

COFFEE WITH AVA

Nat Coughlin sat outside the coffee shop on 3rd smoking a menthol and scratching a string of lotto tickets over a folded copy of the *New York Times*. The morning's mugginess had given in to the heavy, oppressive heat of the day, and Nat had already thrown in the towel on the crossword, figuring he'd try his luck elsewhere. The cigarette hung low from the left corner of his mouth. Smoke seeped from his nostrils over a jungle of matted whiskers as he squinted and leaned forward to see if he'd won. He then leaned back in his chair, straightened, and cleared his throat and spat, just missing the store-bought combat boots of a kid holding the door for his girl and trying to sip coffee that Nat knew from experience was still way too hot.

"You'd better let that cool, son."

"You ain't kidding," the kid said, spitting onto the sidewalk.

"Yeah," Nat said, directing his speech to the young lady. "That's the sorta lesson a man's gotta learn for himself the first hundred times or so before it really kicks in, not unlike these damn donations I keep making to the "Carolina Educational Fund." You don't have to tell me. I know it'd be easier to just write'm a check, but what fun would that be?"

"No winners?" the girl asked.

“Not a goddamn thing—not even a buck for my trouble,” the old man replied. His voice sounded like something from an old western, seasoned with grit and sandpaper, and the lines that spread across his face resembled a busted up windshield on an old farm truck. “Can’t say I’m surprise, though. I never really been the lucky type. Ain’t in my nature.” He paused to sip his coffee before continuing. “Nah,” he said peeking over the lip of his cup. “I’m the type that’s number only comes up in the wrong kind of lottery. You know, the kind when they send you off to some godforsaken country to tramp through the rain and pray for mercer and a dry pair of socks. That’s my version of luck. Always has been”

The kid and his girlfriend both laughed.

“I know the feeling,” the girl said.

“Yeah, well, I reckon most people do in one way or another.” He gave the couple a quick nod and a crooked smile.

The boy was twenty-something, a kind of *new Bohemian* typical of the kids today. He wore a tight, plaid pearl snap shirt with the sleeves rolled up to expose his tattoos, which Nat estimated had probably cost the kid at least a grand all told. His beard was long but well-manicured, and he had those crazy rings in his ears that stretched out the lobes to the point where a man could easily slide the handle of a Phillips-head screwdriver right through without touching a thing. The girl he was with was attractive, though only a few shades shy of anemic. She shared the boy’s appreciation for body art, and her short black hair stood spiked and accented with a color of red not found in nature. Nat dusted the failed lottery shavings from his lap and gestured for the couple to take a seat, and so they did.

“Y’all ain’t from around here, so I gotta ask. What brings ya to Smithfield?”

“Ava Gardner,” the boy said, as the girl lifted a small bag into view that bore the words *Ava Gardner Museum – Smithfield, NC – USA*.

“Funny, wouldn’t ve pegged y’all for fans. I mean, don’t get me wrong. It’s just y’all don’t really fit the typical profile is all.”

“My mother was obsessed with those old movies, so I’m kind of a fan by proxy. Plus, she named me after her, so I never really had much choice,” the girl explained. She then glanced up at the boy, squeezed his hand, and said, “And I guess poor Brad here just got taken along for the ride.”

“Sweetie, we all have a choice,” Nat said. “It’s just that sometimes we don’t give it much thought. Take this boy you’re with. Brad, is it? Did he come willingly on this pilgrimage, or did you have to threaten him?”

“Mostly willingly,” she said and smiled. “There may have also been a small amount of implied bribery involved.”

Nat nodded—taking it all in. “Threaten, bribed, or even just smitten, the boy made a choice to join you whether either of you knows it or not. That’s the thing. When your number’s called, every man has to make a choice.”

She looked at Brad. He shrugged.

“So, not pry too much into y’all’s business, or nothing, but whatcha got in the bag, honey? A set of Miss Ava’s earrings?”

“Nothing fancy like that. Just a mug.” She pulled it from the gift shop bag and began to unwrap the coffee mug on the table, stuffing the white butcher paper back into the bag. When she had finally freed it, she handed the mug across the table to Nat for inspection.

