

Mapes Hebert

I was already ^{out} ~~kk~~ the door. I was near the car. Finally, I was going fishing. Two weeks I had been telling myself I was going fishing, but each day something came up. Today I was going. It was nice and warm and blue sky, and too good to stay in any damned office. I was going fishing. I was going home and change these clothes, and I was going fishing. I had already taken out the ~~kk~~ ignition keys when I heard Griffin calling my name. "Sheriff, Mapes, Sheriff Mapes." I waved the key hand over my shoulser, telling him to get somebody else to handle whatever needed to be done, I was going fishing. He kept on calling me, running after me and calling me. I got into the car and swung it around, but he grabbed the door. I had always thought he was a little weak in the head, but now I thought he had completely gone crazy.

"Get the hell out of the way, " I said. "I'm going fishing, damn it."

He held onto the door with one hand, beating on the top of the car with the other. I dragged him twenty, thirty feet, but he wouldn't turn loose or stop beating on the car. I slammed on the brakes and knocked the door open.

"You crazy basterd," I said. "You trying to get yourself killed?"

"That's what I been trying to tell you, Sheriff," he said, breathing hard. "Skomebody alrrdy been killed. Beau Boutan. Killed at Marshall."

I didn't want to think about it. For a while I didn't think about it. I still wanted to lthink about fishing. I could see myself sitting in my boat with two ~~hahh~~ six packs of beer. That's all I wanted to think about.

"Tell them you missed me," I said.

"I alrady told her you were here," he said.

"Go back and tell her you lied," I said.

"Sheriff, a man been killed," he said. "A Boutan, Sheriff. A Boutan."

I looked at him a moment, still thinking about fishing and drinking beer. But I backed up the car and went back into the office. Henderson passed me the receiver. Merle LeDoux Jack Marshall's ladyfriend was on the phone.

"Mapes, hurry up and get out here," hshe said.

"What hapeened?" I asked.

"Beau Boutan's been shot. I think it's pretty bad."

"Who did it?" I asked.

"I don't know," she said. "Hurry up and get here before the wrong people do."

"Anybody else know about this?" I asked.

"Just the people in the quarters," she said.

"Keep it that way," I told her. "For godsake, don't spread it around."

"You don't have to remind me."

I hung up the receiver and turned to Henderson. He was the one I could trust most.

"Go back on that bayou and tell Fix what happened," I told him. "And keep Fix back there. I don't want him at Marshall."

"Mapes, that's like telling that sun not to shine."

"That's what you're going to have to do," I said.

"Keep that sun from shining."

"For how long?" he asked.

"I should be back in a couple of hours. But you just keep him back there until you hear from me. I'll talk to Fix later myself."

"I wish you'd send somebody else," he said. "It ain't going to be too healthy on that bayou."

"I'm sending you," I said. "And listen, I want you to keep Fix back there, even if you have to use that gun to do it. You hear me? Keep him back there. That's all we need, for that crowd to come into Marshall." I turned to Griffin standing there with his mouth propped open. "You, you going with me," I said.

"Me?" he said, like I had just asked him to jump off the courthouse. "Me?"

I didn't answer him. I got the pump gun and loaded it with shells from a box I kept in the desk drawer.

"Let's go," I said.

"Me?" he said.

"You stopped me from fishing, didn't lyou?"

"Me?" he said.

Out at the car, I told him he had to drive. He wanted to say "Me " again. I could see it in his eyes.

It's fifteen miles to Marshall. You drive along the St. Charles River ten of those miles. You look out at ~~the~~ *the* pretty, quiet, blue water, and you know that where you ought to be. You and a good fishing rod and a couple six packs and a radio with some quiet classic music. *for him then that way* ~~What a way to spend~~ *to make a good fall evening. for him then* What a way.

But no.

"Who you think was crazy enough to do that, Sheriff?" Griffin asked.

"I donit know, boy."

Because I couldn't imagine who on that plantation would be crazy enough to kill a Boutan. Not only lthere, but no one in the lparish, black or white, or even in this state, once he knew the history of the Boutans. I first thought about that gal Candy. I knew she didn't like them. She hated them. She didn't like the idea of them farming that land, she though the blacks should lhave it. But she wasn't in any position to take it from them, and even if she could, there weren't any balacks on that place ~~well enough~~ young enough to do lany farming. *may.*

I next thought about the two niggers, Bear and P ssum. But I soon wiped lthem out of my mind. I had seen him talk

to them like you talk to a dog, and they hadn't even raised their heads. So I knew neither one of them could have done it

Then it hit me--Mathu. He was eighty, ^{if} he was one, but he was still more man than any of the others in the quarters. Yes, old as he was, if he was pushed, he could do it. He was the only one there, besides Candy, who could do it.

