

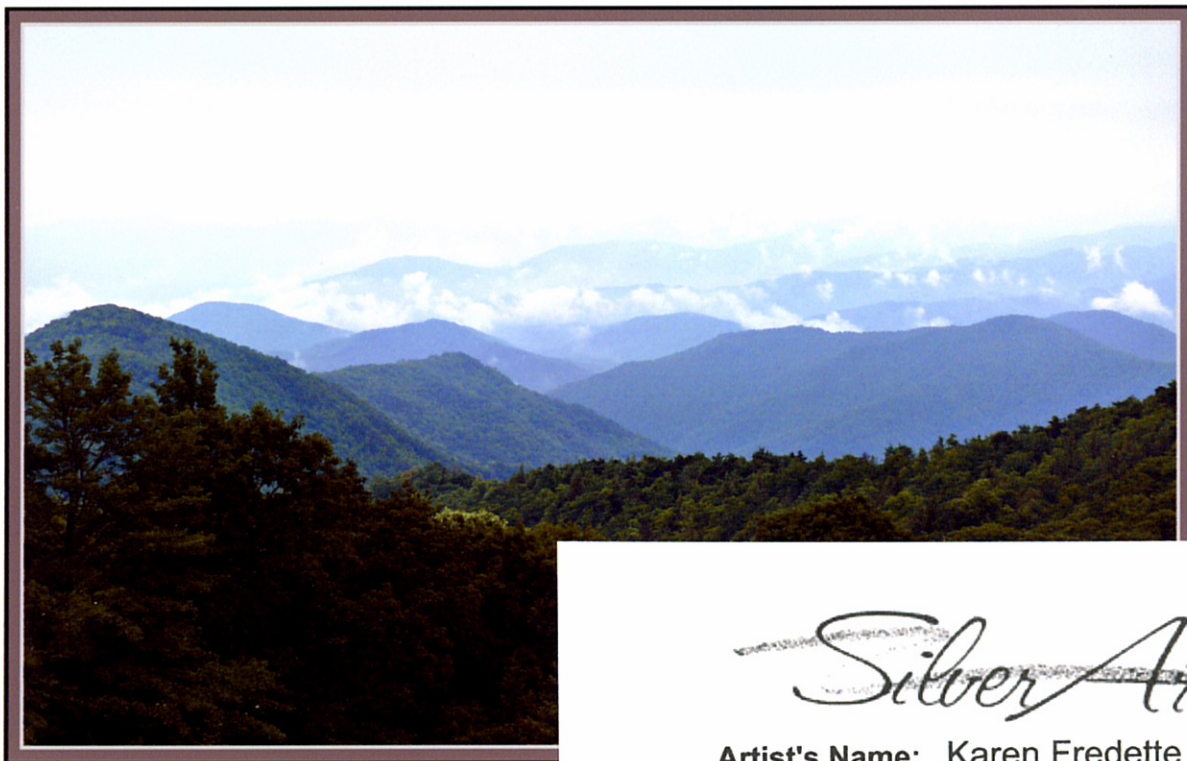
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# TROUBLESOME GAP

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Short Story  
By Karen Karper Fredette



*Silver Arts*

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## Troublesome Gap

Alena fought panic as her Cherokee was forced off the road into a ditch by a logging truck which crossed both lanes as it rounded the sharp curve. While trying to brake in the rocky soil, she glanced down the slope to a creek bed far below and began to quiver. Didn't anyone believe in guard rails around here?

After taking a few minutes to settle herself, Alena drove around the rocky point of the curve and was relieved to see that the road flattened and ran arrow straight for nearly a mile. Her rusty driving skills had been tested more than once after she'd reached these mountains of western North Carolina. Now, with no other vehicles in sight, she took her eyes off the road so she could review her scribbled directions. This must be the Flats where she would find Smokey Realty, Owner Vono Lesk. Alena passed an abandoned general feed store, some tobacco fields starting to yellow and a weathered barn. The poverty of this area began to impress itself upon her. "*Are you sure?*" her inner voice queried yet once again.

Squinting through her sun glasses, Alena spotted a sign dangling from one hook just where the road began to curve again. Her goal! Two enormous oaks sheltered a stone house where several trucks of uncertain vintage clustered like partisans for the Confederacy. When her Jeep with its Yankee-state license crunched onto the graveled berm, assorted heads swiveled in her direction and five dogs leapt up, baying in chorus. Intimidated more by the silent surveillance

of the grizzled men than by their yapping dogs, Alena assessed the scene in her rear-view mirror before cutting her engine.

