

Excerpt from *Tuscarora*

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I concluded someone would soon deduce I had gone into the mountains to hide, and I knew there would be more than one person who could tell the police of my plans to hike to Maine. I do not remember having used logic to decide to head south instead of north, but as I drove toward Gettysburg, I remember being relieved by the wisdom shown by whatever part of my mind had made the decision. The highway I was traveling was taking me toward Maryland and access to the Appalachian Trail near Penmar. Over three years before, I had passed the access as I through-hiked the Trail and remembered the end of a jeep track not far from where the steep ascent of the southwest face of Mount Dunlop leveled off. It was there that I was headed.

In Gettysburg, I found Route 116 and headed southwest to its junction with the Waynesboro Pike, at which point I pulled to the side of the road and examined the section of trail map on which my destination was marked. I located what I believed to be the jeep track of memory on the map and traced it to where it branched off of the road leading to the old Buena Vista Springs Hotel, and in turn, where that road intersected the Waynesboro Pike. Within ten minutes, my Corvair was making slow progress on a rutted dirt and gravel road through the dense woods that covered the side of Mount Dunlop.

There was no certainty in my mind as to whether or not I was on the right track, and the Corvair was not built to traverse a jeep track with high ridges of dried dirt and deep ruts, but I did not turn back. If the Corvair became stranded, I was prepared to make my way through the

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forest on foot without any idea of where I was going other than the direction indicated by my compass.

The dirt road I traveled was met by another track that led west, and looking down this track, I saw the looming structure of the old hotel about a thousand feet away. I located the hotel on the map and confirmed that I was exactly where I wanted to be. Continuing on, I passed a few solitary hunting cabins that were roughhewn and covered with tar paper or assorted styles of asphalt shingles, each abandoned until deer hunting season returned in the fall. The Jeep trail ended behind a nondescript cabin not unlike its cousins along the track.

I drove the Corvair into a small cleared area close to the rear of the structure and turned off the engine. For the first time since I awoke to the horror in the basement, I allowed myself to pause. I rested my head on the steering wheel for a few moments, but worry soon found me again. I removed my registration from the glove compartment and then removed my pack from the front trunk of the Corvair. I took a screwdriver from the tool kit I kept in the trunk, walked to the back of the car and began to remove the license plate.

“Hold it right there, you son of a bitch.”

I jumped up at the sound of the voice that was aged but menacing and was rewarded by the deafening blast of a ten-gauge shotgun that sent birdshot into the trees above my head. I stood stock still as leaves severed by the shot fluttered down around me.

“You deaf, you dumb son of a bitch? Turn around boy and give me a look at you.”

I did as I was told and saw an ancient vestige of a woman dressed in patched khaki pants with rolled cuffs, old work boots, and a red, black, and green flannel shirt. Her hair was dirty white and wild, and her skin was lined

with hundreds of wrinkles. Stooped from age but large boned, she had withstood the substantial kick of the double-barreled shotgun that she was aiming at my head.

“I got one shell left in this thing, boy, and next time it ain’t going to be leaves falling down. You get my drift?”

When I nodded vigorously, she laughed at me and spit a large salvo of tobacco juice onto the ground.

She lowered her gun a bit and came several steps closer to me.

“Good God Almighty, what the hell happened to you? You look like somebody took a baseball bat upside your head.”

Still in shock from the unexpected appearance of the woman, I said nothing.

The woman lowered the shotgun and chuckled, “I plumb scared the shit out of you, didn’t I? You ain’t nothing but a goddamned city feller running away from something and got his self lost. Ain’t I right?”

Her face turned mean when I did not respond, and she leveled the gun at my head again.

“Ain’t I right?” she shouted.

“You’re right! You’re right! Please don’t shoot me.”

I was terrified and she knew it. Once again she lowered the rifle.

“Why don’t you just get back in that car and turn right around. You follow that road and you’ll get to a highway sooner or later, lest you’re dumber than I think you are, and in that case, you’ll end up dinner for some bear.”

I remember being surprised to hear myself say, “There aren’t any bear in these woods.”

“Says who?”

“Me,” I answered, sensing that perhaps I was not in as much danger as I had thought only a few seconds before.

“Thought you was a lost city feller.”

The old woman narrowed her eyes and looked me up and down.

“I don’t mean you any harm,” I said. “I’m just headed for the Trail.”

“You one of them weekend pioneers think they Dan’l Boone?” she asked before mumbling, “Goddamned dumb sons of bitches.”

I almost smiled at the woman’s righteous indignation of those she saw as pretenders, but the notion that this American antique was going to derail my escape sobered me. It occurred to me that I was dealing with a renegade, living for whatever reason as a hermit, and she might appreciate my dilemma. I was certain it would be unwise to go back to the highway and travel to another trailhead. The car would have to stay where it was, and I decided that somehow I had to convince this woman to be my accomplice.

“I’m going to be honest with you,” I began. “I’m in trouble.”

The woman laughed. “I guess having a shotgun pointed at your head by an old woman with a palsied finger would qualify as trouble.”

“I’m serious.”

“I’m right serious myself,” the woman interrupted as she again pointed the rifle at my head.

