

CICADA KILLERS

Echo, Georgia's one real grocery store burned down and everyone in the one-street town blamed Chance Ballanger. She didn't hesitate to take full responsibility. It was her way. She had a ragged tuft of blond hair in the middle of her lumpy skull, which she was known to blame on a jet ski accident from three summers ago but Chance Ballanger had never ridden a jet ski and she didn't torch the solitary Save-More. It was all lies but lies make interesting stories, sorta like this one and most times, they exist as jury rigged walls, protecting the softer parts of those involved. Armor in all its thrift store practicality.

Her inherited Levi 501s, black TransContinental Pussy shirt with the sleeves ripped off and battered RedWing boots made up her uniform, slashing a stark silhouette in the sticky August air. The type of weather wherein her clothes made half sense and everyone felt like they'd gone crashing into the quieter parts of the Nantahala after a simple walk to the mailbox and back. Punk had gone outta fashion almost four decades before and Chance loved that, like hiding in plain sight. She could be found out by the trestle, smoking a Black & Mild and cutting up old poetry books that the library couldn't manage to sell in its annual and poorly attended community yard sale. She'd thoroughly read Ginsberg and Burroughs and the other Beat poets and concluded they wore too many structured jackets and refused to withhold judgment, so her admiration was always cut short. That didn't keep her from pasting new sentences like ransom notes on acid-yellowed paper in the back of an ancient Sears catalog, forming weird art relics in their own rite. Most of those New York gents were Jewish, and Chance was Baptist by birth but she didn't have any qualms concerning religion, it served its purpose for those it needed to serve. She figured The Blood of the Lamb rendered conviction in a variety of forms.

She got her first tattoo at age 13, in the back of Ronnie Leroy's pick-up, Ronnie doing the honors with a hollowed out pin and a makeshift set of ink bellows. It was the outline of Briswell County, land of Echo and Breedlove Mackentire, the only fool stupid enough to steal Chance's heart and not give it back. Breedlove, who everyone simply called Beard, cause he'd had one since he was 12, had kissed Chance behind the Save-More on the night of her 17th birthday before passing off a damp brown paper bag full of Werther's toffee.

"Old lady candy."

"You shut your damn mouth."

He grinned and kissed her again, tongue slithering over her back teeth like garden snakes in the wake of an afternoon rain. Beard was particularly infuriating as the years went on cause he held kisses like trophies and Chance finally came to grips with the idea that he hadn't earned that prize and she didn't even like boys anyhow but as one knows all too well, you can't steal a kiss back. Especially when the thief now lived hundreds of miles away on the gulf coast, hauling crab choked out with crude oil and dead seaweed.

I showed up on the scene a mere three days after someone or something set blaze to the Save-More and I was instantly judged as an outsider which is more than fair. My family has roots in Echo but they are tenuous at best. Three generations back my great granddaddy had preached fire and brimstone from the pulpit of the Second United Methodist Church but that's all history. My father is an energy surveyor of the Nuclear sort, highly out of fashion but so it goes. I'm a 30-something with a throwaway bachelor's degree from a women's college upstate of literary and analytical leanings which is basically good for a bonfire of its own making and unsolicited ridicule.

I ran into Chance at the corner of Harvey and Willmore around 4pm on a Tuesday. There was an unofficial speculation party standing outside the remains of the Save-More voicing their opinions on who was guilty of taking the town's one local grocery store away from them. They were all rather possessive and Chance found it hilarious. She was laughing in the side alley, no desire to conceal the disdain in her gravelly voice, hard earned by years of smoking.

"What's your poison?" Not my best introduction but I wasn't exactly known for my subtlety, or known for much of anything now that I think about it.

Chance smirked. She saw right through me. She had these placid watery eyes, set deep in a dark face, tepid tap water left at the bottom of a glass for days on end on a windowless closet shelf in a much neglected back room. Equal parts mirror and portal. "I wouldn't know what you speak of."

"Fair enough."

"You new?"

"Depends. Whatcha mean?"

"Pretty self-explanatory."

"I'm not known for my comprehension."

She squinted. "You're wasting my time."

"You're wasting my breath."

She grinned. "Fair enough. I'm short, anything stronger than cigs."

