

Conversation Pieces
Volume 9

Alien Bootlegger

by
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Introduction

Every writer worth admiring has her place of power, that locale or perspective from which she does her best and most assured work. For Rebecca Ore, it's the Blue Ridge Mountains of southwestern Virginia. Though she has lived much of her life elsewhere, the land and its people are in her bones and the rhythm of their speech lodged in her head. It's not an easy place to love, and she returns to it always with a certain degree of pain and regret. But it's the forge and well-spring of *Alien Bootlegger*

The Blue Ridge area is a region of stunning beauty where guns are common, old wealth holds to traditional values ("like owning people," as Rebecca enjoys explaining), and operating an illegal still is not so much disreputable as a matter of cultural pride. It's not like the North, where I grew up, but it sure isn't the South people tell you about either. It doesn't parse out like other places. It's its own thing.

Nobody has ever written so well about or with such insight into this corner of the world as Rebecca does. She presents it without condescension or sentimentality. She knows the social networks and how they connect. She's got the speech down pat. Mostly, though,

she knows how the people think. I've lived in the area, and I'm here to tell you that a "foreigner" (as they call outsiders) can hear some good stories and experience some strange times there—but he's never going to get to know the truth of their lives, the core stuff, the meat. Only someone who belongs has access to that.

Yet, though Rebecca's family has had strong associations with Patrick County dating back to 1812, she grew up in Clemson, South Carolina, and Louisville, Kentucky. And though she always read science fiction and was a writer from an early age, her original metier was not SF but poetry. It was a long and twisty road that brought her to this genre.

Here's the short version: By age 19, Rebecca had been published in *Red Clay Reader*. A year later, she ran off to New York City to become a poet. She found a job. She led *la vie boheme*. She published poetry and had a mimeographed book or two. She worked for a year for the Science Fiction Book Club. She attended Columbia University School of General Studies. She became a reporter for *The Enterprise* in Patrick County (that's one county over from Franklin), where she got to know the sorts of people—state's attorneys, chicken-fighters, sheriffs—that poets don't. She went to grad school at SUNY-Albany. She moved to Critz, Virginia. She taught at a business college. A friend (me) wrote her, saying, "Rebecca, you've got to get out of Critz!" She moved to Philadelphia. She got involved in computers. Today she teaches at both Temple and Drexel. With a career path like that, it's hardly any surprise that Rebecca has a quirky and independent perspective on pretty much everything.

And somewhere in there, after Albany but well before Philadelphia, she became an acclaimed science fiction writer.

So why, out of all the places she's been and lived, does Rebecca choose to write about Franklin County? Because of the deep loam of family stories and connections, to be sure. But also because, as she explained to me once, this is where human beings are to be found in their natural habitat. Not domesticated humans, mind you. Not law-respecting city dwellers whose lives and emotions are under their careful control, but folks who have never entirely bought their way into civilization. Wild humans.

Wild humans live on their own, off at the edge of society, rather like urban raccoons. Everyone knows they don't belong—not to anything or anybody but themselves. They have messy lives driven by furious emotions, and the law only holds as much authority over them as they choose to give it. Wild humans are often outcasts, and inevitably outlaws.

This is a story about them. Which is to say, this is a story about us.

—Michael Swanwick

Alien Bootlegger

Lilly Nelson at the Hardware Store

When I first saw the alien was the first warm day after a terrible winter of layoffs. Years like these, men stare at the seed packs, the catalogues for fertilizer spreaders, and wonder if they've got enough land for a distiller's corn crop. Or would the mills hire back soon enough as to make farming superfluous? Rocky Mount was full that day of men speculating about turning back to what their ancestors did back when southwestern Virginia was the frontier. Sort of like what didn't starve out the great-grandparents won't starve out us. But few had kept their tractors. No one had draft animals. The ancestors had hated farming like crazy, and the descendants really wanted the factories to start hiring again. But, meantime, let's get some equipment clerk to distract us or go out and gossip about the alien.

My own business wasn't off—none of my DUI clients had written me a bad check yet—but I'd still gone to the hardware store, even knowing how crowded it would be. I needed my own distraction. Fibroids waited in my uterus for a sonogram on Tuesday, so today, I hefted plastic mesh bags full of spring bulbs, compar-

ing the lies on the package flap to the real flowers I'd seen the last summer I'd planted them.

