

OUT OF THE FRYING PAN

Mavis stopped ironing, straightened up, gently touched her swollen left eye, then in rapid order, threw another piece of wood in the fireplace, jerked a fresh flatiron from the hearth, slapped its face with licked fingers, and hissed through clenched teeth, “This last shirt, then I’m gone – for good this time.”

In a wary voice, just loud enough to be heard inside the house, Roberto called out, “Mavis? You in there? We leaving. You coming?” He stood behind a water pump in the front yard looking tense, one hand gripping the rusty pump handle, the other in the pocket of a baggy coat. “Mavis? . . . Mavis! You hear me? I said come on.”

Mavis leaned back from the battered table she was using as an ironing board and peered out a grimy window. She was in no mood to be ordered around by a man, not even Roberto. But she was ready and wasted little time studying the half-ironed shirt before pitching it in the fire.

Sniffing, her chin jutting high with mouth set firm, she slung a faded cotton wrap around her shoulders, picked up a satchel fashioned from a pillowcase that contained all her possessions, and without a backward glance, marched out the door, slamming it behind her like a leaden exclamation point to a string of scatological invectives.

“They in there?” Roberto asked.

“Hell no,” she said, striding past him, headed for the highway and his flatbed truck. She knew it was there in the forks of the road where he and two carloads of his relatives had been camping the past three nights. In fact, where the same group had camped when passing through the South Carolina “Lowcountry” on their way to and

from Florida every October and April for the past three years, where gypsies had camped for generations. Dan Jacobs had allowed them to use that spit of land to fish Chub Creek and wash their clothes. “Providin’ you don’t stay more than a couple of days,” he had warned.

“Where they at, then?” Roberto took several steps backward, his eyes riveted on the door.

“They in the swamp. Where the hell you think they at?”

Running fingers through matted curls on his head, his focus still on the door, Roberto grabbed Mavis by the arm as she brushed past him, a pistol but showing in his coat pocket.

She jerked free without slowing.

Roberto double-stepped to catch up. “What’s wrong with you, Mavis? Jesus, where’d you get that shiner?”

“Just don’t touch me right now, Roberto.” Mavis quickened her pace. “If we gonna go, like you said, let’s go.”

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Three rawboned hounds trotted out of Snuggedy Swamp followed by Bunyun Hatchett and his teenage sons, Will and Rudy. Another thirty yards and they were on the porch of their weather-beaten shack, the dogs vying for a sunny spot at its edge.

“Mavis.” Bunyun shouted, emptying a canvas bag of dead squirrels on a small table, “Get your bony ass out here and skin these squirrels. I’m hungry.”

Will, who had already entered the house, shouted back, “She ain’t in here, Pa.”

“Where the hell is she, then?” Bunyun barked.

“Now how the shit am I gonna know that,” Will said, rejoining his father and younger brother on the porch.

“You watch it, boy,” Bunyun said, with a menacing glance.

“She done run off ag’in, I bet,” Rudy chortled, then ducked as Bunyun swung the barrel of his shotgun in a wicked arc, ruffling the top of Rudy’s shaggy red head.

“Skin them damn squirrels, boy.”

“She’ll be back,” Will said. “She always comes back.”

#

Roberto drove. His mother, Rosa, and a young girl in her early teens named Angel, whom Roberto introduced as his cousin, filled the remaining cab space. Mavis was forced to huddle in the open truck bed amongst the family’s possessions.

Taking the left fork, a county highway, the truck headed south at a rapid clip. Mavis braced herself against the cab with autumn’s chilly air lashing in from all directions, stripping away the heat of her anger. Tied down behind her were a rocking chair, a well-worn leather trunk made from elephant hide, a wooden crate filled with pots and pans, a galvanized washtub weighted with four smoke-blackened bricks, several packages wrapped in oilcloth, and a large canvas bundle that Mavis knew to be a fortuneteller’s tent. Two passenger-stuffed vehicles, one a late-model sedan, the other a dilapidated undertaker’s hearse outfitted with seats, preceded the truck, baggage tied on top of each.

