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First Draft

Dick Dona is Nelson Bell's Brother. Sheriff Johnson on a tip goes out in the country and kills George Pearls. Before he dies he tells him that Hannah Rowe ~~plotted~~ plotted with him to kill Merrill. He goes to the town, He has a case. He should release these ~~man~~ two prisoners and take Hannah Rowe into custody. But he couldn't get even with Bell that way. He wants Bell to prosecute his own brother

Numedia, Mississippi 1932

To those very few who knew the old negro woman, or to those curious ones who had seen her sitting in front of the sherriff's office those three days since the murder and had the curiosity to ask about her, she was called Easter. She was an ugly woman, not as old as she looked and because of her recent illness she ~~was~~ looked as if the ~~fl~~ flesh had been stripped from her and ~~her~~ skin stretched back over her bones. She had made the dress which she had on five years ago, a blue thing with small once white but now brown flure de lise speckled over it. There were no holes in the dress and except for the part of the garment where her ~~breast~~ breast bones had worn the cloth so thin it had ~~bleached~~ bleached, the color was only a few shades lighter than when she had made the dress. Her shoes were once a man's shoes but over the years they had ~~been~~ worn so flat along the sides that her heels stuck out over the back as if they were sandals. It was good that they were that way because the pain of her bandaged foot was not as acute when her tough elephant skin heels were allowed to protrude over the worn heels. At home she wore no shoes.

It was almost noon when the sherriff who was also the Chief of the Numedian police force drove into the garage behind the station.

"Its that nigger woman again." the deputy said. "Hal, do you want me to get rid of her. Jessie and I can run her out of twon a few

Hannah says the sherriff off. She says
even the sherriff's brother is dying
so she confesses later

miles. Since she's crippled up and can't walk very fast it'll take out of our hair for a few hours at least. "

The sheriff did not answer. He seemed to be thinking about something else, about the murder which had occupied his mind for the last three days. Though he thought he had the killers, there were still doubts. The state police might be called in if he did not handle the case well. The governor had called for an immediate solution to the case.

" Well, damn it, Hal, what in hell are we going to do with her. "

" Just leave her alone, " the sheriff said as he got out of the car and handed the keys to the attendant. The deputy followed the sheriff around the car and both of them walked up the steps to the rear of the old Victorian house that served as the police station and jail. As he grabbed for the doorknob the sheriff turned and looked down into his assistant's face. " Don't touch her., " he said.

" Ok, Hal, ok. I'm just trying to help. The people are beginning to talk about that nigger. She ain't yellin' like she done that first day, but now she don't have to. They all know what she got to say and some of them are talking. Even the DA is talkin like maybe them two you got locked up got railroaded or somthin'. . . . "

" You don't have to tell me what that son of a bitch Hilton Bell thinks. I know that son of a bitch from the word go. You just leave that nigger gal be, hear? "

" Sure Hal, you know that I'm with you. "

The sheriff opened the door for his assistant but the deputy insisted that the sheriff go first. There was a look of disgust on the man's face, but the deputy attributed that to the pressure of the last three days. The deputy walked into a side room and the sheriff walked alone down the shiny grey hall to his office ~~was~~ in the faont of the building. ^{As he turned his head} He could not help but see her head warped by the old leaded front door windows, more of a shado than an image, as still as the august air which surrounded her. Hal had no sooner sat down ~~when~~ Jessie appeared in the doorway. He knocked even though the door was open. The sherriff put down his deputy reports and looked up slowly.

" Yek? "

" Sir, it's that nigger woman. She's back. "

" Yes, yes, I know. What do you want me to do. I guess I could have her arrested for vacrancy. Would that make you happy? "

" Sir? "

" Ok, ~~what~~ is it, then? "

" She wants to talk to you. "

" Well, hell kid. Why in hell do you think she had been sitting out there for three days for? " said the sheriff. He slammed his reports down on his desk and stood up.