Just my luck, I'd have to have surgery. Odd, I'd never wanted children, and it would have been absurd to have a child to take care of when I was forty-three and had my aunt Berenice to worry about, but to have it come to this. Then while I was drinking a Dr. Pepper for the caffeine to soothe my addiction headache and waiting for a clerk to sell me some dahlias, the alien walked in and I was finally distracted.

Nobody wanted to act like a gawking hick. We watched each other to time one quick stare apiece, aiming our eyes when nobody else was looking. The hardware store itself looked weird after I looked away. The alien jolted my eyes into seeing more detail than I'd ever noticed before—dead flies on a fly strip, the little bumps in the plastic weave under my fingers, a cracked front tooth in the clerk's face as he came around the counter.

"Welding equipment," the alien said as a nervous man in a business suit tugged on one of his long bony arms. "Stainless-steel welding equipment, stainless-steel pipe, stainless sheets, stainless-steel milk tank."

The clerk looked at me, I nodded, meaning *okay, deal with that first*.

As the clerk came to him, the alien adjusted the flow on an acetylene torch. He looked like a man crossed with a preying mantis, something a farmer watched for crop-damaging tendencies. In the chitinous head, the eyes looked more jelly-like than decent, though I suspect my own eyes in that head would look just as bad. Actually, the eyes were more or less like human eyes; it was the ears that were faceted like stereo speakers.

Big enough. Little indentations inside the facets. I bet it could tell you precisely where a noise was coming from.

So, here the alien is, one of the ones about which we've been reading all the reassurances the government chose to give us, I thought. One was hiking the Japanese central mountain crest trail. That was the one the media went crazy over, but others were living in Africa working on tilapia and other food-fish recombinant DNA projects and weaving handicrafts or in Europe taking sailing lessons or studying automotive mechanics. They'd all arrived in an FTL ship and said they were tourists. Yeah, sure, but they had that FTL ship and we didn't.

"Lilly, told you I been seeing saucers since 1990 down in Wytheville off I-77 junction," a bootlegger's driver said to me. I looked at the man and wondered if he was driving for one of the DeSpain cousins now. Berenice always was curious about the DeSpains, as though they were a natural phenomenon, not criminals at all. She accused me of resenting criminals who made more money than I did.

"Look at its ears," I said, meaning *lets not talk until it's out of the building at least.*

He considered them and looked back at me with tighter lips.

I shrugged and visualized the fibroids down inside me, flattened sea cucumbers, squirming around. Maybe the alien would bring us better medicine? He bought his equipment and said, "Pickup truck with diplomatic plates."

"Bring it around to the side," the clerk said, trying to sound normal, almost making it.

After the alien left, the bootlegger's driver said, "What is he planning to weld stainless for?"

We all knew one of the options—still-making, no lead salts in stainless-steel boys' product, and the metal was cheaper than copper. Or maybe he was setting up a dairy? "Maybe he's a romantic." I paused. "You ever consider working for Coors?" I said before walking back to the office. I knew his answer before he could have replied—driving legal was a boring ass job; driving illegal was an adventure.

Tomorrow was Legal Aid; so I wanted to get the partnership papers filed on the Witherspoon Craft Factory before five. I dreaded Legal Aid. When times were bad, the men screamed at their wives and children, and the women wanted divorces. If he beats you, I'd always say, I'll help you, but just for yelling at you, come on, honey, you can't support kids on seven dollars an hour. Better to dust off the old copper pot and get a gristmill, clean the coil, fill a propane tank, and cook some local color in the basement that tax evaders and tourists pay good money for.

When we heard the aliens were just tourists, the first joke everyone in Franklin County seemed to have heard or simultaneously invented was if having one around was going to drive up real estate taxes again.

When I got into the office, the answering machine was blinking. My aunt Berenice spoke off the disc: "I remembered hearing where Patty Hurst was hiding, but I think it was just some fire-mouthing. Even then, I was getting too old for simple rhetoric. Bring me something... I forget now...when you come home. And, Lilly, your message makes you sound impossibly country."

It wasn't that she was that senile, Berenice was simply righteously paranoid from a long radical life. I made

a note to pick up some single scotch malt from Bobby. He was making fine liquor for now. An independent, but maybe everyone would leave him alone because he made such classic liquor. And he had hospital bills to pay. Pre-existing condition in his child.