By mid-afternoon, the little caravan had reached Lawyers Creek, a community consisting of a defunct turpentine distillery, a few houses scattered along the highway,

and a packaged-food store that sold gasoline. A poorly lettered sign attached to a porch overhang proclaimed: WESLEY STOKES PLACE.

The sedan and hearse continued down the highway without slowing. Roberto eased off the road and pulled up to the pump but didn't turn off the engine. He remained in his seat quietly talking to his mother in a cacophony of unintelligible words, which added to Mavis' discomfort.

A thinly built Negro man with a slight limp darted around the corner of the building and began working the pump lever back and forth, while exposing a gold tooth in a wide grin. Clear reddish-orange gasoline began gurgling up into the glass cylinder and washing the area with its fumes. He said, "You want me to fill 'er up, Suh?"

"Yeah. You do that, boy," Roberto said, getting out.

Mavis stood up to stretch her legs, her shawl over her head, pinched together just under her nose. "You stay there," Roberto commanded.

"Where you think I'm gonna go?" Mavis said, heat flushing back into her face and neck. Scowling, she remained standing, her back to the black man. She held her defiant stance until Roberto had entered the store, followed by Rosa and Angel, wondering if she had made a mistake.

Roberto was a good-looking man and a persuasive lover. It was fun slipping out to meet him when he passed through town the year before, but now he was beginning to act like all the other men she had known. She never intended living with him. That is, not for any length of time. She would admit, however, that she gave him good reason to think she would. All she really wanted, though, was a ride to Florida. There, she might find

work picking strawberries . . . or anything that would allow her to be self-supporting, a chance to create a new life for herself.

“Dey got six gallons, Mister Stokes,” the Negro man shouted through the open door; Roberto had left it open.

“You finished guttin’ them catfish, Neptune?” came the harsh reply.

“Yassuh. Pretty soon now.” Neptune hobbled back around the corner with a barely audible chuckle.

Mavis kept the shawl up around her face. She knew the colored man and didn’t want to take any chance of Bunyun learning which way she had gone before she was out of the county.

In a surprising few minutes, Rosa exited the store in a waddling gait, as if carrying something between her legs. She was a large woman and wore a long, layered, loose-fitting skirt. Angel followed, holding her coat shut with arms wrapped across her belly. “Damn if that skinny little thing ain’t all of a sudden got pregnant,” Mavis whispered into her shawl.

It was another two minutes before Roberto backed out the door. He moved slowly, stuffing something in his pants pocket – those of his coat bulging full – while pointing a pistol at the doorway.

Mavis was unable to speak or move. With eyes wide, she swallowed hard, losing grip on her shawl. The truck bucked forward convulsively, kicked up sand, and swerved back on the highway. There was a fading shout from inside the store: “Help! Neptune! NEP-T-U-U-NE!”

Roberto drove at high speed for the better part of an hour before turning off the paved road onto an ill-defined dirt track that led a circuitous route through a drying swamp with dust roiling, settling on everything. Mavis was angry, cold, and scared. She wanted to talk to Roberto but the violent bumpy ride kept her busy trying to stay upright.

Eventually, the truck slowed then slammed to a halt. Off to the left, half-hidden by dwarf palmettos, was a small pond, an irregularly shaped depression that held a pocket of water. A catfish was gulping air at its surface. Roberto opened his door and stepped to the ground.

Struggling to her feet, clenching her teeth at the pain in her buttocks, Mavis said, “What the hell’s goin’ on here? What did you do back there at that store? Ain’t we supposed to be goin’ to Florida?”

“Just shut up, Mavis. I’ll explain it later.” Roberto spoke without looking at her, concentrating on the pond. He took several steps forward, bent down, picked up a small stick and flung it into the water. The surface erupted, broken all about with dorsal fins and splashing tails. He breathed a low whistle and said, “Mavis, bring me that washtub. Angel, you and Momma come on out here and let’s catch us some fish.

