

## THE BOOTLEGGER

Bluesy Figwater was ready. The Spirit tree had set up a tinkling before Archer The Fifth and his grumpy old uncle came into view. Strange things were bound to happen when the world was lit by Goddess Moon.

As Bluesy stood outside of his bungalow, listening to the whirling cicadas and the clinking of blue bottles he spied Archer and his Uncle Isaac coming around a far curve and heard Archer ask, “Have you given a lot of thought to this getup you’re wearin’?”

“My disguise?” Isaac nodded. “Yep.”

“I was afraid of that,” Archer said.

Bluesy knew what he would do for Isaac.

As the pair approached Bluesy’s front porch, Isaac shook his head in wonder. “Listen to that crazy tree, and there ain’t a breath of wind blowin’.”

“Best not to question things around Bluesy’s house. You’ll remember he’s the old man that made the devil disappear last year.”

Isaac stopped and stared down at Archer. “I didn’t see it, but I do recall folks speakin’ of it.”

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Archer the Fifth slid his bicycle sideways, sending sand flying and jumped off never bothering with the kickstand. His uncle stood on the home’s wide, front veranda chewing on a piece of dried grass. Archer swiped his brow. It was hotter than a pit-fired potato this July in the low country of South Carolina. “Sheriff Jones is after you,” he shouted, approaching his uncle at

a trot, his reddish-brown hair soaked with sweat and stringing across his forehead, his brow furrowed with seriousness. “You know makin’ moonshine ain’t legal.”

“You don’t say? Why, he can’t just lock up a progeny of the Overmountain Men! My great, great . . .” Isaac flicked a thick hand, . . . granddaddy, Colonel Isaac Shelby, would turn over in his grave. He’d likely regroup his men, American patriots every one, fought at King’s Mountain against Cornwallis in 1780.” Isaac scratched his round stomach encased in size XXL Oshkosh overalls. “They killed most of those Brits in little over one hour, Archer. Imagine that. That’s pure D American ingenuity for ya. Ha!” he laughed. “Those Whig frontiersmen run the rest of the Brits off. Why, it’s an American birthright to know how to go about sniper attacks. The Native Americans—you do remember your Grandma Shelby was one half Cherokee, don’t you, Archer?” Archer nodded his head. “Good. Weren’t no fault of grandma’s that her daddy preferred red skin. Native Americans were expert snipers. They would cut one man at a time out of a regiment before anyone was aware. The Overmountain Men would be after Sheriff Jones right now if I was only to give the word.” After a great hesitation that consisted of Isaac’s serious probing of teeth, while Archer panted, then he said, “Besides—I ain’t done nothin’ of what Jones claims.” Uncle Isaac spat, clearing the porch rail.

Archer shifted his weight to his other foot and sweated. Convincing his uncle to mend his ways was not going as he had anticipated. “The Overmountain Men have been dead hundreds of years, Uncle Isaac. You got to fend for yourself now.” Archer had pedaled a long way to bring this warning, and he was tired and needed a drink of water.

Isaac pushed back his Clemson baseball cap, narrowed his faded blue eyes and looked skyward. His streaming, gray ponytail didn’t move a whisper. “I don’t make moonshine

anymore.” He rubbed his gray stubble chin and his light eyes seemed to glaze over in thought. “I don’t think I do.”

“What do you mean, you don’t think you do?”

Isaac shook his head. “I can’t rightly say. I’ve been tryin’ my dangdest to recall a dream I had. Bein’ eighty-two, I can’t always pull dreams back now. But, I noticed Jezebel’s hood was warm to the touch the other morning.”

“You mean that old Mustang?”

Isaac pursed his wrinkled lips in recollection. “Yep. That’s Jezebel. I was just standin’ out there in the barn admirin’ that black devil car, reached down and patted her shiny coat lovingly-like.” He looked sheepish and readjusted the wispy grass between his teeth. “I always have my mornin’ coffee with her. She’s a piece of work, that sixty-eight is. Worth a lot of money these days. Bought her when I was forty-two. Your dear Aunt Sally Mae said I was goin’ through mid-life crisis. Said it was better I had a fancy car than some floozy she’d have to kill me over. Sally ain’t got any easier to live with.” Isaac grimaced and shook his head. His faded gaze flicked toward Archer.

“Anyway, I keep Jezebel shined. I even take her out once a week. You know to blow out her tubes. She’s a beaut, my Shelby.” Archer nodded and his uncle continued. “Has a 428 under the hood with dual four barrels. Racin’ is in Jezebel’s oil, all right. She always ran her best at full bore. Still does. Years back, when I needed a little extra cash, I made a change in that car. I opened up the space behind the driver’s seat and the trunk to make the storage capacity bigger so’s I could haul white lightnin’ to my friends.” He chuckled. “She can fly . . .” He shrugged, “but those days are over.”

Archer was confused. He hated going up against kin, but Sheriff Jones was not given to hallucinations. “The sheriff says he saw you, Uncle Isaac.”

