

In the Woods

LESLIE RUBINKOWSKI

I.

The day my grandfather saw the naked woman began at dawn. He and his brother Louie had parked the Chevy pickup at the edge of the woods and stepped down between the trees, carrying their rifles. When they lost sight of the road they parted, Louie disappearing deep. My grandfather found a stump, sat down, and waited.

Hours passed with no sign of deer or any other living thing. The middle of the day came but among the trees it was dark and still.

Then my grandfather heard a sound, a shuffling in the leaves. He looked up.

"Louie," he said, "is that you?"

It was not. It was a woman and she was standing before him, naked. She was young and very pretty and shivering in the cold.

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My grandfather stared at the woman. She hugged herself, made some small joke. She offered no excuse for her nakedness and it did not occur to my grandfather that she needed one. She smiled at him and the woods fell silent again.

After a long time my grandfather stood, still cradling the rifle in his arms. Then he turned and leaned the gun against the stump. He slid off his jacket and held it up for the woman to see.

"Here," he said. "I got long johns."

"I'll bring it back to you, I promise," she said.

"No," he said. "It's okay."

My grandfather turns to look at me. It is not deer season anymore but a night in July, maybe August. We sit on his back porch. I am fourteen. I know my grandfather wants to see what I am thinking so I lower my eyes and stare at my bare feet. While he talked the sun slumped below the trees just behind the beagle pens at the back of the yard. The sky is purple turning over to blue. In the kitchen behind us my grandmother says, "Oh God." Neither of us move. I scuff my toes on the fake grass carpet. I study my feet. They are huge for a kid my size.

He knows he has me.

I know he is lying.

I hate my grandfather's lies but I love a good story even more. I know this fact will either be my salvation or the reason I will never get a date. But I also know I must hear what happened next. I need to know so much that I might as well be naked. I am too young to understand that I already am. And that this truth is both my future and my everlasting doom.

I look up.

"Then what," I say.

That is where it all starts, doesn't it? *Then what*: that lovely

painful pull of the thing you need to know, whether you need to know it or not. One thing follows another and you tell yourself you know all the answers but suspect in the end you are still stupid because you lack the strength to say: Enough. Because you also know that your stupidity can teach you something.

This is a true story about lies. I spent my childhood listening to my grandfather lie. That is not what made me a writer, but it is what made me the kind of writer I am, the kind of person I am. The kind of person who asks too many questions.

Like: Then what?

Like: Did you ever get that jacket back?

Like: Have you ever wanted to know the truth about something so much you made it up?

2.

Some facts about my grandfather:

He was born September 10, 1910, in Phillips, Pennsylvania, to Hungarian immigrants, the second child of six. He dropped out of school in the sixth grade and went to work in the coal mines after his father died. He began smoking around the same time—unfiltered Chesterfields. He met my grandmother at a dance. The first time he saw her she sat at the edge of a dance floor on a wooden folding chair, wearing a white lace dress.

They married on July 31, 1931. They had three children—my mother, who was the middle child, and two sons. My grandfather was a mechanic in the mines and he settled his family into a company house in a neighborhood of other miners and their families in what people called a coal patch. Sometimes he drank. Sometimes he drank too much. On one of those nights my grandmother threw a bottle of ketchup at him and when my

mother and her brothers saw the spatters on the wall they thought she had finally killed him. In 1941 a mine ceiling collapsed on him; a sheet of slate shaved off his face and the crush of rock nearly killed him. They rebuilt his face but he was different. After the accident he got softer, stopped drinking. Started telling stories.

He loved professional wrestling. He used to sit in front of the television in his favorite recliner—the armrests sticky from where my grandmother had taped the cracks in the vinyl—and shadowbox while the wrestlers dropped on each other like meat falling out of a grinder. When he swung his recliner lurched, and by the end of the show his knees nearly touched the screen.

He had his teeth pulled around 1945 but hated the way his false set felt so he went around toothless. He used to open a box of chocolates and squeeze each piece to determine which were the creams. Anyone in the house hungry for candy had to decide whether they wanted it badly enough to eat my grandfather's dented rejects.

He wore his teeth only for special occasions like weddings and deaths. At those times he disappeared into his room and emerged wearing a blue suit, white shirt, black shoes. He lingered outside his door, studying the plastic runner in the hall, and when his eyes darted up his smile shone like a burst of flashbulb, an unexpected slice of moon, and from the living room everyone already dressed and waiting would smile back and say how nice he looked, and he would open his mouth a little more and his eyes would get shiny behind his glasses and he would study the runner again, and though I am not a child anymore I still ask myself: What wrong could ever live inside a man bashful about having teeth?

