

By Wayne Halm

Introduction

Mid summer in the South of Louisiana has one over riding quality - it is hot. The same "Africa Hot" a character in Biloxi Blues once described. The temperature and humidity, both in the nineties, join to melt the ambition out of everything having a choice. The morning breeze gives up and lies down in submission before nine. By noon trees of full vigor droop in exhaustion. Even "mad dogs and Englishmen" don't venture far into the South Louisiana heat - yet others do.

Chapter 1

Through the shimmering heat rising off LA143 rocked the uncolored pickup of Rufus Green - Roofer. The Ford pickup had been silver in the past, but 25 years of Louisiana sun had bleached it into "uncolored". Years of hauling shingles, new and used, had weakened the springs so it sat lower on the right side and bounced over bumps both real and imagined.

Rufus drove the truck at 45 miles per hour with his elbow stuck out the window. He leaned back into the seat seeking the breeze. His satisfied smile contrasted with the weary frown on the face of his passenger.

"Cheer up boy," Rufus commented, "All we gotta do is shovel this load out at the dump and we're done for the day."

"It's Sunday, why we gotta work on Sunday? It ain't right," came the reply.

"Cause that's where God put the work, we went to church this morning, he knows we're doing it," Rufus returned.

"You almost sound happy about it," grunted the boy.

"I am. We've got forty dollars that we didn't have yesterday. Twenty dollars for you to impress that Marcy girl with tonight. And twenty, well your Mama will probably take my twenty," Rufus chuckled, "God works in mysterious ways."

A dip in the road, assisted by the load of roofing trash, sent the truck bouncing more than usual. In the back a roofing nail slipped out of the rotted tar paper and flew into the air. The nail bounced

once on the rim of the tailgate then tumbled onto the asphalt.

Chapter 2

The white Camero speeding along LA143 had the AC and the CD cranked up to the max. Inside was a cool riot of noise compared to the sweltering silence outside. The Camero wasn't new but it was running well, even with the left front hubcap missing. "Bad Billy" was stenciled on the driver's door.

Billy Brown drove the car at over 70 miles per hour with his left hand. His right hand kept time with the music by patting the dashboard. His satisfied smile contrasted with the fear in the eyes of the beagle puppy in the passenger's seat.

The puppy crawled over and laid it's head on Billy's leg.

Billy slapped the puppy away and yelled over the music, "Get away from me dog. In a little while you can make all of the friends you want. Rabbits, bears, alligators, and whatever else lives out in this shit, but you ain't coming back with me."

The puppy cowered against the door hanging it's head off the seat staring at the floor.

Billy continued yelling, "The nerve of that woman, running off with that hick trash. Said she'd send for you - well when she does your flea bitten ass ain't gonna be there."

Chapter 3

A Cotton Mouth Water Moccasin silently slithered out of the canal beside the road and onto a branch hanging over the water. There in the shadows a few inches above the dark water it was a little less hot. The snake intended to stay there until sundown.

Twenty feet away, well back under the bushes, a Bullfrog watched the snake climb onto the limb. The snake was a danger to the frog, but it was one that could be avoided. The heat was also a danger and it was everywhere, so the frog sat in the shade, half submerged, and watched.

A Rabbit sat motionless under a fern not four feet from the frog. The rabbit smelled the snake and

also occasionally got the scent of a bobcat, that made her nervous. She was unaware of the frog.

A Bobcat slept against a log about a hundred feet from the rabbit. The bobcat knew that there was both a rabbit and a dove nest around, but the mid day heat made hunting unattractive. It would sleep until sundown.

A Dove sat on her nest in a near panic. Tucked into the grass she and the nest were nearly invisible but the smell of bobcat was strong and constant. In her mind thoughts of flight battled with dedication to her eggs. The dove did not sleep.

Chapter 4

The pickup rode smoother returning down LA143 without the load. Like the truck the mood inside was lighter now that the last of the work was over. But the lighter mood didn't mean easy conversation, shoveling in the sun had cooked that out of the riders. They rode along in exhausted contemplation.

Finally the boy spoke, "This morning in church, what was that preacher talking about? All that yelling about vengeance."

"I'm not sure," Rufus replied, "But he sure got fired up about it. What do you think?"

"I think we'd be home by now if he hadn't started on that stuff," the boy answered.

Chapter 5

Half a mile after the roofing nail punctured the left front tire of the Camero the steering wheel began to shake.

"What the hell?" Billy said against the music.

The puppy whimpered as the whole car began to shake.

"Damn, a flat," Billy shouted and banged his hands against he steering wheel, then began to slow down.

The shuttering car swerved back and forth across the road. Three times it went from shoulder to shoulder before it stopped half on and half off the asphalt.

"God damn it, I don't need this shit," Billy yelled through gritted teeth.