One of the men, lean in jeans and plaid flannel shirt, detached himself from the group and ambled toward the car. Despite herself, Alena checked his hip for a holster. Of course, there was none. "*Get over that, woman!*" she silently chided herself.

"Lookin' for somethin', Mam?"

Alena let the motor die. "Y-yes. I'm looking for Smokey Realty. I have an appointment with Vono Lesk." Nerves betrayed her, turning her statement into a weak question.

Without answering, the man merely tilted his chin toward the faded sign and rolled his eyes toward his buddies under the trees. Alena registered the unspoken slur on her mental capacity and anger surged through her. Swinging open the car door, she stepped out, her five feet, ten inches bringing her nearly eye level with this overbearing male. "*Never show them you're afraid,*" her inner monitor murmured.

"I'm looking for Mr. Lesk," she repeated firmly.

"So you said, Mam. Waal, you're looking at 'im."

"And you're looking at Alena McCroy, the woman who called you from Bristol yesterday about seeing some properties," she retorted.

Lesk's eyes traveled over her slender frame, noting the sweatshirt (new) and jeans (still creased), the city-white sneakers. When he glanced briefly at her glossy shoulder bag, Alena clutched it more firmly to her side. Flushing under this appraisal, Alena wondered how much was apparent to the realtor's keen glance.

Where was the legendary hospitality of the South she'd counted on? Then she remembered what an old friend had told her. Locust County was "mountain" and a different breed of folk lived here. Her friend had insisted on this distinction but until now, it hadn't registered as need-to-know with Alena. Her surge of irritation had pinked her cheeks, momentarily obscuring their pallor. She held her head high, though that only seemed to amuse this realtor in some obscure way. Hoping he couldn't guess how much keeping up this front cost her, Alena jangled her keys impatiently.

The lanky man waved toward the interested crowd. "Lowel, Harrold, Isa, I'll be about some business now. Meet you'ns later at Woodard's place." Nodding, the men hopped their dogs into their trucks, and drove off in clouds of dust.

Feeling only slightly less threatened, Alena followed the realtor, now striding toward a two-story garage where an outside staircase led up to a door labeled "Office." Once inside, Alena found herself in a surprisingly modern space. A computer hummed on one desk, piles of brochures lay scattered about and a bulletin board was covered with House-and-Land-For-Sale notices.

Lesk leaned over another desk, rummaging through slips of paper. "Yem, here it is. You called from Virginia, sayin' you was interested in puttin' down on a house around here but didn't want no land with it. How'd ya hear of Locust County? Whatcha lookin' fer, a summer place?"

Alena flinched, noting how his eyes narrowed in disapproval. Puzzled, she ignored the first question, and asserted, "No, I'm planning to live here year round. I'm just not into farming ....nor," she added, surprised by her own candor, "wanting to pay taxes on land I don't need."

With a glimmer of respect, Lesk waved her to a chair. "Well, then, let's start from the ground up here. How much money we lookin' at?"

Taken aback, Alena realized she'd better risk the truth of her situation upfront. "I can't do more than \$60,000.or \$70,000", she admitted and scanned the realtor's face for fading interest.

When his attention didn't seem to waver, she plunged on, "But I don't want a single-wide or a, a 'fixer-upper', I guess you call them."

"Yem," muttered Lesk, "that don' give us much to look at."

Despite this pessimistic response, Alena's heart leapt. That there was *anything* to see encouraged her. She hurried on, outlining her dream despite the voices warning her not to tip her hand. "I'm looking for a, a homey place, anything fastened to the land...a place where I might sink roots," she added and noticed a slight softening in Lesk's gaze.

Nodding to himself, he tugged open a lower file drawer and brushed over the ranks of folders thoughtfully. "Not a fixer-upper, room enough fer one..." he mused softly, while Alena's heart clenched. How much had he already guessed?

Lesk's callused fingers paused over the files and he glanced up, "How far out or up you willin' to live?"

"You mean?"

"Like this, Mam. Would you consider somethin' off a paved road? Are you lookin' fer a place with a view? Do you want neighbors about or do trees make you happy?"

