

*Fedora*

The water laps at the shore, ebbing and rising to wet two women's legs. Their floral dresses are hiked to middle thigh, exposing smooth and winter-pale skin that glimmers on the shallows as they wade. Green twine runs from the dock into the water. One woman wears her hair short like a man's, and pulling the dampened twine she raises a wire basket filled with beer bottles from below the surface.

"Any of those chilled yet?"

"Not quite," says the shorthaired woman.

"I don't even care to wait."

"I want to wait," says the shorthaired woman, lowering the basket back into the stream. The other woman wears a grey Fedora, wading slowly, moving deeper and impaling the current with milky calves.

"How can any person work in this heat?" she says, watching two men with shovels digging in the trees off shore.

"You sure don't," says the shorthaired woman.

"Better believe I won't."

Watching her steps through the water, the shorthaired woman moves to her. "Why not," she says, "why won't you?"

The other woman ducks the brim until her eyes are within the dark shadow now hanging on her face. "Could I wear this hat?" she asks.

"I don't think so."

"Why couldn't I? Maybe not with this dress, but I could do it."

"Then I suspect you will," says the shorthaired woman. "Think if you had an office you might wear it around."

"That would be unprofessional."

"What do you know about being professional?"

"Enough to know you're mistaken thinking one could wear a hat inside an office," says the woman in the hat.

"I was wrong," says the shorthaired woman. "You look foolish. I hate that hat."

"Now you're just a damn liar."

"Then take it back where you found it."

"It was in the grass up the banks. I had to go into the brush for it, my legs have been scratched to get it, see. No one just leaves a hat like this. This is a good hat."

"I'd like to take it back," says the shorthaired woman.

"You'd like to take it home, is what you mean."

"I would not. I hate that hat," replies the shorthaired woman.

The current streams between their marble colored legs and the women hold the hems to their thighs, saying nothing. The drone of cicadas seems to spring from the arid heat itself, and the soft sounds of trees and shovels melt into dry melody.

"It's beautiful today," says the shorthaired woman, eyeing downstream. "It's like the sky is a perfect piece of glass resting atop all these trees." Her hand wipes the air in front of them both in a slow arc.

"Beautiful would be if those bottles were cold."

"Well."

"I don't know what we're waiting for," says the woman in the hat.

"I suppose I don't either."

Their knees rise like pistons and pull each step high and loud from the stream until the water shallows and they lower their dresses and let them hang and sway just above the licking ripples. The woman in the hat pulls the damp chord with both hands and water seeps between her fingers as she squeezes.

The basket of beer bottles resting on the planks, the women thrust from the water to dangle their legs from the dock and tease the surface with their toes. The shorthaired woman smooths the dress in her lap and takes the bottle when it's handed to her. The glass is green and in the sun the neck is lighter in color where there is no liquid. The label-less bottles bead in the heat.

"You never answered my question," says the shorthaired woman.

"Which?"

"Why won't you work?" The woman in the hat pulls the cork and drinks from her green bottle and looks out across shore, eyes fixed even after she starts speaking.

"There are such better ways, if you ask me," she says, drinking again.

"I am."

"You're what?"

"Asking you," says the shorthaired woman.

"Oh," she says, fingering the brim of the hat. "It's like this hat. This hat is expensive, see, you can tell. Look at this stitching, and have you felt this? Feel this fabric."

"My hands are wet, I'd better not."

"Feel the hat. You can feel the money. Isn't it lovely?"

"Yes, lovely," says the shorthaired woman.

"Someone had to buy this hat. A man bought this hat, a man with money," says the woman in the hat, taking an extensive drink from the green bottle as though to punctuate her thesis. In the trees behind their backs the men's grunts are low and rhythmic as they dig, and the women barely make out their motion through the branches.

Turning again to the water, the shorthaired woman takes a drink. "You'll be a man, then? A man with money?"

"You're mocking. But I'll have you know, finding a man with money can be as easy as finding this hat."

"Lying in the grass?" laughs the shorthaired woman.

"Maybe so. You know, I bet a decent man owned this hat," says the woman in the hat, holding the Fedora in both hands and talking into its face. "Probably came down from his busy office where he practices law to relax and think by this stream. What if we've only just missed him? What if because you walked so slowly carrying that basket he slipped right by us? But it's no bother, you know why? He'll realize that he's forgotten his hat, because it's such an expensive one, and he'll come back here and find us and love me for finding the hat and not you. He'll ask my name and take me to dinner and then I'd be surprised if he ever let me go again."

"You are just a lovely drunk fool," says the shorthaired woman.

"I've had only as much as you."

"And I'm drunk," she says. "Have another?"

"Well."

