

Snail Honey

“This is what we’re doing. We are going to the beach, and we’re gonna make a big sandcastle,” says the guy with a neckbeard and Orlando Magic sweatpants. Tortilla chips, soft with guacamole run-off, spills from my mouth.

“How big?” I ask, half crying. Neckbeard makes a gesture with his hands that indicates approximately two feet.

“No, no we’re not doing that,” I say.

Dueling flamenco guitar solos wail over maracas and a trumpet, somewhere in the background. Neckbeard looks around the cantina and asks me where all the cactus paintings are. I tell him something about Democracy and it’s all over.

Earlier, we had been selling Snail Honey in Arkansas. Except Neckbeard called it 'our Kansas,' and I decided quickly not to correct him. We sold the honey for eight dollars a jar. Before being emptied, these jars had originally been used for pine nuts, which are an expensive nut. Not eight dollars a jar expensive, but pricey. They were stolen anyway. Unlike nuts, honey is a type of sticky, amber liquid used for heightening the experience of chicken nuggets and sweetening tea, among other things. Before it’s bottled in pine nut jars, the honey is extracted from bee hives and diluted with citric acid. At about this time, a customer would furrow their brow and ask: *where exactly does the snail come in?* And I would then explain all about how it’s really extracted from boiled fair trade snail shells and naturally fermented with pomegranate for a bone fortifying, amino B4 enriched, finished product. We don't tell the customers that it actually comes from a BPA infested plastic bottle shaped like a bear, prior to being sealed in old pine nut jars. Just a minor detail we choose to omit.

Life was hard on the road for my compadres and I. Our '97 Chevy Express was full to the brim with boxes of Snail Honey, and I couldn’t tell if the rattling sound above 65 mph was the jars clanking together or the catalytic converter trying to fall off. But I would say that the thick of our adventure started on a day in a desert where there used to be a cornfield.

“I think there used to be cornfield here.” I tell this to Dr. Billclinton, and I suspect Neckbeard hears, too. Dr. Billclinton is an agrologist. This means she specializes in studying grass. She studies seeds, lawns, fields, fronds, you name it. Professionally, she does it to further advance the technology of lawn care and maintenance. Suburban agriculture and what not. Personally, she just loves how encompassing and important grass is to mankind, or something to that regard. I don’t say this out loud, but I do believe I am in love with her. Before all of this, I had big plans for the Australian countryside. I was gonna go there and marry some tough broad to live in a shack and raise dingo’s or grow pumpkins with miscellaneous vegetation. I told acquaintances that I didn’t really care how tough the soil is in the outback. And they would tell me that there’s more to that country than outbacks and dingoes. There is more to life than outbacks and dingoes (Yeah, right). But then Dr. Billclinton enters my life. An agrologist from some podunk town in Australia. My dream lady. Right from between the lines of my Christmas list to the Aboriginal gods.

The three of us stand inside the entrance of an Arizonian diner. This waitress with a 'Halle' name tag semi-politely informs us that we can seat ourselves. Neckbeard sits next to Dr. Billclinton in the booth and I get my own little area. Dr. Billclinton plays with the duct tape on the vinyl while I thumb through the tabletop jukebox selection. Neckbeard asks if they have any Batch.

“It’s pronounced Bok,” I tell him.

“What did I say?” Neckbeard mutters, but he’s transfixed on the menu. I know I’m getting buttermilk pancakes, but I look at the menu anyway, seeing as how the jukebox was just for show and the buttons don’t even depress. Outside the window, the sun is white and wavy, just the way I like it. The greenhouse effect is in full swing, with heat breathing in through the glass. The three of us are baking inside of a stainless steel, bolts and vinyl satellite nestled on a squishy parking lot. Bear grass jutting out from the cracks. The waitress makes her way to our booth and pours instant coffee into shiny brown mugs. I can tell from the dusty odor.

“Do you have anyone to soilate the xerophyllym in the parking lot?” Dr. Billclinton suddenly asks Halle. Halle is fifty eight or an unhealthy forty five. She smells like tobacco and the color mauve. Her uniform matches the picture of the French toast sundae on the very last page of the menu.

I grunt a polite chuckle so that the waitress will feel less uncomfortable. “Excuse me. The bear grass. It’s a predatory perennial to the fig population.”

“The plants are a threat to the bugs?” Halle says. She does not look pleased. Dr. Billclinton gives Halle her menu.