Then I wondered why I wasn't more excited about the alien. Maybe because I had so much to worry about myself, like who was going to take care of Berenice when I went under the knife?

I filed the partnership papers at the courthouse and drove by Bobby's to pick up the single malt. When I pulled up at his house, he was sitting on the porch, twitching a straw in his hand.

"Bobby," I said. He had to know what I was here for.

"Yo, Luce. I had a visitor today."

"Um," meaning *are you going to be a client of mine any time soon?*

"One of the DeSpains."

"You been aging it for five years. . ."

He interrupted, "More."

"So, didn't you just slip it to friends like I suggested? It's not like you do it for a living."

"I do need the money. But I wanted to make really good liquor. Seemed less desperate that way."

"It's fine liquor," I said.

"It was fine liquor," Bobby said. "DeSpain isn't going to make me his man."

"Well, Bobby," I said, watching the straw still rolling between his hands, "be careful." What could I tell him? Dennis DeSpain wasn't the roughest cousin, and nothing in the liquor business was as rough as the drug business. "You don't have any liquor now?" Bobby shook his head, the straw pausing a second. Now I had

to stop by the ABC store before I went home. Daddy always said legal liquor had artificial dyes and synthetic odors in it.

When I got up to go, Bobby said, “I guess my wife will have to start waiting tables over at the Lake. I’m just lucky I’m on first shift. In the dye house.” We both knew why the dye house never laid anyone off—the heat drove close to one hundred percent turn-overs there.

“When I was younger,” I said as I got my car keys back out of my purse, “I was going to reform the world. Then, Franklin County. Now...”

“Yeah, now,” Bobby said.

“Well, I won’t have you as a client, then.”

He jerked his shoulders. “I don’t know what I thought I was doing.”

“Liquor-making the old way is a fine craft.”

“Oh, shut the fuck up, Lilly. I thought if I did it fine, it wouldn’t be so desperate. Man with bad debts turns to making liquor.”

So, bad times and no simple solutions. I sighed and got in the car, then remembered the alien buying stainless-steel welding equipment, his fingers longer than a man’s but fiddling with the valve with the same bent-head attention as a skilled human.

I drove back to the ABC store. The alien was leaning against the wall of the ABC store, eating Fig Newtons. At his feet was an ABC store brown bag full of what looked like sampler bottles. The man with him looked even more nervous than when I’d seen the two of them in the hardware store, furtive like. When the alien opened his mouth to bite, I saw his teeth were either crusted with tartar or very weird. They were

also rounded, like a child draws teeth, not squared. He stopped to watch me go in. When I came out with the legal malt whiskey, I nodded to him.

“Lawyer,” he said. “Ex-radical. Wanted to meet you, but not so much by accident that you’d be suspicious.” I went zero to the bone. The voice seemed synthetic, the intonation off even though the accent was utter broadcast journalism.

“He’s very interested in Franklin County,” his human guide said. “And liquor.” Poor guy sounded like he knew precisely why the alien had bought all the stainless-steel welding equipment and the liquor samples.

“Really?” I said, not quite asking, remembering quite well the year when most of the distillers went to stainless steel—thank God, no more of the car radiator stills that killed drinkers.

The man said, “I’m Henry Allen, with the State Department. He’s Turkemaw, of Svarti, a guest of our government.”

“And a vegetarian,” I said, having recovered enough to pass by them and get back in my car. A farmer would try Sevrin dust or even an illegal brew of DDT if he saw the alien in a stand of corn.

I don’t know why I think farmer—I’ve never farmed day one in my life, and I lived in New York for years. Berenice complains I sound like I’m trying to pass for redneck, but the sound’s inside my head, too. Back at home, a chill intensifying with the dark, Berenice and a young black woman were sitting on the porch talking. They didn’t have the porch light on, so I knew they’d been sitting there awhile, Berenice in the swing, the black woman stiff on the teak bench, both so absorbed

in each other they were oblivious to the cold and dark. I tried to remember her name, Mary...no...Marie, a chemical engineering student who'd grow up to be one of those black women who'd gone to college and become plant chemical control officers, rather ferocious about her rise up. Berenice loved anyone who had ears to listen and hadn't heard all her stories yet.

