

OUTSIDERS

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A noise shook me alert from my book. Rustling, bodies moving. Voices: male and female. A foreign tongue. And close—within range of the cabin. Steadily coming forward from the woods with no attempt to hide.

Anyone who knows anything about moonshining knows you never sneak up on a still, or you might end up with a face full of birdshot. That's where my mind lingered in the midst of reading about Virginia's historic moonshining capital of the world.

Backed up by The Peak in Shenandoah National Park, surrounded by thousands of forested acres and only one part-time neighbor in the vicinity, this one-room hideaway in the Blue Ridge Mountains offers up just a few noises I would expect to hear while reading on the front porch: a woodpecker tapping against bark, a squirrel rustling in leaves, the speedy gallop of a light-footed deer, or maybe the clumsy tromp of a black bear linebacker through the brush. None would arouse my suspicion.

This shuffling movement was something else entirely. I picked up the three-foot long barrel of the BugZooka™, a gray plastic contraption we use to suck up stinkbugs, and cocked it on my denim hip like a shotgun. I opened the screen door and then slammed it shut. The voices did not abate with my warning.

Trespassers.

My Center City Philadelphia apartment-dwelling, politically-active mother had always been an anti-handgun advocate—a member of the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence and so forth. She espoused the values of many urban liberals who lived in cities ravaged by gun violence in the 1960s, '70s, and '80s, like the Bernhard Goetz incident in the New York City subway. The only kind of gun use people like us cityfolk had ever really heard about was urban and gang-, drug-, or race-related. And so guns—all guns, for all reasons—were bad, and wrong.

When she visited our weekend cabin one spring, however, spending two nights high up on the mountain—three miles from town; out of view of any other house, building, or structure; out of earshot of any living soul; alone with the elements and the wide sky and all of God's creation deep in the dark forest—and secured only by an unlocked screen door all through the day and the long, moonlit, shadowy night, it was then that she admitted to me, "I can see why someone would want to own a gun, living in a place like this."

"And something faster than a handgun, too," she added.

And so there I was, with my fake shotgun and intruders I couldn't see persisting a few hundred feet away. Still caught up in the drama of my book, I whisper-shouted into the cabin to my husband, "Someone's on our land!" And since we really were weaponless—aside from the axe used for splitting wood and the machete for cutting down brush along the edge of the road—I sent the Big Man outside to take care of business.

My biology-teacher husband strolled down the driveway

in his cartoon-frog t-shirt, shorts, and Birkenstocks, armed with his man-hands and biceps and killer personality, while the group's conversation continued down the hill. This is unbelievable, I'm thinking. Something's gonna go down.

"Come pick me up in the car once I get down there, and let's get some lunch," he had said on the way out to the confrontation. So I waited a few minutes, and then I set aside that useless non-weapon, grabbed the keys, and thundered down the driveway in a bigger killing machine than a lousy firearm—the silver Subaru station wagon—hardening myself up for when I got a look at these criminals.

At the switchback, a flat, smooth clearing along the edge of the driveway about 25 feet from a trail into the national park, a group of ten placid men and women sat relaxed in the grass, cross-legged. In the center of the circle was a small black pot. In each cupped hand was a porcelain bowl. Fingers clacking wooden chopsticks made quick trips from bowl to mouth. As I approached in the vehicle that could have easily steamrolled them, they looked up at the car, unfazed. Neil opened a door and got in it.

"Keep driving," he said calmly.

I pressed the pedal gingerly, not wanting to go too far too fast away from these strangers. What's their story? I still wanted to know.

They were hikers from the park, he explained. They did not realize they had wandered onto private land. They did not speak English well. They may have been, as we then recalled, the same group of chopsticked soup-eating hikers we had encountered on a hike in the same park just a few weeks ago, enchantingly huddled in a circle in a foggy forest, like a tradition, something

we'd never seen in 20 years of hiking in this area.

"They said they'll leave as soon as they're finished with lunch," he explained. And they continued eating their noodles and meat—mothers, brothers, sisters, friends—as I picked up speed and drove around the pond and away.