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Sweat, Mud, Moonshine

NED SMELLED OF WOOD SMOKE, GRASS, AND BERRY flavored chew. He leaned under the “Colored” sign hanging on the outhouse, spitting sweet tobacco juice at his feet and squinting through the hot Georgia night at the pump station. The sheriff’s car hummed under the station awning while its owner placed two dusty mason jars under the wood crates at the rear entrance of the Shell. Straightening, the sheriff walked back to his car, eyes on the dirt road. He climbed in and rolled away, headlights off and dirt crunching under the tires.

Ned waited. He spit a few more times and watched the juice sink into the dry clay, drawing a circle around it with his toe. He was seventeen years old and ran moonshine for the sheriff, receiving compensation for his work. Ned’s father enjoyed its benefits as well. He drained the liquid, sweating with eyes closed on the front porch, after twelve hours at the station. He was a stranger to Ned. Seven years ago, he had called Ned and his twin brother, James, to the station with their mother, and presented them two Billy goats hitched to a small wagon.

“Take these goats and get on home,” he said handing James a stick, while their mother beamed at the gift. He attended every high school football game and worked along side a radio tuned to sports. Ned’s relationship with his father was built on Ned’s perfect quarterback passes. His father also gave their mother a Chevrolet Bel Air Deluxe model for Christmas. Then he went down to the recruiting station and signed papers that allowed Ned, James, and Cousin Lester to enlist at seventeen.

Ned did not know that shortly after he boarded the bus to Texas Basic Training his father would die of a heart attack while Ned remained exhausted and homesick. Ned did not know he would be unable to attend his father's funeral because Korea needed defensive positions to resist communist invasions. Ned did not know that the rainy night Washing Machine Charlie deliberately flew low with discordant propellers to set off the air raid siren, he would play football until dawn in his underwear with the men in his unit and think of his father the whole time. He did not know the newly invented margarine came with a bag of yellow coloring, until the mess tent burned down and professional Japanese cooks were hired to cook steak to order, but Ned wanted possum his father cooked so tenderly instead.

Ned walked barefoot, mason jars in hand, towards the wood smokehouse. He wore shoes one time. The family took a road trip in a borrowed convertible to Uncle Royce's house on the Suwannee River. Uncle Royce and their father took Ned and James on an overnight fishing trip and Ned wore brand new shoes. They set out hooks, built a fire, and drank coffee for a couple hours, after which they checked the hooks, took the fish off, and sipped more coffee. Uncle Royce and their father had Jack Daniels in their coffee, but the twins were oblivious as they gutted and filleted their catch. On the second hook check, Ned's shoe sunk into the soft mud and held tight as he stepped away. The rest of the night, he poked mud with a long stick and drank coffee looking for his shoe. Now, Ned's hands sweated around the mason jars.

The sweat of his father followed Ned working on the P-51 fighters. Ned would sweat on the fifteen-day cruise from San Francisco to Korea when the ship caught the tail end of a typhoon and for three days, the crew threw up while on safety lock down. Ned never threw up, just sweat. Ned would sweat when he had sex with the Japanese waitress in the newly built dining facility. He would sweat at night huddled around the pot-bellied stove in the middle of the tent with big-eared Ernesto Diaz from California who made fun of Ned for eating canned pig brains on scrambled eggs. And the brains made his sweat smell different. And maybe he would hate the sweat because it was his father's.

When Ned reached the smokehouse, he whistled low and James and Lester appeared. The three headed to the catfish pond behind the house. It was Saturday night, but they did not go to the ten-cent double features downtown to buy penny candy bars. They sat on the dock. Ned screwed open the first jar since they only drank one at a time and passed it to Lester while he swiped chew out of his mouth into the water. Ripples appeared and chew disappeared then quickly reappeared.

"I guess catfish don't like chew," Ned said.

“This is a special batch Ned,” the sheriff told him on the porch after a visit with Ned’s mother and that night the boys tasted hints of peach in the strong brew. Ned closed his eyes. It burned, but tomorrow his father would slaughter a hog and put the boys to work after church. Before the meat went bad, they ground pork, sweat, and spices into sausage, canned brains, and mixed pig head parts with gelatin to make a mold. They could sleep on the bus to Texas, showered or not, but Ned’s father wanted every ounce of work out of them.

Moonshine and heat made the boys silent. Not the silence heard at James’ funeral following his death in a helicopter crash while traveling to Japan for a dental appointment. It was not the silence Lester heard after his eardrum ceased to function during an explosion that left him face down, but alive, in the dirt. It was not the silent Ned responding to his mother’s questions about his adventures in Korea as he drew circles with his toe in the dirt. It was not the silence of the bus ride that caused Ned’s father and brother to die. Ned just drank and sweat and fingered circles around the fruit patterns on the mason jars and wondered if he would run moonshine again.



TRISHA GUILLEBEAU is a 2008 graduate of the United States Air Force Academy. This is her first publication.