As I got out of the car, I felt a bit ashamed of myself for thinking that. She'd told me enough about Marie that I should have realized Berenice listened to her, too.

When Berenice said, "And the Howe women I knew from Boston said that Emily Dickinson was a senator's daughter and that she tried like a motherfucker to get published," the girl threw her head back and laughed. Laughed without holding back, genuinely fond of my aunt, genuinely amused, so I thought better of her.

Marie said, "They don't teach me that at Tech."

"No, professors all want to believe they're more than schoolteachers, but they don't know what real poets are like." Berenice could be fierce about this. One of her husbands or lovers wrote poetry books that sold in the forties of thousands. "Always remember you're more than a chemical engineering student, Marie. Everyone is always more than the labels other people want to put on them."

"Of course, I am more than a chemical engineer," Marie said, tightening the dignity muscles again. I reminded myself of what I'd been like at eighteen and felt more compassionate to us all.

"Terrella—" Berenice began. I remembered hearing about Terrella, the black woman bootlegger in the forties who killed a man.

“Terrella,” Marie said. “That kind of kin threatens me.”

I set the bottle down by Berenice. She sniffed and opened it, sniffed again. “Argh, fake esters. What happened to Bobby’s?”

“DeSpain.”

Marie stiffened. Yeah, I remembered too late that I’d named a lover she’d just broken with. Berenice heard quite a bit about it, as Berenice, when she was in her best mind, could get people to talk. I’d hear more later. Berenice said, “Lilly, get three glasses.”

“I don’t want to talk about Terrella,” Marie said again. As I got the little glasses we used for straight liquor, I wondered if two denials made a positive. Terrella wore long black skirts way into the fifties, with a pistol and a knife hidden in the folds. Her hair had grown into dreadlocks before we ever knew the style was a style and had a name. She left \$25,000 and a house to her daughter when she died, which was remarkable for a black woman in those days, however she got the money. Berenice admired people who could work around the system and not lose, even when they were criminals. To Berenice, one should never resign oneself to any status other people thought appropriate.

“So, you’re kin to Terrella,” I said, putting all the glasses on the table that went with the bench and pouring us each about an inch of the Scotch.

“I’m even kin to Hugous, the man who runs The Door 18.”

“Smart man,” Berenice said. “Terrella was smart, too.”

“She was a hoodlum,” Marie said. “Hugous—”

“Hugous puts money aside, no matter how he makes it,” Berenice said. “That’s always useful in a capitalist state. Considering that sloppy capitalism’s all we have to work with.” Berenice freed her long grey hair to dangle radical-hippie style and grinned at me. So, she’d always been looser and more tolerant than I. I had enough rigidity to get a law degree so I could support her. Retirement homes, even ones better than she could have afforded, terrified her.

Not that we weren’t more two of a kind than anyone else in the county, but I always wanted to organize the poor while she thought the poor ought to kick liberal ass as well as boss ass.

“I saw the alien today after I made the appointment for the sonogram,” I said.

“Fibroids. Mother had them,” Berenice said. “They thought they were cancer and sent her womb to Wake Forest.”

“Jesus, Berenice,” Marie said. “That’s like hearing Dennis talk about jail rape.”

So, I wondered, what was the context? Did Dennis rape or get raped? Berenice picked up her scotch and drank it all down in one swallow, the crepey skin jerking on her scrawny neck, the long grey hair flying. “So, Marie, you like your life?”

“It’s fine,” the girl said tonelessly. “I like Montgomery County better than here.”

Meaning gossip in Rocky Mount about Dennis DeSpain was a problem, I thought, and none of the Tech students knew yet that she had outlaw kin. I looked at Berenice. Marie got up to go, her hyper correct suit wrinkled anyway around her rump. I watched as she got in her little Honda.

“Berenice, I saw the alien buying welding equipment.”

Berenice said in a conspiratorial whisper, “Marie can weld, too.”

“DeSpain won’t like that.”

“Dennis taught Marie about bootlegging. She left him because he tempted her.”

“Tempted her? I mean, it isn’t like half of Rocky Mount didn’t see them having breakfast and smelling of come last fall.”

“Tempted her to become a bootlegger. I suspect it’s become like any other supervisory job to Dennis, and he needs to have someone new see him as glamorous and dangerous.”