Alena blinked, such options having never entered her calculations...or dreams. "I'd like privacy," she admitted, "and a view would be great, I guess, but... I don't want anything too ... too primitive," she added, hoping this man would catch her meaning without asking more intrusive questions. She wasn't ready for them ... maybe never would be. Yes, she'd definitely prefer trees to neighbors.

Lesk ruffled a few more folders and then slammed the drawer, muttering only half to himself, "They's the Worth place up toward Troublesome Gap, the Trebold cabin along Champ Branch or mebbe the old Haggert house? Don' know if any of 'em maught suit but they're in your range, sort of. Bin on the market awhile so's the owners' might could dicker some."

Lesk cleared his throat, "You got time to see'm now? Got no pictures of these places to show..."

Alena paused, alarm bells ringing. Was she being pushed? This man was only doing his job, wasn't he? It was time she stopped being so jumpy. Smoothing her sweat shirt, she tried to look eager. This might be the day she launched her new life, the fresh beginning she'd dreamed of through long, hopeless years. Alena nodded, not willing to trust her voice.

Assessing the unconscious revelations of his client, Lesk plucked some keys from the peg board by the computer. "We'll go in my Rover," he announced and strode from the office. Alena followed, still disturbed by his casual assumption of her compliance. A single woman, house-hunting with a man she didn't know...but what option did she have? Find a female realtor? She had no more reason to trust women than men after what she'd been through. Shrugging, she let curiosity override her caution and scurried down the steps with an agility that belied her fifty-four years.

However, Alena was nettled when Lesk made her circle his mud-splashed vehicle to climb into the passenger seat. *Didn't men hold doors for women anymore? "Of course not,"* she chided herself, *"A lot has changed since ... since then."*

As soon as Lesk turned the key, country music blared but he made no move to turn the radio off. Wheeling onto the pavement, he drove swiftly back down the flats until he swerved across a wooden bridge spanning a deep creek bed. Suddenly, asphalt turned to gravel, which soon yielded to a rutted lane that just kept climbing. Dust billowing in their wake discouraged the dogs that rushed barking from houses concealed among the trees they passed.

Lesk slowed only slightly as the road deteriorated and Alena gripped her door handle, keeping her smile fixed in place. Finally, he flicked off the radio to announce, "We're on Bearshot Branch here, which goes on up through Troublesome Gap. The place I'm showin' you used to belong to the Worth's. Folks built it themselves... had some kinda' strange ideas but they lived here purty happy 'til he stroked and died. It's been bought and sold a few times since. The present owner wanted it fer a huntin' lodge but in the end, it didn't suit."

The tree-shaded road was pleasantly cool. With the radio off, Alena became aware of twittering birds and ... silence. A door long shut within began to crack open and she drew a deep breath, involuntarily closing her eyes. When a front wheel dropped into a deep rut, Alena skidded on the seat, her heart thudding. Glancing over, she caught a grin flickering across Vono Lesk's face. "Is this why they call it Troublesome Gap?" she gasped, sliding back onto the seat.

*"Watch yourself, woman,"* Alena's inner voices warned. Then the Rover lurched a last time and stopped in a yard. Alena turned to see an unpainted structure of undetermined style set on pilings in pleasant shade. A deep porch constituted its sole charm. Lesk pulled his vehicle closer to the sagging steps, explaining that snakes often lurked in such untended yards. About to step out, Alena hastily pulled her sneakers back and flushed at Lesk's dry chuckle. Did he enjoy testing potential clients? It seemed a strange strategy for making sales.

Piqued again, Alena jumped out of the vehicle and joined Lesk on the porch where he was jiggling a lock. When he pushed the door open, Alena peered over his shoulder into stuffy gloom. Nearly empty of furnishings, it was soon apparent what Lesk had meant by "built

themselves". Rough boards paneled the walls and a poorly mortared fireplace appeared as her eyes adjusted. It seemed to be all one room with cupboards and a sink in an alcove, a built-in desk beneath a wide window and what appeared to be a permanent couch facing the hearth.

She noticed steps crudely fastened to one wall, graceless, even perilous, without a railing. When Lesk nodded, Alena carefully climbed them, nearly banging her forehead on a low beam at the top. Obviously, this was only meant to be a sleeping loft. Spying two dusty windows, Alena crouched to peer through one and was surprised to see a small pavilion almost covered with a leafy vine. "Kudzu?" She'd have to study up on local flora.