"There's not a whole lotta places available for me to purchase anything else, seeing as we're faced with ashes and all."

Chance plunked down on the cracked sidewalk and smirked up at me. “I like you, your whole small town put-on, its endearing.”

“Its not meant to be.”

“Well, interpretation is everything.”

“Hardly.”

“What brings you to town?”

“My Pop’s work.”

“And he does what?”

“Makes sure we don’t end looking like Chernobyl.”

“A fascinating endeavor, I’m sure.”

“You seem rather annoyed with this entire conversation, so I’ll just let you go.”

“Did you want a cig or not?”

I really didn’t. I’ve had three cigarettes before in my entire life and every puff made me feel like I was riding some rickety death carousel. “If you’ve got one to spare.” Also, dear reader, one of my greatest flaws is, at all times, I so desperately want to be liked.

She handed over a Marlboro Red 100 out of the frayed box in the pocket of her jeans, tobacco packed tight. Part of me truly expected them to be hand rolled from tobacco she’d grown herself and snatched from one of the vast undulating fields nearby, but maybe she could sense I was among the uninitiated and wasn’t yet worthy of her personal handiwork. The lighter appeared out of the other pocket, a banged up, off-brand zippo, garish neon orange, its frosted plastic resin scuffed to kingdom come. It was weirdly one of the sexiest objects I’d ever laid eyes on. Cupping the flame, she deftly lit the cigarette for me and I unceremoniously choked on the first draw.

“Outta practice?”

“Something like that.”

She studied me, my shaky attempts at smoking with any kinda swagger, my trembling fingers and practical footwear and was kind enough not to laugh. I took the liberty of plopping down next to her on the curb. If this was some kinda test I had no idea if I was passing or failing.

“You skate?”

I was nonplussed. “Like skateboard?”

“Roller Skate.”

“Shit, I haven’t been on roller skates since I was like eight.”

She worked her cutthroat jaw, thinking, thick eyebrows knit. Groucho Marx eyebrows, Frida Kalho eyebrows, eyebrows that knew they had things to say and said em. She also had these real fine hairs along her jaw and upper lip, lightly burnished auburn, delicate peach fuzz. I was both entranced and bemused by how something so fragile could exist as part of someone who seemed so weathered.

“You got the shoulders for it.”

“I don’t see what my shoulders got to do with roller skating.” I was stocky - my Pops liked to say all the women in our family were built like bulldogs and all the men were built like cats. Which would explain why all us women had asthma and all the men skittered outta sight as soon as anything got mildly inconvenient.

“Roller derby.”

I laughed and then choked again cause both the smoke and the statement caught me off guard. Chance didn’t bat an eyelid. She had some of the most sustained eye contact I’d ever seen on a person, my college professors would have both loved and loathed her.

“What’s your shoe size?”

“Ten but nine in men’s.”

“You got big feet for someone who's like, what 5’2?”

“That’s what all my boyfriends used to say.”

“What do they say now?”

“Nothing, mostly cause I don’t date men anymore.”

Chance plucked the cigarette out of my fingers, dropped it to the concrete and crushed it under her boot. She stood, knees giving a resounding crackle-pop.

“Good.” She looked me up and down, lips pursed, like she was still deciding something.

“...I don’t really smoke.”

“I surmised. What’s your name?”

“Tallulah-Ann Harding but most folks just call me Talli.”

“Whatcha wanna be called?”

“Tallulah.”

“Great. Well, Tallulah, you got something to write with?”

Of course I did. I carried a battered pocket notebook and pen around with me everywhere cause I wanted to be a writer, went to university to be a writer. Maybe now I’d be asked to put something in there more interesting than the weekly grocery list.

I handed the items over and Chance ripped out a piece of paper and scribbled with the pen and notebook pressed against her thigh.

Returning the items, her voice dropped to a rough whisper. “10pm tonight, look for the firefox stump, it’ll be kinda hidden in the scrub at the crossroads but you’ll see it if you’re looking right. And whatever you do, don’t whistle.”

“Whistle?”

“Yeah, also bring some socks. We’ll take care of the rest.”

And with that she walked off, heavy boots thwacking the hot concrete, a lockstep march gone cockeyed.