

PAYDAY

By Warren Florence

Thomas straightened up his britches, gave a spit, went back to telling his story. They were all gathered ‘round, some farm workers standing on the ground just off the railroad receiving dock, some leaning on rickety porch stilts with their arms crossed, keeping the roof from falling in. And each of ‘em dripping sweat off his own nose, ragging heat off his red or black skinned neck.

“That piece ‘a shit turned up two miles down river yesterday, four days later,” Thomas reported back second hand. “All chalk look ‘n and blowed up like a puff fish. They only knowed it was him because ‘a how much he had in his pocket. That, and how fat he was.”

A couple men tried not to laugh, ‘cause manners says you’re not supposed to laugh at death, but they just snickered tight-lipped anyway, the way folks do when they got only a handful of teeth. But we all seen Old Fat Man Flint, how he spreads wide over his stool up high on that truck bed, most days yell ‘n, give ‘n orders with one hand, while the other elbow props himself against his knee. Nobody likes him, ‘cause everybody knows he cheats people out of what they owed.

“They say a couple ‘a boys must of seen to him for not square ‘n up,” Thomas said. “Well, he got his all right,” and he emphasized how with the pocketknife his daddy gave him. “Right across the neck.”

That’s when a voice as slow and deep as molasses simmered Thomas right down. “Don’chu boys listen to that fool.” We all turned slow like rusted screws to the other side of the dock. Everybody knew who it come from. It was Rabbit. “We ain’t seen the body to know how. Unless...unless, *you* did it.”

Many ‘a eyes turned back to Thomas. No mindful soul would suspect him, though. That’s for certain. He and old Fat Man Flint were blood. But more like dirty roots related than branches that blossom. More like greedy pigs in the same pen, if you ask me. It was enough to notion that Thomas just might want to whaller in on Flint’s bread ‘n butter. But he waited a long pause before he leaned forward and peaked on down the receive ‘n dock at Rabbit, through all the men stand ‘n like they was a bunch of corn stalks. No one said a word, though, because many folks suspect Rabbit might ‘a had something to do with it. In the silence, the mess of people could only see Rabbit standing in is own pipe smoke. He was turned down way, toward the General Store. He gazed across the dirt road and the train tracks, watching more folks ride in on their horses and carts, a couple of puttering trucks weighed down with this fall’s harvest. Everybody waving ‘round, too, happy to see one ‘nother, ‘cause ain’t no one seen no body in three or four moons.

Then Thomas chuckled at himself, ‘cause he’s more like a yellow opossum than man. He tucks and runs at too much work, ‘cause he manages to get all he’s got in the scrawny body just to pick up one bushel where we all can pick up two. Besides, every man knows he stretches what he goes on about anyway.

“Whatcha say there, Rabbit?” Thomas asked across the dock. Faces with sun wrinkles, years of hard field labor looked over at Rabbit, again. “He owed you more ‘n anybody. You mean you ain’t happy to see...Flint...soak?” Some of the farmers couldn’t help just laughing ‘n and showing what little teeth they still got attached. Still Rabbit said nothing. Just kept ‘a puffing on that pipe like he always does. “Get it, Rabbit?” Thomas was starting to poke too much, like he was poking at a meaner ‘n hell rattle snake, laughing and taunting it. “Hot-under-the-collar, stone-cold Flint...getting all wet? His sparks doused? ...” He was the only one laughing, then it died off pretty fast just as soon as Rabbit turned only his head back at us with a look like your mamma gives you when you talk’n rubbish, and to just shut the hell on up.

“Don’t no man deserve to go. No matter how rotten.” And that’s the last breath Rabbit paid attention to it. No body would jaw about it anymore. And you knew it, too. It’s hard to explain: he...he is like a Ingian Chief, smoke ‘n his pipe, listening to some of this quarrel and some of that dispute until that chief says about six words and mosey’s on back to his teepee. He spouts the last word, and you know he’s right, but you mumble on along anyway. Rabbit’s like that. He says the good notion, and that’s about that. Some says he’s got some style to him. Got a way, some say, that he thinks he’s better than most, mostly ‘cause he’s many a’ respected by his own. Nope, not any man in this Lowcountry, from Savannah to Charleston able to allege Rabbit lazy. No sir! How’d you reckon he got his name?

Then again...nobody likes making trouble for himself, losing wages ‘cause of your tongue. Rabbit just don’t know...well, he used to not know what to say to somebody when that wife ‘a his and them three children got toes poking on out they shoes. So he bided on because some money is better than no job. But Thomas says he saw Rabbit talking---more like beg ‘n---Fat Flint to pay ‘em what’s right. But that was a month or two back, when the other men weren’t ‘round to see it...but Thomas.

