

Janisse Ray

an excerpt of

Pilgrimage

CLOSE to midnight, with a screech of grapevines, Marrakesh embedded her pickup where a road long ago had led countrymen to purposes unknown. She cut the parking lights and sat within branches, staring into the night. Beneath the broad hood the hot engine ticked, and elsewhere the old truck fidgeted in its settling. The world slowly emerged a wan gray: silhouettes of tree limbs and dangling leaves, driven not by blood but sap. A place that claimed vengeance slowly, a metered malevolence.

Only Marrakesh would have dared enter Errol Peacock's woods. *Hermetic, cantankerous, bitter—he's as likely to kill you as not.*

She levered open the door and with her weight against it made an alley through which to slide alongside the truck, a small pack on her back. She watched for car lights. In the telltale sand she scrubbed out the tire prints with her boots and dug for a flashlight. To find your way back to something, you must, at odd intervals, look behind. In the small nimbus the light created, the dirt showed itself scarred by movements of small creatures and pocked along its sandy edges with the funnels of ant lions.

She crept to the edge, face first, and looked down. The world feels different when you know it's not always there. She aimed the light over, and it dispersed against a ground contoured with limestone maybe thirty feet below.

The face of the bluff was verdant with plants: emerald fern, growing lushly from moss. A sprout of red maple. Fiddlehead fern, and resurrection. Venushair. A small vine looped around a few red fruits—partridge berry. Marrakesh stopped the light on a pale green stalk that arched thinly from the cliff,

at its tip the dry wisps of past blooms. Could that be green-fly? Yes! It was. Green-fly orchid.

Rare, protected. This might be a plant to help save the place.

Marrakesh heard dogs but didn't think much about it at first. A number of coon hunters, mostly old men, still ran hounds, for exercise more than anything. Hop hornbeam. Cherry laurel. Swamp chestnut oak. Overcup oak. A godhead of trillium. She checked her watch and found it almost one.

Then the dogs roused her attention, and she hunkered and studied their yelping. They were closer than she had thought. She pocketed the notepad and tightened the press before zipping it into the pack, which she hoisted. Checking the compass, she headed southeast, stopping first to listen.

The noise of the approaching dogs was gaining volume so rapidly that Marrakesh knew she would never reach the water. Briefly she felt panic, then told herself that hunt dogs wouldn't attack a human, although these sounded as much bloodhounds as coon dogs. Their yelping careened through the woods, enough to raise the hair on her arms. Marrakesh looked wildly for a tree and saw one, miraculously, some kind of oak whose limbs started low enough. She dashed to it, hands free. Leaping, she barely reached the first limb and, using her legs for leverage, shimmied up the trunk. One time she'd seen a dog so crazy for a Frisbee that it appeared to climb a tree, but even that exceptional dog never got higher than three feet.

She listened and heard another voice, this one more discernible. It sounded like "Joe Riley," except that in the effort to gain volume the caller sacrificed enunciation, so that all the consonants of the name melded. Before the call faded, Marrakesh heard it again, exactly, this time from the opposite direction, from out the river swamp. Odd how a swamp can echo good as any mountain, words bouncing off buttressed cypress and tupelo. "Joe Riley

. . . Riley . . . ley.” The woods, too, wanted whatever was lost to be found and whoever was confused to be made to understand.



By no means was the tree in a clearing, and thus the men appeared to her one by one, each swinging a light that flickered across the ground and through the trees this way then that. Three of them, as far as Marrakesh could tell, came on, although she saw only the spooky gray outlines of their bodies, backlit by a glow reflected off foliage. So hindered was her sight that she couldn't see details, although one of them, even viewed from above, appeared to be the biggest man she'd ever laid eyes on. For a moment she wondered if these weren't men at all, but hooded lucifers plundering the gloom without quiescence. Their devil hounds were real enough.