Descending, Alena tried to conceal her conflicting emotions but Lesk caught her frown. "What was you expectin', Mam? A chalet?" and then added softly, "Don' worry 'bout "facilities". They's a composting toilet jest out the back door and a black bag shower outside that gits hot enough, leastwise in the summer. The folks what built this wanted to live off the grid so the only electric comes from a generator that runs when they's enough sunshine on them roof panels you nearly hit. Problem is, they wanted trees 'round the place to cool it in the summer. That Worth couple mighta' bin edjicated but din't seem overmuch blessed with common sense."

Smiling uncertainly, Alena stepped back onto the porch where she suddenly caught her breath. There are views and then there are VIEWS! If she'd wondered what might have kept folks living up here in such spartan conditions, she had her answer. Her soul expanded as she looked over blue ridges rolling hazily into the distance. No sound reached her but the rushing of a nearby creek – a "bold branch" the ads would probably call it.

Intrigued despite herself, Alena walked around outside, noting a fragrant bush planted near the back door and a bench circling the trunk of an ancient apple tree, now gone to suckers. She recognized some honeysuckle and a few feet away, a towering shrub, probably Laurel. "*Not all the wild things around here are rooted to the ground,*" her voices reminded her. She swept the ground hastily but her eyes kept wandering back to the view. No trees blocked it because the mountainside dropped off so sharply. Staring out across the valley, Alena felt her very eyeballs expanding. But when she went back into the cabin her heart began to pound.

Despite some charming touches, something about the place disturbed her. With only three windows downstairs, it felt closed in, cramped ... and before she could help herself, Alena rushed back out to the porch. Could she bear to begin her new life in such a small, dark space? Even if she spent most of her days on the porch, as the builders probably had, this would never do, would it? Alena tried to calm her racing pulse. When Vono strode out behind her, Alena turned with careful control. "What's the asking price for this?" she inquired, hoping she projected only casual interest.

"What would you give for it, Ms. McCroy?" he asked in return. Alena didn't like being toyed with and said sharply, "Nothing! I'm looking for something larger – a place with lots of light."

"Don' have much like that hereabouts – leastwise not in your price range," he replied just as bluntly.

A sudden rage boiled up in Alena – this testy mountain man was not going to push her into doing something she might regret, something that would betray the person she was struggling so fiercely to liberate.

"Give me the asking price and I'll think about it," she demanded and swirled down the steps. Two could play this game. But a second turn around the grassy yard became a bit of "what if?" What if the windows were enlarged? What if she could get some used kitchen appliances on the cheap? What if she put up curtains and laid some pillows around – homey touches she'd sorely missed in past years?

Lesk was perched on the front steps, staring out across the mountainscape as Alena came around from inspecting the composting toilet and outdoor shower. When he didn't say anything, Alena accepted the unspoken invitation and joined him, taking one step above him. This view soothed her soul and whether or not she was being a fool to buy the first place she saw, Alena knew this place could be home to her.

"So, tell me, what's the asking price?"

Turning to look up at her, Lesk repeated, "What'll ya give fer it?"



"So, it's up to me?" Alena mused aloud. "This place needs a lot of things, not to mention a lot of work, if someone wanted to live here year-round. Given what I've seen, I might offer ...hmmm, \$40,000?"

"Make it fifty and it's a deal!"

"Forty-five.", Alena countered, almost dizzy at the prospect of getting such a site for so little.

Lesk glanced up at her and pronounced, "Done!"

Just as Alena was about to grin in jubilation, he laid his hand on her knee. "When *did* you git outa the joint?"

"Wha-a-t?" she began but her bluster deserted her. "How did you guess?"

"I know the signs. Bin there meself," he admitted. "What were you in fer?"

Staring out across the valley, Alena muttered, "Murder."

"Yeh?"

"Shot my husband nine times."

"Must've bin a sonofabitch."

"That he was ... and more."

"If you let this story git out hereabouts, you'll shore git a lot of respect. Not likely anyone'll bother ya overmuch!"

Alena propped her elbows on her knees and caught a gleam in Vono's eye. She turned toward The View again and a proud smile spread across her face, her first in a long, long time.