

FROM

Sugar Run

BY MESHA MAREN



At the Greyhound station in Dahlenega the van driver shooed Jodi and the redhead out into the parking lot. The rain had slowed to a thin, sifting mist.

Jodi tilted her head back and pivoted left, then right, trying to find east, but the yellow-gray dawn seemed to come from every direction. The redhead started toward the station, where a flannel-shirted man hunched under the tin overhang, smoking a cigar. Jodi followed. She couldn't think past this moment or else her mind washed all white again but the redhead seemed to have her feet set resolutely on a path pointed forward.

The station was warm, filled with the calls of departure times and TV chatter. Shelves of colored bottles lined the wall of the newsstand: the ribboned neck of Grand Marnier, stout-brown Jack, filigreed Wild Irish Rose, and below them, a spinning rack of sunglasses where, in the mirror, Jodi saw her own cavernous cheeks and pit-dark eyes. *Got the worst of both sides*, her grandmother Effie had loved to say. *British teeth and Injun eyes*.

"Can I get you something?" the newsstand man asked.

"Marlboros," Jodi said. Cigarettes, at least, were something solid and not new. When her eyes went back to the bottle of Jack, the cashier set it down on the counter beside the cigarettes.

Out front the wind smelled green. Jodi lit a cigarette, nodded at the flannel-shirted man, and stared through the window to where the redhead stood at the ticket counter.

"Cold for July," the flannel man said.

Jodi glanced back at him. He was small with age, bent deep in every joint.

“Where you headed?” he asked, his breath smelling of cherry Swisher Sweets.

“South,” Jodi said. “Chaunceloraine, Georgia.”

The man shook his head. “We weren’t meant to live in the low places. He tries to show us. Hurriken, flood, malarial fever.” The man pursed his lips and turned the corners down. “The Lord resides in the mountains,” he said, exhaling a funnel of pale smoke.

THE GREYHOUND WOUND OUT of Dahlonga and down toward the Piedmont, until the hills and ridges were nothing but bruise-blue humps beyond the yellow fields. Jodi had settled herself into the farthest-back seat. The bus was more than half empty, just a mustached man with a pencil stuck behind his ear, a woman in striped pajama pants, a mother with four kids, and a few other sleeping passengers. At Jaxton private space had come only by the inch, if at all. Silence came only in the middle of the night, and even that was often punctured by whispers or screams.

Jodi set her bag on the seat beside her and leaned back but even there, in the quiet of the Greyhound, the voices trailed after her, the roiling noise of the cafeteria. *Last supper?* Tressa had shouted the night before, tucking her hair behind one ear as she leaned across the table. Jodi had looked away and pressed the back of her spoon into her instant potatoes, flattening them out so that the watery gravy spilled into the creamed corn.

They weren’t supposed to know one another’s release dates but everybody always found out. And once you knew, you could see it, that palpable energy ringing out from a girl in her last week. Some of the women couldn’t bear it and they’d steal a girl’s date, slip something into her pocket or pay a cellmate to plant it, and next thing you knew she was being kept for another six to nine. The ones who played at husband and wife, they were all the time stealing one another’s dates.

“Where you headed to tomorrow?” Tressa had asked, and Jodi had glanced up at her. Neither of them said the word aloud but it had floated around them, that slippery *s of release*.

“I’ve got a little something I’ve got to move out of here.” Tressa leaned in, lover close, lips on Jodi’s ear.

“You’ll help me right?” Tressa said, and Jodi had smiled, shaking her head.

“No,” she said, and it had really hit her then, she was *leaving*. In twelve more hours it wouldn’t matter what shit favor Tressa needed or what retaliation she’d dream up later. Another world existed out there, another world that had kept on jumping and skipping and spinning for the past eighteen years.

THE RAIN QUIT but the trees still glistened through the bus window and the clouds sat low enough to hold on to. Just past Dawsonville the bus skirted a lake, the water dark and high to the brim, and from there they raced on toward the shadowed spikes of a city.

The highway ducked straight into the downtown and Jodi watched the buildings emerge, rocket ships of glass and chrome stretching so tall she couldn’t see the tops. Streams of people rolled across the sidewalks, clutching newspapers, cardboard cups of coffee, and cell phones. Jodi had seen the new phones on TV over the years but out here they looked even more odd: oversize metallic insects gripped tight in every hand.

“Atlanta,” the driver hollered. “Fifteen minutes.”

Jodi stayed in her seat, knowing for certain if she got off she’d somehow manage to get left behind. She craved a cigarette but opened the bottle of Jack instead and let the scent burn up all her thoughts.

Three sips in, the door to the bathroom opened, letting loose the smell of cigarettes and a chemical reek. She could have sworn the bus had emptied out but there, right in front of her, was the mustached man. He smiled a false-sweet smile and ducked his head down under the luggage rack.

“Hey, honey.”

Jodi pulled the paper bag up around her bottle.

“Hey, now, hey.” The man hunkered beside her. “Hey, I ain’t like that. I ain’t gonna tell nobody.”

Jodi shrugged and held out the bottle to him. Men like this were always popping up right in that moment of pleasant silence. Always jumping at you, like the groundhogs Effie taught her to shoot back down into their holes.

“You’re going to Jacksonville?”

Jodi swallowed her sip of whiskey slowly. “Chaunceloraine.”

Every time she said the name it sounded stranger and she'd have figured she made the place up if the ticket man hadn't nodded and printed it on her slip. The word itself was like something she'd bitten off, too big and complicated to chew. And her plan was nothing but a thin line connected by fuzzy memory dots, an invented constellation that only she could see. Paula's parents' address was gone, stowed up somewhere in her brain with the other memories she'd worked so hard to pack away. All that remained was the name of the town and Paula's little brother, Ricky Dulett.

PAST ATLANTA THE RAIN-CHOKED RIVERS gave way to flooded fields. Raw clay banks, limp tobacco plants, and peach trees. The water was a skin pulled tight between long rows, dimpled now and then by a gust of wind. Through the tangled branches the orange fruit glimmered, and around the edges of the groves, men huddled under tarps and stared at the gray belly of clouds.

They stopped in Montrose and Soperton, Cobbtown and Canoochee, and each time the bus rolled onto an exit ramp Jodi's gut pinched and she turned toward the window, searching for road signs, relieved only when she saw it was not her stop. She did not want the ride to end. Once the bus stopped there would be the street and all the new decisions that would come with it. She got the bottle back from the mustached man, took a long swallow, and quite suddenly those eyes—Ricky's blue, blue eyes—hovered in the near distant space.

SUGAR RUN

by Mesha Maren

978-1-61620-621-5

On Sale January 2019