

In the Ether of the Night

Alexander pardoned me with a stale and quiet courtesy when I told him I was leavin' the Sugar Grove party and steppin' out the barn door with another man.

"My dear friend Sam!" I announced, gigglin' and flourishin' my skirt and hair and hands - "He wants to show me his new moonshine still" I added in a whisper-smile that several people could hear, but in that company, no one did care. It's stills like his that are how we managed to have such fine and rowdy times on those Appalachian nights.

Alexander's eyes flashed lightnin' at the backs of our heads as me and Sammy departed. To go out with a man was a common enough thing, but goin' out with one man and swappin' him for somebody else mid-party was just my kind of a time. Of course, 'Xander didn't have the opportunity to get used to my incandescent personality, having appeared in our town only a few months prior. He was like a grey drenchin' cloud on a sunny day, yet somethin' inside of my mind was thirstin' for just such a storm. When he noticed me at my usual places he glowered from his dark corners, looking at me like he was hatin' bein' so taken by my presence. That energy was electrifyin', to feel solidly the glare of another human. I couldn't have known what was to come. Once 'Xander did stop starin' and come talk to me, his gravity made my stomach drop right to my feet, and there I stood planted like a peach tree. I could see my pensive moonin' reflecting in his black irises. We became a steady fixation for a while and he took me out regularly, although, I wasn't interested in narrowin' my options down to one person. After a season, I grew bored and restless in his heavy dirt.

Now I'm leavin' him in a barn and walkin' out on the arm of another man, a man Alexander considered to be simple, and how that howled at the outer banks of his rage. I knew I might of taunted him, though in the ether of the night, I didn't believe I could do anything to make him so treacherously ill-tempered.

I always tried diligent-like to keep pride and fury outta the way of my livin' - absolute monsters our mean emotions make of us if left unchecked. I saw it in my mama, keenin' over

Papa goin' down to the city most weekends. She would take it out on her daughters, 'cause that old crow didn't have anyone else to talk to.

"You gonna be purty enough for a man til he's done with you, then you ain't gonna be good enough for him to look at you twice." The air around her words tasted like gunpowder, her steel grey eyes cold as an unfired pistol. She tried, but not even Ma' could make us hate. Me and my sister Anna Mae were two peas in a pod, sweet and bloomin' up just like our garden. We had no qualms with each other, 'cept for that time Anna Mae dirtied up my lace shawl when she went out for a ramble with her beau. Can you believe, she slipped it back in my bureau right before sup time like I ain't gonna notice all that mud. So, I was a cantankerous bitch at dinner, makin' a big 'ol scene. I think I musta been sore over some other thing and takin' it out on her. And that is why I say, you gotta keep those monsters like anger and envy at bay.

Everyone around town from the far eastern holler to the southern river border knew us Brown gals - we was the crownin' fancy of our time and place. And we didn't mind bein' "hot to trot" - as we heard the words come up from the big city - although I did get myself into more trouble trotting around the county then did little Miss Annie. To be sure, she was more the settlin' down kind of gal. She was practically engaged to that ol' boy at the time when my time ran out.

At least I was honest about who I was, and honest about life the way that I saw it fit to live in. I wasn't gonna be cowed as if some mean ol' god hated me. I was raised up in the most beautiful country we called the Land-of-Sky, on the eastern slope of the Appalachian Mountains and I was never ever afraid, not one day, not with all of that glory around me. I just knew it was inside of me too. Until I met Alexander, my mama was the only rough scratch on an otherwise perfect little scene, but with me and Anna Mae and Papa not ever mindin' her much, we put out her gripin' like dirt in a dust pan.

So anyways, Sam Sully and I skedaddle from the hootenanny outta Sugar Grove and go tearin' toward Tennessee on his horse. It seemed to hardly take any time at all, with me holdin'

onto Sammy and leanin' into his strong back the whole way while his hardworkin' mare Juniper Berry carried us through the mountains on a rumblin' road that his kin whacked out ages ago. We slowed down as we approached a cabin with a lantern outside blazin', like there might be someone watchin' us from inside to make sure we ain't no trouble.

"That's my mawmaw's shack Mags, she been livin' there since the beginnin' of dad-gum time. She been livin' there since she sprung out of the dirt with the pine trees and the chickadees on the day that God created the Earth," he's chucklin' at himself, Sammy is, cause he's such a big-hearted storyteller. He revels in a telling. I've heard his version of creation before, many times while whilin' away the nights in Sugar Grove. In his account, God built the world from nothin' at all by coaxin' it along with a song. That story seemed more or less right by me.

"She gonna switch me good if she catch me bringin' a lady-friend up here at this hour, so we better keep our mouths shut while we pass 'er by," Sam looked back at me and grinned, as if I were gonna be the loud mouthin' one. I prodded him in the ribs, right as we were passin' his mawmaw's door, and then I clamped my hands over his mouth to help him keep quiet. I was provokin' I s'pose, but well-meanin' all the same.

We cleared enough rough road to put Mamaw and her cabin a ways outta earshot and Sammy stabs his heels into Juniper's side and the hardy brown mare kicks her legs up in a gallop again and I'm holdin' fast to the feeling of being carried away. Shortly, we slow down to a stop at a place that seems like any other stretch of Appalachian forest and Sam helps me down from the horse onto pine needle covered ground. With one hand at the small of my back, he points up at a tree lookin' over us.