Isaac blinked. “Don’t know how he could have seen through that dark window tint. I reckon he’s sure about that?”

“Why would he lie?”

Rolling his shoulders and said, “Business is slow?” He pinned Archer with his gaze. “I think I need me a disguise,” he said, drawing out the word in his southern way.

Archer drew back. “Disguise? Why do you need a disguise if you ain’t runnin’ moonshine?”

“Let’s us walk over to the well yonder and have us a sip o’ water. You’ve sweated a gallon while I’ve been tellin’ my story.”

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The next evening, Archer stepped out onto his porch, drawn outside by a high squeaky voice calling his name. Then he got a look at who it was. “Uncle Isaac, are you sober?” Archer glanced up and down the road to see if anyone else had noticed his uncle in the hideous getup, not to mention what he was riding.

“Hell, yes, I’m sober, son. I’m a-hidin’ from the law. This is my disguise.” Isaac stepped easily from the short donkey’s back. A shrill bray of relief came from the ass as it flopped its long ears.

Isaac straightened up his red and blue checked skirts and yanked down the lacey top before settling the blue denim bonnet back atop his head. The gray ponytail had been tucked up beneath the wide-brimmed hat and red lipstick was smeared over his big mouth, his mustache still in place. Isaac foolishly attempted to hug Archer, but Archer was fast. Backing away, he

warned, “Don’t be tryin’ to squeeze on me. No respectable man goes a-ridin’ around the countryside dressed up like no woman, an ugly one to boot. I can’t imagine what Daddy would think if he saw you. Good thing he’s workin’ tonight.”

Isaac swept his arm across his face to stanch a river of running sweat intermingled with goeey makeup an action he’d apparently taken many times as evidenced by the embedded grim on that particular sleeve. Isaac stuck his head out and said, “You think I like this? Why, this is an act of survival, son.” He ran his hands down the long skirt. “Revenuers is after me, body and soul. Those two-faced church do-gooders want my hide in jail, locked up tight behind them steel bars, no food but bread and water, and me as innocent as a new-born lamb. I been hidin’ out in them woods beyond my house But I come to hide out here now until the dust settles.”

“Daddy won’t want you stayin’ here. He’s just been elected to the town council. They’d run him out of town on that donkey of yours if they knew he was hidin’ a criminal bootlegger in his house.”

“I promised your Aunt Sally I’d stay with you until this whole thing was settled. I’m posing as her long-lost sister, Helen Ray, who ran off with an Eskimo when she was fifteen.” Isaac winked. “I wouldn’t ask for shelter unless it was a matter of life and death. My sweet Sally was totin’ a shovel. Have mercy on an old man.” Isaac looked down at his bowed thighs, groaned and shook a leg. “You know, I do believe I have broke somethin’ from riding on that ass.” The creature turned two evil black eyes on him, and Isaac sneered at the donkey.

“The sheriff told Daddy you made a moonshine run just last night. Nothin’s gonna blow over, Uncle Isaac. Your goose is cooked, unless . . . we can get you over to Bluesy Figwater’s place and see if he’s got a potion can help you.”

Isaac frowned. “That crazy old back man? He’s a witch.”

Archer tilted his head and narrowed his eyes at his uncle. “That old black man could be your only hope. He’s got power.”

“I hate the thought I have to go to a witch for help,” Isaac whined.

“Don’t do no thinkin’ then. You wouldn’t be the first—or the last—white man he’s saved from the gates of hell.”

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Bluesy was back inside his bungalow when Archer knocked.

The door blew open and Bluesy called to them from another room. “Come on in, gents. Make yourselves to home. Just finishing some blueberry muffins—and how about a hot cup of cocoa to sip along with ’em? ”

“It’s almost one-hundred degrees outside, Mr. Figwater,” Archer said, and motioned for his uncle to sit next to him on a well-used and faded couch. The couch springs poked Archer’s butt.

Bluesy blinked over the steaming cocoa now on his tray and steam disappeared and three mugs turned frosty. “Okay. I’ve remedied that little problem.” He laughed to himself and carried the tray into his sparsely furnished living room. “Got some refreshment right here. I was expectin’ company, and sure enough, here you are. Bluesy’s big, round eyes opened wide as he stared at Isaac. He set the tray on the coffee table and stood straight. “Must be somethin’ bad’s happened for a man to be looking like you do.”

Isaac nodded. “Jones thinks I’m a-runnin’ white lightnin’. I haven’t done no such thing. But with this getup the sheriff will think I’ve disappeared. Then my problem will disappear.”

Archer added, “He doesn’t remember making white lightnin’ or any recent car chases.”

Bluesy reached into his pocket, drawing out a tiny bottle. "I've got some of your solution right here." He unscrewed the lid and tapped a little powder into the palm of one hand. Bluesy's black eyes knifed into Isaac's. "You sure bein' a woman is the answer?"

"Why sure I'm sure," Isaac replied.

Archer swallowed. "I've seen that look before, Uncle," I don't know . . ."

Bluesy blew the fine powder toward Isaac as Archer was struck speechless.

