

Shine

It's June in Tennessee, just after five o'clock now, the hills are lush and fragrant with mountain magnolia. Golden goblet flowers of tulip poplars are just unfolding. Whippoorwills sing all night. I am hiking near the French Broad River in Cherokee National Forest, trying to follow an overgrown fire road to an abandoned fire tower, twenty miles in, above Greenville, Tennessee. Once I get there, I'll revel in the dazzling panorama of the Smoky Mountains.

Most fire roads are only listed on older maps, namely, park service maps from the 1940's and 50's, from before fire risk was monitored by planes or satellite images. Many of the fire roads are grown over now. That's why I'd grinned with sheer delight when I discovered a 1940's era park service map in a crate of old *National Geographic* magazines in the Newport Goodwill store, just a few weeks earlier. This outdated map specifies two distinct old fire roads that climb the ridge line from Spring Creek, entering the forest from route 107 in Del Rio. Assuming this map is correct, I'm on the right track to the fire tower.

Due north and northwest of the tower are the small, blue-collar factory towns of Newport and Greenville. Newport is home to the ConAgra Foods plant, producer of Slim Jim and Hunt's Tomato Ketchup. The factory, which first opened its doors in the 1930's as Stokely Brothers Tomato Cannery, remains uncontested as the primary source of employment in the county for nearly a century.

Greeneville, Tennessee, originally named in honor of Revolutionary War hero Nathanael Greene, gained notoriety during the Civil War as the home of Andrew Johnson, president of the reconstruction era. Rebel flags still decorate homely doorsteps along country lanes in Greenville, men still stroll through town in Stetson hats, dark waxy leaves of enormous magnolia trees still shade the old gas lamp district, catfish still settle in muddy shallows of the Nolichucky River. Beyond the amaranthine main streets of

these historic southern towns, sun-drenched fields of tobacco, okra, tomatoes, and corn end abruptly where purple peaks of the Great Smoky Mountains rise through layers of cloud.

Much of the forest is strangled by kudzu, a menacing, invasive vine, draping the hills with haunting forms. Hunched monsters, shrouded phantoms, dinosaurs, gorillas, and surreal creatures lurk in dense forests of the Tennessee back country. Hemlocks are being decimated by a parasite. Hemlock skeletons host a thousand varieties of mosses and lichens. Smoky tendrils lend a softer countenance to the portrait of death and decay; there's sunlight, more sassafras, paw paw, sourwood, and invasive empress saplings taking root.

The rocky red soil of Tennessee is so different from the dark fertile soil of my New England home. The trees are different. The southern plants are different. The relentless heat of the day is different. I grit my teeth against seizures of nostalgia. My relocation has been an attempt to walk away from a life and a future that vanished before my eyes. Hiking in the Tennessee hills, I've found strength and solace in nature. I've found proof that we all possess an inherent power to move past things, to forgive, heal, grow, and reinvent our lives.

That's why I had accepted the unusual job offer so eagerly, serving the most underprivileged schools in the country. Charged with improving literacy in the poorest rural communities, I was fortified with a new sense of purpose. Still, it was an exit strategy, an escape from grief and self-pity, an escape from my empty life in New England suburbia.

An indigo bunting careens through neon green hammocks of kudzu. A June bug is cinched by a spider's web. A faint breeze stirs a grove of persimmon trees and yellow trillium. Thunderheads the color of chicory flowers, swell above the Smoky Mountains.

The road dips through a wet hollow, then crosses a thin trickle of a mountain creek, where mud pulses with mosquito larvae. Here, I first notice ATV tracks in the mud. Recent tracks. Delicate

branches of yellow jewel weed are crushed into the mud. Sap still oozes like saliva from glistening twigs, wilting flowers dangle in dappled sunlight. How unsettling to find tracks in this part of the park where vehicles and ATVs are forbidden. Odd to find any signs of people at all, on this old road.

I look back at the fire road I have been following and for the first time, feel disoriented. I'm no longer on state land. Kudzu seems to thicken and encroach, vines slither in distant shadows. I calm myself with a long, cold drink from my water bottle; squeeze icy water on the back of my neck to wash away sweat and apprehension. I re-examine the vintage map. Something is not right.