Almost nothing, except that he lied to me every time I saw him—once a week, minimum. Most Saturday nights my parents

would drop off my younger brother and me at my grandparents' house and go off ballroom dancing; we would sleep over and they would pick us up in the morning after my grandmother had served us a breakfast of pancakes and hot dogs smothered in homemade syrup that tasted suspiciously like whiskey. I remember those Saturday nights as an improbable cocktail of Lawrence Welk hours and marathon story sessions. Sometimes my grandmother would corner me and explain the recipe for this soup she made that had an omelette floating on top or confide her dream of becoming an accountant, killed when her mother made her quit school in the eighth grade to clean houses. My grandmother never lost the sense that she was destined for better, and she was always trying something artistic. Her garden took up two-thirds of her backyard. While supper cooked one afternoon, she spray-painted every surface in the living room gold. We all had to agree it looked pretty amazing.

Most nights I would try to slink across the side yard into the house but my grandfather would always catch me. "Hey, farmer," he would holler. "Come here. I gotta tell you somethin'." Sometimes I would be padding across the living room with a plate full of nut rolls and a head full of adolescent disco misery and he would say something like, "Boy, I'll bet Mazerowski's cold," which was my signal to sit down and start listening.

Some stories were set in the mines where he worked, tales of horrible accidents involving heavy machinery and rats as big as lunch pails. A few took place in his childhood, like the one about George Washington, a kid in second grade who was so stupid my grandfather sold him his own shoes.

But most of my grandfather's stories unfolded in the woods: infinite possibilities, no witnesses: wilderness. Most people went into the woods and got lost. My grandfather found things. Once he saw a laughing monkey in a tree. Once he stumbled upon a

truckload of shih tzus. Once, when he was a boy, he found something in the woods and he didn't know what the hell it was. It bristled with quills just like a porcupine but the quills were more like fur. It had a bill like a duck and beady black eyes.

Like a platypus? I asked when he told me this. I was probably twelve.

He looked at me as if to say: Shut up. "We put it in a bucket and filled it full of water," he said. "We called the game warden. He came over and looked at the thing. 'I don't know what the hell that is,' he said. He took the bucket and left, and that's the last we heard of him."

As I am writing this, I realize that I am lying to you. I am telling stories that I know to be untrue. And I am filling them with memory, the clumsiest editor of all. I don't remember my grandfather's exact words. I do remember the color of the summer night sky, though maybe time has simply convinced me this is true. But in one thing I am honest: I accept that in some ways I am no better than my grandfather. Writers lie all the time, even when they deal in fact. We try to sell ourselves as natural-born architects of polished sentences and balanced arguments when bias and doubt force and influence every word. My first draft of this story looked nothing like what you are reading now. In an earlier version I began with a story from another hunting season. My grandfather was sitting on a stump, holding a rifle in one hand and a walkie-talkie in the other.

The walkie-talkie crackled.

"Louie," he said, "is that you?"

"No, John, it's me," a woman's voice said. "You want some pie?"

"What kind?" my grandfather said.

"All kind," the woman said. "I just made 'em. My house is just through the trees."

My grandfather walked for a while. He saw the woman's house. He saw the pies, steaming on a kitchen windowsill. He saw the woman. Good God, she was ugly. My grandfather was not an educated man but he knew he wanted no part of any ugly woman's pie. He slipped back through the trees.

A year later, he was sitting on the same stump. The walkie-talkie crackled.

"Louie," he said, "is that you?"

"It's me, John," the pie woman said. "Where you been?"

When I was a kid, this story would not let me sleep. On nights when I stayed at my grandparents I would lie awake listening to the beagles moan in their pens out back and try to make sense of what I'd heard. How did this woman find my grandfather's frequency? How did she know when he'd return? How in the hell did she know his name? *What kind of pie?*

I was a pretty sad kid.

It was probably inevitable that I grew up to be a reporter.

3.

Three a.m. on a Thursday. I lie in bed in my own home obsessing over a stranger who told me she used to be a star on *Hee Haw*. To be exact, a Hee Haw Honey, one of those women in hillbilly bikinis who pop out of a cornfield and tell awful jokes. My past warns me she is lying; I can feel it. Nothing feels like the feeling I get when I sense I am being lied to, that hot whine behind the eyes, that cold pressure beneath the bridge of the nose. I love that feeling: not surprise or shock but a wash of comfort and relief. People lie. You can count on it.

If she is telling a lie it is a small one and in the scheme of things—in the book I am writing—it means next to nothing.

