

The Vine That Ate The South

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The kudzu took over the stone field, the northeast field where once they'd dug a foundation for what was gonna be a Golden Corral but the bank never approved the loan. Grampa cashed the check for the land all the same, and his old Lincoln sat just over the property line, on blocks cause Gramma said if he hadn't got the sense to fix her up when he was livin' there was no sense doin' for it now he wasn't. Pop hates it when she says things like that. Pop's Gramma and Grampa's son and Adamae's only parent, just as she's his only natural-born child. Right now he's off on a toot, which is how come Gramma's got Adamae out in the stone field plucking up kudzu blossoms.

Adamae has never been to a Golden Corral because Gramma says restaurants are just a waste of money for any able-bodied soul, and Pop tells her he'll bring her and means to, but never gets around to it on account of when he goes out it's usually with a woman or cigarette-smoking men, and they don't eat places where little girls ought to. But she has heard from her friend Jimmy that they have a buffet, which is when they put all the food out on a big table and you can take whatever you feel like eating, even if what you feel like is just mashed potatoes and noodles and no peas at all. They have salmon, which is a kind of fish you can't get from the creek, a kind of giant red shark with a swordfish horn, that's what she pictures.

The kudzu blossoms are shaped kind of like Christmas trees, flower-purple and bedsheet-white, the colors of church. They only grow when it's hot like this, and Adamae is glad it's now and not winter, because when Pop goes off on a toot and Gramma can't make him any kudzu sweet tea afterwards, he's a grouch for days and sometimes throws things at the wall like a baby. She has a basket she fills with blossoms, and Gramma will steep them with mint and sugar until the tea is a deep rich color. Adamae likes kudzu jelly, but not the tea—the tea tastes like pot liquor without the collards.

But sometimes Gramma will fry up some bread in bacon dripping, and Adamae likes to sprinkle powder sugar on it, so it tastes like donuts at the church potluck.

There's a stranger looking her over amidst the vines.

Kudzu grows like a lava flow, and it's up over his knees from where it grasps onto remnants of that stone foundation. He's in jeans and a T-shirt and as old as Pop, she'd say, in a wide-brimmed hat that keeps the late-summer sun out of his eyes. From here he smells like sweat and company.

"Hi," she says shyly, when he doesn't say anything.

He nods absently as though she's interrupting. "You're so awkward," he says matter of factly. "Not an ugly duckling, but—you're not pretty at all, are you?"

Adamae's ears warm and she doesn't say anything.

The stranger lights a cigarette. She smells it over the smell of the blossoms in her basket and the pigshit on the breeze. She smells his aftershave. "It's okay," he says. "That makes sense. That makes sense. Who's your favorite person in the world, Adamae?"

"My grandfather," she says right away. "Wait, he's dead. But he's still my favorite."

He nods and looks off at the horizon like he's waiting for something. "Well, that doesn't really do me much good, does it. You won't remember any of this later, talking to me. Don't be scared. Just get on home. Today's the day your father dies." He sounds irritated and for a minute she thinks he's threatening Pop. She waits for him to leave but he doesn't, so she takes the basket of blossoms back even though it isn't enough, not if Pop has been drinking a lot. Kudzu tea takes care of hangovers, takes care of drinking. But you need a lot of it.

Her father's found hours later in the west field, heart attack while trying to dig a stump out. There's broken glass around, broken Mason jars smelling like corn liquor.

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Years later, Adamae leaves the Star-Lite theater crying because it wasn't enough for Jimmy to dump her, he had to do it right there during the previews and then get up from his seat and move three rows up to where Sheila was sitting, so Adamae could see them—see them canoodling, Gramma would've called it. He did it just to be mean, and why? Because she won't put out? She's not a prude, but he's not the right guy, she's too young, and they were only seeing each other for two months. You give a guy a little bit, a handjob after two hours of coaxing in the lot behind the Waffle House, and it opens a door, it makes him want all he can get from you.

She doesn't want to go home and have to explain why she's back early, so she drives to the diner in town, the one teenagers aren't likely to be hanging out in because it's square and the old waitresses frown down at you if you're—canoodling. She's not the only irregular there—at the counter is a stranger, with a wide-brimmed hat resting on the stool next to him on top of a crumpled-up coat that's a little too warm for this time of year when you can get by fine with just sleeves. The man is easy and smiling and Becka behind the counter obviously likes him because she put whipped cream on his cherry pie.

For no reason at all she blushes after a second of watching him eat cherry pie. He makes her nervous without even knowing she's there.

She has French-fried potatoes and a child-size chocolate milkshake she dips them in, letting the remnants of the milkshake melt in the chrome flute once the potatoes have been eaten. For some reason he's still there when she leaves, and when his car won't start she offers him a ride to the mechanic's, since Gibby Tarton's is in the next town over and there's no taxi service this time of day.