Before I see anything, I hear voices. I hear the gritty, honey-like drawl, the unmistakable door-hinge creak of mountain dialect. Hillbilly, thru and thru. I stop short, try to listen. The voices are close. I did not expect voices. I can't discern words or meaning, I close my eyes to listen more intently. When I open my eyes there is a man with a shotgun standing in the trail. He is aiming the gun at me. The barrel is level with my heart.

"This here's private property. Yer a'tresspassin," he snarls.

I blink and envision the indigo bunting sailing through dim forest undergrowth. I pray that death is a pure, fast, flight of freedom. I suck in my breath, squeeze my eyelids tight and wait for the sound of a gunshot that does not come. The heat of the day is more oppressive than ever. The man with the shotgun does not budge.

"I think I'm lost." I whisper in terror.

"Lost?" He eyes me suspiciously. "Who else ya with?"

"I'm not with anyone. It's just me."

"Yer 'lone out here?" The man seems baffled. He shifts his eyes away from me for a split second; scans the forest behind me. He's not a big man, he's older, maybe sixty or sixty-five. His hair is

mostly gray, his large hunting jacket too big, bib overalls hang loosely on his lean frame. His dark eyes are glazed, weary, watery, his nose is runny. “Yer not wit the law are ya?”

“The law?” I repeat in confusion. I hear other male voices in the distance where something metallic; copper-colored, glints through the kudzu in afternoon sunlight. I hear the faintest crackling of a fire; I smell wood smoke and notice the ribbon of smoke curling through thin branches of a box elder. A sweeter aroma mingles with wood smoke, a nauseating aroma that reminds me of burning molasses. And all at once, the full picture of things clicks into focus. Tucked amidst the kudzu, honeysuckle and multi-flora rose, hidden in crown vetch and elderberry- set back from the trail- is a moonshine still.

My heart pounds with the adrenaline of panic, the raw reality of Tennessee backwoods consumes me. I've told no one where I'm hiking; it will be days before anyone expects me home, days before anyone will even know I'm missing. I've taken my chances with solitude, with fire roads, with vintage maps, and now in these desolate hills of Tennessee, I'm about to be murdered. Or worse.

Blood roars in my eardrums as my mind races through scenarios of terror. I realize that kudzu is sovereign here; it grows quickly enough to cover over everything. I take a few steps backwards, wonder whether I could turn now and out-run this old man. I wonder how accurate his aim with a shotgun really is.

“Look, I was just hiking.” I plead, in a feeble attempt to hold him off or explain myself out of this situation. “I was hiking to the fire tower; and - ”

“Yuh gawn the wrong way.” He drawls.

Two more figures emerge from forest shadows and approach hastily. The second man, likely in his forties, wears an orange, sun-bleached Tennessee Vols baseball cap, dirty Carhart pants, a faded NASCAR t-shirt and work boots. The third man is much younger; just a kid really, thin, wiry, and tall -

in his early twenties at most. He's in dusty blue jeans a worn tee-shirt and army boots. His face is sun burned and peeling.

“Whut the hell is *she* doin here?” Drawls the man in the Vols cap.

“Dunno.” shrugs shotgun man. “Sez she lost, talks like a Yankee.”

The three men stare at me for several long, silent moments. The wind jostles tulip poplar leaves high in the canopy; the wind is the loudest sound for miles.

Vols cap steps forward, “Where ya from, girl?” He drawls, eyeing me suspiciously.

“I work in town. Look- I must've got mixed up following the fire road. I was just trying to hike to the tower...”

“Yeah, yuh got mixed up, sure enough.” Vol's cap smirks. “Where the hell yuh work in town?” He demands. “I ain't never seen ya at the Fox Den, Bobarossas Saloon, or Truckstop, even.” All three men chuckle at his mention of Truckstop, a dingy motel where truckers can rent a room and a hooker. “Jus where 'xactly ya work?”

“I'm a teacher. A speech therapist.” I explain quietly.

