

Grant Bello

We ~~had~~ picked up Yank, then we picked up Dirty Rd. Yank was waiting for us behind a bush on the river bank side of the road. Clatoo didn't have to stop, just slow down some, for old Yank to hop up in the back of the truck. Yank thought he was still a cowboy. He had broke horses and mules years and years ago, so he hopped up in that truck the same way he had ridden horses years and years ago. He still wore the kind of clothes he wore then. His straw hat was draped like a cowboy hat. He had a dirty polka dotted handkerchief tied round his neck. His pant legs was stuck³d inside his boots just like he used to wear them years and years ago. He spoke to us when he first got into the truck, but after that we didn't do much talking. And we kept the guns down on the bed of the truck so people outside wouldn't see them.

A mile or so after we picked up Yank we picked up Dirty Red. Clatoo had to blow the horn twice before we saw Dirty Red coming from round the back of the hosee. Dirty Red looked dirty even from here. He always looked dirty. Except on third Sundays and fourth Sundays when he went to church. On third Sundays he told his determination, on fourth Sundays he took the sacrament. He cleaned up pretty good for those two Sundays. but the next day he was dirty again. He had a doubledbarrel shot gun, carrying it by the barrel, witha the stock nearly dragging the ground. He had a self-rolled cigarette hanging from the right corner of his mouth. The cigarette was fat in the middle and twisted tight at each end. Dirty Red got in the truck, but not all the way in. One of his legs hung out of the truck almost toughing the ground. I looked at Dirty Red, and I had to grin to myself. Any other day I would've kept my distance from him. But today I was as proud of Dirty Red as I was any man *there*.

Three or four miles after we picked up Dirty Red, Clatoo turned off the main highway on a dirt road that divided Morgan and Marshall plantations. Then after he had gone far enough down the road so people ^{on} the highway couldn't see the truck, he stopped and told us ~~that~~ he would leave us ~~off~~ off there. He had to go up the road and pick up the rest of the people. He told us to meet at the graveyard, and we would all walk to Mathu's house together. He thought that would look better than if ^{we} straggled in one at a time. He turned the truck around and headed back out toward the highway, and the rest of us started walking.

Jacob and Mat were in front, with Chimley a step behind them. Jacob was carrying his gun over his shoulder, Mat carried his tucked under his arm. Chimley had his under his arm, too, but he wasn't walking straight as Mat. Mat was always very proper, him. Chimley wasn't. Chimley just kind of shuffled along like he didn't know what was going on. The rest of us--me, for sure--was more like Chimley than like Mat or Jacob. I was just there. Didn't know exactly why. Just knowed I had to be there. When Clatoo called me and told me what had happened, and what they wanted us to do, I just reached for one of my ^{old} guns. When he stopped before my door and I saw Jacob and Billy in there with him, I just hooped ^{I didn't ask a question} in the back of the truck ~~without saying a word~~.

Me and Yank carried our guns tucked under our arms. When I looked back at Billy Washington and Dirty Red, I saw Dirty Red carrying his by the barrel with the stopk nearly touching the ground. Billy was carrying his gun over his shoulder, but not carrying it the way you ~~should~~ should carry a gun. He was carrying it more loosely, the way you would carry a fence post or a stick of wood. I couldn't tell who looked the worse between him and Dirty Red. Neither one look

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like he was ~~going~~ ^{ready} to fight--that's for sure.

We had cane on both sides the road. Morgan cane on one side, Marshlall cane on the other side. But it wasn't Marshall cane, now, it was outan Cane. Beau was leasing Him and his family the whole plantation ~~from~~ ^{from} the Marshall family. ~~He~~ had been leasing all of it the last twenty yearsk, ~~whenxxxxxxxthe~~ ~~lastxblackxfamilyxxxgivesupxandxleavesx~~ The same land we had worked, our parents had worked, our great parents had worked in slavery--they had it all now. Or, he, Mr. Beau had had it all up to about twelve o'clock that day.