The mug itself was white with a picture of Gardner in a lacy number, decked out in diamonds and red lipstick, against a pink curtain background. Her signature began atop her left breast and ran clear across her shoulder into the Pepto-abys of the curtain. On the backside of the mug, the museum had printed its info just in case anyone had any doubts about where the mug had been obtained, and the tag that hung from the handle boasted a six dollar asking price and claimed coffee to be an “essential part” of the starlet’s success, her not being a “morning person” and all.

“Says here, you’ll be lucky if your coffee tastes half as good as she looks. Of course, one can only presume they mean her as she was and not the decaying corpse she’d be today,” Nat said and chuckled to himself as he handed the girl back the mug.

“Let’s hope,” the girl said, as she popped the plastic lid off her cup and began to pour the contents into the mug.

“You never know ‘round here. After all, this is ghost country and stranger things have happened.”

“Yeah, so we’ve heard,” the kid said.

“Boy, you got no idea. Heck, I’ve seen some things that’d make the hair on the back of your neck stand up and testify to the Big Man himself.”

“You talkin’ Nam?”

“Might be. After a while, it all starts to blend together, and it gets tough tell which part happened where. You know what I mean?”

“Not exactly,” the girl said.

“Yeah, bud, you kinda lost me, too, on that one.”

Nat leaned forward and arched his back like he was looking for it to crack back into shape, and then sat back in his chair and collected himself.

“Let’s take Ava Gardner for example,” he said, pointing to mug in the girl’s hand. “Back when I was still a little fella, my daddy took me and my older brother to the Johnston County Fair. At least, I think it was the fair. It might’ve been a rodeo or a circus or the like.” He tilted his head and squinted up toward the sky as if he was trying to tell the time by the sun’s location, and then shook it off. “They definitely had animals. I know that for a fact. Reason is, all my brother and me cared about was seeing Miss Ava Gardner, but we never got the chance.”

“She was supposed to be there?”

Nat nodded. “Yep, her homecoming was the big attraction of the whole shindig, and they’d been playin’ *The Killers* for a week straight over there at the Howell in preparation.” He pointed up the road at the old single-screen theater. “You ever seen that one?”

“Hemingway, right?” the boy asked.

“Sorta. Let’s just say Hollywood took some liberties, but then I guess they always do.”

“It’s the nature of the medium,” the girl said.

“You got that right. Of course, I digress.” He cleared his throat and hacked into his fist. “The point is that my daddy’d promised my brother and me he was gonna take us to meet Miss Gardner that day. And if you ever saw that movie, then you know that ol’ Kitty Collins was the type of gal that’d turn a boy into a man real quick. A *femme fatale*, I think they call’m.”

“So, what happened?”

“Funny story. See, my daddy was a farmer and a bit too preoccupied by his trade.” Nat reached for his pack on the table and withdrew a menthol. “Y’all want one?”

“Nah, we got our own.”

“Let me guess. Spirits?”

The kid nodded and reached for his own pack. Nat offered a light.

“So, anyway, we weren’t at this fair thing for five minutes before we ran into our neighbors, the McCullers. And all they could talk about was this goddamn chicken. Said it was the size of a dog. And that’s how everybody described it. Not bigger than a bread box or taller than a two year old—just the size of a dog. That’s it. And my daddy just had to see it for himself.” Nat scratched behind his ear for a second like a mutt going after a flea, and then rolled his neck back a forth a few times. “I mean, what’s that even mean? Are we talking Rottweiler/Great Dane big? Or, are we talking Pekingese? ‘Cause that’s quite a discrepancy there.”

“Valid point,” the boy said, probably wondering where this story was going. He looked to girl for a way out.

“So, how big was it?” she asked.

“Dunno. Never saw the damn thing. We stood in that line all damn day waiting to see that chicken, and when it was our turn, I was too short see past the guy in front of me, but my brother saw it.”

“And what’d he say?”

“Said it was about the size of a dog.” Nat laughed and crushed out his cigarette in the ashtray.