“Speeeech therpist!” The three men raise their eyebrows, exchange sarcastic glances, then erupt into laughter. Vols cap snorts and wheezes when he laughs, the old man coughs between fits of laughter.

“Well, ain't that the most goddamn ridiculous thang I ev'r heard! So, you gonna learn hill-folk to talk like sum goddamn Yankees? A damn *speech* therapist in these hills!” He spits a wad of chewing tobacco in the dirt.

My mind swims against currents of frustration and fear as I try to untangle myself from whatever mess of reality I have stumbled into, all a thousand times more convoluted than the kudzu vines

surrounding us. I elect to stop talking for the time being. My own reality is so far removed from theirs- they will never believe my explanations anyhow.

The youngest man speaks up for the first time. “Jack,” he says slowly, “Ya reckon she really just lost?- Ya reckon she really live in town?”

“Dunno Sol,” shrugs Vol's cap. “I ain't never seen her. Yer call, Sol. Whachya wanna do?” The older men fall silent. I realize they are both waiting for a response from this teenager.

The kid takes a step closer to me. His gray eyes are calm and cool. His facial hair is soft and blonde; hardly touched by the blade of a razor. I doubt whether he is even twenty. Despite his youthful features, there is a haunting depth I perceive in his eyes, a glimmer of compassion that sets him apart from the older men.

“What's yer name?” the kid asks serenely.

“Sara.” I reply solemnly.

“I'm Sol.” He states in a concerted attempt to make a courteous introduction. “Yuh really work in town?” I nod. “So, who ya know in town?” He taps a finger against his chapped lips, picks at his lower lip with a dirty thumbnail, and watches me. I realize he is giving me an opportunity to prove the validity of my story. I think through my response carefully before I say it aloud.

“I know Billy Morrow. I know Jim Gaudette cause' I buy my tomatoes from him. I know Nancy at the gas station where I get coffee, I know the other Tom, at the garage. He fixes my car.” I do my best to name off a handful of notable locals in my obscure mountain town. Valid names will carry weight.

“Ok.” Sol nods slightly in approval. “Ok. Jezt, I ain't never seen no lady hikin in these woods, so I reckon you either lost like you say, or someone dun told you we was here. This ain't park land. Fellows hunt out here.” Sol pauses, as if waiting for some reaction from me. “But listen...” he continues,

“we ain't gonna shoot nobody.” He waves his hand to dismiss the entire situation as if it is no more threatening than a Sunday picnic. He glances gravely at shotgun man, who has already lowered the gun. “Well, sure, we'z crim'nals, sure 'nough,” Sol admits, “but we ain't no killers. We jez tryin' to make our livin,' jez like anyone else.”

I nod again. My muscles are still tight with adrenaline. I notice Sol's quick glance at my left hand, and realize he is contemplating the ring I wear. Lately, I have worn my college ring on my ring finger; a simple but effective trick I employed to avoid conversations or in-depth interaction with the mountain men of backwoods Tennessee.

“Yer man know you out here by yer lonesome?” Sol inquires. “Cause I jez can't figure what kinda man gonna let his girl wander out here. Ain't your man tell you these hills ain't safe? Do he even know yer out here?” The kid stares at me quizzically.

“Maybe she dun run off.” Snickers the man in the Vols cap.

I make every effort to endure the crass interrogation of these backwoods men who have no concept of my life or lifestyle. We are worlds apart. Still, their provocation is poignant. I clench my teeth, clench my fists at my sides until my fingernails dig into my palms. Vol's cap saunters closer. He leans in until his face is inches from mine. I smell his sour breath, the stale, lingering aroma of alcohol mixed with chewing tobacco and decay. What I smell are his teeth rotting in his skull. “Ya run off, didn't ya?” Vol's cap winks smugly.

“No.” I state coldly. “I did not 'run-off'. I moved here from New England after my fiancé died.” I exhale a breath I didn't even know I'd been holding. Until now, I've told no one in Tennessee this story; not my employers, not my co-workers, not my new friends. I left my past behind and have preferred things that way. Yet, I have suddenly shared my secret with three hillbilly moonshiners miles and miles from civilization. I marvel at the absurdity of life.

