

The Mountain's Shadow

Jennifer Barton

“Other kids probably say, ‘Man, I wish I was him,’” Buck Lawson Jr. says as he leads me around his father’s racetrack on a snow-blown March day. He throws a hand up at the concession-stand vendors and cruises through pit row like it’s his living room. His older cousin, Lane Lawson, 13, follows close behind us. As Buck Jr. slaps the hands of various crew members, each tuning up a car for the New River Valley Raceway’s first race of 1968, Lane gives me a wink to imply that he doesn’t always let this 9-year-old get away with so much swagger. He keeps silent as we walk, however, and lets the racing legend’s son do all of the talking. Both boys are visibly proud that Buck Lawson will be the first NASCAR driver ever put on the cover of Sports Illustrated.”

I look up when Little Buck stops reading. He closes the magazine and studies the floorboard-view photo of his daddy on the cover, which has his signature scrawled across it.

“Is that reporter making fun of me, Momma?” he asks. Multiple readings have worn down the excitement of seeing his name in print and given way to suspicion.

“No, son,” I reply. “He’s trying to make your daddy sound like a big shot.”

He looks up at me. I don’t usually let my contempt show in front of the kids. Taking another Mason jar full of canned vegetables out of the kitchen cabinet, I wrap it in newspaper and pack it in a wooden crate stamped “Lawson Lumber.” Even though Big Buck has been bringing home more than enough money to buy our food for years, I’ve never gotten out of the habit of canning. My mother always told me it would save my life in hard times, and she was right.

“Well he is a big shot, ain’t he?” Little Buck says.

I put the jar down and look at him. My youngest child, my only boy. At one time, I was just as enamored with Big Buck as he is, maybe even more so, but 19 years of big talk, fast living and turning a blind eye have worn me out. In the past week, the magazine article has made everything bad about our marriage

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up at me again.
“What’s bootleg?”

worse. Big Buck has hardly been home at all, and when he was, he was either on the phone or throwing loud, wild parties for businessmen I’d never seen before. Overflowing ashtrays, empty liquor bottles and stray nylons litter the house. Several times I heard him talk of sinking all our money into a new track down in North Carolina. As usual, me and the kids haven’t even registered as afterthoughts. The whirlwind forced me to make the decision I’ve been struggling against for years.

“The rest of the world seems to think he is,” I tell him.

Little Buck opens the magazine again and labors across long words in a slow, careful voice. “Buck Lawson learned his signature slides and breakneck speed early in life, transporting bootleg out of the mountains of his home county in southwestern Virginia.” He looks up at me again. “What’s bootleg?”

“Oh, Bucky,” I sigh. I don’t want to hear my husband mythologized on this of all days. Plus, the bootlegging is one part of Big Buck’s past I would still prefer to keep from the kids. Even though I no longer have any interest in covering up Big Buck’s mistakes for him, I don’t want Little Buck following in his path.

“Footwear,” I reply.

Little Buck shrugs. I wrap a quart of mixed pickles and top the crate off with it. “Help me carry this to the car,” I tell him. He slips off the barstool and puts both hands on a handle.

I lead the way through the kitchen and the living room, past the shiny appliances and leather furniture that I'll have to get used to living without. Outside, our sloping front lawn is beginning to show signs of spring. The grass is more green than brown, and the bare tree branches display small buds. My nose doesn't sting as I breathe the warming air.

"How long we gonna have to stay at Aunt Bonnie's?" Little Buck asks, straining to keep a hold on his side of the crate as we make our way down the winding driveway. "This looks like enough food for a month."

I don't say anything, knowing the time has come to tell him the truth about our leaving. My three girls are already at my sister's, happy to be away from their daddy's changing moods and the ringing telephone. People have been calling all week to congratulate Big Buck on his cover story. Little Buck is different, though. He idolizes his daddy in a way the girls never have. He won't be able to sympathize with me and see that this change is for his good, too. The perfect moment I've been waiting all day for isn't going to come. There is only now.

"We're not just going so the construction crew can attach a garage to the house," I say when we reach the red '68 Cadillac that Big Buck bought me after one of his long trips away. It's parked behind a tin shelter that protects two of Big Buck's racecars. Putting the crate down on the gravel, I pop the trunk and look at Little Buck. "We're going. For good."

Little Buck stares at me. "Daddy, too?"

"No. He's staying here. It's only us that's going."

Little Buck tilts his stare down to the gravel. His open face steels against the source of his pain, against me. Then, in a flash of movement, he runs back to the house.

"Dammit," I say, watching him jerk the front door open and slam it behind him. Leaving the crate of jars where it sits, I hurry after him. I should have told him hours ago. I should have given him time. Looking down at my watch, I see that it is already after four. Big Buck will be back from the sawmill office before six to pick up his racecar. I don't want to be around to hear his protests and feel his temper. Somehow I will have to make Little Buck understand.