Rationally, I know this. Truthfully, I don't care. Size is exactly the point. The smaller a lie is the harder I scramble to expose it. Because one tiny lie slides past and then bigger ones follow and then rot sets in and then everything flies apart and because it is 3 a.m. I believe that if this happens I will die. This is how pathetic my life is: this is the tension, the engine that drives my days and wrecks my life. I am never more miserable or more alive than when I lie sleepless, trapped in my past and happy in my pathology.

Her last name sounds like a first name. I tried once, in a bright orange booth at a Waffle House in Erlanger, Kentucky, to see if it was her real name when she pulled out her wallet to pay for her eggs. Instead my eyes went *thwock* on her driver's license photo: postapocalyptic corona of platinum hair. Pillow lips. Eye makeup straight off a cathedral ceiling.

"When I leave this world," she informed me at an Elvis impersonators' contest in Memphis, Tennessee, "first person I want to see is my Lord. Second person is Elvis. I want to touch him. I want to say, Thank you."

We huddled in the back of a nightclub while up front a guy in a jumpsuit popped his hips to a drumroll. She told me about her history and *Hee Haw*, offered vague insinuations about Elvis. I asked if Elvis gave her the TCB necklace around her neck, the kind he gave people, the one she claimed she never removes. She started to weep. She proclaimed she didn't love him as a lover but as a man. She said she has a tapestry of Elvis on her ceiling. "It looks like he is going up to heaven," she said.

In bed, I stare at my ceiling. A car grinds past. My head began to hurt the moment she began to cry. It was all so beautiful I knew it couldn't be true.

I trust nothing but I am prepared to believe anything. This seems to me like common sense. Reporting relies mainly on

common sense. This may explain why so many people are so bad at it. So I consult reference books. The dates the woman says she appeared on *Hee Haw* don't jibe with her account of the year she met Elvis. I feel wronged. I feel wonderful.

The show is no longer in production, but at the time it ran in syndication on the Nashville Network. I ask the TV listings editor at the newspaper where I work if she has a phone number for the network. She hands me a fat binder full of numbers. I fish one out. I make a call.

A receptionist ships me to a public relations woman's voice mail. I identify myself, explain my dilemma. She calls back. I explain my dilemma in more detail. It occurs to me I sound like a nut. I don't care. Reporting also relies on the willing suspension of self-loathing. She tells me the name of a woman in the *Hee Haw* office who knows everyone who's ever been on the show. She will call her and get back to me.

A day later, she calls back and leaves a message: No person by the name I gave her ever appeared on *Hee Haw*.

I call the self-proclaimed *Hee Haw* Honey. She has moved, so I get her new number from a couple who take turns checking me out on the phone. The alleged Honey is happy to hear from me. I was so nice to her, she says. She's married now, and happy. I'm glad, I say. Discrepancies, I add. Could she clarify?

Of course. She worked on *Hee Haw* in Bakersfield, California, at a ranch owned by one of the stars. Ah, I say. Again we verify dates, times, years. And again I ask her to spell her name. I have it on tape, but still. One n on the last name, right?

No, she says. Two.

I call back the woman from the Nashville Network. Discrepancies, I say. She sounds frightened. Take the *Hee Haw* number, she says. I call Nashville. I love the *Hee Haw* historian as soon as I hear her voice. She finds my drama funny but is happy I'd

rather not lie. She will check records, files, and the memory of the show's former star and get back to me. A day later, she does. The show never filmed in Bakersfield, she says. The woman is lying. I ask her, "Why would anyone say they were on *Hee Haw* when it is so easy to find out they weren't?"

A few times a year, she says, she gets calls asking about people claiming they used to come out of a cornfield on *Hee Haw*. After all these years she still has no idea why.

We hang up. I put a picture of the woman wearing a black and gold evening gown and a ring on every finger into an envelope with a letter. Could the historian kindly look at the picture to, without a doubt, verify that this woman definitely never appeared on the show? A few days later, she returns the picture. *I must say I've never seen her before*, she writes, *and she most definitely was not a member of the Hee Haw show cast—ever—under any circumstances. You are to be commended for checking the information which is represented as fact.*

I change the passage in what I am writing but still I cannot sleep. At first I decide it's because I'm happy. It takes me a few dream-state days to realize I am miserable. Deep down, I wanted that woman to be a *Hee Haw* Honey.