“Figs aren’t insects. They’re a breed of sparrow,” Dr. Billclinton tells her. Even I didn’t know that. Food is delivered on slippery plates and napkins are scrunched up into little balls. The doctor offers to pay and lets us know that she’ll meet us outside.

I am picking at pieces of pancake in my molar outside the diner. Neckbeard is asking the Doctor about her necklace, and she makes up a story about her grandmother passing it down through the generations because she made it through some historic blimp fire in the 1930s. I stop and pivot on my heels.

“Hold on. My doggy bag.” I start to head back into the diner but Dr. Billclinton throws her arm against my chest and tells me to leave it.

“I have a whole second meal of pancakes in there,” I plead.

“You have nothing in there,” She tells me. “And you don’t really need all that refined sugar,” she says jabbing my stomach, in a low voice. This gets a laugh out of Neckbeard, even though he is at least thirty pounds overweight and should absolutely not be chuckling at my expense. I abandon my pancakes and follow my compadres into the van. Forward on an aimless adventure to peddle snake oil. To this day I cannot eat pancakes. I should’ve known then that something wasn’t right, but sugar and sunlight can make a man mighty numb to the sound of sirens.

The sun sets and rises a few times, and some celebrity scandals entertain the three of us on motel TVs with rusty rabbit ears. These big, navy blue storm clouds form in our wake, but we point the van towards sun. We’ve clocked three hundred miles on the odometer. Driving to some town the Doctor promises will be a lucrative venture. The check engine light has come on and I am less than optimistic about passing emissions.

“Not in Arizona,” Dr. Billclinton tells me. She’s driving. She sits too close to the dashboard, and her pale arms look awkward at the steering wheel. “They don’t do emission testing out here. It’s like the wild west of automotive pollution.” Neckbeard is asleep in the back. We bought the van, used, from a car lot at three in the morning. No salesmen necessary, but we

left some stock certificates in its place. They were really just pieces of construction paper that Neckbeard drew dollar signs on with forged 'Winston Churchill' signatures. Ok, we stole it.

There were three cassette tapes that came with the van, under the front passenger's seat. Dr. Billclinton snapped the radio antennae off and used to it to toast marshmallows over a small brush fire we made one night. But hey, no radio, no problem. I ask her if we're there yet, and instead of laughing she says:

"That's funny." She rolls down the window and the wind whips at her ponytail. I try to fall asleep in my seat with fabric that smells like Sprite. I imagine Dr. Billclinton and I holding hands while riding cartoon koalas underwater. I try to imagine her without a ponytail and glasses but it's difficult and the ocean tastes far too much like soda.

"Lawrence, wake up!" Neckbeard is shaking me. "We're here!"

"In-where-in?" I say with closed eyes. My nose is unbelievably itchy. I can here Dr. Billclinton unloading crates of Snail Honey from the back of the van.

"Welcome to Greenlee," the doctor exclaims with open arms. The first thing I notice about Greenlee is the air. It's obnoxiously fresh, as if located in the eye of a pine forest storm. But all I can make out is commerce. Chains and gas stations. Lots of brown metal traffic signs.

"Look." Neckbeard points to the distance. "Incredible," he whispers like a child seeing an actual triceratops pissing in his front yard. I have never seen so many houses, the same color, so close together. Miles of them in the distance. Off-white siding and red ceramic roof tiles. They're nestled on a giant hill that seems to wind down forever. A waterfall of suburbs swirling and cascading in a perfect Fibonacci spiral. Neckbeard tells me he wants to live there someday. The distant sparkles of above ground swimming pools are blinding as my eye balls struggle to focus. The doctor hands me a crate. She leads Neckbeard and I around the front of a building into a vacant, grassy lot.

"Astroturf," she says. She puts her finger in her mouth like she's trying to gag.

"What's with all the lemonade stands?" Neckbeard inquires.

"It's the Greenlee Sunday Farmer's Market," Dr. Billclinton tells us. And it is indeed. Fresh tomatoes, corn, pesto, bread, and fish. Organic soaps, pie, carrots, beef and tea. Parents with sweater ponchos and kids on leashes. Kids with labs on leashes. Old senile people with orange skin and white hair. Single thirty somethings slurping iced chai from green straws.

“Everyone’s wearing hats,” Neckbeard frowns. The three of us stand side by side. Our hand painted sign is a banner flying over some samples that we spread out on a picnic blanket with a grass stain that the doctor covered up with a ceramic snail. Some old lady with sunglasses covering her entire face shuffles up. I can feel Neckbeard’s fear and uncertainty.