I slip through the foyer and into the living room. Looking up the curving staircase, I see that his door is closed. "Bucky?" I call out. I start climbing when he doesn't answer, my cold hand firm on the black cherry banister. Why didn't I just tell him this morning, I think. Why did I think waiting would make it easier? Trying his door, I find it locked. I give the wood a firm knocking.

"You'll get to play with Lane every day," I say, my voice loud but trembly. "Your cousin Shir'l's twins are just starting to walk and talk. I bet they're a lot of fun."

"I hate babies!" he yells.

"Well, you don't have to play with them, then. But you do have to go, so open the door." I look at my watch again. Quarter after four. We need to get the hell out. The phone starts ringing, but I don't make a move to answer it. I've gotten in a habit of letting it go. Little Buck's door remains locked.

“If you stay here, you’ll never get fed,” I say, thinking that he won’t be bathed or clothed, made to go to sleep or school, either. “Your daddy can’t cook and he can’t get home at any normal hour. You want to sit in there starving to death?”

“I don’t care,” he says in a small voice. “I’ll go to the track with him and eat there.”

“You gonna stay all night and eat breakfast there, too?”

Little Buck is silent. I hear a car crunching up the driveway. My stomach flutters at the sound of its engine being cut. The phone stops ringing.

“Get out, get out, get out!” I scream, pounding on Little Buck’s door.

“No, no, no!” he yells back. Panicked, I consider running out the back without him, but Big Buck is already in the foyer calling my name.

“Why the hell’d you park behind my racers, Mart?” he asks, his voice booming to reach the farthest corners of the house. From the landing at the top of the stairs, I see him move from the foyer into the living room. He walks stiffly, like he just got off a horse. His muscular body is rigid beneath his leather jacket, and his thick neck strains at his tie. He searches out where I stand from the bottom of the stairs, his cheeks and chin fleshy but hard. People who look at his soft, smiling face in *Sports Illustrated* wouldn’t believe how hard and angry it can get.

“You know I have a race tonight,” he says, his voice quieter now that it has found its target. As he speaks, Little Buck’s door bursts open. Shooting past me down the stairs, he attaches himself to Big Buck’s waist. His face is round like his daddy’s, but not hard. His soft features are red and creased with fear. Big Buck recoils in surprise, then looks up at me. “What the hell?”

I avert my eyes from him. My mind seems to empty out, jumping away from what is happening. Looking down, I watch myself pick red fingernail polish from my manicure. My button-up shirtwaist dress is mused from loading crates into the car. There are fancy gowns in the closet just down the hall that I didn’t pack and will no longer have use for. I think about them instead of looking at my husband and my son.

“I said what the hell, Mart.” Big Buck’s voice is calmer, but more suspicious. I venture a glance at him and see that he is allowing Little Buck’s arms to remain clasped around him. He appears to be tender in a way I remember him being a long time ago. Some women would think I am crazy to leave this man. This rich and famous man. Some women would love to be in my place. But the girls are already at Bonnie’s. Everything is set up.

“Momma’s leaving,” Little Buck pipes up, saying the thing I’m not able to. “She wants me to go to Aunt Bonnie’s with her.”

“Oh, she does, huh?” The phone starts ringing again and Big Buck’s eyes dart toward the kitchen, but he doesn’t move. “What’s this all about, Mart?”

“I ...” My voice falters. I’m unable to put everything I’ve been holding back into words. The little pieces of it sound trivial when I separate them out; it’s all of it together that I can’t take.

“Well?”

“I can’t stay anymore, Buck. It’s too much.”

“Too much? What do you mean, Mart? What’s too much?”

“Everything.” I look toward the kitchen, where the phone is still ringing. “The parties, the danger, the telephone ... everything, Buck. I need some peace. I need some peace and so do the kids.”

He stares down at the top of his son’s head. There is more hurt in his face than I could have imagined being able to cause him. After all the other women and all the nights he left me alone, maybe he still cares for me in some way. “Too much ...” he mumbles to Little Buck’s hair. I watch as he turns this over in his mind and wish I were already at Bonnie’s, ignorant of any power I have to wound this man. Suddenly he sheds Little Buck’s arms and heads for the stairs. “So the food I bring home for you and the kids is too much, Mart? The roof I put over your heads? The clothes I put on your backs?”

I squeeze my eyes shut and wait for something to happen. A flower vase or picture frame to smash against my head, maybe. My arm to be jerked out of its socket as I’m dragged down the stairs. He’s always been more vocal than violent, but I can never predict him. I hear his heavy footsteps on the landing and smell a mix of sawdust, gasoline, and aftershave breeze past me. I open my eyes. He’s gone into our room at the end of the hall and is throwing perfume bottles, makeup cases and gowns out the window. Beneath it is the muddy pit that had been dug for the new garage. Everything is ruined.

“Buck,” I say, edging into the doorway.