" Look, sir, you don't have ~~to~~ talk to me. "

" I'm sorry, I'm sorry, " the sherriff said waving his hand dramatically. " But, god, use that colledge educated brain of yours. Sure she's out there waiting to talk to me. But I already know what she's going to say. I've done talked to her already, " he said trying to be conciliatory. He paused for a moment and then said calmly. " Look, go out there and be nice to her. Tell her that I am too busy and that I have already heard what she's got to tell me. Be nice to her. Offer to take her home. "

" Alright," said Jessie throwing up his hands as if he already knew what the answer would be. " I'll go out there and tell her, but it won't do ~~her~~ any good. "

The young man disappeared through the doorway. The sheriff could hear ~~him~~ open the front door and step out onto the front porch. ~~He could hear~~ ~~xxxxxx the hot air is xxxxx sleeping into the house~~ He could hear Jessie's voice clearly, could hear a car go by and could tell it was an ancient model T. He could hear Jessie's words which were his words almost exactly. And he could hear the woman answer but not this time in high, squeaky, outraged words. This time it was a voice so low, so calm that he could not hear what she was saying. She sounded weaker. A gust of hot air blew in through the door. He could smell the old woman, a smell like sour milk, like yellowed goat fur. It was nauseating. He leaned over and switched on his desk fan and turned it toward the door in a vane attempt to blow the smell away. Then he heard the front door close and Jessie came back in. Jessie carried a handkerchief which he had just faken from his face.

" She won't leave until she sees you. "

" Well tell her this "

" She said that if you will talk to her, she will leave and won't bother us any more. But you got to talk to her now. "

" Why that arrogant old nigger. "

" Sir, she said that she won't act angry or yell like last time, if you'll just talk to her. "

The sherriff was quiet for a moment, perhaps a bit too long, because Jessie spoke up.

" Well, sir, what should I tell her. "

" Ok, send her in. I'll talk to her, but tell her if she acts like last time I'll have acouple of boys run her back out to her place and take that crutch away from her. "

" Yes Sir. " The deputy turned to leave, but the sheriff called him back.

" Wait a minute. I'll go out there. I couldn't stand that smell in this room again. "

The deputy waited for the sheriff to get up, and then both of them went out onto the porch together. The old woman did not look up when the sheriff appeared, instead she looked straight ahead of her. The bluish rims around her corneas made her look almost blind. Because there was very little wind the goat smell of the old woman was almost suffocating. The sheriff was unconsciously holding his breath. He wanted to breath through his mouth but he was afraid of the germs that might be on the old woman. Flies ~~flies~~ crawled on her and flew about her head greedily inspecting her as they might a corpse.

" Alright, you may tell me what you want to say. " said the sheriff.

" Ah been to see Mistuh Bell, " she said, suddenly looking up at the two men who stood before her. " He say dat I know 'nough to be a witnus in court. Ah tol' 'em whut I tol' you. Ah tol' 'em dat I was out in mah house in de back o' de big house when dem shots was fired way ovuh der across dat gulley an' both o' dem was at home an not doin' no killin' cause ah "

" Wait a minute, wait just a minute, you're just saying the same thing over again. "

The negro paid no attention and went on speaking. The pitch of her voice was beginning to rise.

" ~~ah~~ . . . 'cause ah heard him playen on de piana an' ah see dat de light is on in her room and her shadow is against de shade. Ah seed dis when ah hear dese shots way off on de other side of dem woods. "

The sherriff turned to his deputy. " Get this woman out of here. Don't be rough to her but get her out of here. And don't take her out in my car. Get the pickup.

" Wait jus' a minute. You's 'structin' justice. Mistuh Bell say so. He can get you into bad trouble. "

" Jessie, get this nigger out of here. "

The sheriff could see that the boy did not want to touch the old negro. The sheriff understood.

" Well get her to get up by herself then. "

" Wait den jus' one minute den I'll leave an won't bother ~~you~~ no more till dey tries dem. Mistuh Bell say dat it ain't right fo' him to get ~~the~~ dem a laywer cause he de persecutor. Dey gots to have somebody dat'll speak fo' dem. Tom Ramey will speak fo' dem. He got a colledge education in Texas some place but I don' know where. So Mistuh Hilton Bell say you can give him dat information so he can write a letter or telegram to git dat boy up here. Mistuh Bell say he will come over dis afternoon to get dat address. "

" Ok, he can come and get it then. Do you want to say anything else? "

" No, suh, nothing dat you will listen to. I say dis. You is wrong even if you is de police. You gonna wish you done listen to me when it be too late and de people done be yellin' at you fo' not puttin' de real killuh in jail. "

" You ready to leave now. "

" yes suh. "

The sheriff started to walk back inside.