“Good morning,” Doctor Billclinton says in her most enthusiastic voice. The old lady asks about the honey and I tell her all about it. I told her what the doctor told me, some time ago at a truck stop four hundred miles away...

Neckbeard and I were on a reverse road trip back from a potential contracting job in New Mexico, or Old Mexico or one of the Mexico’s. Needless to say, we were unqualified and were drowning our sorrows with soft drinks in a parking lot when this girl asks us if our truck needed a jump start. She’s got this razor sharp ponytail and thick glasses frames with thin lenses. She’s short but she stands with her arms on the hips of her khaki shorts in this weird power stance that makes her look taller. I tell her we don’t need a jump start and she asks our names, and I am thinking holy crap. The part where she says we needed a bigger car to sell the Snail Honey came after the part where she told us about how much money there is to be made from Snail Honey. She had a pen that said 'Flagstaff Sheriff’s Department' on it in gold. We’re sitting at a picnic table, or a booth or something and she grabs this napkin and writes:

White People + Influx of jobs in South West Arizona + Farmers Markets + Pomegranate
+Fair-trade ++and Organic =\$\$\$\$ - and a smiley face.

Except she draws the smiley face on the top of my hand. And I can feel the ball of the pen gliding on my skin and her eyes meet mine and I am like *holy crap*.

I watch Dr. Billclinton take a twenty dollar bill from this old lady. The doctor says thank you with this crazy smile that makes her look like a crazy person. She does this at least forty or fifty more times that day. Neckbeard sits in a folding chair and just kind of takes it all in, until the sky gets all pink and gold. We start to pack up and when I lift the cigar box it weighs about as much as a coffee table book about canyons. We’re back in the van and we’re laughing and listening to the cassette deck. I’m driving while Neckbeard is in the front seat. The doctor is counting money in the back and singing along to the song. It’s something about the fourth of July

and for a moment I get this feeling like we're a family. Mr. and Mrs. Billclinton hyphenated with my last name, because I consider myself a progressively mobile gentleman.

"There!" The doctor points to an Applebee's. We eat apple crisp sundaes for dinner and they come out on a big, hot iron skillet. I look around at all the other families and office workers and we are no different. I see the Doctor's grin through the bottom of my oversized mug and for a second it looks like she's missing a tooth. I tell her she looks familiar. Like a face from the past. But I am drunk and I tell her this in a way where all the words are connected.

"I got the bill. You guys get the van started." She says. Outside, the smoke from the vents smells like peppers and I have cinnamon from the apple crisp on my tongue. We pull out of the parking lot, right on red, and I have no idea where we are going, but I don't care. Neckbeard is asleep in the back and the doctor's driving. Three cop cars and an ambulance with blaring Christmas light sirens speed by us. We enjoy this perfect calm, and I think about the future and the cigar box getting heavier and having to buy more cigar boxes. All the white, green and blue lights from bars and gas stations dance on the smudged up windshield glass. It's cold tonight and the heat is on. I can smell the engine oil. The fumes stay in my nasal cavities even as we step outside in front of a motel. Big electric white sign that says 'Free Ca le.' I tell the doctor to inquire about the complimentary lettuce at the front desk, so that she knows I'm witty.

Neckbeard falls asleep again fast on a cot and quilt the Doctor discovers in the closet. I'm lying in the twin sized bed when Dr. Billclinton comes out of the bathroom wearing only her shorts and the same facial expression she has when she counts money. When she slides into the bed and doesn't use a pillow as a barricade I think something is going to happen and it sobers me up all too quickly. She takes my hand and she just kind of talks in these exhaled words without tone or treble. I don't talk, but I listen so close that the sound of the TV completely falls away.

"Back in, in Australia. The Milky Way would seem closer because of the difference in hemispheres. At night I used to lay outside with the lemon grass as my mattress and trace the path of the galaxy with my finger. I'd always stop and look at my palm and the infinite space beyond it. Just this contrast between my knuckles and wrist and this organic human hand thing being close, right in front of my face. And then this massive, purple painting right behind it, in this strange relationship. This contrast between hand and everything else that is utterly untouchable. I would just stay out there until dew saturated the ground." She stops and turns her

head on the dusty pillow. “Someday, we’re going to have a farm there. We’re going to raise dingoes and have pumpkins as pets.”