“Listen to me. I’m not here to cause you any trouble.”

I think because its heft had begun to take its toll the woman lowered the gun. She let loose another spray of tobacco juice, and squinted at me.

“You were planning on leaving that car in my back yard. Seems like trouble to me.”

“Look, I’ll give you the car,” I said.

“What the hell do I want with a car? I already got me a truck, and that Tin Lizzy of yours sure as hell ain’t made

for mountain roads. You *are* a dumb son of a bitch, aren't you?"

Before she had a chance to raise the rifle again, I had an answer that got her attention.

"You could sell it."

"Sell it? Who the hell would want that thing? Don't think I ever seen a car so strange looking."

"A lot of people would be interested," I said. "You might get a thousand dollars for it."

"Jesus H. Christ. People must be plumb dumber than deer shit nowadays."

I noticed some interest coming through the woman's skepticism, so I pressed on with my spontaneous pitch.

"They may be crazy, but they'll pay. Tell me you couldn't use a thousand dollars."

She thought for a moment before again squinting at me as though her left eye had a direct line of sight into my soul.

"It might come in handy," she said in a thoughtful way, "but how come you ain't in need of a thousand?"

"I can't sell it."

"You steal it?"

"No, I didn't steal it. I've got the registration right here. You can match the name with my driver's license. It's mine. I just need for you to let me go my way here, and I'm willing to give you my car if you'll do it."

"You must have done something damn evil to give you this much of a flame up your backside, or else, from the looks of your face, done something to piss off a right nasty man. Maybe there's a reward for you worth more than a thousand, and all I got to do is haul your carcass down off this mountain."

"Please," I pleaded, "let me be on my way. I beg of you. You'll never see me again. All I'm asking is for you

to let me go, and you can have the car to do whatever you want with it.”

The woman spit again, and a line of brown drool appeared on her chin. She wiped it off with the back of her hand, spit again, and stared at me for a few seconds before responding.

“Let me tell you something, son. I’m so damned old I lost count. I’ve lived in this part of the world for the better part of a century, I reckon. Got family somewheres near Harrisburg, but I haven’t heard from them since before the war. Haven’t seen or heard much from anybody for years, excepting those damn fools that shoot up the mountain and each other every fall.

“Been living on this mountain since my husband died in 1954, the miserable son of a bitch. Used to beat me, he did. Drunken son of a bitch. There was a couple times my face looked worse than yours. People thought he fell and hit his head one day. Fell and busted his skull, they said, but I knowed different. Didn’t say nothing, though. Played the grieving widow is what I did, but I couldn’t live in that town no more. Couldn’t face no one no more. Best thing that ever happened to me when that old bastard died, but I had to come up here and get away from all them faces. Seemed to me somehow, they knew what happened. Couldn’t trust myself to keep the truth knowing I was going to have to keep looking at them faces, so I come up here.”

She spit again as she studied my face.

“I don’t know what’s after you, boy, but I reckon I understand what you’re up to better than you. I know what kind of life is lying ahead of you, and I think you ought to ask yourself whether or not running off is the best thing.”

I sat on the back of the Corvair and looked into the woods. The old woman had given me something to think about, but I was so scared of consequences that exile seemed the only possibility.

“You have a gun?” she asked.

I looked at her, but my mind was tied up in knots and I did not answer her.

“You gone deaf again? I asked you a question.”

I considered all of the ramifications of carrying a gun on the trail but could not come to a decision. All I could come up with was to shrug my shoulders.

“Now you listen good,” she said before spitting another brown stream into the leaf litter at her feet. “I ain’t just going to take that car. It don’t feel right. I got to give you something for it. My husband had a damned arsenal, he did, and I got me a nice Colt revolver I’ve been caring for because cleaning it gives me something to do. I’ve got some ammo, too. I’ll give you the gun and a box of bullets for the car. Only a damned fool would go off into the mountains without a gun.”

I agreed to the trade and wrote and signed a note explaining the car was sold in exchange for goods. I got the old woman to promise not to sell the car until at least July, because by that time I believed I would be far from Pennsylvania and beyond the reach of authorities. The gun required some instruction before she would give it to me, and she advised me about stowing it in a place where it would not be noticed but accessible. She wished me well and watched me walk away.

I expect the woman did better than she promised and waited until fall to sell the Corvair, probably to a hunter who happened by her place while tracking a deer he had wounded. She would have been surprised at the amount of money she likely received for the car but would not

have been surprised when a State Police detective appeared at her door a while later with a long list of questions. She would have corroborated that it was me from whom she received the car and would have identified me by some photo—perhaps the one from the previous year’s Cumberland Cedars’ Yearbook. She may have even acknowledged that she had traded a gun for the car, and if she had, I would bet that fact would have interested her visitor more than anything else she said. I want to think that being cooperative to a fault, the old woman made the detective a pot of sassafras tea, which she served while telling him she was certain I had headed west with the intent of hiding out in the West Virginia mountains or some other such lie.

If the detective asked if she was certain of that, I have always imagined her replying, “I may be old, but I ain’t stupid. I know that if some son of a bitch dumber than deer shit lets slip he’s headed to West Virginia, then by God it’s to West Virginia he’s headed.”