"Yes, let's have another, I'm teasing, only," says the shorthaired woman. "Let's not pout, I'm so sure he'll come back. You've convinced me now."

"Well if that's the case, then I've to pee, first."

"I'll stay here. Someone should be around when he comes back. Leave the hat with me?"

"You're filthy if you think I would." The woman in the hat stands and walks the planks to where they meet the grass and the gentle bank up to the trees. Behind her the sounds of the stream are as steady and constant as the air, and her eyes trace the shade patchwork of the grass. Up the slope, the trees thicken and the canopy is dense and there is no sun at all. Together the branches whisper, the woman in the hat listening and moving on silent feet.

She leaves the grass path and enters the thick. Her legs are clammy from the drying stream water and the cloth resists as she slips her underwear to her ankles and squats among the trunks. In the trees the wind does not blow nor carry the mutterings of the stream to her ears, but somewhere much closer now the shovels pierce and sift the ground, the sound of dirt falling on dirt heavy and dull. The urine is clear as water and pools beneath her, running down and away. The air is heavy and her breath hangs about her and already beads of sweat form above her lips and on the bridge of her nose.

She pulls up her underwear and stands in one motion. The woman removes the Fedora and fans herself as she walks toward the grass path. The shoveling has stopped. As she emerges from the trees, so too does a man from across the path. He wears a hat as fine as the woman's and rolled up sleeves and a tie loosened about his neck that hangs on his chest between the dark stains under his arms.

"Afternoon," he says.

"How d'you do?" she asks.

"Well, I'm all right." Hands in his pockets, he rocks from heel to toe.

"What brings you ladies to these woods today?" He nods to the dock down the path where the shorthaired woman sits.

"Just a warm day and cool stream. Is that your partner back there?" she asks.

"Yes it is."

"You must be the men doing all the digging, is that right?"

"That's right."

"Of all the things to be doing in this heat."

"Of all things," he says, pulling an unlit cigarette from behind his ear. For a moment they say nothing and the woman shifts her weight.

*"That's a fine hat you've got, ma'am."*

"Yes it is."

"Where does one find a hat like that?" he asks.

"In the grass, actually."

The cigarette hangs in his lips. "In this grass?"

"It isn't yours, is it?" The man gestures with his eyes to the hat on his head.

"Right," she says.

"But I might just know the fella that hat belongs to," says the man.

"I was hoping I might find him," she says, trying to see beyond him into the trees.

"You might."

"Will he be coming back for it, do you think?" The woman holds the brim and turns the hat in her hands.

"I really don't think so," he says.

"Well, how will I find him?"

"I wouldn't worry, don't think he'll have much need for it."

The woman shifts once more, and again they say nothing, the cicada drone thickening about them. The man lights the cigarette and exhales with his mouth to the sky like a wolf calling to his pack under some daytime moon.

"I'll tell you what I'll do," he says. "How's about when we're all-set up back here, I walk down to you and, if you still want, I'll make certain to put you in contact with the owner of that fine hat."

"I'd be much obliged," she says.

"Well then."

"My name's Pattie," she says and holds out a hand. The man's grip is firm.

"Don't go running off, Pattie." The man lets the cigarette fall and turns it under his sole. He walks back into the trees and Pattie watches him until the trunks hide him entirely, and then she walks down the bank back to the dock.

When Pattie returns, the shorthaired woman squints up at her. "You must have been filled to the rim," she says.

"What?"

"Nothing." She hands Pattie another bottle, and with her dress between her palm and the cork Pattie pulls it loose.

"You'll make me ask, I suppose." says the shorthaired woman.

"What about?"

"Who was your friend, up there?"

"Just one of the men doing the digging," Pattie says, gesturing to the trees. They turn and find nothing but the forest curtain with their eyes, and for now the women's conversation is the only affirmation that the wood contains any man at all. Then the sounds of work.

"They're still up there, all right," says the shorthaired woman, turning back to the stream.

"He said they'd come down to meet us."

"How'd you find him?"

"Just on the path," says Pattie.

"No, I mean, how is he?"

"He's handsome. A little quiet I suppose."

"Was he wearing a suit?" asks the shorthaired woman. Pattie drinks from her bottle.

"He was."

"He's working in his suit?"

"I guess so. He might be overseeing," says Pattie.

"He might be. Did you ask what they're digging?"

"I didn't."

"What's his name?" she asks.

"He didn't say."

"Well what the hell did you talk about all that time?"

"He was interested in the hat," says Pattie, motioning to the Fedora on her lap.

"Is it his?"

"He says it isn't, but that he might know the owner," says Pattie.

"Do you think it's true?"

"I think he's handsome enough." Pattie smiles and swings her toes above the stream.

"They're coming down, you say?"

