

## **Love in a Live Oak**

**Robert Stimpson**

The big old southern live oak is a giant standing in my path. His knuckles drag the ground as he stands sentry afore me.

Momma'd always tell me the live oak is the best house a man can have. The way its canopy arcs over'll protect you, and the way it's branches dip low'll give you a dry bed. The nuts are food and the leaves sheets and the trunk stays warm all winter what lets it never lose its leaves, even when the hills get mighty cold at night. She said they call it the live oak because none'd ever seen one dead, but once momma went to bed papa told me that was horseshit. Don't matter much now what papa thought. Nobody gives a damn what the six feet under think. Don't matter much now what momma thought either. My Caroline is waiting for me, and momma cain't stop me finding her.

I first saw my Caroline next to a big old live oak. Thatn had been a whole lot better cared for than the beast in fronta me now. Tall and proud it was, standing straight with the branches curving out at the top. Not like my Caroline. She had been just as fine and proud as that tree, but was hunched down under it in one of her fits. Then again, I cain't say this monster here is worse off for not having been cared for. looks pretty dang healthy to me. Its branches might stoop and touch the dirty earth, but they're big around and strong enough and they never quit at growing. Not like me. I might be strong and big like the tree, but I stand up tall and I quit growing years back.

Every week or so my Caroline sends me a letter with onea them damn little postage stickers on it. I don't know where she gets them from, and neither does momma. If I leave the letters at the postman's house without one, he gets all huffy and says he caint deliver it. That's the

difference tween Caroline and me. We might be just as poor but she was raised right. Her momma knew where to get the damn little stickers and how to find food coupons and where in the county to send your girl to schooling. My momma knew how to live off what the hill's'll give you. How to survive on chestnuts and live oak shoots and how to bed down where it was dry enough to sleep but ain't so dry the snakes'd want to share your bed. She knew the schooling that the thorns and the kudzu'll give you, and Caroline's momma knew the schooling that the manor houses and the plantations'll give you. Two kindsa poor I suppose.

While momma taught me about the hickrees and the snakes, papa taught me something else. Nobody much cares what the six feet under think, but they can tell you things. Papa was the last boy given to the first line of shine runners on this sidea Old Mine Mountain. He showed me how to build a still, build it high so the raccoons cain't get in, and fill it up with corn and sugar, maybe some barley and cuttings from the roses if momma was feeling her best. How to let it sit and how to know from the smell of it when to bottle her up. After momma showed me the paths the deer use, papa'd show me the paths the runners use. The ones that even the deer cain't find, with thorns and a big old live oak growing over them, that'll let you get close enough to taste Bensenville without being seen by one lonely resident of that forsaken town.

Papa also taught me real fast why I don't wanna let them see me. Vigilante bullet cuts your head just as sure as a runner's does. And at least the runner'll bury you.

Caroline'll get mad if she doesn't get letters, and I can't have her knowing she's too good for me, so I run em. But that big old live oak is in my way. If I'd brought an axe or a saw or even a hammer, I'd get to knocking. Instead I have to start picking my way through the tangle of branches. That was the other thing momma'd said, thorns don't like growing under a live oak. Sure enough, there's thorns all around but not under him. As soon as I'm able, I reach for the

trunk. Its too big for three men my size to stretch our arms around. Good thing there's no three of me. Just one big man, a knitted bag fulla shine and letters over one shoulder and a knotted hickree walking stick over the other. And just like momma said it'd be, the trunk is warm under my hand.