

Blue John

On August 12, 1948, Mr. Jim Johnson came to work, as he did every morning, carrying in one hand a black metal lunchbox with the top in the shape of a gambrel roof. In the top was a thermos bottle filled with coffee and in the bottom were sandwiches in waxed-paper bags. In the other hand he carried six bottles of Coca Cola in a paper carton. Unlike the other men who worked alongside him, he wore a tie with his workshirt. He was also the only white man in the group.

All day, Mr. Jim sat in an old armchair and operated four levers: The first lever would slide the heavy top over the charging box, the second would ram a heavy steel plate to within two feet of the end of the box, and the third would ram a plate from the side. The end product would be a two-foot cube of crushed automobile steel. Mr. Jim would then pull back all the levers part-way and then operate the fourth lever to drive a ram upward to a level where a forward thrust of the cover would topple the cube into a railroad car parked on the siding below where the press operated.

Blue John and Willie B. worked with Mr. Jim every day, the two of them using acetylene torches to cut automobile bodies into pieces that they could throw into the charging box. Banter between the two was continuous. Mr. Jim listened but rarely said anything.

What prompted Blue John to strike the wager that morning could have been that he simply needed five dollars. Or something may have passed between him and Mr. Jim that needed public expression. Whatever prompted it, word spread around the scrap iron yard like a burning dynamite fuse line. Engines of cranes went quiet, someone turned off the power to the continuously running shear that two men fed heavy steel through before tossing pieces into another railroad car. Two women, Miss Mary and Miss Lizbeth came out of the office and walked onto the yard, perhaps for the first time. The owner of the yard came out to ask what was happening.

“Don’t worry, Mr. Henry. We be all right. We having a little fun,” Blue John said.

“Don’t nobody get hurt and keep it to 10 minutes,” Mr. Henry Frank said. “I’m going to the post office and I think that’s a good place for me to be.” Miss Lizbeth had already told him about the wager, which she learned about from John Simms, who came into the warehouse for a tank of acetylene. John roamed the yard, running errands, carrying supplies, guiding truckers to the proper spots for unloading the constant flow of junk.

Blue John was betting five dollars that he was going to lie down in the charging box while Mr. Jim slid the cover over the top, a position in which Blue John could be crushed from three sides if Mr. Jim had a grudge against him or lapsed ornery or simply automatically performed the sequence that he followed about fifty times a day. John Simms was holding the money from what had turned into six wagers instead of one, and Blue John had signed a paper instructing Miss Lizbeth, the bookkeeper, to give five dollars from his paycheck to each bettor if he didn’t go through with the deal. If Mr. Jim

made a mistake during the process, Henry Simms was to give all the money to Blue John's wife.

Mr. Jim never got up from his seat and if he changed his facial expression, it was to let his smile become slightly more enigmatic.

Before he stepped into the box, Blue John looked at Mr. Jim's face, which did not change its expression. Mr. Jim took a cigar out of his shirt pocket, unwrapped it and put it into his mouth.

"Is you ready, Mr. Jim?" Blue John asked. Mr. Jim took the cigar from his mouth and touched it to his forehead in the manner of a salute. He also smiled now, appearing uncharacteristically kindly.

Blue John stepped into the box. "Here, hold this," he said, handing his wallet to Willie B. Then he first sat and then lay down in the bottom of the box, his head facing the railroad tracks, his face turned up to the sky, which would soon be eclipsed by the cover. "Now don't forget what you got in here, Mr. Jim. I ain't no scrap iron."

Mr. Jim motioned to Blue John with his right hand, signaling that Blue John should stay flat, as it dawned on him that Blue John had as much opportunity to do something awful as he did. For the first time, Mr. Jim spoke. "Now stay flat."

"Yessir. I'm gonna stay flat," Blue John said.

Mr. Jim moved the first lever forward, letting the hydraulic fluid press the door forward, slowly covering the box. Blue John was focusing his eyes on the cover as it moved toward and over him closing him into the box. There was silence. No one spoke a word. Now everyone was looking at Mr. Jim.

"How long did he say he wanted to stay in there?" Willie B. asked Mr. Jim.

Again Mr. Jim spoke. "He didn't say." Mr. Jim picked up a scrap of iron and reached across the levers. He tapped the iron on the top of the box and everyone listened, but there was no sound.

Mr. Jim motioned people to get away from the box and he pulled back on the first lever, slowly exposing Blue John, who was lying perfectly still, his eyes watching the edge of the cover as it receded. When it was withdrawn all the way, he broke into a grin and pushed himself up with his elbows. Then he stood up and climbed out of the box, looking around for John Simms, who came up behind him and thrust thirty dollars into his hand. He looked at it quickly and took a five-dollar bill from the stack and handed it to Mr. Jim, who was now out of his chair. "Well thank you Blue John," Mr. Jim said, putting it into his pocket and going back to his chair. He stopped before he sat down and took a new cigar from his pocket and touched it to his forehead before handing it to Blue John.