The Real Thing

I tried to get inside moonshine any way I could

by MATT BONDURANT

THIS PAGE:
Checking corn mash before distillation

THE LIQUOR STORE DOWN THE street from my house in Oxford, Mississippi, is slowly vanishing, bottle by bottle. When stock is depleted it usually isn't replaced. The land behind the store has been cleared and leveled—like a lot of Oxford recently—and a new mixed-use shopping center is coming soon. There's no more wine to speak of, and all that's left in the vodka section are dusty bottles of expensive European stuff that's quadruple distilled and made with elderberries gathered above the Alpine tree line. Sometimes, just for fun, I peruse the "specialty" whiskies, the new fad of clear corn liquor in mason jars and faux clay jugs, often with names that play on "moon" or "corn" or Southern-hick stereotypes, making claims to authenticity. The real thing, they say. It shouldn't mean anything to me; the people putting this stuff out aren't taking bread from my children or restricting my artistic ambitions. Yet the sight of it on the shelves gives me a jolt of irritation and a lingering hint of something like regret.

The first time I smelled pure corn liquor I was nine years old. A pack of us kids were out in the cornfield that night, racing through the tall rows trying to scare the shit out of each other and herd

The author's grandfather
Jack Bondurant, ca. 1930s

some unwary loser, usually me, into the high-tensile strands of electric fencing at the perimeter that were nearly invisible in the darkness. This was at my uncle Howard's place in Franklin County, Virginia. The adults were sitting around the television, quietly digesting the evening meal of chicken hash, green beans, and cast-iron skillet cornbread, the crust made from super-heating the lard till it smoked, the inside white and slightly sour. My father and his brothers and sisters would crumble a hunk of it into a glass of fresh buttermilk, spooning it out like ice cream. "I'll have just a light meal," my dad used to say, "a light brown meal."

I was a small child, and that night on a dead run the wire caught me neck high, a 4,000-volt shortcut to my brain. A bit later I stood in the kitchen with my cousin Andrew, holding a rag filled with ice to my neck. I looked like I'd been garroted with a jellyfish. The adults had gone to sleep and the house was quiet enough to hear the roaring cicadas in the trees. Andrew dug around in a bottom cabinet and produced a half-gallon mason jar filled with clear liquid. "White lightning," he said.

He opened the jar and told me to take a sniff. It was like putting my face into a campfire. The heat seared my nostrils and erupted through my skull, the second dose of brain damage I received that evening. He took a sip, then dared me to. For a few minutes we swapped the jar, taking tiny sips and going into exaggerated hacking and coughing fits like some kind of vaudeville act. I thought the sole purpose of it was for a dare—how much miserable suffering could you endure? Why else would you want to drink something like that?

Over the next twenty years, I caught regular glimpses of untaxed, homemade corn liquor. On the day after Christmas in Franklin County, we used to shoot skeet in a sloping pasture that ran down to a muddy creek. The men drank eggnog and white lightning, and as the day went on, things got a bit loose. I remember my father, a teetotaler his whole life, telling me to stand behind the pickup trucks while my cousins tossed clay pigeons like Frisbees, four or five men working their pump shotguns at the same time, the crisp winter air thick with the scent of gunpowder, lead, and whiskey. At family gatherings, men would suddenly disappear, returning an hour later, bleary-eyed and grinning. I remember seeing my grandfather, then well into his eighties, leaning into the trunk of his Oldsmobile in a gravel parking lot, pouring liquid into a plastic cup.

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THIS PAGE: Photo courtesy of the author; PREVIOUS SPREAD: Blue Ridge Institute & Museum of Ferrum College, Earl Palmer Collection

It's the smell that gives it away—pure corn whiskey is an olfactory sledgehammer. You have about a second before the heat of the alcohol burns away any discernable aroma, but in that first instant there is the unmistakable, unadulterated fog of rotting corn mash, the heated stew of fermenting sugars and enzymes. None of my relatives ever called it that. White mule, rotgut, wildcat, stump whiskey, white lightning, or just plain white, but not moonshine. And they ought to know, as the Bondurants of Franklin County remain one of the most notorious moonshining families in Virginia history. The real thing.

We were the branch of the family that left. When the Korean War started, my father and a buddy flipped a coin to see which service they'd join. My father lost and spent the next couple of years at a Navy base in French Morocco, Africa, as a crewman on training aircraft. When he was discharged from the Navy, he hitchhiked from Norfolk across the state to Franklin County in his Navy dress whites, Dixie-cup hat akimbo, wearing the mad grin of the free man. He got a ride with a couple of young women on their way home from college, driving a convertible Chevy. They took him as far as Roanoke, and I imagine that my father, hat in hand, watching those ladies roar away in a cloud of dust, began to think that college seemed like a damn good idea.