“Damn.” Whistles Vol's cap. He takes a step back, shifts a wad of chewing tobacco between his teeth, stares at me with an expression of bewilderment. The old man glances nervously at Sol. Sol furrows his brow. He stops picking at his sun chapped lips for a moment, runs his hand through his hair.

After a moment, Sol turns to glance back at the moonshine still. He is distracted and preoccupied by a spout on one of the barrels. “I gotta finish this batch,” Sol explains tersely. “Sara, you gonna wait here till we done. Gonna take a few hours.”

“I can hike out.” I assure him. “Please let me hike out. I can get back to 107. I promise I'm not gonna tell anyone you're here.”

“Naw,” drawls Sol, “Ya can't hike out how ya came in. That there road run too close to park boundary; chance someone'll see ya. You gonna wait. We'll be done roun' sunset. Gotta go out a different way.” Sol turns swiftly on his heel to tend to the moonshine still.

The old man with the shotgun points out a shady place at the foot of an enormous tulip poplar, roughly twenty paces from the still.

“Sit here.” Mutters shotgun man. I sigh and lower myself to the forest floor. I lean my head against the rough bark of the tree, gaze up at the panorama of leaves, blossoms, and blue sky.

The men talk quietly amongst themselves while they load kindling into a brick and clay kiln that reminds me of a pizza oven. Sol monitors a copper spout. He makes a hand motion to Vol's cap, who disappears into kudzu and elderberry bushes. I hear the rough metallic slam of a truck door and ascertain that the men have a vehicle parked behind the bushes. Vol's cap returns moments later with an arm load of mason jars. The old man busies himself chopping more firewood with a rusty axe.

One by one, Sol fills the glass jars with clear liquid. He holds each jar up to the sun, swirls the liquid, waits patiently for the moonshine to settle, squints as if analyzing diamonds for flaws. Now and then he shouts something to Vol's cap. Vol's cap disappears again, returns this time with plastic milk jugs
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filled with water, likely from the creek I crossed earlier. They drink from the jugs, then pour the water into one of the barrels.

While the men work in the fading afternoon light, I count the berries on a poke weed plant. The berries are ripening from chartreuse to a rich vermilion. The forest floor around me is thick with princess pine and wintergreen. Wood sorrel and columbine bloom fervently in the sunny perimeter of the moonshine still. A blue tailed skink suns himself in the branches of a flame azalea.

Several hours pass before Sol sits down beside me in the cool shadows below the tulip poplar. He coughs, wipes his face with a dirty handkerchief and takes a long drink of water from a plastic milk jug. He passes the jug to me. “Thirsty?” He inquires. I decline.

“My pa built this still 'bout six years back...” He drawls. “No one's found it yet, far's I reckon... guess I gotta move it now.”

“Move it?” I ask.

“Ain't no small task movin' a still. But one thang my pa always said-, soon as someone find yer still, it gotta be relocated. Can't go takin chances. My pa was quite the legend in these parts. This was one uh his last stills.”

“The old man who tried to shoot me is your father?” I ask.

“Naw.” Sol laughs. “To start with, Lee wern't gonna shoot you. Second, Lee ain't my pa, he just an old friend of my pa. He help me run this still when he can. My pa dun passed two years back.”

“Oh.” I reply. “Sorry.”

“Well, I sorry 'bout yer man too.” Sol drawls softly. “He really dead, huh?” I nod. “That why you hikin so far out here all 'lone? You thinkin' 'bout him?” I glance apprehensively at Sol.

“I guess.”

“After my pa died, I dun spent an awful lot a time in these woods too-” Sol admits. “Jezt hikin an thinkin’... an makin’ shine. Me an’ my pa weren’t ‘specially close, but I still miss him. He weren’t never much of a father... he did teach me somethin’ ‘bout shine tho, and I real thankful for that.”

“You wish he had lived longer?”

“Mostly jez wish my son could’a met him.”

“You have a son?” I ask in surprise.

“Sure do. He gonna be five. He gonna go to school.”

“How old are you, Sol?”