"...Sammy," I say, "Whad'ya do...go fixin' a stuffed owl to that tree branch?"

He's a snickerin' at himself like usual, thinkin' he's a dad-gum genius.

Indeed, it is a dead and stuffed owl, white and tan feathers, with yellow marbles for eyeballs that gleam, and it's tied to a tree branch like it's a watchin' the road below. I can imagine the twine wrapped 'round it's talons, although in the dark I cannot see.

"She keepin' a watch out for us," Sam said, grinnin' and diggin' a lantern and flint outta hole on the other side of the pine. We're in for a whole adventure tonight, I think to myself, though the depths of which I couldn't know yet. Whether by premonition or apprehension or plain ol' giddiness, Sam can see in my eyes how I am assessin' the sitchiation.

"Don't worry now Maggie Brown, you've been here in the light of day – remember? We used to play here in the summertime, down in the crick." I nod silently, remembering those old days, and then my eyes roll, involuntarily like, cause I ain't a scaredy cat, no way, I am brave.

I do take his arm when he offers it though, and we step off the road and into the woods. If we weren't cuttin' up so much as we capered through the trees, me and Sammy mighta' heard our shadow. A mighty wraith on a mean ol' steed been followin' us since Sugar Grove, carryin' that man with black eyes closer to us all the while.

We just keep laughin' at each other in the dark, and scramblin' through the woods, our bodies as light and free as the spirits inside of them. And not too long goes by before we arrive at a post driven into the ground and Sammy hangs up his lantern on a nail struck in the lumber. A wide circle of rocks soon takes some kindlin', and flint forms the sparks that grow into great bonfire flames. By the light of the fire, I can see the vague shape of a still-house a short ways off. I ask, "Sammy now, we ain't gonna attract no bad company are we?" and he just says, "Oh sweet Maggie, don't you worry," and hands me a jar of hooch.

In the Land-of-Sky, air is fresh and pure, like a deep breath of relief. Bein' in the night forest, seeing the moon peek like treasure through the trees sure put me in a better way than when I was sittin' in a stifflin' hot barn at Sugar Grove, waitin' for somethin' entertainin' to happen. We don't need no entertainin' out here. I listened to the sound of gentle waters between

the trees. Just at the moment I was thinkin', "We are in a heaven for the living," I saw a shootin' star streak across the velvet smooth sky. I cried out "Make a wish!"

In reply, Sammy sits me down on a politely fallen tree. Slowly, he lowers his self to the ground, and watchin' my face, he gently moves my skirt away from my ankles, up my calves, past my knees. I try not to give away too much in my expression, 'less he stop workin' so good for it, but the corners of my mouth pull a delighted smile, and Sam gives my inner thigh a kiss. I put one hand out on the log to brace myself and the other 'round the back of his neck, and his kisses keep goin' up and up and up until they are right inside of me.

The sounds comin' out my mouth were louder than the ones that Alexander was makin' huntin' us down, footsteps quietly crunchin' his vengeance through the woods. Any indication we might of heard was covered up on account of my moanin'. Sammy kept doin' the good work that he did, lendin' me bliss, and I kept on approachin' it.

Right there at the brink, with the pearly gate wide open and beckonin', I heard the unmistakable click of a revolver hammer, a few feet behind my ear. Many times I had witnessed the violence of men and their guns, and on occasion, a heart-broke woman with one, but never had such a weapon been brought so close to me in a place of worship. I had just the exact amount of moment in time to turn my head and see a black hole in a metal barrel before I took Sammy's love inside of me with all of my might. When my life ended, in a smokey bang and thrown open gates, I wasn't afraid.

Dyin' is as common as lovin', and both make you feel supernatural. As quick as the pleasure and pain flooded my senses, so did a lightness, a sense of new beginnin'. And my spirit picked up as it quit livin' in the body we knew as Maggie Brown. When 'Xander shot Sammy dead, still in between my legs, his spirit picked up too. We drifted up from the mean, needless death and met again, in the air of an eternal Appalachian night. We saw 'Xander strip our bodies of a few nice things and dump our old frames into the high burnin' flames of our

funeral pyre. He stood there and watched us disappear into smoke and charred remains, unaware that we were lookin' on, knowin' everything.

Sam and I drifted in the Land-of-Sky. Our spirits intertwined in a new night like death had just freshly exhaled us and we were still alive. In between the trees we could see how we are called to be. Souls like ours know how to touch with hands and our hearts also. We understand a fair few of the Great Mysteries, like how to laugh in the language of crick tumblin' and dance in the wild, tortured wind. We swirled together above Alexander's crime, lookin' down with our ghostly eyes and feelin' no hate, only awe at all the Glory and a tinge of sadness for our fates.

"I wonder what is to come now Miss Maggie...what do ya wonder?" Sam's spirit whispered into mine. I looked to the golden tossing sands of time, drifting in towers and dunes higher than sight allows through my eyes. In the cast open space, I showed him all I could and could not see. Sam's spirit and mine, we continue being.