Isaac's eyes grew wide as he jumped up from the couch. When he looked down, his mouth open, he began twitching. "Uh-oh!" he shouted jumped around and knocked over a floor lamp.

Archer inhaled sharp and loud. Scared, he covered his face with his hands, then dared a peek through splayed fingers.

Isaac slapped his groin. "Good Lord in heaven, my wingding's gone!" His hands flashed to his chest. "And these here things are real," he squeaked. "What's happened to me?" he bellowed in falsetto.

Bluesy shrugged. "It's what you wanted."

"Not really."

"Uh, huh," Archer nodded. "Hey! And your mustache is gone, too! That *is* what you said you wanted. Wow! You've got fire-engine hair."

"I didn't want nothin' permanent," Isaac protested. "I told you this witch was crazy!"

Bluesy hiked his bony shoulders. "The good side is Sheriff Jones will have to admit you're gone."

Isaac's mouth turned down. "My Sally will never have me now." His face sagged like an old hound dog. "Done in by . . ." His voice trailed off. "Can I go back to normal . . . after?" No one said a word.

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Bluesy snapped his fingers and in a heartbeat the three were standing back at Uncle Isaac's beside the newly painted Jezebel.

"That kind of travel sure does save on gas, and a whole lot on the ass ." Isaac looked at Archer. "You know—the donkey."

"I know." Archer rolled his eyes. "You better hope that donkey ain't eatin' Daddy's garden."

Isaac cleared his throat. "Well—here she is just like I said." He patted Jezebel's front fender.

Bluesy moved to the driver's side door, opened it and slid in. Isaac and Archer watched him. The old man didn't move. He sat. And sat.

Isaac and Archer glanced at one another; neither spoke a word. Minutes ticked by. Isaac sighed and began tapping a foot. The door opened so suddenly it startled both of them.

Bluesy stood straight. "She has the need for speed bad. I told her we'd take her to Sebring, Florida. There's a short racetrack there. Only problem is she'll have to go back to 1969. I'll drive."

The air blew right out of Isaac. "No way! Jezebel's like my very own progeny."

"He's the Magic Man, Uncle," Archer responded. "How could you not trust him?"

Isaac looked down at himself. "Well—he is a might handier than any fellow I've encountered, but no way. He can get carried away. Look at me. My tallywacker is gone. If that

ain't carried away, I don't know what is. And who knows if I'll ever see that again, I can't afford for him to get carried away with Jezebel."

Bluesy flicked an eyebrow. His shoulder hitched up. "Can you give her up if you have too, Isaac?"

Isaac looked stricken. Tiny rivulets of sweat hung on his cheeks. "Give up Jezebel?" he whispered.

"Here's the problem," Bluesy explained. "Jezebel ain't gonna sit out here on a full moon and be the sweet little lady you have embedded in your mind. You named her Jezebel for a reason. She's gonna get you locked up is what she's bound to do, and you've already got one woman mad at you. We need to take Jezebel where she'll be happy and your problem will go away. Think of it this way—the old racehorse has gone lame, but when she hears the gun and the bells and the clank of the steel gates, she takes off and runs through the pasture even though her legs are weak and could break; her heart is full of hope and the will to win."

Isaac shivered. He lowered his massacra eyes. "You seem a wise man, Mr. Figwater. Do you reckon Jezebel could be her old self, back there in that other time?"

Bluesy nodded.

"She'll be strong?"

Bluesy nodded again.

Tears welled in Isaac's eyes. He said, "To make her happy, then."

Bluesy threw his arms into the air. "Let's race!" he shouted.

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Archer watched them go. Isaac behind the wheel and Bluesy in the passenger seat, the 428 roared to life, shaking with power. Black paint blended with black smoke from spinning

tires, then they were gone, leaving Archer behind, his heart hammering in his ears. “Holy cow,” he whispered.

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Two days later, Archer finally found his uncle—along with Bluesy on Bluesy’s front porch. He was so happy to see his real uncle back as a man that he even gave him a hug.

“That’s how it was,” Isaac said as his story wound down, “and here I am, all normal again, too. Even my . . . well you know . . . is attached and the other stuff is gone.” He cupped his now flat chest. The guy at the track in Sebring gave me forty-five thousand for Jezebel. He said he’d been drag racing for twenty-five years and never seen a nicer, more powerful Mustang. She’s gonna be in her first race next weekend.” Isaac shook his head real slow and reached for the grass stem sprouting from between his front teeth. “I sure hope that fella gets to racing Jezebel real quick. I never mentioned anything to him about her temperament. Jezebel will give him hell if he doesn’t race her, next week bein’ a full moon and all.

The clanging of the blue bottles hushed Isaac and Bluesy squinted toward the Spirit Tree now in frenzy. Isaac grimaced, his face a thousand wrinkles, as a familiar roar came out of nowhere, then the shiny, devil-black Mustang named Jezebel screeched to a halt outside of Bluesy’s front gate. Smoke and fumes engulfed them. “Oh, Lord,” Isaac whispered. “I reckon I best cash that check.”