher doubled his fist and looked really mean at his wife, then dragged her away. One by one the other folks left.

So far as anyone knows, Billai and Maribell haven't been mentioned for any reason other than business since.