“Jesus, I thought he was half-about in the Klan, certainly able to fuck blacks, but not able to admit they’ve got brains as good as a white boy’s.”

“Marie’s definitely smarter than most white boys.” Berenice looked for the clip she’d pulled out of her hair and tucked all her hair in the clip behind her neck again. “She’s specializing in alcohols and esters. State’s going to legalize liquor-making one of these days to get some of the taxes.”

“Why would a Tech student want to make liquor?” I said, angry that she’d risk a college degree for something that trivial. Not so trivial, perhaps, if one were Bobby sweating in a polyester dye house for two dollars an hour over minimum wage, but for a chemical engineering student—stupid.

“I didn’t say she was making liquor now,” Berenice said. She looked down at her hands, then rubbed a large brown patch between her index finger knuckle and her thumb. “First sign I had I was getting old were

wrinkles going up and down my fingers on the palm side. Nobody ever warned me about them. I like Marie, but the youth doesn't rub off, does it?"

"Berenice, there's an alien in Franklin County."

"So, the government put it here. We never have any real say, do we? Alien? No different than a foreigner in most folks' minds." *Foreigner* means from outside our home county. The Welsh brought the concept with them, which is only fitting as *welsh* means foreigner in Anglo-Saxon. Berenice continued, "You think Marie's sad, don't you? Like self-cultural genocide? Maybe she'd be happier if she were more like Terrella?"

"Cultural genocide is a stupid term. It trivializes things like really murdered people."

"Well, then I'll just say she's awful divided against herself then."

"Are we supposed to judge blacks?"

"It's racist not to," Berenice said, and I realized she'd been teasing me. Berenice could be such a yoyo, but she'd ceased to take herself seriously without giving up what had been good about her ideals. Taking her in, I had to watch her mind wobble, but right now, Berenice seemed fine, not bitterly ironic, not lapsing into the past because the present jammed in short-term memory, three-minute chunks throwing each past three minutes into oblivion. "Lilly, you're sure you're going to have to have surgery?" She asked sharply as though needing surgery was my fault.

If I did have cancer, Berenice would be extremely pissed. She'd have to go to a nursing home. The jittery insistence I tolerated for the delight she was on good days would get drugged out of her. I nodded, then said yes, because she wasn't looking at me directly.

Berenice poured herself another whiskey, drained it, and said, "I've lived fully, interestingly. I'd rather lose my present than my past. At least, senility won't suck that away. Did I tell you about the time I hitchhiked down to Big Sur and met Henry Miller?"

Not that she hadn't had senile moments already, I thought in pity. Then I realized I had not heard about Henry Miller and said, "Tell me."

DeSpain in Tailwater

DeSpain cast out with his Orvis rod, the Hardy Princess reel waiting for a big brown trout to inhale his Martin's Crook rigged behind the gold-plated spinner. He was missing Marie, wanted her back, and wanted to kill her, but he'd do a sixteen-inch-plus trout instead.

Or, break the law and kill a little one. But DeSpain had principles. He broke the law only for serious money. One of his nephews who'd gone to Johns Hopkins said that DeSpain was trying to work sympathetic magic with the law.

The Smith River fell with the sun as the Danville and Martinsville offices and factories turned out their lights. *All but poachers out of the water in half an hour.* DeSpain remembered what the guide told him about tying on a stonefly nymph, but he hated strike indicators and fishing something he couldn't see upstream.

Intending this to be the last cast of the day, DeSpain pulled up the sink tip and cast the big wet fly and the spinner across the river, shooting out line, then reeling in. Then he saw the alien, standing in bare legs in the cold Smith River, casting with the guide, coming on the opposite bank. DeSpain realized that the alien was two

feet longer in the legs than the guide, who was up to his hips in the river, closer to the bank than the alien.

DeSpain yelled, "I knew the Smith was famous nationally, but this is ridiculous."

The alien said, "DeSpain. Liquor distributor. Still maker."

The Smith wasn't chilly enough to suit DeSpain right then, and his waders were much too warm. He'd heard the alien was rude. Correct—rude or very alien. DeSpain remembered gossip about the alien and said, "Turkemaw, Svarti resident extraterrestrial, mate went back home after two weeks here." He felt better.

"Dennis, you fishing a stonefly nymph?" the guide asked.

DeSpain pretended not to hear and left his line in the water, no orange foam strike indicator on the leader, obviously either real cocky about his skill with upwater nymphs or not fishing one.