“Go on, Mart,” he says with a restraint that chills me more than his roar. “You think you’re too good for me now? Well, go on back to that filthy lot I took you from. Go on and teach our girls to be dirty whores like your sister taught hers to be. But if you touch our boy, I’ll sue you past poor.” He tosses the two hard-shell

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suitcases I packed earlier out into the hall. They make a great clatter on the hardwood floor as I dart away from the doorway to miss them. One of them bursts open, letting some of my underwear and slippers spill out. I kneel and stuff it back together as quickly as I can.

Big Buck stands in the doorway of our bedroom, watching me work. My hands tremble over the silk. All of this was supposed to have been done in private. He wasn't supposed to see any of it. My head is spinning and nothing makes sense. Somehow he has turned things in his favor once again.

"Buck!" he yells, bringing the boy scampering up the steps. Our son steps over my remaining underwear on the floor. Big Buck clenches the boy to him, his massive forearm stretching across his chest. "Your mother is leaving," he says. "Tell her goodbye."

Little Buck looks down at where I sit on the floor. He doesn't leer at me the way Big Buck does. He is distraught and frightened. I stand and look him in the eyes, angry that his daddy is making me his enemy, but powerless to do anything about it. Big Buck doesn't want to take care of him, he just wants me to suffer. I want Little Buck to break free of his daddy's hold and run to me, but I know he won't. I will forever be something beaten in his eyes.

"Bye," he says quickly, looking away from me. I look up at Big Buck. His face is frozen in that hateful expression. Despite it, I wish I could still tolerate him. I wish I didn't care what he said to my face and did behind my back. I wish there was some way I could remain the glamorous wife of a famous racecar driver. But even if I wanted to stay, Big Buck wouldn't let me. It took 19 years of betrayals for me to say enough, but only once for him.

"You know where the door is," he says. "Get off my property."

"I love you, Bucky," I say, but he won't acknowledge me. "You know where I'll be, if you need me."

Big Buck reaches a hand out like he is going to run his fingers through my hair, but grabs a fistful of long black strands instead. I gasp, smacking at his arm. He pulls harder and my knees begin to buckle.

"Get the hell out!" Big Buck yells, pushing me away as he releases my hair.

I stumble backwards against the banister, shielding my head with my arms. Pain spreads out from the left side of my scalp. I look through my elbows and see Big Buck standing there with his arm across our son, like he is protecting him from a vicious animal.

Letting my arms down, I pick up my two suitcases and look at Little Buck once more. He is still staring at the ground. I turn and hurry down the stairs. The front door closes on the sound of the phone being answered.

Trudging down the hillside to my car, I see a pile of green, white, yellow, black, and pink satin in the steaming red clay next to the house. The ground is starting to thaw in the warmer temperatures. Soon there will be no traces left of the life I lived here. Everything will be consumed by mud and covered with concrete.

The crate of canned vegetables still sits behind my car. It's too heavy for me to lift on my own, so I take half of the jars out before hoisting it into the

trunk. A dozen newspaper-wrapped jars sit askew on the gravel. I stand for a moment looking at them, knowing Big Buck is watching from inside the house. I want him to remember when canned food was all we had to eat. He was so gentle then, so happy. It seems like a whole lifetime has passed since there was no legend for him to uphold. Replacing the jars in the crate inside the trunk, I wonder what Little Buck will eat tonight, or if he'll eat at all. I've torn us apart, I think as I put my suitcases next to the crate. I've torn us all apart.

Head throbbing, I climb in the driver's seat. In the rearview mirror, I see that some of my hair is snarled into a knot. The hairspray my stylist used yesterday to smooth down my waves holds the shape of Big Buck's fist perfectly. I comb at the tangle with cold, shaking fingers, not caring when it snags and pulls.

Gravel crunches beneath my tires as I back off the hill. Tears I wasn't able to cry before start to come with the vanishing of the stately brick house, with its white-columned front porch. My Tara in the mountains, I think. Where I learned to host parties and be glamorous. Little Buck is in there hearing what a low-down, trashy, holier-than-thou woman I am. Things will never be the same between us.

Vision blurry, I pull onto the blacktop and head down the mountain. I'm anxious to get back to my girls, but dread being crammed into Bonnie's creaking old A-frame with eight other people. We'll be sleeping head to toe tonight, just like when I was growing up there in the holler. My luster will soon be coated in dull, dirty poverty again. When Little Buck gets older, he won't remember how stunning I once was. He won't remember how hard I tried to stay, how hard it was for me to go.

As the Blue Ridge begins to envelop me, my view is restricted from miles to feet. When I wake up tomorrow morning, instead of seeing sunlit treetops and misty peaks, I'll be trapped in the shadow of a mountain.

Jennifer Barton's stories have appeared in Pindeldyboz, Lost, Hawk and Handsaw, Kudzu, Motif #2, Wilderness House Literary Review and Pine Mountain Sand and Gravel. She has completed her first novel, of which this story is a part.