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The Tobacco Road

It was all land and sky, no margins, just two solid blocks joined at the horizon and Rebecca loved it. She knew who she was in the vastness, everything was focused to a point, senses were taut, the body relaxed and all she carried was portable. The road stretched ahead in the midafternoon sun, its edges blurred by the insidiously crawling dust and Rebecca hitched a lift, home to the country she had adopted.

Cars passed by, sleek. Drivers became part of the bodywork, ignoring her raised arm, and drove on. It didn't matter, the sun was too hot and she knew her car would appear.

It had become a magical existence. To be thrown totally on your own, to be able to do anything you liked --- go anywhere you pleased, be anything you could possibly imagine. Create in yourself a new you and no one would care, a hedonistic liberation.

Rebecca had left Europe nine months earlier, left her job, the constant timekeeping, the cat with her neighbor. Packed all she would need into a rucksack and shut the door on her flat. She had kept in touch with her old life, family and friends received postcards from exotic locations full of new faces and experiences but never fully shared them, they belonged to her and she kept their essence inside.

It was three in the afternoon and to countermand the hollow feeling in the pit of her stomach she lit a cigarette, enjoying the feel of the smoke curling around the back of her throat and down into her lungs. Tobacco was cheap, it was growing all around her. A car stopped and a face leaned out, a man's clean shaven and weather-tanned, smiling, "Where to?"

"B---", she replied.

He opened the trunk for her rucksack and she placed it next to the bottled water and petrol. In case of an emergency, he explained. His name was Jeff and he was driving a blue BMW. Rebecca smiled at the incongruity of the situation and scorned her old life at home.

She had hitched many lifts in the past nine months, balancing herself on logs that filled a tractor-drawn trailer, squeezed herself between families and their interminable boiled sweet conversations, housewives attracted to her vulnerability and men who wanted her conversation to brighten their long journeys --- routine in a country that seemed to have no end.

The seats were leather and Rebecca felt perspiration gather between her legs and into the grooves of the seat. Shifting slightly she asked if she could have a coke from the cool bag on the back seat,

They drove through the sun with visas down and the air conditioning on. Rebecca remembered the journeys where she would be crouched in the back of some truck with the wind playing with her hair, the dust settling itself into her, shifting when she changed position and resettling into the newly formed recesses, where she had felt complete freedom.

Jeff was a farmer with land to the North, suffering from drought, he was telling her. He was traveling to B--- to see to the possibility of digging new bore holes, people on his land depended on him. Rebecca kept to her side of the bargain and asked more questions.

He was a tall man with a tan that stopped on his upper arms and a balding head. She knew he was attracted to her --- they drove on.

People worked in the fields on either side of them, harvesting the tobacco crop, Rebecca wanted a cigarette, he said as long as she wound the window down. Hot air rushed into the controlled leather atmosphere and the skin on her face blanched. She held the cigarette out of the window with her finger and thumb, keeping the bright point at its lowest ebb. Widening her three remaining fingers, she threw the remains to the wind.

"Did you know that one foreign tobacco particle can ruin a farmer's whole crop?" Rebecca felt guilty.

The road stretched onwards, people were living in unseen villages and communities on either side of the road. The people working in the fields had to live somewhere but there was no trace of them in the immensity of the landscape. Rebecca knew she was lucky if she caught a fleeting glimpse of anyone walking towards the horizon until her gaze was lost in the receding mirror. She felt she had understood, in that moment, the organic nature of African life. She had become a part of it and attempted to bring some of it with her but the car was going too fast and it slipped from her grasp.

The car slowed down and turned off the road. "Short cut," Jeff explained.

Rebecca said nothing; there were no short cuts.

The land on either side of her was the same, tobacco growing in straight lines each starkly invisible in its regularity and Rebecca tried to imagine that this was the same road as before. It looked the same.

Jeff's hands stayed in the same position on the wheel. rebecca studied them. Strong hands used to hard work. Overpowering hands wearing a wedding band. The car stopped on the side of the road, Rebecca took another sip of Coke, Jeff leaned over. He clasped her face between his hands turning it towards him and she thought how normal his face looked. It wasn't until he spoke that the spell was broken and she screamed.

"Listen!" He sounded conciliatory as if he had no idea what was wrong. "SSh!"

Rebecca's mouth became mute but her jaw remained in the same clenched position. Her flesh seemed to melt away.

She hit him, flat in the face with her rolled up fist, took him by surprise and hit him again, took the Coke bottle and hit him with that. He grabbed her hair and pulled her face next to his, she jerked back and it came away in his hands. The bottle smashed and she slit the hand that was still making for her face, laughing insanely at the sight of the blood on the seat. she opened the car door and fell out, still clutching the bottle with one hand and soothing her skull with the other, still laughing. he fell out of the same door and grabbed her foot then her knee then lunged for her hair. She was crying now, great screaming sobs, "Fucking bastard. Fucking, fucking bastard."

She was on all fours, crawling. She was losing more and more hair as he kept pulling her back and at the loss of her femininity she kept on escaping. He had the Coke bottle and she felt it tear into her leg; she hadn't remembered dropping it. She turned suddenly and lunged for his face, he loosened his grasp and she stood, momentarily dizzy in the sun, and ran. Sometimes stumbling, falling, cutting her hands on the stones she ran towards the tobacco plants. She didn't know if he followed her.

A truck pulled up on the road and scared faces leaned out. He was behind her again, "It's domestic, she's my wife." Her eyes pleaded with the man and woman in the truck but they didn't understand and drove on.

Rebecca saw her life leave with them and ran desperately screaming down the road. A scarecrow figure, arms waving, running a strange limping race against her attacker. The truck stopped again and she opened the front door and threw herself in.

"What the...?" The man sputtered and winced as she bled over the seats but put the truck into gear leaving the strange road behind her. Rebecca answered their questions, room was tight in the front of the truck,

then remained silent until they found a hospital in the first town on the tobacco road.

They had cut her hair, the bits she had left were too matted with blood to ever be untangled and she lay in the hospital bed in the starched white room on starched white sheets under the fluorescent bulb of a light. Her eyes were closed, blocking out the sights and smells of the sick, and she mourned for her hair.

Days passed. the local priest came to see her, she told him to fuck off. He had left. She made a statement to the police; they wrote the details down with serious faces. They came back.

"Miss Anderson, we've apprehended the suspect."

She said nothing.

"He's claiming he stopped the car for a rest break and you attacked him."

Rebecca opened her eyes.

"He's willing to go to court."

She thought of his reaching out for her face, tearing her hair, her clothes.

"He's a rich man, perhaps it would be better if..."

Who was she? Her carefully constructed self, her magical existence, her adventure were all destroyed. She had become something else in that hospital bed, an alien, scared at the immensity of the situation, angered by her naivety, horrified by her powerlessness. Her mind escaped from the room. She was back on the tobacco road, running, arms raised to the people in the fields, hair in the wind, alone on the landscape, running a race she would never, ever, win.

Alison Clayton, WC '98