

CHICKENBONE EXCERPTS

Rabbit Shine

I pulled into the first place I saw that looked like a mechanic. It was a faded blue concrete building, surrounded by stacks of old tires, and a hand-painted sign over the door that said *JUNE BUG'S TIRES*. Maybe they would know a mechanic around here. I pulled to a stop, steam rolled out from under the hood.

My headlights landed on an older black man, wearing smut-covered overalls, sitting on a grease bucket eating fried chicken from a box with his weathered hands. I got out and went over to him.

"You June Bug?" I asked.

"That's what the signs says, don't it?" he said.

"I don't need tires, but I was wondering..."

"Water pump," he cut me off.

"Yeah," I said. "Can you help out?"

"Gotta finish my chicken first," he said and pulled out another drumstick.

June Bug told me that he had closed for the day but would take a look anyhow and see what he could do. I agreed and asked him if there was a place nearby that I could get something to eat while I waited.

"Chicken place done closed," he said. "Next best place is 'bout a mile away, *3 PIGS* up that way," he pointed up the street. "Best damn barbecue in ChickenBone."

"ChickenBone?"

"That's where you are, young buck," he said. "Good living, but hard living."

"I'll walk up there while you take a look."

"You toting?"

"Toting?"

"Carrying," he said as he worked on the drumstick.

"Carrying what?"

"What the hell you think, big man? A gun."

"No, I don't have a gun."

"Then, fellow look like you don't wanna be walking up this street in the dark."

I went around to the back of the Jeep, took a 34-inch blonde-and-brown bat out of my equipment bag, gave my keys to June Bug and said I would be back a little later.

"You one crazy-ass white boy," he said as he shook his head and went back to working on his chicken.

Make a note: A man who eats his dinner with his hands while sitting on a grease bucket will always treat you right.

Hoochy Koochy

The door swung open with a bang. We both jumped. Sweet Thang was holding the huge pot in both hands.

“Ain’t gone lie, got no sweet tater pie, all we got is stew, but it gotta do,” he sang out loudly. “Bless this meat, let’s eat.” The screen door slammed behind him.

One hour and two episodes of *Hogan’s Heroes* later, we had nearly finished off the whole pot of Mulligans Stew

“Where did you learn to cook like this?” JD asked Sweet Thang.

“Ain’t no cooking,” he said. “You just kill it, skin it, boil it, and eat it. Take a lot, throw it all in a pot.”

Make a note: When you eat with Sweet Thang, always check the meat for a pulse.

“Since you boys dug such a fine snake pit,” he said, as he popped up out of his chair, “you deserve some homemade dessert.”

He disappeared into the kitchen and came back a minute or so later with three red plastic cups and a jar of clear liquid. He sat them down on one of the little tables.

“Moonshine?” I said, “For dessert?”

“Grade A, certified, bonafide, Georgia corn liquor. Handmade, homemade, and one hundred percent guaranteed to tickle your toenails.”

“You make this?” JD asked.

“Nope, this here batch was made by my cousin Scooter.”

“He in the business?” I asked.

“Was. Run out by the Jehovah Witnesses, biggest moonshiners in the county.”

“Jehovah Witnesses.”

“Nothin’ like door to door to drive up your sales. Now, shut your pie hole and let me watch my shows.”

He hit the button on the remote and the theme music from *Green Acres* blared out of the large screen. He took a big swig of his drink and plopped back into his chair.

“This here is a classic. Arnold Ziffel opens up his own bank account and ends up solving a bank robbery. He’s a legend, shoulda won the Oscar for this one.”

I didn’t make it to the end of the show and all of Arnold’s performance. The corn liquor and ten hours of digging a snake pit knocked me out cold. When I woke up, it was a little after two in the morning. I felt the crinkle of paper in my shirt pocket and reached in to pull it out. It was a folded old worn envelope, torn open. On the back was a note scribbled in blue ink. It was from Sweet Thang.