The alien pushed a button on a small box hanging like a locket around his neck. The box laughed.

DeSpain remembered hearing last week from one of his drivers that the alien had bought stainless steel welding rods and that its farm had corn acreage. Everyone wondered if so conspicuous a creature was going to be so very more flagrantly making liquor. Or maybe the creature was making spaceships in its basement? "Be careful," he said to both of them. After they waded on, DeSpain caught the spinner and fly in his hand, then switched to the stonefly nymph.

A trout took it. As he played it, then reeled it in, it came jaws out of the water, eyeballs rolled to see the hook in its mouth. He netted it, then measured it: fifteen inches three-quarters. *We can fix that*, DeSpain

thought, as he broke the fish's spine and stretched. *Bingo, sixteen and one-tenth. The hell I work sympathetic magic with the law.*

Satisfied with the dead trout, DeSpain left the river, his eidetic memory reviewing his investments, both legal and illegal ones. *I have to be so mean with the illegal ones.* Fourteen trucks out with piggyback stills, \$200,000 in an Uzbek metallurgical firm, \$50,000 in Central Asian cotton mills, and maybe \$500,000 in various inventories, legal and illegal.

His brain began to run more detail, like a self-programming and overeager computer. No spreadsheets, he thought as he began to wonder again if he'd bought into the global equivalent of just another Franklin County. He had first wondered if the Armenians were cheating him, but then he considered he was damn apt at bullying other men into working for him. Let other people run their butts off when the law came to blow a still.

The true reality of the world wasn't Tokyo's glitter, DeSpain had long since decided after one trip to Tokyo, but the harsh little deals driven in places like Rocky Mount and Uralsk. Tokyo and New York could evaporate. The small traders would still be off making deals, machine oil under their nails, doing the world's real business.

But that nigger bitch got away from him like no man had ever been able to. Goddamn great body and smart, too. He had a lust like a pain for women like her and his wife Orris. Yeah, Orris, she only wanted him to have simple women on the side.

He pulled the rod apart and wound down the line to keep the two sections together and the fly hook in

the keeper. The trunk security chimed as he opened it. He pushed the code buttons and put the rod and vest in it before he stripped off his waders and boots and put them in a bag, then laid the trout carefully on ice, making sure it stayed stretched out.

Remembering that he paid four hundred dollars to get a ten percent casting improvement over the cheaper generic rod, DeSpain thought, *Wouldn't do that in business, but. . .*

"If you want to just kill trout, may I suggest a spinning rod," the clerk had said in tones that condemned meat fishing and people too cheap or insensitive to the nuances of a four hundred dollar rod.

Liquor. A man needs the illegal to bankroll him for the legal. "It's not romantic with me," he said out loud, thinking about the folklorist who'd come from Ferrum to tape his father about his grandfather's suicide after the feds broke his ring in the thirties.

DeSpain felt a touch of guilt that he was sending bootleg money out of the country, but no more than when he yanked an extra fraction inch out of a Smith River brown so that it would go over sixteen inches. He turned the key in the Volvo's ignition and drove home.

His wife came out when she heard the garage door open. When she wore her red silk dress like she was, she expected to go out to eat. Her hair was blowing, but instead of reaching to smooth it, she folded her arms across her breasts. DeSpain pulled on into the garage and turned off the electric eye. "Orris," DeSpain said in the garage, "what did you fix for dinner?"

"Steven's at Mother's. You owe me, Dennis. The bitch is a college student. You've even taken her out for breakfast."

“Why does that make it different? She’s just another one of my dancing girl friends. I’m tired.”

“I can drive myself to Roanoke if you’re that tired. I know what it means when a man wants to talk to a woman in the morning. And you were telling her about still workings. At breakfast.”

DeSpain knew if he stayed home Orris would harangue his ass off about that bitch, Marie. When a particular black woman was seducing him out of moonshine technology and college tuition, then he should have known Orris would see the woman as a real rival. “Okay, let’s go. You don’t have to drive.” He wouldn’t tell her that Marie had left him.

“To the Japanese place.”

