

Fugitive Day

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Yonder Hills it was called then, and still is now, after the first line from an old hymn my grandmother used to sing, "Yonder Hills are very Fair." And the Smokies still are very fair, stretching out in the valley below. I sit rocking on the broad veranda, breathing the cool, sweet air of hillside Tennessee, as we did so long ago. Humming birds dive in fast and furious when I hang the nectar pots that draw those air born jewels. Inside, the same cool straw matting covers the wide plank pine floors, downstairs and up. The pale green parrots, gold beaked, still swoop across the fading paper on the dining room walls. And there is still no plumbing indoors, in the old home place. Washstands capped with cool marble hold china pitchers and basins in the high ceilinged bedrooms, as in the old days. One bedroom anchors each corner of the fine old house, each claims its own quadrant of the compass, and its own generous view. Valley, meadow, hill, barn.

I slept then, and sleep now, on fair weather visits, in the pink room. The breeze even in summer blows cool off the meadow below, and the light curtains shiver with the soft breath of dawn. I have always loved to rise and swing my bare feet over the edge of the bed onto the smooth straw mat and walk to the washstand. Cool water, distilled rainwater pumped the evening before from the cistern and carried upstairs, has waited all night long in the smooth porcelain pitcher. I pour the limpid stream into the flowered basin of old china, the bowl's surface crazed with a fine web of lines like the criss-cross

gauze of wrinkles on my face in the cloudy oval mirror above the washstand.

And then, I plunge my arm into the basin of cool rainwater. And it never fails, the liquid kiss brings back the sweet sharp memory of that fugitive summer day. Calls back the taste and touch and sounds of that day, that burning August day, deep in the woods below. My memory, like my sight, like my hearing, sometimes blurs a little now. But the cool water in the flowered bowl pierces the gray shroud of time and decline and I am young again.

It was a terrible time. Kingdoms had stirred into the war that devoured the young men of Europe, and demanded with rapacious appetite even the youth of Tennessee. Still, the world seemed sure and pure up here at Yonder Hills. Mountains outlast the strife and grief of man, trees bloom and leaf and fruit oblivious to war and peace.

My brother had gone as a soldier, leaving his ten month bride, Birdie, and unborn baby at our family home place, Yonder Hills. Bird and I had been dear friends at Grandview Seminary, rooming together in the girls' dormitory. Our teacher Miss Larned used to say, "Grandview is well named. It affords a good view of the Tennessee Valley but also gives those lucky enough to pass this way a Grand View of life and its possibilities." It was at Grandview I fell into the love of books and learning. And upon commencement, I became a teacher there. And Birdie married my brother Walter, and so became my sister. I was happy the next summer to come to take care of her during the last weeks of her pregnancy and escape the sultry heat of Chattanooga. Happy also to escape my mother's worried supervision of her maiden schoolteacher daughter home under her city roof for

the summer. I was happy to be back at Yonder Hills, summer home of my childhood.

Birdie, great with child, was tired and awkward. We whiled away late mornings and afternoons on the wide veranda that embraced the house, sipping iced tea in heavy glasses from the corner china cupboard in the dining room. Tea garnished with mint from the garden I weeded alone now that she was too stout to stoop and bend. We read aloud to each other—Bird loved poetry, and wrote some of her own verses. We gossiped and remembered our Grand View days. Bird didn't speak much of Walter but I sometimes caught her in a moment of soft melancholy, gazing out over the hills beyond. Birdie was a preacher's daughter, though she wore it lightly, and I know that she prayed silently for Walter's safe return and for their baby's safe arrival. I know she kept her Bible marked to the Psalms beside her bed.

Afternoons, she would make her cumbersome way upstairs to nap. Birdie, so called because she was slight and quick, was grown swollen and slow. I followed, to make sure she had a crystal tumbler of water by her bed, that the chamber pot was handy so she would not need to come downstairs to the outhouse. I placed book, embroidery, his latest letter, on her nightstand in case she did not doze. "You're so good to me, Fern," she would sigh from the mound of pillows. I kissed her fragrant cheek, drew the light curtains against the noonday sun, and pulled her tall door to behind me.

Then afternoons were mine to roam in the woods behind the house, into the little gully cut by a mountain stream. To ramble in the soft shade of the trees holding onto the mountain side—persimmon, holly, oak, and pine. To rest on a carpet of pippissewa, crowsfoot, and

partridge berry, beneath the dense green canopy of wild magnolia, mountain laurel, and rhododendron.