Fascinated by the extraordinary sight, Mavis obeyed without hesitation. The pond was alive with fish that had been trapped by the receding water of one of the driest years in Lowcountry memory. Both she and Angel waded in the knee-deep depression and, with their bare hands, began scooping and throwing their prickly-finned prey onto the forest floor. Roberto and Rosa tossed them in the tub.

The swamp crackled with excitement. Mavis began laughing, splashing back and forth. Several times both she and Angel lost their footing, dipping to their knees in the

cold water, juggling their elusive prey into the air as if in a comic circus act. Roberto and Rosa cheered them on with whistles, hoots, and clapping.

It was great fun, Mavis felt, forgetting her concerns for the moment. Angel joined her in the truck bed for the mile or two more to their destination, an elevated clearing at the edge of the Combahee River, where the two carloads of others were waiting. Angel said, “If we don’t have any luck up by your place in Cottageboro, this is where we usually camp and do some fishing. It doesn’t look like we need to do any more of that now, just scale and gut what we already caught.”

Deep fat frying pots were soon sizzling with breaded fillets of cat and brim. Mavis was starving and pitched in by preparing a large pan of coleslaw and hushpuppies made from balls of cornbread laced with diced onions, crumbled cheese, pork skin cracklings, and chopped dried chili peppers – the cornmeal and cracklings probably were stolen from Wesley Stokes, she thought. Other dishes, none familiar to her, soon accompanied the fish. The men filled their plates as soon as the first batches were done.

After eating, Angel took two old army blankets from the leather trunk. She wrapped one around herself while undressing and gave the other to Mavis. They sat on a downed tree by the river, apart from the others, while their shoes and clothing dried by the fire.

Angel said, “Why did you come with us, Mavis?”

“Roberto asked me to. Besides, I was goin’ to leave that sonovabitch I been livin’ with for the past two years, anyhow.” Mavis frowned, gritted her teeth, and spat, “Bunyun Hatchett done hit me for the last time.”

Angel puckered her lips, as if in thought. “I don’t think you want to stay with us, Mavis.”

“How come?”

“Roberto is my husband. That’s why.”

“Damn! When did that happen? I mean, you ain’t nothin’ but a stringy little kid. What, fourteen?”

“Sixteen!” Angel shot back. “We were married last month. Rosa arranged it. And Roberto knows I’m plenty enough woman for him. That’s one thing he can’t lie about.” From somewhere in her blanket, Angel pulled out a penknife and began pecking at the dead tree bark in the few inches between them. “And besides, I don’t want you staying.”

“Well, maybe I don’t wanna stay, anyhow.”

“Good.” Angel stopped splintering wood and grinned.

Mavis pulled her blanket tighter against the cold, sniffed, stared at the fire in a fixed gaze, and said, “Then again, maybe I will. Roberto probably won’t let me go.”

“You do and there’s going to be a fight. And you’re not going to win any fights with us. Rosa will see to that.”

Mavis looked squarely at Angel and flashed her friendliest smile. “I think we better get dressed,” she said.

Later, while the others sat around the fire listening to an older man who seemed to be their leader, Mavis found Roberto working under the hood of the hearse. A young boy not much older than Angel leaned on the fender watching him. “I wanna talk to you, Roberto,” she said.

“Talk.”

“Alone.”

“Go on back to the fire, Cyril,” Roberto said, without looking up, straining on a wrench.

Mavis moved to put the hearse between herself and the fire. “Look at me when I’m talkin’ to you.”

“Don’t make me mad, Mavis,” Roberto said, without halting what he was doing.

“Angel said you two was married.” Roberto didn’t answer. “And what happened back there at that store?” No response. “I want some answers or I’m leavin’. You hear?”

Roberto stood up straight and pointed the wrench at Mavis. “None of that is any of your business. And you not going anywhere unless I say so. Now get back over to the fire and stop acting stupid.

#

“You fulla shit, Wesley Stokes. I done been to Oyster point and back three times, now, and I ain’t seen a sign of a truck full of gypsies.”