“What do Pumpkins eat?” I croak, trying desperately not to wake up Neckbeard. Just in case. I think about trying to kiss her face, but I hesitate.

“It’s Atalanta.” My name.” She says, before falling asleep.

“Goodnight, Atalanta.”

For such a cold night, the morning air is a stagnant eighty-two degrees. I ask the Doctor if the Snail Honey needs to be kept cold, and she says it's fine and to just get in the van. Neckbeard lets out a huge yawn and Dr. Billclinton blesses him. She tells him this story about how back home the old folks used to say 'god bless you' when people yawned because Tasmanian phantoms would drown you in the ocean if your yawn wasn't properly blessed. Neckbeard doesn't believe her, but he draws a picture of the van on a map he finds in the glove box.

And so we go. Our van full of Snail Honey, speeding down interstates, being chased by a billowing trail of black air. Farmers market after farmers market after motel after farmers market. I cannot believe the variety of melons, let alone the squash. Don't even get me started on the squash. We make enough money to get some wicker baskets for country-chic product placement. We're halfway across Oklahoma, when we've made enough money to buy new clothes. Dr. Billclinton gets this shirt with the silhouette of a bear on it and I buy the kind of hat a fisherman would wear (minus the tackle). We take a sharp right in Arkansas, when we get to an accident and there's a roadblock.

“It’s muggy today,” I say to the Doctor. We’re at our booth, and we’ve made enough money for a professional sign. We pack up and pile into the van for what feels like the thirtieth time. We’ve all memorized the words to the songs on the cassette tapes, and we’ve gotten tired of singing them. It never occurs to me to buy new tapes, but we’ve made enough money-

“To buy a gun.” Dr. Billclinton states.

“We don’t need a gun. Why do we need a gun?” I ask her.

“Fine, no gun,” She says, immediately turning away. We’re loading crates of Snail Honey into the van. We’ve mastered the skill of pouring bottles of generic brand honey into pine nut jars. We’ve even made enough money to print off expensive looking labels at Staples. Complete with the image of a farm and a bunch of words like 'tradition' and 'superfood.'

I think we're in Texas. Our booth is the fanciest of all the booths, and there has got to be at least forty or fifty other vendors here. Neckbeard says it's like the Mall of America of farmer's markets. We're adjacent from another honey stand and Neckbeard flips them off, but I slap his hand down before anyone can see. These two young guys in tight polyester walk up to the stand. The one wearing sunglasses picks up a pamphlet.

"Snails, eh?" One says to the other. I start to tell them about the antioxidants and how it helps regenerate cells that are absolutely vital for muscle growth.

"Does she come with the honey?" The guy without sunglasses says, looking at Dr. Billclinton's chest. She folds her arms and asks if they would be interested in reversing the dangerous effects of air pollution.

"It's all in this little jar of miracles," she recites.

"How does it taste?" One of the guys folds his arms too, so that his forearm muscles bulge. "What if I buy a whole case, would you want to come hang out for a while?" The other one laughs, somehow without smiling.

"Thank you, gentlemen," she says through clenched teeth. "Have a good day."

"Oh, I think you misheard him." Sunglasses says, breathing heavier. He rests his hands on the desk of the booth, wrinkling our table cloth. "We are just two, cordial young southern gentlemen asking your patchouli ass to take a brief lunch break."

"Thank you," she says, and I can hear tears stab her voice. I want to do something brave, but I freeze up, even as I can feel hot adrenaline in my teeth. Neckbeard is sitting in his chair, silent and terrified.

"Fuck her and her fat hillbilly fuck-buddies. Let's grab the squash for G-rod and hit the beach." Sunglasses swipes up a jar of Snail Honey and they walk away. I can't look at the doctor. I tell her that I was going to fight them off but I know she doesn't believe me. She walks away and I get this feeling like she's never coming back. I think about how much I would miss her as she disappears into the parking lot.

We're driving down the Texas coastline in the Chevy Express. Dr. Billclinton tells me we're not stopping until we get to the southern most tip of Mexico. We start keeping the money in the empty Snail Honey crates. Big wads of cash held together with the infinite supply of hair elastics in the Doctors pocket. I am beginning to think her ponytail is permanent. Sometimes when I'm driving down an endless stretch of interstate and I hear the song 'A Whole New World'

from the kid's movie cassette tape, I think of this one time when the Doctor's glasses slid down her nose and I saw her eyes. These crazy eyes that looked like Iguana scales, outlined in this crusty, black warrior paint. Literally. We made enough money to buy a novelty tin of warrior face paint. At that moment there was nothing separating her eyes from mine and I grin this massive grin when I think of this.