He eventually earned a master's degree in engineering and settled in the suburbs of Washington, DC, where I was born and raised. As a child, my dad went barefoot all summer and and worked the fields on the family farm—the endless, backbreaking labor of pulling tobacco. When I was a kid, I spent my summer making mix tapes, going to swim-team practice, and attempting to hack into business mainframes with my Commodore 64 computer via a telephone modem. It would be hard to find a larger generation gap in twentieth-century America, and for this reason I've always considered myself lucky. But the break is about more than just time. We are the branch of the family without a Southern accent. My sensibilities are more East Coast, closer to New England than the South. I prefer chowder to gumbo, Melville to Faulkner.

My wanderlust hasn't helped much. In the last twenty years, I've lived and worked in four different states and two countries. As a professor, I've had teaching jobs at four universities, making me a sort of journeyman academic, a Moses Malone or Bobby Bonilla of English departments. I've published three novels so far, one set in London and Egypt, one set in Virginia, and one set in Ireland and Vermont. I have a child born in New York, one in Texas, and now one in Mississippi. It is clear to me that I am a man of no place.

ALL THROUGH MY CHILDHOOD, my family made the requisite visits to Franklin County during the holidays and summers, and my cousins took great delight in exposing my naïveté about agricultural practices and rural life. I also heard the stories of how Grandpa Jack was once the moonshine king of the county. This wasn't hard to accept. My Grandpa Jack was a flinty character straight out of a Larry Brown story; stoic, silent as a stone, physically imposing, and with an accent that was nearly impenetrable to my ears. He would stare at me over the breakfast table, slowly masticating a biscuit, his eyes glazed over,

> I pieced together my grandfather's life, in fact and fiction, through rumor and research.

then shake his head in a dismissive manner, like I was too pathetic to bother with. He carried a gun for much of his life. A pair of brass knuckles hung on a nail over the toilet in the back bathroom. People from around the county treated him with a palpable deference. He'd been shot at least once, under his left arm on a snowy morning at the Maggodee Creek Bridge in December of 1930, and never told anyone about it. When his own children found out around 1985, he merely acknowledged the story as true and lifted his shirt to show the bullet hole. No explanation, no context. Grandpa Jack was the real thing.

When I visited, my grandfather would roust me in the mornings to feed the cows. I remember the silent truck cab in the darkness before dawn, the wheel wells mucked with red clay, straw, and tobacco. How I stood in the truck bed cutting the twine and pushing out the hay bales as he cruised through the fields, a funnel of cows lumbering in our wake. We didn't talk. This was terrifying, exhilarating stuff for a suburban kid like me, and I have to think that was his way of trying to communicate something to his grandson. He died when I was a teenager, and I regret that I never had an actual conversation with the man.

Instead I pieced together my grandfather's life, in fact and fiction, through rumor and research. He had a rich and violent past, and with his brothers formed the Bondurant Brothers, the infamous crew of moonshiners in Franklin County, Virginia, the "Moonshine Capital of the World." I learned that Bondurants have been living in that little corner of the Appalachian foothills since the early eighteenth century, eking out a subsistence living growing tobacco, raising a bit of cattle and corn, and making untaxed liquor.

I studied basic chemistry, learning the fundamentals of distillation. I toured legitimate distilleries, read all the books, newspapers, letters, memoirs, listened to the music. I rode four-wheelers through the woods to visit old still sites, the rusting remains of cooling coils, thumper kegs, mash boxes. I stood on the remains of Maggodee Creek Bridge, trying to approximate the exact spot where sheriff's deputies shot Grandpa Jack in the chest and my great uncle Forrest in the stomach. Both survived, and my father still remembers the way Uncle Forrest's stomach would bulge unnaturally when he ate, the food leaking through the perforated stomach lining. I sampled product. I holed up in my brother's West Virginia mountain house with a half-gallon jar of Franklin County white for three days, wandering the woods during the day, sitting in a pool of lamplight at night listening to the Carter Family sing murder ballads. I tried to get inside moonshine any way I could.