“And what about Ava Gardner?” the girl asked.

“Never saw her. She was keeping cool signing autographs and handing out kisses under a tent, but we never made it over there in time.”

“Bummer.”

“Just the beginning of a life chalked full of disappoints and missed opportunities.”

“Aw,” the girl said.

“Well, not everybody gets to meet Ava Gardner. In fact, the vast majority of us don’t.”

“The world needs ditch diggers, too, right?” the boy added.

“Exactly. And I may not of ever met a Hollywood actress, but I’ve seen at least fifty ghosts in one sittin’, and I *know* that’s more than most.”

The young couple exchanged glances but didn’t say a word.

“I ain’t pulling your leg. I swear, I seen it. At least once, maybe more. That’s where things get fuzzy.”

“How so?” the girl asked.

“Yeah, you can’t start something like that without finishing it,” the boy said.

Nat smiled and lit another cigarette. He leaned back and bellowed the smoke, glad they’d taken the bait.

“So, not long after the chicken debacle, my daddy tried to make it up to us. Told me and my brother he was taking us fishing out in the swamps east of town. Loaded us up in this dinky little boat one morning before dawn and off we went. It was spooky out there, like something weren’t right. The trees were so dense they completely blocked out the moon and the stars, but it wasn’t just dark. It was something else. You could feel it. You didn’t know what it was, but you could definitely feel it. And as we’re getting deeper into it, my daddy starts to tellin’ us this story he’d heard when he was a kid.”

The girl sipped her coffee from her Ava Gardner mug and brushed her foot across the boy’s calf.

“And?” she asked.

“He tells us there’s this island he’s taking us to, and that it’s got a history. Says back in the Civil War, sometime after Sherman had had his way with the area, there were all these bandits, like land-pirates, rapin’ and pillagin’. And there was one group of ’em that hit up this old colonel’s place, a big old plantation. They were demanding money and gold and whatnot. And when the old coot refused ’em, they strung up his wife. Then, they hung him from the same tree.”

The couple leaned in, fully hooked by this point, and Nat hit his cigarette a couple of times in quick succession and exhaled in the same manner and waited for the smoke to clear before continuing.

“And as one can imagine, the colonel’s son wasn’t too pleased when he heard the news.”

“I bet.”

“So, this kid goes to his commanding officer and says he wants to put together a unit of about twenty men or so and hunt these fools down. And long story short, they found those bastards, all fifty of ’em, hiding out on this little island in the swamp. The same one my daddy’s takin’ us to. And this kid was smart, ‘cause he knew he’s outnumbered, so he tells his boys to go find the rattiest clothes they can find for the raid.”

“Why’d it matter what they were wearing?” the boy asked.

The girl reached into boy’s front pocket and grabbed herself a cigarette and lit it.

“‘Cause,” she said. “It’s easier to sneak up on your prey, when you look like he does.” She smiled and winked at Nat.

“Spoken like a girl that’s dawned the sheep’s clothing a time or two,” Nat said and returned the wink.

She blushed.

“So, they get in their skiffs all dressed up like bums and head over to the island claiming to be Yankee bandits. And those dumb bastards welcomed’m right into their camp.”

“Nice,” the kid said.

“Damn skippy. That boy hung every one of’m, ‘cept one.”

“Really?”

“He saved the leader for last. Made him watch his boys choke out and shit themselves before giving him the pleasure of joining’m.”

“Dang.”

“Yeah, and maybe it was the moss or the swamp or just dumb youth playing a trick on my brother and me, but when we got to that island that morning, we saw something—fifty figures swinging from the trees.”

“And you think they were ghosts?” the girl asked, setting her mug down on the table.

“Coulda been,” Nat said. He then paused and stared at the picture of Ava Gardner. “Or, maybe I just *choose* to believe they were. Maybe that’s just easier. You know, like the dead never leave us. Like all the soldiers and starlets, victims and bandits alike, are all still here floating around in the stories we tell children.” He looked at the mug and then the girl.

She smiled.

“Don’t you agree, Miss Ava?”