We make enough money to buy suits, briefcases and duffel bags. We sell twelve crates of Snail Honey to an organic grocery chain. We've made too much money and Neckbeard is crowded in the backseat with boxes full of cash that he uses as a pillow.

The three of us are driving, listening to a song without drums, about California. Neckbeard says:

"You know, this is just like that show. Two guys a girl and a pizza pl-"

I feel the bottom of the van drop out, and Neckbeard's head slams into the roof. The doctor jerks the wheel towards the shoulder, and I see thick sparks and dust in the rearview mirror. I ask Neckbeard if he's alright, as Dr. Billclinton jumps from the van. I start to inspect the damage, swatting smoke plumes with my hand. A smell of burning plastic.

"We're fucking out of here," she hurls a duffel bag into my chest.

"What?" This guy behind us is on his car phone. He asks if we're OK, and says the entire muffler just fell off our van.

"Let's go." The doctor orders. It's starting to rain. I notice it's the first time I've seen rain in weeks. The clouds. I saw the clouds. Big dark ones, but they were behind us the whole time. Neckbeard looks up at the sky, the way a child would to catch rain. We walk off the exit, duffel bags slung over our backs. Away from a lonely, burning Chevy van slumped on the shoulder. Abandoned in the rain.

When we get to the cantina and sit down at the bar, the Doctor tells me to order her a green margarita while she heads for the door marked *Senoritas*. I make the observation that this is the first time she has ever drunk. She had always said alcohol makes everything too pragmatical, whatever that means. I slide the duffel bags under our barstools. Take a good look around and make sure none of these patrons are eyeing our luggage.

"I don't know what we're doing." I say to Neckbeard, stuffing the free tortilla chips into my mouth.

I glance up from the salsa and I see her. Pretty as she was that time her glasses slid down her face. Except now her hair isn't in a ponytail and she's on TV. Halle is on TV. Out of uniform, smiling in a Christmas sweater next to a guy wearing a US Navy hat. The guys from the market are on the screen. Graduation gowns on. Other people. There's a cop. Her hair is a different color. There's a phone number. All I can hear is Tex-Mex music. I think of us lying in the motel bed. I think of all the times, talking in the van. That first time, when I told her about my Australian aspirations and she said:

"No way, I grew up there!" This big surprised smile on her face. She told me she had lost her accent. The TV goes to commercial and Neckbeard tells me about sandcastles. I tell him something about democracy and the back of my throat hurts from swallowing sobs.

Dr. Atalanta Billclinton joins me at the bar. I ask her why she had to kill that waitress. Ask if she was planning on killing us too. She pauses before withdrawing a sip of margarita.

"Larry, you don't get this wealthy paying bills and tipping the help." She takes another sip, but avoids the salt. I see this from the corner of my eye; at first I can't make my head turn to see her. "You think stealing vans and getting rich off of innocent people is right? You think that sucking off the grid and getting some slave desk job just to pay off the government is any way to live?" Her voice sounds disconnected and bitter, but I can still see that beautiful grass scientist squinting in the sun by a former cornfield.

"We never even got to the part with the hot tubs, and the Toccata sampled rap song crescendo. The orange soil of the outback and the single engine airplane," I say, but I don't really know what I mean. I pick up two out of three duffel bags. People in the bar are eyeing us now. Mumbling to each other about that girl from TV. The one from the rich family who went crazy.

"Come on," I say to Neckbeard. The doctor gives me this little nod, and in that moment I'll say that I became much too acquainted with the notions of possibility and redemption. But the moment passes and we just leave those ends loose.

The two of us are walking in spit rain, with thousands of dollars stuffed in gym bags. Neckbeard tells me that he knew what she was doing, and I immediately forgive him. He says he knew how much I liked her.

"Do you think she liked me?" I ask him. The duffel bag is getting heavy fast, and my arm is getting tired.

“I don’t know.” Neckbeard tells me. Tex-Mex music stuck in my head. Grass scientists. Dingoes driving vans singing along with the soundtrack to Aladdin. An infinite variety of squash floating up into the Milky Way galaxy. Check Engine lights trying to warn me of something obvious. Waitresses and kids with grieving families. Apples on a hot skillet. Big piles of pine nuts, discarded. Stuck in my head.

“I don’t know.” I say.