After going another mile, we turn onto another road. You had cane here, too, but just on ~~one~~ ^{of the road} one side, the right side. On the left, the side that took you back ~~kk~~ intow swamps, the can there had been cut and hauled away. It made you feel lonely to see it had been cut and ~~h~~ hauled away like th t. ^{in my mind ge} Anytime I seen a harvested field, it always made me feel lonely. I liked to look at a field full of something growing. I realized you planted the crop to harvest it, to seel it, or to eat it, but it always made me feel lonely when it wasn't there. The rows looked so naked and dreary and lonely. I saw Mat and Jacob looking at the rows, too. They probably felt the same way I felt--lonely. They was probably thinking about the tim we ourselves had farmed all this land. Many, many days we had plowed these rows, chopped that cane, pulled that corn, ^{plowed then} Many, many days. But that was mamy, many days ago, too. ^{Colten} Not days, but years. ^{now}

Then I heard a shot, and when I look4d back, I saw a little rabbit bobbing across the field. By the time I took aim, it was already too late. He was down one of the middles now, and all I could see of him was his little ears bobbing up every now and then. I could tell that it was Billy who had shot at the rabbit, and missed. I waited for

him and Dirty Red to catch up with us.

"Missed him, huh, Billy?"

Billy didn't answer, he wouldn't even look at me or Yank. He was ashamed he had missed.

"I hope he don't miss Fix like that," Billy Red teased him. "Rabbit was so close I started to hit him in the head with the butt of my gun, but I thought Billy wanted him."

"He was moving," Billy said.

"Sure, after I nearly kicked him in the head," Dirty Red said.

Dirty Red had ~~that~~ ^a little ~~shirt~~, wet, ~~dirty~~ cigarette hanging from the right corner of his mouth. He kept his head to one side to keep the smoke out of his eyes.

We started walking again. I was thinking about Billy missing the rabbit. I hope it wasn't a sign ^{And sure in cat we} if it came to ^{we had} ~~us~~ to do battle with Fix and his crowd.

Now, up ahead, I could see the pecan and oak trees in the graveyard. You had about a dozen trees spread over the graveyard, and about the same number of head stones. But the stones had been kept there only a few years ago. Long ago, people didn't mark the graves. Each family had a little ^{plot} ~~spot~~, and most people knew where their little ^{plot} ~~spot~~ was. If it was a big family, of course, they cheated into some other family ^{plot} ~~spot~~. But who cared? They had mixed together when they were alive, why not let the dust mix now--which it had to do. That had been the burial place for black people on that plantation since the time of slavery, and I'm sure the dust of many different ones was mixed by now.

next to the

We squatted ~~against~~ the barbed wire fence a few minutes then Jacob stood up and went into the grave yard. I looked

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back over my shoulder, and I saw him leaning over and pulling grass from his sister's grave. Tessie had been drowned out in the river one Mardi Gras day by a gang of white men dressed up in Mardi Gras suits and masks. Tessie was one of these high ~~g~~ellows--pretty, pretty--^{into a girl} and ~~like~~ she used to mess with white men and black men. ^{didn't} The white men didn't like it and warned her to let black men alone. She would not, and so they ganged her one Mardi Gras day. Drowned her out there in the St. Charles River that run before the Marshall plantation. After pulling weeds away from the grave, Jacob knelt down at the head of the grave and made the sign of the cross. We was all looking at him now, and in another minute we was all going in there to visit our people. The weeds was nearly knee high, and you could feel the pecans and acorns under your feet. We went to the different places where we thought our people was buried. Sure, we knew they was there somewhere, but we couldn't tell you the exact spot ^{say} if the people had been put there, ~~any~~, like forty years ago. If they had been put there the last twenty five years, we could tell you. But if they had been put there fifty years ago, we couldn't go to a spot and stand there and say this was so and so's grave. Since the people never put markers in the old days, the graves sooner or later just melted away with somebody else's. Most times it could've been somebody else in the same family, say a grandmother and a grandchild. But ~~often~~ lots of time it could've been somebody in a total different family.

Dirty Red, with his doubled barrel shot gun, was a little bit farther away from the rest of us. Even in life the rest of the people didn't mix too much with Dirty Red's people. They kind of looked down on Dirty Red's people, and if you knew Dirty Red's people, you would know why.

After I had said a couple of prayers, I wandered over to where Dirty Red was standing by himself. He was eating a pecan and looking down at the grass and weeds that covered the graves. Some of the graves had sunken in.