And accord ‘n to Thomas, Rabbit was making a good case. Reckon ‘cause Flint kept tellin Rabbit he’d pay ‘em later, but instead, went and just got him *another* truck from up ‘round Charleston somes place. And if Flint can get another truck to carry his fat ass around in, then, well...I’d be fuming like a swarm of bees, too. So Rabbit got in Old Man Flint’s face good, for the first time. And Flint just told ‘em to stop having kids if he’s got mouths to feed. Told ‘em to just go and try get ‘n work in some other field. They took to a long stare-off, before Rabbit up ‘n said, “Yes sir. I think I will,” and just trodded off the field, not mind ‘n the harvest still in the ground. “But you still gonna pay me what’s right, Flint. You hear me? You gonna pay me what’s right!”

Then Flint went to talk ‘n so fast, and hollar ‘n so loud, and calling Rabbit bad names that he nearly fell over. He was red as coals about him leaving his field high ‘n dry in pick’n season. Some of the others walked out, too. And then that got all crazy. About a minute of all that hollar ‘n, Fat Man Flint bent over with exhaustion. It wasn’t too long when Rabbit made a deal with Mr. Jim’s widow to work and buy some ‘a her land. She was partial with the notion, because she’s running out ‘a all the money Mr. Jim made in tobacco.

As I peered over by Rabbit’s way on the loading dock, he was still smoking that pipe and greet ‘n with a small hand wave some neighbor Negroes who come ride ‘n in with lots of cotton and greens. God was good to us islanders on occasion this summer, like He knew just when them crops got thirsty. Everybody had big loads to sell: rice, tomatoes, a little indigo. Folks from the other islands like Helena and Dataw and Hilton Head had been here a while wait ‘n for the train. Some since last night, ‘cause it takes longer than suspected when you got to unload from a wagon, sail or motor it over on a open boat, then load it back up again on a truck to sell it here at this dock. Them big plantation owners know this set of rail tracks right here leads all the goods in and out of Port Royal and Beaufort, right here in Seabrook. So they get here might early, in the middle of night at times, to make sure they’re ain’t late when the rooster crow starts all the local trading, before the train shows up.

And as I settled my eyes on Rabbit, his pipe smoke got darker, almost black look ‘n. But once I got my perception squared away, that black smoke was much further off, way back in the distance. Way back behind the tree line. And that’s when we heard the train for the first time.

“There she is!” I said after filling the air with a good, “Yeehaw!” I wasn’t the only one, neither. Many of us jumped on the tracks to watch her big black body roll on down like she was on air. But she

wasn't, 'cause you could hear her vibrations scream down the rail tracks. She gave a call again, closer. Her black smoke rising above Whale Branch Creek, slowing over the truss into Seabrook.

It wasn't quite over, though, all the run'n on about Flint. He controlled near most of the farming anywheres near these tracks. It was like other folks were come'n on his turf to trade and sell without him so much as get'n a nickel for it. But he got a nickel or up to a dollar from just about everybody else he crossed. Paid people pennies to work long hours. I myself ain't sad to see him nibbled on. I hope he fed a good number of fish bobb'n in and out 'a the water. Because he about starved 'bout everybody he crossed. He owed me, too. Something deeper than money, though. An apology. Nope. He don't do me no good dead.

"All right fellas!" shouted Thomas. "Now let's get them crates and bushels ready to weigh. It's payday!"

He's right. We could eat all the cabbage and turnips and tomatoes, and spin all the cotton we could to just survive one day to the next. To get boots or lace-ups, or take Ann Marie to the picture show, or buy mamma something nice at that new botique...well, that ain't possible unless the folks from the upstate ready to buy up what we dig up the earth for. Like buying a truck or get 'n electricity, or a new radio to hear Dixieland play 'n so you can dance to it around a fire out in the field? All that takes money.

When the train hissed down like a radiator gone bad, we all elbowed by the boxcar to be the first in line to sell. That boxcar slid open to a man stand 'n up straight, wearing a jacket as white as Ann Marie's Sunday dress, and shoes so sparkled they must 'a been spit-shined. Behind him was the same mean-look'n man always fling'n a shot gun over his shoulder. Hands went to waving and voices grew so loud to deserve his attention, but the man just kept stare'n out among us with a puzzled look about his face like he lost something. After a while it just got uncomfortable and one by one we stopped all that wav'n 'n yell'n we was doing.

“Where’s Flint?” he asked all slow and puzzled. From the boxcar, George McLeod looked us over on the ground. The way he pulled up was like he was God. Maybe richer. Nobody wanted to say so where Flint was so we kept look ‘n at ourselves, scratch ‘n our heads. “Well? Where is he?” Still, we were quieter than a mosquito around our ankles. “That man’s been standing right here for the last 15 years and you folks act like you don’t know who I’m talking about.” That is until Thomas pined up.

“Old Man Flint is deader ‘n turkey buzzard grub,” he said, I reckon ‘cause he kin and can say something like that.

“What happened?”

“Let’s just say the authorities are look ‘n into it.”

More...