The result was the novel *The Wettest County in the World*, published in 2008, which became the movie *Lawless* in 2012. My family came to Los Angeles for the premiere, and my dad loved every minute of it, joking with Shia LaBeouf, the actor playing my grandpa Jack, taking selfies with Jessica Chastain, and working the crowd at the afterparty well after midnight. I was having lots of conference calls and meetings in Santa Monica with thirty-year-old guys wearing flannel

Men leave their still site with pieces of the still. Virginia Blue Ridge, ca. mid-20th century

OPPOSITE PAGE: Blue Ridge Institute & Museum of Ferrum College, Earl Palmer Collection

A moonshine still confiscated by the Internal Revenue Bureau, ca. 1920s

National Photo Company Collection/Library of Congress

shirts and flip-flops who wanted me to pitch them ideas for television shows. First-class flights, press junkets, my wife doing the backstroke in the rooftop pool of the W Hotel on Hollywood Boulevard. The world seemed like it was speeding up, and at times I felt a bit sick about it. I had cashed in on my family's past. I took something real, something true, and packaged it into a story. Now, I know enough about the history of moonshine to know that it's always been about money. Was this any different?

I also noticed a growing mainstream interest in moonshine. It began to appear in liquor stores as a sort of boutique whiskey, a way to experience this exotic, outlawed practice. Some say it was the recession that caused a few states, such as Tennessee, to relax their distilling regulations, creating an opening in the market for these faux moonshiners. About 50,000 cases of legal moonshine were sold in 2010, jumping to 250,000 in 2012. And the numbers keep rising. Ole Smoky Tennessee Moonshine, the top-performing brand, sells more than 300,000 cases each year, and the international market is just beginning to catch fire. Now corporate giants like Jim Beam and Jack Daniel's are marketing "white" whiskies. Package the story, feed the legend, make some money.

Last year, my first cousins Robert and Joey Bondurant, buoyed by the press and buzz surrounding the movie made from my book, renovated an old warehouse in Chase City, Virginia. They moved in a couple of stainless-steel stills, got the requisite permits, and started making legal whiskey. Bondurant Brothers Distillery hand grinds Hickory King corn, an heirloom sweet corn, all of it grown in Virginia. This is the same white corn my grandfather used in the 1930s. Their tag line: "Some Moonshine is legendary and some is made by legends, ours is both!" They use an old family recipe, and it's fair to say this is as close to the authentic article as you can get, legally. The real thing. I hope they succeed. I plan to order a bottle or two, if my local liquor store here in Oxford hasn't disappeared.

WHAT DOES MOONSHINE MEAN? I'm talking about the actual article, the condensed drops that gather in the coils and coalesce into a stream of clear, hot liquid. Spinning the lid on the jar, the heat on the back of the tongue, the loosening of the joints, the bones of your chest floating apart, watching the clouds race through the trees, the rush of feeling that comes with knowing that anything is possible in this life. Does moonshine have any inherent value or meaning? I've come to the conclusion that it is an existential object; its existence precedes its essence. We as a society have created its value and meaning, bound up in images of mountains and overalls and shotguns and the way a man wears his hat. I played my part in this fiction.

People write me all the time wanting to tell me stories of their family's moonshining past, their Southern roots, even to parse bits of Southern history, culture, recipes. I'm flattered and I try to answer them as best I can, but I am merely feeding an illusion. What I want to say is this: The person you think I am is a façade. I inhabit different worlds for the three to five years that it takes to write a novel. The last four years, I've been living (in my head) in the far northeastern corner of New York, in a fictional town where people work in supermax prisons and run snowmobiles across the frozen Canadian border with a million dollars of ecstasy strapped to their backs. I left that world of southern Virginia, the world of moonshine and dangerous, silent men like my grandfather, ten years ago.

But that's not true either. I was never really there. I was always the outsider, the kid from the suburbs visiting on the holidays, the one who talked differently, the one who didn't hunt. The young boy herded into the wire at midnight.

The Wettest County in the World wasn't about feeding the legend of the Bondurant Boys, or even feeding my growing family. It was a love letter shot into the darkness of the past. I know there will never be a reply.

And yet. The deep red clay of the road cuts, the ripple of tobacco leaves in the afternoon. A stand of silent corn at night, the winking sliver of taut wire. The way an old woman invites you to come visit, the offer of four different kinds of cake and pie with coffee. The bowl of creamed corn bubbling in the skillet, my grandmother tossing in a heavy pinch of sugar. The sharp tang and burn of corn whiskey going down your gullet like a rusty knife. History reverberates like the tones of church bells in winter; you can't see it or even sense the direction but you can feel something coming back, an answer. The real thing. You're never ready for that. It's everything you were afraid to know, and everything you wanted to say.

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