The Japanese place made Dennis nervous. Orris had picked up more about Japan than he had. “I need to log some items on the bulletin board.” He watched Orris carefully for a loosening of those arms before he went inside. He got his Toshiba out of the safe, unfolded, it and plugged in the phone line. His bat file brought up all his bulletin boards: Posse Commitatus, the Junk Market, Technology Today, and Loose Trade. He pushed for the Loose Trade bulletin board and scanned through the messages. All his messages were coded:

TO RICHARD CROOK: BOONE MILLS LOST HUBCAP, FOUND, NO PROBLEM. GOT GAS AT THE USUAL. SPINNER.

TO MR. MAX: COLLEAGUES REALLY APPRECIATED THE LOBSTER. WOULD LIKE TO ORDER DOZEN MORE CHICKEN-SIZED.

TO RICHARD CROOK: HOPE CAN BUY ANOTHER FIVE LAMB’S FLEECES, WASHABLE TANNED.

TO BUD G.R. HARESEAR: NEED SOME SENSE OF PROGRESS REPORT.

One of his trucks had almost been busted at the Cave Spring I-81 exit Exxon station. Three of his suppliers needed deliveries. DeSpain made code notes and purged the messages. Then he noticed that the alien was asking in plain text if anyone wanted to sell it an old tractor. *Why is he on this bulletin board?* DeSpain swore he'd bring in the feds if the alien was going to be able to distill openly when people had to be discreet about it. *Fool, the feds brought the alien here to begin with.*

After DeSpain exited Loose Trade, he took his accounting discs out of his safe. He needed to ship out twenty-seven gallons to the small bars and then collect on some of the larger accounts. Follett's salary came due again. DeSpain paid his men full rate when they were in jail and half rate when they were on probation and not working a full schedule, but Follett would be off probation next week. Damn Follett, DeSpain thought, he just sits there when he's raided. Most of his still men had never been busted. He wrote a check on his hardware store account.

An image of the researcher listening to his grandmother came to mind, all romantic-ass about the business and believing the guff that no one ever died at a still raid, that both sides of the game had an understanding. Yeah, and the mountain counties averaged a murder a week in the twenties and thirties.

His grandfather wouldn't have hanged himself over a game.

Orris came in and said, as though she hadn't been bitching at him minutes earlier, "I hope your foreign investments do well."

DeSpain rubbed his eyes and said, "I've got to go back over there in September."

"I'd like to go with you this time."

"Babe, it's just like Detroit over there. Really."

"If you went to Detroit for a month, I'd want to come along."

He wasn't sure if she were implying anything further, so he decided to just stomp change the subject. "You think I should wear a suit?" Wrong, that sounded hick asking his more sophisticated wife what to wear in the larger sense. DeSpain learned how to dress at Emory & Henry before they threw him out for getting arrested.

She said, "It's not Sunday."

"Man who looks like he was just in the river they know is rich enough not to care what a waiter thinks. Mud equals real estate."

Orris said, "Not on a nigger or a neck, mud doesn't."

DeSpain wondered if she thought her red dress would look like polyester if he didn't dress to match. He said, "I'll change," and she stepped her skinny body out on her high heels without indicating whether she was pleased or not. *Orris, an Iris root*. DeSpain had looked it up once and wondered who in her family knew such an arcane thing.

He folded his computer and put all his records and it back in the safe, then found a blue suit to wear with a string tie. String ties made Orris nervous.

On the drive to Roanoke, she said, "Don't do that to me again."

"What, with a college student?" Dennis realized she knew the affair was over, but did she know the how and why?

“Right, Dennis.”

“And if I did it with some poor-ass good old girl, I’d probably be fucking your family.”

“So crude, but then what was I to expect, marrying a bootlegger.”

“Not that I’m not employing half your cousins. The bitch left me, if that’s any damn consolation.”

She laughed, then said, “One of my friends said at least recently you’d been more considerate.”

Stomp change again. “Did I tell you I saw the alien when I was fishing?”

“Dennis, you are so obvious when you don’t want to talk about something. I heard he was rich.”

“I suppose. He had a guide with him.”

“And I’ve heard he’s rude. Is he?”

“He told me to my face I was a still maker and a liquor investor.”

“Maybe he’s just alien, doesn’t know not to think out loud. At least, he didn’t tell you how he knew about Marie.”

“Gee, Orris, you can find the good side of anyone, can’t you?”

“Not everyone,” Orris said. They pulled up to the restaurant and walked in. “I need sashimi tonight,” she said as if eating raw fish took guts.