Hear tell you headed into town. Get my list and do not dilly dally

Beer—Taterchips—Sodicrackers--Bacon pork rinds--White bread—Mustard--TP

And go see if Rusty has my spark plugs

PS I done checked your truck top to bottom Ain’t no snakes nowhere

There are times in your life that you realize that somehow you have taken a turn down some road you can’t find your way back from. I had turned down that road and become the errand boy for a man who milks snakes for a living. Catfish wasn’t going to believe this one, or maybe he would. Hell, far as I knew, Catfish might even know Sweet Thang. If not, I hope he at least knew Rusty.

MudCat Moon

Catfish jumped on the line.

“The last time a dead man called me I hung up on him.”

“Last I checked I’m not dead, but the night is young,” I said into the crackling phone.

“That’s not what’s on the TV news,” Catfish said.

“The news says I’m dead?”

“Watching it now.”

“Any details you care to share?” I asked.

“Yep,” he said. “Says you were killed when Billy Ray’s security goons rescued Cissy.”

“Rescued Cissy from me?”

“You and your associates they say.”

“I have associates?”

“Apparently.”

“And we’re all dead?”

“According to Channel 10.”

“Breaking news,” I answered.

“Tragic. They still got your name wrong.”

“So, I suppose now would be a good time to fill you in on what’s really going on up here?”

“I was standing by for your call.”

“You were?”

“Billy Ray has been lying out his fat rear end since he was knee high to a billy goat.”

“And now he’s lying about this. You ready for the real story.”

“Talk fast. You running out of time.”

“How can I be running out of time if I’m already dead?”

“Cause Billy Ray has called the GBI and every damn news truck in two states.”

“How much time?”

“Hour at the most.”

“We need to get a move on, but can I ask you a question, first?”

“Make it quick,” Catfish replied.

“Did you just say this wasn’t your first call from a dead man?” I asked.

“I was drinking one night and I think I got a call from my dead high school football coach.”

“You’re not sure?”

“Could’ve been a dream or it might have been the whiskey.”

“Well you did start up with the bourbon two hours before kickoff today. You still drinking?”

“Why stop now,” Catfish said. “I’m talking to a dead man.”

BirdDog Boogie

"She's dead."

"What?"

"I know dead, and she's dead."

The man who made this pronouncement leaned in for a closer look. Ashes from the cigarette in his lips dropped off. He poked at something. I cringed at the sound.

"Yep, she's dead," he said.

"You sure?"

He looked at me, cocked his head, and pointed at his partner.

"Tell him, Henry."

"He knows dead," Henry said and wiped his face with the sleeve of a dirty white t-shirt.

I stood in the ditch next to the road. The sun had drifted below the pine trees behind me.

Nothing in view, left or right, except a long two-lane tar and gravel road. The man asked me where I was from. I told him.

"What you doing way down here?"

"Was on my way to see a man about a piece of machine gear."

He looked me over and rubbed a hand across the stubble on his face.

"So, what do we do now?" I asked.

"Well, getting dark." He looked up at the sky. "I guess me and Henry can haul it back to my yard and take care of it for you."

"How much is that going to cost me?"

He took a long drag off the cigarette and tossed it in the ditch. **"Five hundred dollars."**

"Really?"

"Look, son." He turned to face me. "I don't know where you're from, but where I come from, five hundred dollars is a lot of money to give somebody for a 1974 Ford truck with a blown engine and rusty parts and I've still got to haul it back to my junkyard. A tree will be growing through it before I make my money back. Five hundred. Take it or start walking."

"I'll take it."

"Go get the tow truck, Henry." He fired up another cigarette.

An hour later, I was sitting on a stool outside a convenience store in the dark. I had five hundred bucks in my pocket. I was one hundred miles from home. I had a cardboard box with the remains: two screwdrivers, a hammer, a handsaw, three cans of motor oil, four baseballs, two bats, and a soon-to-be-empty bottle of Wild Turkey to mourn the loss of a good truck. May she rest in peace.