“That’s ‘cause you ain’t no better at trackin’ than that sorry-assed sheriff we got. I’m tellin’ ya, they went thata way.”

“I don’t think that niggah of yours seen Mavis with ‘em neither.”

“Yeah? Well I say your ass is puckered ‘cause she done run off ag’in,” Wesley growled, rubbing petroleum jelly over reddened welts around his wrists and ankles. “She done diddled you one more time, Bunyun Hatchett, admit it.”

“Well, they ain’t nobody tied me up with a rope and took my money in broad daylight.” Bunyun spat on the floor, then flopped in a chair by the stove and hung his

head. "I swear, you take care of a woman, give her a roof over her head and somethin' to eat and she don't appreciate nothin'."

"Don't worry, she'll be back." Wesley chuckled. "And she'll do it ag'in. You'll see."

#

Mavis slept alone on the bed of the truck that night, her stomach in a knot, thinking of how she might escape. She wasn't going to Florida with Roberto and she didn't want anything more to do with gypsies. That was for damn sure.

The following day was a slow start. An uneventful morning led to a cold lunch followed by two or three hours of snoozing by the elders while three young children worried soft-shelled turtles at the river's edge with clods of dried mud. Staying in the swamp all day seemed to be the deliberate plan. They must think somebody is looking for them on the highway, Mavis concluded, keeping to herself, half asleep, pretending more, feeling a soft tug on her dress.

"Mavis, you asleep?" Angel whispered. She was standing next to the truck bed hidden behind the leather trunk.

"Yeah. What you want?"

"You decided what you're going to do?"

"He said I couldn't leave."

"You want to?"

"How am I gonna to do that?"

"I'll help you."

"Oh yeah, how *you* gonna do that?"

“Just don’t say or do anything stupid. You’ll get a chance.”

“Why you doin’ this? You gonna leave too?”

“Hell no. *I’m* not leaving. *You’re* leaving.”

“Then, why?”

“They’re my relatives, my people. Besides, Rosa likes me. She’s a Mitrovitch queen, you know. She says I’m going to be a queen someday, if I play out the cards that she reads for me.”

“But why you helpin’ me? If Roberto finds out, you gonna be in big trouble. You thought about that?”

“Rosa said that the only big trouble in my cards is you, not Roberto. I can handle him.”

#

The night air was chilly but not as uncomfortable as the day before. Roberto wasn’t driving as fast either. The swamp trail moved further northwest along the Combahee, less bumpy now. Mavis hugged herself with shawl and blanket, deciding that after all she liked Angel. She thinks and acts like a bitch of a grown woman, not the little thing she looks like. “By god, I almost feel sorry for Roberto,” she mouthed into the shawl, then shook her head and laughed out loud.

Eventually, the swamp trail intersected the Savannah highway and the group turned south, toward Florida. Somewhere near the Georgia state line, the lead vehicle, the troublesome one, coasted to a halt on the side of the road, smoke boiling out from under the hood. The others pulled up behind. The men met for a few moments beside the

deserted highway. It was dark, heavily overcast with the staggering rumble of thunder echoing over the horizon.

Maybe there would finally be rain to break the drought, Mavis thought, then frowned. "Just my luck," she mumbled, "me in the back of a open truck."

Roberto returned with Cyril and said, "There was a light in a farm house two or three miles back. I'm going to need some parts. We'll just see what we can find."

The truck swung around in the road with Cyril standing on the running board holding on with one arm stuck through the window. He obviously had sharp eyes and quickly spotted a dirt drive. Roberto passed it by before circling back and bringing the truck to a halt just short of the entryway. He turned off the lights. The house, dimly lit with kerosene lamps, sat well back off the road.

"Everybody wait here," Roberto said. "I'll see what it looks like."

Mavis leaned over the side and asked, "What's he gonna do?"

Angel stuck her head out the window and whispered, "He's checking to see if they're friendly, that's all."