I used to think I was trying to expose the same lies that annoyed me when I was young, but as I've gotten older I realize I was lying to myself. There are lies that attempt to hide, and then there are those that reveal. These are the ones that haunt me because of what they say about loss and hope. I could count on my grandfather lying to me the same way I could count on him loving me. He lied to me because he loved me, I think. And because he didn't think he was lying. In his mind he was the guy who rescued naked women in the woods, resourceful and dashing even without

teeth, a coal-patch Cary Grant. This is who I am, he seemed to be saying. Never mind that it isn't true. In his lies he offered up his best self, and he taught me the possibility of strange and powerful things. Naked women may not roam the woods, but coal miners with sixth-grade educations can burn with stories and the desire to tell them.

So maybe what I'm looking for aren't lies at all. Maybe what I'm looking for—hoping for—is a happier truth.

Maybe what I'm looking for is the way I felt another summer night, the summer of the year I turned seventeen.

4.

I am standing at the edge of my woods listening to my grandfather meow like a cat. Seventeen years old and I have nothing better to do on a Saturday night than scowl into a stand of trees beyond the garden so my grandfather can prove something.

He seldom repeats stories but for a couple of weeks he has refused to let one of them go. "Hey, Joanne," he says, as always calling me by my mother's name, "I was up in the woods and I hear this sound, and you know what I seen? This Siamese cat. Just like yours. Cried like a baby. When I tried to come up on it, it ran from me."

"Really," I said.

"Honest to God!" he cried.

So I stand next to him while he makes a sound that suggests his foot has been pinned in a trap. The beagles out back believe him; they yelp and throw their shoulder blades against the chicken-wire doors. "Get in there!" he yells at them, then resumes mewling.

I cannot see the moon. My grandfather yowls on behind me,

dressed in his usual plaid shirt and dog-running pants, patches on top of patches. My legacy in action. I regard my unfortunate feet and wonder how it came to be that I am damned. I am a strange child, given to memorizing soliloquies from *Hamlet* and the lyrics of Barry White songs. I wake at 5 a.m. to write poems, all of them containing the word "darkness." Nothing I see this night gives me any hope.

Then I see something coming out of the woods and I don't know what the hell it is. Except that I know exactly what it is. It strolls, shoulders rolling, wet and yowling and with its blue eyes wide. I half expect a naked woman to stroll out of the woods behind it, carrying a pie.

I cannot lie. I do not remember the speed of the wind or the velocity of my shock and bewilderment, though I can still feel it, how everything in the world seemed to lift and spin, and how it seemed perfectly normal that everything was weird, and how in some way I'd always expected it, and how my grandfather leaned forward and shot me one of his bottomless smiles. And I do remember that its fur looked like wet feathers, and when it cleared the woods it walked right past my grandfather and headed straight toward me.

LESLIE RUBINKOWSKI ON "In the Woods"

I wrote the first draft of "In the Woods" when I was a graduate student in the University of Pittsburgh's MFA program in creative nonfiction. At the time I also worked as a full-time reporter at the now-defunct *Pittsburgh Press*. After I left daily journalism for teaching, I revisited the essay, interviewing family members and looking through old photographs. I tried to tell it the way my grandfather would tell a story: you think it's leading you down a dark row in a

field but suddenly opens up in a clearing, and everything makes sense. It reads to me now like a bridge between the two kinds of writing I have done, connecting the relentless attention to truth that journalism requires and the play of imagination that my grandfather taught me to love and look for.

Some people see an impossible divide between the writing of fact and what they consider more creative endeavors; I just can't. My childhood taught me the astonishment of opposites and unexpected combinations—after all, a coal miner who could barely sign his own name was one of the best writers I'll ever know. Story is possibility: hang out around enough beagle pens and you begin to see.

Sa'm Pèdi

MADISON SMARTT BELL

Someone was screaming so loudly and horribly I shot out of the bed, but the hotel room was too close and absolutely dark for me to see anything at all. The screams were ragged and inhuman, and I had locked somebody's arm—but this person wasn't resisting. He was my friend, with whom I'd flown to Port-au-Prince two days before, then driven to Cap Haïtien in the north of Haiti, and he was now talking to me in a low steady voice, trying to calm me down. As the screams stopped, I realized that they had been coming out of my own body, though not from anything I was prepared to recognize as myself.

MADISON SMARTT BELL is the author of ten novels and two collections of short stories. Born and raised in Tennessee, he has lived in New York and in London and now lives in Baltimore, Maryland. A graduate of Princeton University and Hollins College, he has taught in various creative writing programs, including the Iowa Writers' Workshop, the 92nd Street Y, and the Johns Hopkins University writing seminars. Since 1984 he has taught at the Goucher College creative writing program, where he is currently writer in residence along with his wife, the poet Elizabeth Spires.