

Note: This is an excerpt from the author's soon to be completed historical-fiction novel,
The Lies They Lived.

Water of Life

1863

Laura Bowers Foreman

Ela frowned as she looked at her husband's still. Tucked down in a bramble of green, the copper pot gleamed in the early morning light. It was the source of their livelihood; this she knew. Narboone, her husband, had brought his whisky making skills with him when he escaped from his war-torn homeland in Scotland and each batch he made had helped them survive the bad years, the years when rains never came or else they came with great swords that slashed through crops ready for harvest. Standing with her hands on her hips, Ela sighed and toed the soft soil through the thin soles of her *ulasu'la*, the short summer moccasins she had stitched. Among the few who escaped the round up and forced exodus of her people, she remained in her homeland, in what was now called North Carolina. White folks called her Cherokee, but in her language she was *Ani-Yúń'wiyǎ*, one of the "real people."

She knew only too well that whisky brought misery and death to her people. And yet, she could not deny whisky making was part of her life. For years the still had been a source of contention in her marriage. Only when Narboone promised to sell his entire product to those thirsty in England rather than to those sad remnants of her own people, did Ela relent and concede he could pursue his trade. But, with each passing year, she had been drawn more deeply into the creation of that which, in truth, she loathed.

Throughout each step — whether growing, harvesting or curing the corn whose sugars would eventually be distilled into something she knew as dangerous, Ela wouldn't allow thoughts of

the end use into her head. And now the time had come for the final step before distilling. Together husband and wife worked as if creating an alchemy as mysterious as love itself. Infusing the smoky malt with spring water that tasted of quartz, May apples and deer moss, together they listened for the moment that announced the corn had begun its ascent into the spirit world, fermenting into a brewy mash.

As the mash simmered, primeval bubbles called forth the languages spoken at the very beginning of the world. Entranced, Narboone turned to Ela as he caressed the thick black braid of her hair. Lifting the silky rope to his nose and breathing in the scent of dried corn and wood smoke, Narboone reached over to kiss the soft petal of his wife's ear. He grinned. "Aye lassie, tis a lovely sight you are. You know what the spirits require." He paused; his gaze turning toward the sea Ela had never seen. "I remember when I was a lad," he began. "— before the English invaded Scotland — me grandfather showed me his way of making *usquebaugh*."

Ela frowned, not understanding. Her dark eyes narrowed. "*Usquebaugh*?"

He nodded. "Aye, it means water of life — our ancient word for whisky. My grandfather, an old, old man by then, could barely stand. But one gloomy day he insisted I climb up into the glen with him." Narboone tugged at his beard as he looked off in the distance. "He showed me the workings of his pot-still. Didn't talk much the whole time we were up there but then just before it was time to go back, he turned to me and said, 'The oldest spirits — they be the strongest medicine.'"

Ela frowned, "What do you mean medicine?" To her mind, whisky was anything but.

"Can't say I understand it myself," Narboone continued, "but back then I didn't know that patent-still whiskey was taking over. Patent-stills," he repeated with disgust, "They produce a

soulless libation, without the flavor of peat and ne'er aged a day. But the makers of the stuff found they could make it quickly and in great quantities. Wave a bit of the pot-malt over the wretched mixture, call it blended whisky and sell it to the Brits." Narboone sighed. "so much I didn't understand... I was a wee boy and couldn't gather me grandfather's meaning back then," his eyes misted as his voice trailed off. He reached up to make an unnecessary adjustment to the still and cleared his throat.

"You don't want the mash to get too hot," he said as he showed his wife how to stir the water and malt mixture. He reached for Ela's long fingers as he helped her pull the paddle through the thick liquid. The mash would require at least a week to ferment before it could be distilled into whisky. "If there's too much heat, mash'll turn to vinegar and be no good to anyone," he explained.

At last the time came when all was ready for Ela to actually brew her first batch of whisky. It was this step she had always shunned. "It be up to you should I be gone," Narboone coaxed.

Ela turned away. Though she knew that with the Confederate's conscription, her husband could be called into service at any time, she shook her head, "I can't."

"I know you don't want to," he said and drew his wife close.

She pulled away and turned her back to him, her arms folded, shielding her heart. Until now she had always managed to occupy herself with other chores when it came to the actual distilling — a process that seemed to call up the ghosts her people — and their long suffering from whisky's poison. "No. I can't go through with this," she said, her voice quavering. "I'll never forget that terrible winter ...my uncle's drinking ..."

