

May escapes a mess

Jacob L. Stump¹

“He’s a pervert,” May said.

May stood at the window. Her small, wiry body was positioned to the side, near the curtain’s edge where she could stay out of sight but still peer at the house next door.

Elvia was across the room in her wheelchair. She sat in the sunlight cast through the gap in the curtains. Her lips frowned, eyebrows pursed, and her head moved skeptically. The old woman spat tobacco juice in the dented, gold-colored spittoon and looked at young May.

“May,” Elvia said loudly, “you gotta move on from that mess.”

His truck crept by May’s house and slowly pulled into the yard next door. The man got out, slammed the vehicle door, and went inside the ramshackle structure.

Dob’s arrival always lit May’s fuse. She shook and wept with fear and rage.

Elvia patted May’s back every day and saw the fire in her eyes. May had been on edge since she’d been released.

Nobody else around the small mountain community understood the situation. May was “touched” or “a little off,” so the story went. When May was seventeen, her daddy committed her to the Southwestern Lunatic Asylum.

May was institutionalized for two years. After her release, May moved in with Elvia.

Elvia lived next to Dob who worked at the Asylum as an orderly.

Most able-bodied men and women had already migrated out for work. Not Dob.

The Asylum was one of the few jobs left in the area. It was “a County job with retirement and benefits,” Dob told everybody after he got hired.

¹ Jacob L. Stump is in DePaul University's Department of International Studies. He teaches and writes on cultural political economy. He can be reached at jacoblstump@gmail.com

The Great Depression triggered the migration out of the Appalachian Mountains. Luther Hassinger set the local stage for over 20 years before the economic calamity. He brought his great steam powered sawmill to the mountains, made wageworkers of men, and laid waste to the vast forests and common spaces that surrounded the community.

From all around the mountains, folks followed Route 11, Route 23 and other roads East and North to the big cities for work. “There ain’t no jobs in the mountains,” everybody said as they drove away.

Waged jobs had always been scarce in the mountains. It only mattered now because people wanted cash to buy stuff.

It was during these changing times that May met Dob at the Asylum. Dob helped doctors work on the committed. He held patients down and moved them around.

Dob did obscene things to May. He would put May back into the cell, tranquilized and hazy, and then grab her pussy, squeeze her breasts, and whisper his nasty desires into her ear every Wednesday for two years of routine treatment. His breath always stank of cigarettes.

May could do nothing. She was too drugged to respond at the time. No one believed her afterwards.

Elvia saw what was going on. Since May’s release from the Asylum, Elvia watched her crumble. Elvia could see the end point in May’s eyes.

May’s bags were packed early one afternoon and set by the front door.

A metal can full of gas was out back on the porch.

Elvia had already arranged May’s ride off the mountain and to the city.

Elvia’s nephew had promised to take May “uppa country” to the Washington, D.C. area. Locals knew of a strict widow woman who ran a house with rooms to let for young, unmarried, workingwomen.

May got office work in the city right away and left the mountains behind.

Elvia looked on as she told the story.

Everything looks different. The old wooden house where Dob once lived had vanished. Blackened patches of dirt and burnt timbers had been overtaken by young green grass.

Elvia chuckled and pointed, “The flames reached into the sky as near tall as that pine over there.”