

‘Cat Face’ Mitch

*Jacob L. Stump**

“‘Cat Face’ Mitch went crazy, so he had to move off the mountain,” Cousin Dickey said.

“I didn’t realize he left,” I said. “Where’d he go?”

“Florida,” Cousin Dickey said, grimacing.

Mitch looked like a cat. He had a pinched up face. His eyes, nose, and mouth were too close together. And, Mitch accentuated the cat-look. He curled the ends of his mustache up. Mitch kept his goatee neat, narrow, and smoothed down into a point. Together the effect was to elongate his face and to give his appearance a distinctly cat-look.

If you asked a forest ranger whose job it was to police the Jefferson National Forest, Mitch was a poacher. But, nobody asked a ranger.

Mitch made a living off the mountainside. Most of the land was public, and some private. He didn’t care which. His house sat at the edge of the forest. Mitch would walk out his back door and go “herbing,” which is vernacular for foraging for whole plants like trees, bushes, and flowers, or collecting parts of plants like bark, leaves, roots, and blooms.

Mitch had a wealth of local plant knowledge, as had his father before him and so on down the line. Herbing was a family tradition that dated back to the era of the Appalachian Commons. It was more than just a way to make a living.

The Appalachian Commons suggests an earlier era and set of customary practices when land was not exclusively owned and controlled by a single person. Land was shared. To share land meant that locals who lived in the small communities down in the narrow mountain valleys could fish, hunt, herb, and graze their hogs on the large tracts of land that stretched up the mountainside, even if the land was privately owned.

Mitch still herbed, as was the family tradition. The problem was that the Appalachian Commons as a generally accepted practice had long died out. Laws had changed. Property rights were taken to mean exclusive use. Public lands were strictly regulated. So, Mitch lived as an outlaw.

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Mitch worked on the dark side of the plant market. He sold plants and herbs in nearby towns, at flea markets, along the roadside, at festivals, and to locals around the community.

Imagine the scene. A hill near Mitch's house was the "holding ground." Mitch would spend the day collecting. Then, he would temporarily plant sapling trees and bushes like Black Walnut, White Oak, Sugar Maples, Wild Cherry, Blueberry, Rhododendron, as well as plants like the Tiger Lilly, Trilliums, and so on. He dried Witch Hazel, Ginseng, various barks, leaves, and stems on large brown tarpaulins spread flat on the ground. From this "holding ground," he could meet the demand for the plants he'd gathered to make a modest living.

One day a large yellow bulldozer appeared. A tractor-trailer hauled the equipment and a tall robust man unloaded the dozer and drove away.

Mitch inspected the machine and the surrounding area. He didn't like what he saw. Building permits were stapled to a four-foot tall post that had been driven into the ground.

Two days later, more trucks, machines, and men arrived. They started digging. A driveway was carved up the hillside and bent around the rise to its top. The machines uprooted hundreds of trees and stacked them in great piles of tangled limbs at a clearing edge. The men leveled the earth and dug a large, deep pit. As the days went on, the pit became a basement. The basement was the foundation to a "mansion cabin," Mitch said to me.

The mansion cabin dominated the landscape because it was a huge structure perched on the hilltop. The hilltop only served to exacerbate the size differential. Mitch could fit his four-room house in one basement corner of the mansion cabin, which sat looming over Mitch's house at the bottom of the hill.

Worse, the yard created for the mansion cabin destroyed Mitch's plant holding area. To the bulldozers and builders, the plants, trees, and shrubs looked like rubbish and only obstacles to their development plans. To Mitch, these plants represented tender care, transplantation, cultivation, and countless hours of labor. His stock was decimated. Years of patient work was destroyed.

Mitch was at the edge of crazy by the time the building was done. The months of construction had really taken their toll on Mitch, particularly as the ridiculous size of the cabin was gradually made obvious.

Mitch contemplated revenge, but couldn't see the point. His life's work and livelihood were now large piles of rotting plant matter heaped in the forest at the edge of a perfectly manicured lawn, with sprinklers.

Mitch was gone one day. Some people thought he killed himself. Others didn't care.

Cousin Dickey learned months later through the grapevine that Mitch moved to Florida. He had family there. He cut his goatee off and doesn't herb anymore. Mitch said, "hell, I don't know any of the plants down here, anyway."

Now Mitch hunts gators. It's all legal work. Mitch says, "There's big money in gator skulls. Tourist shops sell them."