" Suh? "

" What is it? "

" You get your man to ride me home. You done said he ride me home. "

" Take her home, Jessie. "

" Yes, sir. "

She had been sitting, almost squatting on an applecrate which she had brought with her three days ago and which had not been removed ~~the~~ during the evenings when she disappeared. She raised her crutch and tried unsuccessfully at first to raise herself up on it. She sat back down on the crate. The two men just stood there and watched. The sheriff was staring at the woman's ankle. The soiled bandage had slipped off part of the wound. The skin was bleached white in spots and blistered. the flies buzzed around it. She was sweating heavily. The smell was even worse and the sheriff's stomach was beginning to feel it. The old woman looked up into the faces of the two men. Her face, black and shiney like a beggar on shunny sidewalk. She gasped as she pulled herself to her feet.

" Be nice to her Jessie, " said the sheriff as he stepped back into the building. "

He heard her say, " Thankyou, mistuh sheriff, thankyou kindly "

He did not turn around as he closed the door behind him.

* * *

The sun was beginning to set. Its orange light struck the white stucco walls of the old courthouse across the street, turning them a gold and reflecting the light across the street into the sherriffs office. The light came down through the shutters, ~~streaking~~ streaking lines of gold across the papers on the sheriff's desk. The sheriff was sleeping. On any other summer day except today and tomorrow which were Friday and Saturday, the sheriff's office would be empty as soon as the last golden thread of light had crossed his desk. Tonight, as on any Friday night when the weather was good there would be people in town from the surrounding Farms. The white would come in to see a movie if there was enough money or just to sit as most of the old timers did around the courthouse square. Very few of them came in by car. Most of them were on horseback or on the backs of mules or in wagons. The negros who came into town walked when they could not get rides with whites. Then in the square, or most likely on the outskirts of town where the speakeasy tavern known as the Skunk's Nest was located the races seperated. Very few negros were to be seen in the town square on saturday and friday nights.

The sheriff opened his eyes and stretched as was his castumn at six o'clock when it was time to go ~~home~~ home. He got up out of his chair and walked to the water-cooler in the corner of the room. When he poored the cup he walked over to the window to look out over the square as he finished his drink. It was the same routine day after day only on Fridays and Saturdays he did not take his coat from the rack and leave at six. Looking up across the street to the hill upon which the courthouse stood the sheriff saw an elegantly dressed man come out of the courthouse and stop on the steps to light a cigar. The man was Hilton Bell, the district attourned for Franklin County. He lit the cigar, the pulled out his pocket watch to adjust by the courthouse clock. He put the watch back into his pocket, walked down the steps slowly almost imperiously. He crossed the street ~~to~~ towards the sherriffs office. The sheriff walked back to his desk, switched on a light and sat back down in his chair to wait for Bell's appearance. The Front door opened and closed and Bell appeared in the open doorway.

"Well," said the sheriff, " If it aint the eminent district attourney, Mr Hilton Bell. How are you, Mr Bell. Come right in. Sit down. "

The sheriff made a feeble gesture toward the chair in the corner.

" Just pull that chair up and I'll see what I can do to help you. "

The sheriff could see that Bell was not ruffled by his facetiousness.

" Oh, that's right. Forgive me, Mr. Bell. I forgot for a moment that you had niggers at home to do that for you. Well, I got deputies here that will do it. There white but they get thiggs done anyway. Hey Jessie! Come in here and and get the chair for Mr. Bell. "

" Are you drunk, Johnson. It'll go bad for you up a city hall if you are. "

" No, Mr. Bell, I am not drunk. "

" Then make sense for onee, and forget ~~about~~ your emnity against me for one minute. I have a few importantthings to talk to you about and I don't have much time. I am going to Jackson tomarrow to get a lawyer for them. "

" That's not going to help your case very much now will it. "

" Look, You don't really think that they actually did do that murder. "