The waterfall was my favorite place. Now, I can no longer climb there, can no longer see it except in mind's eye. The falls shot down the rock slope, even in the driest of summers. There was a shelf of solid rock just below the six-foot drop, just wide enough to stretch out on. Water coursed into a crease carved into the rock, and overflowed into a deep, cool pool in the streambed below. As children we had scrambled down from the rock table and plunged and splashed in the pool.

That summer, on my solitary afternoons while Birdie slept, I stripped to chemise and underskirt and swam around and around the little rock bowl. Then I stretched out on my stomach on the warm rock and baked my hair and linens dry, staring into the water, watching crayfish scuttle in the shadowy pool and water spiders skate across the surface.

One afternoon there was a knock at the front door, just as I came down the back stairs into the kitchen, Birdie settled above to rest. Doors were never locked there then. We had few visitors, and all were neighbors, friends. I came into the broad, dim entry hall. Looking into the burning August glare beyond the wide screen door I could only discern a dark shadow, a man's silhouette. Coming up to the screen I saw with surprise that it was Mr. Edward Holloway, the young Mathematics teacher who had taken Professor Woodworth's place in the middle of last year when the old Professor fell ill. Mr. Holloway was from Cincinnati; how he came to our little Presbyterian school in the mountains had been a matter of eager speculation among the older girls and the younger teachers like myself. He was tall, and fair,

and his sweet tenor voice was a pleasant addition to our Musicales. And he became the star of our Literary evenings, held on alternate Fridays, reciting verse as sweetly as he sang.

But what I remembered on that blazing August afternoon was a cool misted day in spring. He and I had chaperoned the younger children on a picnic in the woods. The forest that day was a canvas painted with the bloom of dogwood, redbud, and wild azalea. The ground beneath our feet was blanketed with trailing arbutus. The sweet, waxy pink flower grows so close to the ground you must kneel close, close to the ground to catch a wisp of its soft, woody fragrance. A stranger to our southern woods he paused, and knelt, and plucked a fragile blossom. "Miss Metzger, what is this?" I knelt beside him. "Trailing arbutus, Mr. Holloway." My complexion in those days told tales on me. The blush crept from my clavicle to my widow's peak as he gently brushed back my hair and tucked the blossom behind my ear. I almost thought he would come close, close and kiss me. Perhaps he would have, but the children we were chaperoning rioted about us.

"Who is chaperoning who?" he laughed, and pulled me to my feet. Mock chivalrous he brushed invisible crumbs of dirt from my skirt.

So on that August afternoon I remembered spring, and I hid in the shadow of the hall, betraying blush suffusing my face, giving lie to my formal welcome.

"Mr. Holloway, how nice to see you. What a pleasant surprise. Won't you come in?"

"Yes, thank you."

I swung the broad old screen door open and he stepped in, taller than I had recalled. I led him into the parlor. We sat stiffly there, in the stuffy room, and I regretted the rocking chairs on the airy veranda.

“Miss Metzger, Fern, I heard you were here with your sister-in-law. I had the day free, I’ve been tutoring this summer you know, a family down in Spring City.”

“I’m glad you came, Mr. Holloway. I am very glad you came. Birdie, Mrs. Metzger, will be sorry to miss your visit. She’s resting.”

“And how is she?”

“Well, tired, waiting for her time, and waiting for each letter from my brother.”

“I imagine it is hard. It is good of you to keep her company.”

“I love her like a sister, and I love Yonder Hills. It is a pleasure, truly, to be here.”

“How do you pass your time?”

“Gardening, reading—my chief passion always, everywhere. And afternoons I walk in the woods.”

“Don’t deviate from custom on my account, I should very much like to walk out with you.”

“But let me offer you some refreshment. Some iced tea, some lemonade?”

“No, no, I’m fine. But perhaps we might take something with us, in case we develop a thirst on our expedition?”

And so it was that I invited him down the dim hallway into the bright kitchen at the back of the house. Led him to the warm heart of our home. The strangeness, the stiffness remained behind in the front parlor. I took a basket from the shelf beside the door and lined it with a soft linen napkin. Wrapping a heavy cut glass tumbler in another napkin I placed it in the basket. Then, leaving him to look out the kitchen window at the sweep of meadow slope behind the house, I

went down cellar. It was dark and cool there, and smelled of damp moss and sweet fruit put by. My eyes adjusted to the shadows and I found the store of dandelion wine my brother had made before leaving us for war. I brought a flask upstairs and nested it beside the glass in the basket. I added cornbread left from lunch and a crumbling block of cheddar.