MARIE

Sometimes I play black and tough, but not at Tech. It’d be too easy to slide from a Dennis DeSpain to a drunk rich frat boy who knows his daddy’s lawyer will get him off if he leaves a woman to strangle in ropes, or to a cracker trucker with a knife.

I hate my colorful ancestors, the liquor queens, the Jesus priestesses. Times were I suspected they just re-named a Dahomey god Jesus so they could keep on writhing to him.

But here I was, home for the weekend in a brick house in a compound that reminded me unpleasantly of anthropology class, the whole lineage spread kraal-style from broke-down trailers to \$100,000 brick ranch houses with \$20,000 in landscaping.

We were at least in one of the nice houses; Momma was waiting for me. “You broke with DeSpain like I told you. I’m satisfied.”

“Yes, ma’m.”

“I saw what you were taking at Tech when your grades came. We’re not paying for you to learn boot-legging.”

“Chemical engineering, Mamma.”

She sat down on the piano bench and closed her eyes. I sat down on one of the red velvet armchairs and leaned my head back against the antimacassar. “I know they can use you at DuPont or in a dye house. Find a place that will pay you to take a Masters in Business. Daddy’s been knowing a white boy all his life that’s now doing that.”

I wondered if we’d moved away from the trailer kin what my life would have been like. I could have grown up in Charlotte, North Carolina—black, white, and mulatto all doing airy things like architecture and graphic design. Momma saw the look on my face and said, “Do you think you collected all the white blood in the family?”

“No, Mamma.”

“You white granddaddies better than that DeSpain.”

Lapsing out of Proper English again, Mamma? I rolled my eyes at her and said, “I need be studying.” Yeah, yeah, I know Black English grammar has its own formality and I was hashing it.

“You need the computer?”

“Maybe I shouldn’t have come home for the weekend. It’s so depressing around here.”

“You are an example to your kin.”

I thought about Granny crocheting billions of antimacassars like giant mutant snowflakes, rabidly industrious while her sisters slid by on their asses. “Do you think they really appreciate it?”

Momma asked, half interested and half to abruptly change the subject, “Is there really an alien down near Endicott?”

“He was walking around Rocky Mount, trying to pass for a good old boy. Yeah, let me get on the computer.” Momma grew up associating computers with school as they didn’t have node numbers and nets and gossip by the megabyte when she was coming along. I could access all sorts of trash while she thought I was studying.

Orris had left me a message on Loose Trade: DENNIS’S DANCING GIRLFRIEND: SORRY, BETTER LUCK/CHOICE NEXT TIME. I felt my tongue begin to throb; I’d pushed against my teeth so hard.

But before I sniped back at her, I noticed messages about the alien: ALIEN IS A BASTARD. HEARD WHEN PEOPLE CLAIM THEY WERE KIDNAPPED BY HIM, HE SAYS HE DOESN’T REMEMBER THEM IN A WAY THAT MAKES EVEN CRAZY PEOPLE FEEL REAL TRIVIAL.

I wondered if he had really kidnapped people, if his people had.

Another message about the alien: HE'S OFF BACK ABOUT A MILE AND A HALF FROM THE HARD-TOP. WON'T LET THE HIGHWAY DEPARTMENT SELL HIM THE SURFACE TREATMENT EITHER.

I left a message to Dennis: MRS. DESPAIN CALLED. TERRELLA IF YOU WANT TO THINK OF ME THAT WAY. I knew he wanted me to be more like her than I could ever wish to be.

Then the alien came on the board in real time: PLEASE, I HOPE TO DO BUSINESS HERE. MY WIFE LEFT ME. I WISH ONLY TO LIVE QUIETLY. YOUR RESIDENT ALIEN.

Someone quickly typed back: ARE YOU FOR REAL? I DON'T REMEMBER KIDNAPPING ANYONE FROM THIS COUNTY.

I wondered why an alien would be doing business on a semi-honest bulletin board and remembered Lilly saw him buying welding equipment. I typed, THIS BULLETIN BOARD ISN'T AS SECURE AS THE SYSTEMS OPERATOR MAY HAVE TOLD YOU WHEN YOU SIGNED ON.

The alien replied: IF I NEEDED SECURITY, I WOULDN'T BE ON THIS PLANET.