He says just the right things, and it's funny, because what he says is so perfect that hardly any of it sticks with her—as though memories keep track of what didn't fit, and he just slides right in as cozy as bluejeans in a Buick. He says she's pretty, he says she looks sad, he says just the right thing about Jimmy without sounding false or making too many assumptions, and they wind up having sex in her car, parked on the far side of the yard before the bend, far enough from the main road that she'll see

anyone coming along, but not yet visible from the house or Gramma's garden. It would sound a little queer if she said this out loud, but he smells like her grandfather, and she loves that.

It's her first time, and he doesn't say anything about that, which she is oddly grateful for. It starts because when he kisses her, he does it in a way that's never happened before—it's not simply that he's a good kisser, because she's been kissed by good kissers before, it's that he kisses her as though he already knows her mouth. He kisses her like he's savoring her, tasting her, and that quickens her pulse and makes her feel hot and light all over, like down feathers and the peaches at the top of the tree, closest to the sun.

After, she feels full and drained, sore, liberated, awake. He's passing through on his way to a business conference and she'll never see him again. He's made that clear without having to say it and sounding mean; made it clear in a way that comforts her and lets her be as she wants to be without worrying about seeing him at the ramps festival in a week, with garlic on his breath and their eyes darting away from each other like the arrows in diagrams of magnets. Everything he says is just right, even the offhand comments, the little things. He loves her favorite album, a Sleepy John Estes record she bought at a yard sale a year ago—she doesn't know anything about it except her love for it, until he tells her about country blues and Blind Lemon Jefferson, pentatonic melody and Robert Johnson, "who sold his soul to the devil, you know," he says, "not far from here, at the crossroads. He waited for the devil to show up, and sold his soul for the ability to play the blues like nobody else."

She wants to kiss his neck and doesn't, but later she'll wish she had, and later than that she'll remember that she had. "How did the devil know to come?"

"Every man knows to come," he says. "He always keeps an eye out for when he's needed."

He's bothered, and keeps looking at her searchingly. "You're so young," he says. "But you still—you still look like you. I didn't mean for this to happen, not when you're so young. I thought we would just talk." She's flattered, relieved, and feels years older. Maybe he took her for eighteen when he first saw her eating her French-fried potatoes in the diner. But even if he was prowling for someone

younger, she forgives him for it, because no harm came to her and nothing happened she didn't want. She feels immensely grown-up for seeing the world this way, as an exchange of needs and wants. Like the air the plants breathe into our mouths.

He leaves her with a secret, and her life always feels different for it. She never wonders about him, just wraps him up in a box, the box of that day, thinking of him like the angels of the Old Testament who arrive for what needs them and then vanish.

The kudzu has overtaken her grandfather's Lincoln, clasping it like a fist veined with vines.

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In college she's raped by a masked assailant who knows her body too well, knows her clothes and the feel of her skin, and she has had too few lovers for this to be true, she has had too few lovers to even understand why she can recognize the touch of familiarity, but it chills her more than the physical violation. And then she feels guilty, in the months to follow, that the sex isn't what she hates most about the rape—doesn't that make her a slut? And if it does, doesn't that mean she deserved it? She knows this isn't true, and would never say it. But the deep shuddering shame would be easier to bear if it were her fault.

She joins the Campus Christian Fellowship the way her Gramma said she should have, to have safe people to surround herself with, or a healthy dose of guilt to purge herself with. She really isn't sure what she's looking for. But he's there, this boy who looks at her with this undisguised wonder that makes her curl into herself. He looks familiar but not in any significant way. He's not unattractive, but there's no—no spark, no tingle. They go out on two dates, because he's so obviously enamored of her that she feels it would be mean not to, and she takes his membership in the CCF to mean she doesn't have to worry about him, not on two dates. She's right. He doesn't try anything.

But he looks at her. He looks at her a lot, watches her, and she has overheard him asking other

people about her, about things she likes, where she's from, things like that. It bothers her and flatters her at the same time.

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They run into each other again a year after college, when she takes a job as an associate sales supervisor in a company that sells carpeting to office buildings, including his on the same block. Somehow he looks more familiar now than in college. "Adamae," he says, grinning. For a moment she remembers him being taller, remembers having to look up at him, far up. She shakes it off. He gives her a few tips on good restaurants in the area around the office, for lunch, and even offers to take her to Golden Corral after work, which she accepts. She's been before, but it feels like the first time, as though that little girl in the kudzu has somehow been brought forward to that buffet. Salmon is nothing like a shark, now.

They talk about all kinds of things over the next months—the way the past is always fading but never dies, the country blues music they both love, the dead men in their families and the cologne her grandfather wore. He has a knack for making offhand references to things that make her head spin as memories are drug up, happy times, formative times—as though he has a list of passwords to open her up. Whatever she thought of him in college, she's his now, and he's hers—the devotion in his eyes is like a drug, and for the first time she feels no jealousy in a relationship, no envy, and it's as freeing as removing a pair of cement shoes. She can't fathom the possibility of him showing interest in another woman. It makes her more confident.