“I’ve packed a little picnic. Shall we go?”

We went, quietly out the back door, careful that it did not slam and wake Birdie in her room above. Down the steep back porch steps, into the burning sun. He stopped and picked two plums as we passed under the tree, and handed them to me. My fingers tingled as the fruit passed from his hand to mine. I dropped the sun-warmed plums into the basket, though I longed to simply bite into one and suck its sweet nectar. He stopped again at the cistern and pumped a tin cup of water, and handed it to me. I sipped. The cool, still water bubbled against my palate. He watched me gravely and reached out his hand—for the cup. He drank, without wiping the rim my lips had touched. Hanging the cup back in place, he reached out his hand—for my hand. And so we walked, my hand warm in his larger one, under the blazing blue sky, down the sun struck meadow into the woods.

It was dim and quiet there, under the leaf-woven awning of holly, persimmon, pine, and oak. The ground cover of pippissewa, crow-foot, and partridgeberry, soaked up the sound of our foot falls. Somewhere a woodpecker drummed on a dry rotted trunk. Golden dust motes, the warm, rich fragrance of decaying leaves, rose in the air. We didn’t speak. He took the basket from me, and helped me over vines and boughs—though I needed no help, sure-footed and familiar

with the path. But it was a keen, sweet pleasure to accept his strong hand beneath my elbow.

We sat on the stone shelf beside the falls. I handed him a plum, so fresh from the branch it was still sun warm. He bit, and juice ran down his chin. I unwrapped the cut glass tumbler and took the napkin and blotted the juice from his chin with the soft linen. Juice stained the napkin red. He caught my hand, and pulled me to him, and we embraced, and kissed—the kiss that had been interrupted by our young chaperones six months ago. We had been pulled apart then, now to come together was such reward. After a spell, under a spell, we pulled back from our embrace, and gazed upon each other.

“I brought dandelion wine. My brother put it by, before leaving.” The flask was cellar dusty, but the amber liquid glowed. I broke the sealing wax around the cork and poured into the cut glass tumbler. I handed the glass, a chalice it seemed at that moment, to him. He drank, and then held the rim of the glass to my lips. The golden wine, made by some strange alchemy from yellow weeds, was good. He told me then—he had enlisted. He would not be back at Grand View come autumn. A chill passed over me.

As I said, the stone shelf by the falls is just big enough to stretch out upon. Space enough for two to lie upon only if close, close together. And we lay together there. The rock surface was hot and rough. We grew warm and thought to swim. He unbuttoned my blouse and gently drew the ribbon from my camisole as though unwrapping a most precious gift. We did not bathe in the pool below after all. Rather, we swam together on that warm stone bed into some other element, one I had never learned of in Chemistry at Grandview. And a new music made me deaf for a time to the purring falls.

The afternoon shadows lengthened and angled. We lay, in a sweet tangle, and then pulled apart and pulled on clothes. We knelt together, by the rock altar, by the falls cut crevice in the rock, and I held the glass to rinse it under the spurling, purling jets of water. The slanting evening light was trapped in the water spray and in the crystal glass. Rainbows and prisms danced in the air—reflections of the lights that had just dazzled beneath my eyelids as we lay together. And then, the glass slipped through my grasp. Or I let it go? It did not shatter, it fell into the crevice, and wedged there. Laughing, we took it by turns to plunge hand and forearm deep into the narrow canyon, to fish out the glass. But it was too deep in, and the fissure too tight. My small hand was better sized for rescue, but lacked the necessary length of reach. He had the length and strength to reach and grasp, but his hand was too big.

So, we left it there, a crystal growing into the rock. And I am sure it is still there, now, that goblet we drank from together. Jammed into the darkness, its surface tumbled and opalized, as chips of glass turn to soft edged gems in the sea's inexorable scouring. I did not know that day, as we walked away, leaving the crystal in the rock, that he, too, would soon be lost, out of reach, beneath the surface of earth and water.

Bone crumbling to dust. But I did know heaven on earth, that fugitive day. And whenever I plunge my arm into a porcelain basin of cool cistern water, I remember clear and sharp that sweet lost day. ▢