"When they've finished," says Pattie.

Soon the afternoon begins to fade. The sunlight is a dirty orange and the near lateral rays cast shadows off the smallest Aphids swirling just above the grass and the women's skins. The basket is empty of bottles, all of which are drunk, and some of which have been hurled into the stream where their images dance under the passing wavelets.

The women lay on the planks of the dock, the brew rolling through their blood and swirling the sky above them.

"That was some real rotgut," says the shorthaired woman. She sits up and her heavy head bobs about and she spits to the stream and makes it only as far as her dress. "Don't you think?"

"Have we been sleeping here?" asks Pattie, still on her back.

"Seems like it. I was so blurry an hour ago my eyes hadn't the strength to stay open."

"You're not drunk anymore?"

"I'm plenty drunk," laughs the shorthaired woman. "It just stopped feeling nice about an hour ago. A bath and some coffee is what I need." She turns at the sounds of grassy footfalls. "Say, is this your man now?"

Pattie pulls the Fedora from over her eyes and leans on her elbow to turn and face them. Two men in striped suits are coming down the grass. One smokes a cigar and the other carries a shovel against his shoulder.

"I recognize the one smoking the cigar from earlier. I haven't seen the other yet," Pattie says.

The shorthaired woman reaches into the air and waves to the approaching men. They continue toward the dock and she puts her arm down. When their steps reach the planks the shorthaired woman calls out to them.

"Don't you gentlemen look fine for a days work?" The man with the cigar puBs it from his mouth and Pattie stands.

"How do you do, ladies?" he says. "Now, we've already met," he looks away from Pattie, "but I can't say I've had the pleasure."

The shorthaired woman holds out her hand and he takes it. "You can call me Ruth," she says.

"Indeed." He puts the cigar in his mouth and the end does not glow or smoke, and both men say nothing.

"What kind of work do you boys do?" Ruth asks.

"Digging, mostly," he says without removing the cigar.

"Always?"

"Not always. If there's a mess that needs fixing, certain people can call us."

"What kinds of people?" asks Ruth.

"Rich people."

Ruth smiles sidelong at Pattie.

"Such gentlemen to being doing such hard work," Ruth says. "Whom do you work for?"

He pulls the cigar from his mouth and looks at Ruth intently. "Whoever's hiring."

The man with the shovel keeps his back to the group and eyes the trees where they have been digging. Pattie watches the other chew on the end of his cigar until he speaks again.

"See, me and my partner," he gestures with his thumb, "we've been trying to understand how you ladies knew we was here. Sure can't see much," he says, now turning to the tree line.

"No you sure can't. But we could hear everything, that's how we knew you were there," says Ruth.

"Is that right? You hear that?" he asks his partner. "They heard everything." He taps an empty bottle with the toe of his shoe.

"I'd love to offer you a drink, but I'm afraid we've none left to give," says Ruth.

"That's fine," he says, smelling the cigar. "This kind of work is best done with a dry mouth."

"You have more to do?" asks Ruth.

"Only a little. There were a couple obstacles today." He turns to his partner. "But I'd say we've just about taken care of them, wouldn't you think?" His partner nods and rubs the shovel's handle with his thumb.

The man with the cigar snaps his fingers and looks to Pattie.

"I told you I'd help you find the owner of that hat, didn't I? I sure did. How about this, how about we accompany you ladies to your car and I'll write out his information for you right this minute." -

"I'd appreciate that very much," Pattie says, holding the Fedora.

"*That's* perfect. Where have you all parked?"

"Up the grass and around the trees," Pattie says.

"You know, if you just follow us through where we've been working it's about half as far."

"That's lovely, I'm feeling terrible," says Ruth. "Let's just gather our bottles."

"I wouldn't worry about the bottles," he interrupts. "Help them with their bottles," he says to his partner. The partner shoes the empty glass into the water and drowns them with the shovel.

"There. It's like you were never here," he smiles, throwing the cigar in the water as well.

"Well. It'd be silly if someone rich called you boys to clean up that mess, wouldn't it?" asks Ruth.

The man thinks for a moment, then smiles. "That's awful clever. Clever women can make a man worry, you ever know that?"

Ruth laughs. "Call it a man's burden," she says.

"Indeed."

The four leave the dock and move up the grass. Ruth and Pattie walk in front of the men who have removed their jackets. The men take turns rolling their sleeves while the other holds the shovel. Pattie puts the Fedora on her head, and the women hold the floral dresses against their thighs as they step over the brush and follow the men's direction into the trees. From the dock, the sounds of their rustling are gentle over the water. Then there is nothing. The hoHow resonances of the shovel are pronounced and alien in the woods, sending blackbirds out of the trees and into the gloaming.