“Gonna be nineteen.” He replies matter-of-factly. He pauses to take another long drink of water. “Sara, ain’t you ever heard the name Sutton around here?” Sol asks. I shake my head. “Guess you really ain’t from ‘round here.” he laughs. “There’s plenty of moonshine legends in these parts. My pa was one of ‘em. He were the best o’ em. It were pretty big news when he took his life.” Sol’s last three words hang in the air between us, buzzing like static electricity freed after a lightning bolt.

“Your father killed himself?” I ask. Sol nods and stares up into the blossoms of the tulip poplar. “Why?” I whisper. Sol’s eyes are foggy and distant. Several minutes pass before he responds.

“ATF dun caught him one too many times. Moonshinin’.” Sol shrugs. “What else? He couldn’t ‘ford to pay their fines, so they dun took him to court, gave him a federal prison sentence.”

“He went to prison for making moonshine?”

“Naw.” drawls Sol. “My pa never saw prison. He outsmarted them ATF fellers. Besides, my pa had the cancer at that point. He knew he weren’t long for this world anyhow. So, jez a few days ‘fore he

wuz s'posed to go to prison, he dun rig some tubing from his stills, ran exhaust from his ol' Ford tailpipe into the cabin of of his truck. He climbed into the front seat of that Fairlane, turn on the engine, rolled up them windows and jez went ta sleep. Carbon Monoxide poisoning. Peaceful way to go. Goddamn government jez wouldn't leave him 'lone, so he dun killed himself.”

“Wow.”

How'd yer man die, Sara?” I gaze at Sol without saying a word. His gray eyes meet mine. In the fading daylight his eyes flicker with hazel and gold. After a weighty moment of silence, he acknowledges my silence with a small nod and a whisper; “Damn. Suicide too, huh?” I nod. Sol sighs. “An' that's why you dun move here to Tennessee?”

“Sort of.”

We sit in silence for a moment beneath the tulip poplar. The air grows cooler in the fading daylight. Crickets chirp. Somewhere far off in the forest, a barred owl calls.

“Ever drank shine, Sara?” Sol asks quietly.

“No, I never have.”

Without a word, Sol stands, and ambles off to retrieve a jar of the moonshine from a stack of jars; prismatic jewels glistening on the skin of twilight. He hands me a large mason jar. I need both hands to hold the heavy jar as I try to steady it and sip; the wide mouth brim balanced against my lower lip. I suck in a mouthful of liquid, potent as gasoline, velvety smooth with a crisp, metallic finish of mineral water or green apples. I swallow hard and quickly. The shine is fire against the back of my throat. I gasp to inhale a mouthful of cool evening air and cough forcefully. My tongue feels numb and fuzzy, as if I've chewed a mouthful of stinging nettles. Slowly the raw burn subsides and is replaced by a sensation of warmth and comfort.

“Good stuff, ain't it?” Sol laughs harshly.

I nod and lean my head back against the steady, rough bark of the tulip polar. I gaze up at the purple sky, silhouetted branches, the faint stars, and streaks of sunset the color of crepe myrtle. I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand.

The second and third sips do not burn like the first. My body feels warm and relaxed, the canopy of tulip poplar appears to lunge sideways into stereoscopic view, as if I'm adjusting a binocular focus in slow motion. Leaves spin and diverge into one-dimensional panes of color. A bat jackknifes through plumes of sunset like a piece of colored glass twirling inside a kaleidoscope.

“Careful there.” Warns Sol. “Couple nips is plenty. Shine ain't like beer.”

The men gather their tools, their jars of moonshine, and carry them to the truck as the first fireflies begin to flash. Sol pours the last of the water from his plastic milk jug onto glowing embers in the furnace. The pickup truck rumbles to life; forest is illuminated by headlights.

“Yuh gonna ride with us, Sara.” Sol instructs, pointing to the truck. “We gonna drop off these jars, then I'll give ya a lift back to town.”

My head feels dizzy, my balance off kilter as I stand. In the darkness, I feel Sol's fingers, firm but gentle on my elbow as he leans in quickly to steady me. In the night around us, the whippoorwills begin to sing.

END