SweetTater Tango

I felt a poke in the ribs and turned to see Cool Breeze with his cane. He looked me up and down.

“Baseball is a funny game, ain’t it?”

“That it is. Especially tonight.”

“Ice cream,” he said.

“What?”

“You like a good ice cream cone?”

“Sometimes.”

“I do too. But these days you try and get that ice cream cone and some fool will cover it up with all sorts of things. Little sprinkles, crumbles, runny syrup and even jelly beans.

“How did we get to talking about ice cream?”

“Done mucked up baseball like my ice cream cone,” he said. “Can’t find the game under all them jelly beans.” He poked me in the ribs again with his cane and headed off toward his seat. “Game is still down there underneath somewhere. Just keep looking.”

I heard a giggle. A familiar one. Alex. She was dressed in khaki pants, white t-shirt, her black carry vest, a hip bag and one camera around her neck.

“I just had a chat with your friend from the Bandit.”

“Sugar?”

“The one and only. Dressed in white pants, red shirt and pink sunglasses.”

“Why?”

“Didn’t ask. Don’t want to know.”

“Did he ask you for a date again?”

“He did indeed.”

“The Bandit doesn’t give up easily.”

“He said I would come around sooner or later because as he put it, ‘he knows things’”

“What kind of things?”

“Didn’t ask. Don’t want to know.”

We were rudely interrupted by a blast of loud music from the ballpark speakers. Sharp horns in a familiar tune. The crowd inside began to cheer and point toward center field. We made our way to the fence next to the dugout. A black van with a red stripe and red wheels turned sideways in the middle of the field. The rear doors flew open and a big man leaped from the van. He wore jeans, no shirt that showed off big muscles, a huge band of gold necklaces ran down his chest. He sported a thick beard and his hair was cut in a tall mohawk. He flexed his large muscles and let out a big scream. Mr. T from the A-Team had arrived at the ballpark. Alex grabbed her camera and pointed it toward centerfield. “Pity the fool that misses this shot.”

“Jelly beans,” I said.

ButterBean ShingAling

Two men ran past the van, headed toward the cabin porch. One skinny, no shirt. The other man was beyond huge, in overalls, hair down to his shoulders.

I jumped up, ran after him. I ran as hard as I could after skinny boy. I closed in on him. A few feet more and I would be close enough to jump on his back. I did not have to.

From behind a tree, a blur, followed by a loud ugly *smack*. A half scream, half moan and skinny boy crumpled backward toward me. His head hit the ground hard, blood squirted from his nose and forehead. He was out cold, maybe *dead* cold.

A high-pitched cackle turned into a long snort. CoonDog, head alligator cook and moonshine maker.

"Diddly damn doodle and cockle doodle doo," he shouted. "Now you cooking in *my* kitchen."

He shined a flashlight at me and down at skinny boy. "Is he dead?"

I bent down. I could hear his breath rattle. "Hard to tell, I think he is breathing. What did you hit him with?"

He held up a huge cast iron skillet, maybe sixteen inches wide. "Good for frying greasy gators and greasy idiots."

I picked up the other bottle, yanked out the cloth, emptied it. "Did you see the other guy, the big guy?"

"There was two of these idiots?"

"A huge man, had two fire-bombs and was headed that way."

I pointed toward the rear of the pavilion and kitchen area.

CoonDog let out a cackle. "Good."

"Good?"

"That's where Big Rig stays."

"And that is good, why?"

I did not have to wait for an answer. The thick night air was broken by a loud, long scream. I looked at CoonDog with a question on my face.

"Giddy up," he said with a grin.

"Explain?"

"Leg hold trap," he said. "Nasty ass metal trap. And worse if they got teeth. He's got them damn things planted all around back there."

The man screamed again, louder.

"Like a bear trap type thing?" I asked.

