

EXCERPT: The Story of Sassy Sweetwater

Mama said I was born by a stream named Sweetwater. She called me Sassy the moment she realized I was a girl. Mama said girls should be sassy, gives them sex appeal. So I was named Sassy, after an attitude, and Sweetwater, after a stream. The year was 1949 and the place was a dirty back road shack in a dusty little town in South Carolina. Mama never could remember the name of the town but she told me that it might have been Cottageville, or maybe even Ridgeville. Didn't matter much what it was called though. I never saw it again, and as far as I knew, Mama didn't either.

Some people think a grey tumultuous sky is an omen of discontent, especially if one's entry into this world is shadowed by blustery clouds and thunder's emphatic roar. But my mama said that heaven welcomed my birth with great horns blowing and mighty cymbals clashing, and omens sent by mighty seers bring the blessings of miracles, not the doom of devils.

"Gave you its grey," she said. "Passed it right on to you."

I always knew she meant my eyes, grey as the weather on the day I was born, and sometimes showing up hazel when the sun confronts the gloom and demands I show some color.

"Gave you its temperament too, and its mystery, girl. Women need a little mystery. That's what turns a man's head. Beauty has nothing to do with anything more than that."

It always sounded like the great God Poseidon was my father the way my mama tells it. Where else could I have come from? No man ever came forth and claimed me as his own. Not that I didn't wonder who my father was but when I asked I always got the same reply.

"You came from the sky, Sassy Sweetwater, clear as the stream I bathed you in, fierce as the wind that blew away the storm, the one that welcomed you here with great aplomb, and tender as the aftermath of nature's roar."

In other words, I was born an ambiguous bastard by a stream in South Carolina and my seventeen year old mama was not about to tell me whose handsome smile had won her over. He was obviously too young or too old to pay for his mistake. I would find out one day, of course. When you ask as many questions as I did, the answers come at you eventually. My birth was a riddle and I wanted my mama to connect me to some kind of heritage I could claim as my own, but she only gave me new conundrums to chase down. It should have been enough, there's nothing wrong with chasing around after answers you don't have, it's how hard you're hit with them when they fly back and knock you down.