Billy turned off the CD player. He snickered at the puppy trembling on the floor, but the snicker turned into a roaring rage when he saw the puddle on the seat. "God damned dog! You're

outta here right now!" Billy screamed. He threw open the door and the heat assaulted him.

Sweat was already beading on Billy's forehead as he yanked open the passenger side door and dragged the puppy out. The puppy immediately walked to the back tire and lifted his leg. "No you don't," Billy yelled and kicked it. The puppy tumbled four times and got to it's feet running. The rocks Billy threw fell short and the cussing grew distant as the puppy ran down the road.

Chapter 6

The snake, the frog, and the rabbit were all aware of the car and the yelling. But it was across the canal and not reason enough to move in the heat. The bobcat and the dove didn't know anything about it - yet.

Chapter 7

The temperature was well over a hundred and ten on the asphalt. Billy was soaking with sweat by the time he started tightening the lug nuts on the spare tire.

"God damned dog! I should have killed him," Billy complained, "I'll run his ass down, that's what I do."

The lug wrench slipped off of the fourth of the five lug nuts. Billy's hand scraped across the asphalt pulling the skin off his knuckles. "Shit, damned, shit," he yelled, then jumped up in a rage kicked the tire and threw the lug wrench into the canal.

Chapter 8

Rufus saw the Camero and began to slow down to pass. He saw the man jump up and throw the lug wrench and began to slow to a stop.

"We gonna stop?" the boy asked.

"He might need some help," Rufus replied then added, "It's the right thing to do ain't it?"

"I guess so," the boy mumbled back.

Chapter 9

The lug wrench splashed into the water two feet from the snake. The snake instantly slid into the water and swam away from it - toward the frog. The frog saw and heard the splash too, but it was the snake that caused him to move. The frog leaped up away from the snake. The splash alone was enough to make the nervous rabbit move. She took one quiet hop, then the frog landed on her back and she tore off in a blind

panic. The cussing caused the bobcat to open it's eyes. The sight of the rabbit rushing past naturally started a chase. The dove didn't hear the cussing but did hear the chase coming directly at it. This was more than she could stand, in absolute terror she abandoned her eggs and took to wing - toward the road.

Chapter 10

Billy was stomping around holding his hand and cussing as the truck approached. Rufus stopped the pickup opposite the Camero and asked, "Need any help?"

Billy gave a cold stare before snarling, "What do you want?"

"Just offering to help," Rufus replied.

"Don't need no help from trash like you," Billy yelled, "So you just git."

Rufus watched Billy take a stand, arms folded, next to the driver door.

Chapter 11

The terrified dove was pulling it's wings hard as it came over the road. The unexpected sight of the vehicles and the yelling doubled it's terror and redoubled it's effort to get away. With all attention and effort going into the wing muscles there was none left over for the sphincter, and it loosened. An airborne glob of dung began it's descent.

Chapter 12

Billy glared from beside the Camero, "I said git," he growled.

Rufus and the boy stared back at Billy. With the last growl the boy began to move, but Rufus put his hand on the boys knee and released the brake.

The truck had just started to move when the bird dropping landed in Billy's right eye. "God damn it, shit," Billy screamed. The boy looked back to watch him stomp around and wipe his eye on his shirt as they drove away.

Chapter 13

"What's wrong with that man?" the boy asked.

"Got shit in his eye," Rufus chuckled.

"No, before that," the boy pressed.

"I don't know. Some people just act ugly," Rufus replied more seriously.

"I felt like getting out and throwing something at him - calling me trash," the boy stated.

"I know the feeling, but no need. You saw what happened. God took care of that," Rufus said with a smile.

"Yeah, he did, didn't he?," the boy said with a growing grin, "Good aim too. Right in the eye."

Laughing, Rufus added, "God don't like ugly."

Chapter 14

After they rounded a bend in the road Rufus saw the puppy sitting on the edge of the road. "Go home little puppy, get off the road," Rufus pleaded.

The boy sat up and said, "Ain't nobody lives around here, he's been dumped. Stop and let me get him."

"I thought you was in a hurry to get home," Rufus said.

"He might need some help," the boy replied then added, "It's the right thing to do ain't it?"

"I guess so," Rufus chuckled and pulled the truck over to the side of the road.

The boy was kneeling with his arm outstretched letting the puppy smell his hand when the Camero raced by with the horn blaring. The puppy leaped into the boy's arms. The boy was just opening the truck door when the State Trooper raced past with lights flashing.

Rufus watched the Trooper chase the Camero until they disappeared into the heat shimmers. Then he watched the puppy licking sweat off the laughing boy's face for a moment before putting the truck in gear.

Once back on the road he mused, "God don't like ugly - but he seems right fond of puppies."

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