"Bear, coyote, wild boar and of course, some fool with firebombs aimed at my kitchen."

"I thought those traps have long been illegal."

"Ain't nothing illegal in the swamp," he said.

"But in reality, those things are outlawed."

"One hundred percent outlawed, prohibited and illegal as all hell." A grin showed off his missing teeth.

Another groan, followed by a long stretched out curse echoed into the swamp night.

"But highly effective," CoonDog said.

DEAD RED DINGER

A half hour later, a man emerged from behind the wall and headed to the exit. Dressed in high-end hunting clothes, he carried a leather duffel bag, and it was not hard to spot the shoulder holster inside the hunting jacket. The holster was not empty, nor was the duffel bag.

“So, this is what you see James do every week?” I asked Gartrell. “Hide back there, greet and meet.”

“Talking the truth,” he said, “the only thing legal delivered back there is the whiskey.” “Well, Bawana Johnny just left, so it’s our turn to talk turkey,” Percy Dean said.

“Hang on now,” I said. “That is not the plan.”

It was too late. He was up and moving. I tried to grab him but missed.

“This ain’t gonna turn out good,” Gartrell said. “What is that big fool doing?”

“Shaking off the catcher’s signs as usual,” I said. We rolled off the stools to follow him. The slender Asian security guy met him ten feet from the rear booth, and without a word, he stuck a finger in the chest of Percy Dean.

“Howdy Tommy Tokyo,” Dean said. “If you like that finger, move it or lose it.”

The guard slid backward and made a smooth move. With his arms in motion, he spun, and his leg came up high in a circle toward Percy. He blocked the leg with one hand, and with the other Percy whipped a twelve-inch steel wrench from his back pocket and hit the man right above his ear. He went down hard, rolled over with a moan. Percy leaned down, grabbing the man by his hair.

“Problem with that kung-fu crap is that you little dudes always think the other dude will fight fair. Sayonara Bubba.” He dropped him to the floor.

The farm tractor charged Percy. They bounced off each other, tables and chairs flew, and Percy was on his back while they danced in a circle. In the rear, I saw Oliver James, with two other security men head down a hallway and out the rear exit. Percy bounced off the big guy, charged him hard, and rammed his head through a glass beer cooler.

A loud explosion ripped through the roof. Everybody froze. The big barkeep stood on top of the bar. He had fired a round from a twelve-gauge shotgun into the ceiling. A light fixture swung from a wire and dropped to the floor with a crash. The whole place went silent.

Twenty-five minutes later, the three of us were locked up in the Gundy County jail.

CATDADDY COW PATTY

I told her about you. I thought it would be good to have somebody around. Stay close, keep an eye out.”

“An eye out for what?”

“Some things that have popped up,” he said. “Thought she could use a bodyguard of sorts.”

“She doesn’t sound like somebody who would need a bodyguard,” Alex said.

“She doesn’t,” Catfish said. “She’s not who needs guarding.”

“I’m confused,” Alex said. “Then who does need guarding?”

He smiled, reached into his pocket and laid a 4x6 photo on the table. It was a picture of a big black and brown dog with long floppy ears.

“*That* is who needs guarding?” Alex said. Her grin spread wide.

“A dog,” I said. “You want to hire me to be a bodyguard for a *dog*.” My voice grew louder.

Alex started laughing, and beer poured down her chin, onto her shirt. She grabbed the photo. Catfish snatched it back.

“This is not just a dog. His name is Sir Englebert Starling Finn.”

“I do not care if his name is Sir Ringo Starr,” I said. “You want me to guard a *dog*?”

“He is the sire of Baron Alistair Caspicin, who was a Grand National Champion in the Hound Class.”

Alex’s head was on the table. She banged the side of her head with her fist. She had not stopped laughing.

“Oh, jeez,” she said. “I think I just peed my pants.”

“A bodyguard to a dog,” I said. “I knew I should have studied more in school