"My brother Gabe there," Dirty Red said. I didn't know exactly which spot he was looking at, because soon as he said it he cracked another pecan with his teeth. Not ~~with~~ ~~his hand~~ cracki g a couple together with his hand, but cracking one with his teeth. "Mama and Papa right there, " ^{le} And my grandpa Ned Jefferson right in there--somewhere."

The whole place was kind of sunken in, and you had weeds everywhere, so I couldn't tell exactly where Dirty Red was looking at.

"We got plenty of them in here," I said. "This where you want You be buried when you die?"

"Might as well," he said. "If it's still here."

"They chipping up lot of the old graveyards," I said.

"That's what I heard," Dirty Red said. "Like the people was never there." He cracked another pecan. "Graveyard pecans always taste good," he said. "You tried any of them?"

"I'll gather me a few before we leave," I said.

I looked across the graveyard toward the empty fields. The cane rows came up to about ^{thirty} feet of the grave yard before ending. Beau had cut and hauled the cane away, and we could see ^{all the way} ~~plumb~~ back to the swamps. It made you feel so lonely, and so useless. ^{And it made you feel so useless.}

"Him and Charlie had a chance to get some of it done, huh?" Dirty Red said.

"Some of it," I said. "But he won't be getting any more done." I looked from the ~~now~~ empty cane rows to Dirty Red standing to my left. "What you thi king about all this, Dirty Red? You been thinking about it."

"I look at it this way," he said. "How many more years I got here on this earth?"

That was all he said. He stopped right there. It was just like him. *not to finish. Glad we could have been too much of*
~~He didn't think it was necessary to finish.~~ *li*

"So you think you ought to do something worthwhile?" *stupid.*

"Something like that," he said, *we looked out from out in* "Maybe that's what *test.*
 them buried in there want. I don't know."

"I'm sure they proud of you, Dirty Red."

"Well--maybe," he said, and looked past me. "Yonder *they*
~~come the rest of them.~~ *now.*"

I looked to the right, and I saw Clatoo and the others walking the railroad tracks towards the graveyard. Clatoo was in front with his gun in one hand, and a shoebox under his left arm. We went out to meet them. Besides Clatoo you had John Green, George Williams, Kionel Chambers, Hoppy Robillard, Bing and Ding Toussait, and Jean Pierre Morgan. They all had guns.

"Every body shot?" Clatoo asked.

"Billy shot at a ribbi on his foot and missed him."
 Dirty Red said.

Clatoo looked at Dirty Red, but he didn't think it was funny. Some of the other people thought it was funny, but they could see how Clatoo was looking at Dirty Red, so they didn't laugh.

"Anybody ain't shot, shoot," Clatoo said. "We all must have empty shells."

"That's what I been thinking about," Dirty Red said.
 "Empty shells for what? Throw at Dix?"

"I was hoping I'd see a rabbit," I said. "Besides the one Billy scared across that cane field. I had to waste a good bullet."

"Y'all shoot," Clatoo said. "Shoot up in them trees. Anybody who ain't shot, shoot now, and lets get moving. Shoot together."

"Is that holy?" Dirty Red said. "S ooting over the people in the graveyard?"

"They'll understand," Clatoo said. "Shoot."

We raised our rungs--about five of us--me, mat, Dirty Red, couple others= -and shot. A few pecans fell, a few acorsns, some moss , some leaves fell down on the grass and weeds that covered the graves.

"We ain't no soldiers," Clatoo said. "No use tying to play soldiers. We bunch of tired old men, but men still. That's how we ago ng in there--like men." Anybody got anything to say before we start out? Anybody feel like turning round? Speak up now be re we start out. This is a big day in all our lives. And we better be sure this what we want to do." Anybody got anything to say."

"That shoe box?" Dirty Red asked him.

"A present," Clatoo said.

Dkrty Red had rolled another cigarette, fat in the middle, and twi ted tight on each end. He was looking at Clatoo with his head to the side to keep the smoke out of his eyes. The rest of us looked at the shoebox, butnobody said anything.

"All right," Clatoo said. "Let's get moving. And let's walk straight."

He started out first, with his gun in one hand, and the shoebox tucked under his arm. Mat and Jacob followed, then the rest of us.