Narboone stepped up to her back, held his wife's shoulders and buried his face in her hair. "Tis a terrible thing to be asking of you." He paused, "I wish there was another way. But don't you

see?” He turned his wife around and held her firm as he looked directly into her eyes. “Should I be called away to the war I couldn’t take my rest for fear you and the children had no means of raising funds for yourself.”

Ela squirmed away from his grip. “No,” she said curtly and headed into the trees. Narboone’s arms fell helplessly to his side as he watched his wife disappear into the forest.

Her pace steady, she pushed away briars and brush that clawed at her arms and face. Trudging down switchback after switchback, she followed an overgrown game trail deep into a hollow. Sweat rolled down her spine and she swatted at the ever-present swarm of gnats. Her breathing shallow, she felt the ghosts of her people pushing against her back. She walked faster as if to escape their relentless pursuit. For years the ghosts had been chasing her, crying out accusations. Ela covered her ears to the plaintive voices she heard crying out. It was the anguished wails of her ancestors — *You are making poison! You are one of them! And your children, what will become of them?*

At last Ela stood on a high bank and stared down at the raging river. Black clouds had gathered and the day was now dark as dusk. Any moment now the sky would break loose. She knew better than to go closer. This was the place in the river where currents met and twisted and coiled in battle, the place where her mother told her the story of a giant leech lay waiting to suck in those unsuspecting souls who wandered near. Ela shivered as she imagined the enormous worm-like creature looming just below the writhing waters, its giant mouth open and hungry. This was the place where the fish waited for a chance to slip beyond the hungry jaws of the leech. And here fishers of all kinds gathered, hopeful and hungry for the sweet flesh of those waiting trout. In the stillness of winter, those fishers, lured by ice that seemed firm, were all too soon swallowed by the one that lay waiting. Come spring the leech spit out the remnants of their broken bodies; the evidence of their demise washing ashore downstream.

“*Tlanusi’yi*,” Ela whispered the leech’s name as she studied the churning water. The roiling river boiled red from the clay banks that crumbled in its path. “It is awake and angry.”

Ela thought about the last time she had been here. More than ten years had passed since the horrible fight she’d had with Narboone over his whisky making. She had been in such despair then, hoping only that the greedy leech would rise up and pull her down. And though it seemed a lifetime ago, the familiar feelings of anger stirred in her belly, like a snake waking from hibernation. *Whisky destroys my people*. Still she had not made her peace with Narboone’s livelihood.

Suddenly a bright yellow warbler landed just ahead of her. Nearly eye level, the bird, a bright flash against the gray sky, began to sing a song so bright it rang out above the din of voices in her head. Ela listened. In this song she heard another voice: *Your children are your people now*. She listened as the bird sang its tender but persistent song. As the warbler repeated his message, she felt the walls around her heart soften and give way. Looking at the fury of waters below she shuddered and reached for her belly, hoping to calm the slow churning she felt. Now that she had children, she had no longing for death. *We have to pay the bills*, she told herself. *I’ll have to take over should Narboone be called to war*, she added. *My children - they are my people now; they must come first*. Ela looked up into the tree tops. Leaves rustled as branches whooshed in the wind. She could smell rain. *Water of life*, she whispered sensing a mystery she did not yet understand.

As rain fell in thick wet splashes, Ela slowly made her way home and to her husband. Finally the bad cloud passed and a steamy sun broke through. Drenched, Ela watched as the bright light glinted silver on the gray strands in Narboone’s wild and unruly hair. She knew here was the man she loved: the great bear who had blown in that first wintry night smelling of snow and pines, the young immigrant who had been startled in the Appalachian spring by the angry report of a beaver’s tail, the loving man whose fingers caressed her spine as if to tease a song from his fiddle. This man

who had traveled the seas. *His seas* — Ela mused: waters she could only imagine as she listened to his tales of waves crashing against the rocks near his home; of mist so prevalent it was as if his had been a life lived in the spirit world and, the sea — leaving in her wake — a shroud of salt so thick it could be gathered each summer.

She looked into her husband's face. "*Usquebaugh*," she whispered. "Alright, teach me the secrets of whisky making." Her words flowed as water streamed off her crow black hair.