I remembered the fight between him and Fix, Beau's daddy. Out there at Marshall's store. I was this boys age then, twenty-two. Guidry was the sheriff. And we were all sitting out there on the porch. Black and white. All sitting out there eating ginger bread and drinking pop. Fix wanted Mathu to take his empty bottle back inside. Mathu told him no. What? Fix said. Get one of them others to do it, Mathu said. Not me. You know who you talking to? Fix asked him. I know who I'm talkin to, Mathu said. And he got up to leave. Come back here, boy, Fix called. Mathu was at least ten years older, around forty. Mathu kept on walking. kFix jumped up from the end of the porch and went after him. Epun him around. Take this bottle in that store before I get one of these pecan limbs and teach you a lesson. (I was this boy's age. I remember it well." I don't want no trouble out of you, Fix, Mathu said. What you say, boy? You say mister to me. I don't say mister to nothing like you, Mathu said. Fix rammed him in the belly with the bottle. Mathu looked at Guidry. "I don't want no trouble, Sheriff." Guidry don't answer hi. I look at Guidry. A tall, lanky big boned man who had been sheriff nearly forty years

already. He bit into his ginger bread and turned up the bottle of pop. Fix hit Mathu in the stomach again. "I'm go'n protect myself, Sheriff," Mathu told Guidry. "I don't bother nobody." Guidry went on eating and drinking his pop. The rest of us watched. Fix started to hit Mathu again, but this time Mathu blocked his hand, and clipped him on the jaw, and down went Fix. The blacks were too scared to move, but the whites wanted to stand with Fix. Guidry stopped them. Let them fight, he said. I had never seen a black man and a white man fight before though I had heard that Guidry would fight and had fought many, black and white. kHe had bragged that he had never had to put a air of handcuffs on any man. He had said if he couldn't bring a man in without handcuffing him, the man could go free--that is if he didn't shoot him first. But I never seen a worse fight than that fight between Fix and Mathu. A nigger was supposed to take lhis whipping and go on home, but not Mathu. Maybe he stood there and fought , because he knew Guidry was a real man and a good sheriff. Maybe that was it, I donit know, because I never asked him about it. But they fought and fought. They must have fought there an hour, an hour and a half. I had never seen anything like it. Mathu was best at fist fighting, and Fix was best at wrassling. He was stronger than Mathu, but not quick enough. For an hour, hour and a half, Guidry let them fight. When it was over, Mathu was standing, and Fix was on the ground. Guidry left the porlch and went up to Mathu and cracked him side the head, and down he went. Then he helped Fix to his feet. Fixx told him thanks, but that's all he said, because kGuidry had him right back down on the ground again. T

Then he came back to the porch and finished what must have been is third or fourth bottle of pop and third or fourth ginger bread.

Yes, Mathu could do it. That was not the only time. The old boy had stood his ground before, to the Marshall and to any one else. As a young man he had been the driver for old Nathaniel Marshall. Old Nate loved him like he loved one of his own sons. Had told him that he couldn't keep him out of the graveyard, but he sure would keep him out of the pen, ~~as~~ long as he was right. That didn't give Mathu license to be a trouble maker, but it sure gave him license to defend hiself, and defend himself he did.

Ravel Boudreaux was the over seer at Marshall. Rode a black stallion, a whip tied to the saddle. You fell too far behind in your work, he rode up to you and started swinging. One day he thought everybody needed a couple of licks or two *to perk 'em up*. Then he rode up to Mathu. They were cutting sugar caen. Ravel crew back the whipe, Mathu drew back the knife. "Tjat whip fall. This knife fall, Mr. Boudreaux." Ravel went u to the house and told old Nate Marshall that he had to get rid of that nigger, or he would kill him. Old Nate, dead these past fifty years ~~ss~~ kpaid him on the spot. He had to go, his nigger stayed.

Yes, the old boy could do it. The old boy could do it. I couldn't think of anyone else down there who could do it. Unless that gal did. ⁴ She could do it. She was tough just like her great granddaddy. And she cared for those ~~blacks~~ *niggers* down there ^a much as old Nate cared for Mathu. Yes, she could do it, and ~~one of them~~ ^{she be a nigger} did it, I'll bet my boots.

"Candy?" I said to Griffin, handing him the roll of life savers.

"Sir?" he said, as though he had been thinking deeply. "Oh no sir."

"Don't worry," I said. "Nothing is going to happen to you."

"I ain't scared, Sheriff."

"That's a good boy."

When I stopped before that house, and I saw them standing there with those old shotguns, with the women there, and the children there, I thought I was dreaming. Next to me, Griffin said: "Good Lord, Sheriff you see what I see?" But I didn't answer him. I just flipped the lifesaver over with my tongue, and got out of the car.