He's attentive and affectionate, and listens to her. It's almost uncomfortably perfect sometimes—she feels swept along, and by the end of the year they're living together, living in sin, the subject of gossip in the secretarial pool. He quickly proposes and she accepts, and everything seems wonderful—Gramma even likes him, and likes that he doesn't drink.

He works in a research lab doing work no one seems to understand, even—she realizes after a year—the other men he works with. They fear him as much as they respect him, and she pieces together that despite his easy ways with her, he commands great authority at his place of business. It makes her proud of him, and proud to be his. Things are good.

But then they aren't. He comes home after a car accident leaves him uninjured but covered in a deer's blood, and for weeks he's shaky, as upset as she's ever seen him. They still make love, but he makes her face away from him. His heart is no longer in the wedding preparations, and when she lets some of them slide, he says nothing. It's as though he's hoping she'll forget to marry him.

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She confronts him.

"It's nothing," he says.

The chink in the armor, the stutter in his easy ways, brings to light other things about him. He doesn't have any female friends. He barely speaks to hers, or to the wives and girlfriends of his male friends. He's competitive, but only if he can study a problem in advance or gamble on the outcome of something—at sports betting he is ridiculously adept, and when Todd makes a joke about it, he glowers at him. Todd is soon transferred to Maine.

Sometimes the length of his hair or the exact style of his beard seems inconsistent from day to day. It's silly but it's true. They're the differences only a wife or fiancée would notice, but they're there—a man who trims his beard doesn't trim it exactly the same way every time, and regrowth isn't enough to explain how his face feels different three days in a row.

She comments on it at one point, nervously, and he stiffens next to her, then distracts her with such an obvious change of topic that she knows she's rattled him but doesn't understand how or why, doesn't know what she's done wrong.

He finally tells her, when she brings up the wedding.

"I'm a time traveler," he says.

He isn't given to metaphor and she waits for an elaboration, and when it comes, it has to do with his work, and how he was recruited straight out of college because of a paper he wrote in mathematics, and how math geniuses do their most important work when they're young. He was recruited young, when he was still malleable—his word—and not blinded by his own knowledge. And he contributed some mathematics that helped shape a project that invented time travel. That's what he tells her.

"I was—I—I missed you," he said. "I remembered you from the church group in college, you were perfect right away—you were just what I wanted—you even liked the same music I did! So I --"

His hair is abruptly an inch longer and the rest of what he says is a practiced speech. She realizes by the end of it that he has been rewinding time again and again until he gets it right, and sometimes she hears the reverberation of him overlaid upon himself. He found her, he says, that's his word. Like malleable. He found her in different times and got to know her. He put a Sleepy John Estes record in a yard sale bin because he knew she would be there. He found out what cologne her grandfather wore.

"And," he stumbles, nervous, ashamed, "when you were—when you were young, I was only there to ask you questions, I had talked to you so many times before, at different times in your life, just idle conversation waiting in line, and things like that—but you were—after you broke up with Jimmy."

Of course, of course it was him, and now it seems obvious. The smell of her grandfather's cologne on his neck, which years later he—a younger he—would ask her about and she would identify, unwittingly aiding in his seduction of her.

She leaves him.

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He's been a wreck, he tells her, and he has some fucking nerve. She hangs up on him and changes her number, doesn't see him again for two years, not as far as she knows.

She's suspicious of everything she enjoys now. Her life, her personality, tricked her— collaborated with him in the trap. She listens to Blind Lemon Jefferson and it makes her sick. She examines memories over and over, wondering where he is in them, trying to remember offhand chat in bank queues and dentists' offices. Those strange little confessions we make to people waiting for the same bus. Those little pieces of ourselves we casually and freely give away because they're worth so little on their own, never thinking of how they could be stitched together.

"You bastard!" she says. He's finally tracked her down, she got a new job on the west coast and he found her anyway, under her cloud of dark hair that used to be dirty blonde.

"You stalked me!" she says. "That's what it was. They have a word for it. You manipulated me! You made me love you!"

"I didn't make you love me," he practically growls at her. He can't look her in the eye. "I made YOU. The music you like, the food you like, the life you want, I inspired it all. I made you into someone I'd be perfect for, where's the harm in that? I designed you. Like guiding a hoop with a stick, like blowing on a feather in the breeze. You can't hate me, you're not made for it."

She hits him, and he hits her back. Before he cleans up and returns to a time when she loved him, living in the little moments he'd left behind by opening her up to his advances, he hits her back. Before he comes to miss her enough that he waits for her in the dining commons parking lot, he hits her back. And the kudzu creeps, foot-a-night vine, covering the Lincoln in its clutches, covering the stone field, covering her father collapsed by the old stump, and the smell of Mason jar moonshine.