

Old Laws of the New River

It occurred in the evening. It was the vespertine solitude. *Vespertine*.

It was my first day with the Boy Scouts on West Virginia's New River. We had set out that morning and it was not like the mornings in Texas where I could see the sun rising over the flat plains but it was a different kind of morning. One where you had to wait to see the sun rise over the Blue Ridge Mountains, deep in the valleys and the crevices that had been formed so long ago. I saw myself among the likes of Davy Crockett and Daniel Boone as I crossed through those old trails, among the hunters and trackers and Indian warriors who had braved that wilderness, and I did not think my gender had anything to do with whether I was part of that history or not. I did not think it mattered at all.

We paddled all day in kayaks and stopped at a rocky beach to eat sun-butter sandwiches. It was not very filling and it was raining, too, but I was with my brother and the rest of the boys and it was all right so long as I could argue and poke fun at the adults chaperoning us. They had assigned rules to me because I am a girl, and because I am a girl I am— in their eyes— separated from my brother's blood and we are not seen as true family but there is a kind of fracture in our connection. We do not see this. Have never seen this. The other boys did not see me as a *girl*, either, because I waited for the sun to rise in the morning just like them. I kayaked through the rapids at the same pace they did. I ate sun-butter sandwiches on rocky beaches in their company.

Vespertine, the painting by Amanda Smith, does not show a rocky beach. It shows soft soil under a lawn chair.

When the sun sank, we put in at a muddy beach. Once the boys and I had our drybags we scampered off to the edge of the camp— around the bend of a pond, hidden behind the poplars— and determined that we would pitch our tents in a circle. Our own kingdom, separate from the other troop, separate from the adults, next to the train tracks.

I had my tent set halfway up before two of the chaperones came over. My own mom, her friend. They told me to move.

I planted my feet. Why, I asked.

Because, they said, you can't be this close to the boys.

But he's my brother. These are my friends.

It violates the rules.

We're in the mountains. There are no rules.

Sure, but, you're a girl. You can't be this close to them.

The shrubbery in *Vespertine* is a deep emerald green and there are flowers growing in the tangled vines that look like the honeysuckle that grew in the clearing I pitched my tent in, directly across camp from the boys. Beneath the greenery and the flowers are shadows and there is a depth of unknown around the lawn chair, which is the only trace of humanity in that small patch. It is fenced off. The fence is not cut through but the chair and the soil and the honeysuckle are absorbing it, becoming it or perhaps transcending it.

-Brianna Hall



Amanda Smith
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