Roberto moved with such stealth, Mavis was unaware that he had returned until she heard him say, "It looks good." There was total silence for another moment before he said, "Okay, here's what we do. Angel, you ask for something to eat. Cyril, you help me. Momma, you look around. Mavis, you stay here and don't make a sound."

Mavis stood leaning on top of the truck cab muttering, "Now what? How the hell did I get into this?" She neither could see nor hear anything more until a feeble baying-bark of an old dog announced the presence of an intruder. It was the unmistakable sound

of a blue-tick hound, nothing like the scrawny animals Bunyun kept. With a dog like that, they certainly ain't trash, she thought.

A man in overalls appeared at the door with a kerosene lamp in his hand. It was too far for Mavis to hear what was said but she could see that Angel was standing on the porch. In barely more than a minute, a woman appeared behind the man and Angel was ushered inside. The door shut returning the scene to inky blackness. Mavis was sick with anxiety but in this situation there was nothing she could do. Her chance for getting away from these people would have to come at a better time.

Feeling even more vulnerable, and colder, she settled back to a sitting position, wishing that whatever was going to happen would hurry up and happen, "damn it!"

A speckling of rain began. She pulled the blanket tighter and cursed out loud, "Shit!" not caring if anyone could hear or not.

Suddenly, the probably blind and arthritic hound found voice enough to sustain an alarm that brought the farmer back to his door. In what little light escaped, Mavis made out the silhouette of Roberto and Cyril pushing a Modal-A Ford toward the highway, Roberto gripping the steering wheel through an open window.

Angel dashed out the house as the farmer ran back in. She lunged into the rear of the car, helping to push until they reached the highway. Mavis was surprised to find that Rosa was ahead of them, already climbing into the front seat.

As Roberto worked to start the car, Angel jumped in beside Rosa and Cyril got in the other side, behind the wheel. The truck hurtled around the stolen vehicle headed for the others down the road.

Mavis heard a shotgun blast followed by the coughing start of the stolen car. There was a flash and thunder of another shotgun blast from the porch but Roberto's headlights were already on the highway, gaining on the truck, safely away.

Like a well-drilled bed of ants, the group stripped everything of value from the broken down hearse. The more personal items that could be held in laps were transferred to the smaller Model-A. Bulkier pieces were thrown on the truck bed, behind Mavis. All were back on the road speeding across the Savannah River in a matter of minutes.

A jumble of emotions perplexed Mavis, mixed feelings of relief, elation, abandonment, anger, and fear. Adding to her stress, a hard stinging rain, like bird-shot from the farmer's gun, began its relentless assault. Sleep seemed her only sanctuary.

When she awoke, the truck was traveling down a lifeless city street. It was just before dawn and the rain had stopped. She wasn't sure exactly where she was . . . probably Savannah, she thought. The caravan was forced to drive more slowly here. Maybe she could get off without anyone noticing. She knew they wouldn't stop inside the city. She could get lost until she decided what to do next. But she had to move quickly. It was still dark only because of overcast skies.

Taking hold of her satchel, she worked her way to the rear, sucked in a deep breath, clenched her teeth, and jumped.

Landing in a squatting position, she began rolling backwards, heels over head, two complete turns, coming to rest against the curb, sustaining a few bumps and bruises, nothing serious – she had been hurt much worse slugging it out with Bunyun. The street was bare so she remained seated 'til she could get her bearings. Slowly, she stretched her

legs out straight and pulled her satchel to her side, feeling giddy; she was in Georgia, free of the Hatchetts and Roberto. Her future belonged to her.

As things settled back into focus, she snorted at the smell of damp dust, stood up, and spanked her backside clean. Then, in a flush of rare elation, she ran hands in her pockets to straighten and fluff out her damp cotton-print dress. Puzzled, she pulled a bundled piece of paper from one of the pockets. Unfolding it, she found several dollar bills, fourteen of them. A note read: *Mavis, This is the money Roberto took from that store. Use it to buy a bus ticket to somewhere else.*

THE END