" I'm not paid to make any judgements, sir. That's up to gour and and the judge and jury. But I'll tell you this, Bell. You know they did it and I know they did it. You just ain't admitted it to your self yet. "

" Ypu don't have one tangible shred of evidence. " That evidence is your evidence, and if you don't give it in court I will. I want to see what you think of that evidence when the jury swallows it. You know as well as I do that this evidence would get ~~xxxxx~~ anybody convicted. "

" The district attourney walked over to the corner, picked up the wicker chair, brought it over in front of the sheriff's desk and sat down. He was perhaps the best dressed man in town. At least it was his attention to be so. He never wore white. Always grey. A suit that was tailored to perfection, always fitting with perfection his plump frame. His face was not tanned but yet quite red especially when he was excited as he was now. There was something about his cleanliness, his fastidiousness that incited contempt. He never sweated. His suit was always cleaned and well pressed, his shirts always cleaned and spotless. His shoes had a military shine to them.

Attorney Bell put his hands on the sheriff's desk and leaned forward.

"Johnson, this case is never going to court. I'm going to see to it. I'll get a mistrial. I'll do something. There's more to this murder than meets your eyes. I don't think I am going to prosecute this case. I'll have Busby do it. I've been out there at that house for the last three days. I know as much about this case as you do. There's too many other facts that are popping up, too much that points to robbery as a motive. . . Yes I know that you found the money where it was hidden, but that ~~doesn't~~ doesn't mean that robbery wasn't the killer's aim. "

Bell was waiting for the sheriff to agree to such a possibility, but Johnson seemed to be thinking about something else.

"So your not going to prosecute, huh. "

"I think you understand why. "

"You won't get elected next time. They'll put a new DA in office if you try to prove their innocent and fail. You know that don't you. "

"I think that is my worry, not yours. "

"I'll guarantee you its not mine. "

"What are you going to do when they put you out of work. I know you got land, but land and cotton ain't worth nothin' any more. "

"I will get elected next time. I'm not going to be their lawyer. I'll just declare myself unable to prosecute because of personal reasons. "

The sheriff put his pencil into his mouth and bit down hard against the soft wood. He talked through his teeth.

"You kind really protect their own, don't you, whether right or wrong you stick together when you are in a pinch. And you were her lawyer once. I just don't understand it. "

"I don't even know these people. I know I don't like them, but for reasons that seem to be beyond the range of your feeble comprehension you don't understand the idea of justice. "

"I understand you idea of justice, very clearly. I know you from the word go, Bell. Maybe I even know you better than you do yourself. You and your precious aristocracy. "

"You don't have to drag up dead memories to show me your ire, Johnson. "

"You and your goddamned class honor. Get out of here, Bell, you stinin' son of a bitch. Get out before I throw you out. Get out before I give you what you deserve, what my sister would never let me do when

*Thought put
that didn't
Busby*

you should have gotten hell beat out of you then. "

Bell was on his feet.

" You're a petty little man, Johnson. I wish you would hit me. It would show this town just what a petty little man you really are. "

Again the sheriff wasn't listening. He had taken out a pad from his drawer and was scribbling something on it. Hilton Bell just stood there breathing hard, his face even redder, even though he still was not sweating. The sheriff ripped the peice of paper off the pad and slapped it down on the other side of his desk. ~~xxxx~~

" Here, " he said, " This is Ramey's address. This will get you in touch with the kid. " He looked up into Bells red, plump face. " Now get out of here. "

Beill took the paper and left. The front door slammed behind him. Jessie who had heard the loud words came into the room.

" What in hell was that all about. "

The sheriff got up, turned off his desk lamp, grabbed his coat. He turned around to Jessie and threw the keys at him. " Hear, Jessie, Lock up for me, please. I'm going home tonight. "

" Yes sir," the deputy said. Who stood there in the sheriff's office looking at the man with amazment, then hearing the front door slam again and looking again, seeing the man gone. Johnson didn't even take his car. He was walking home tonight. It was the first time Jessie had seen the sheriff walk home. It was the first time the deputy had seen the sheriff neglect his duty. Jessie walked out into the hall and stopped at the front door, just looking through the warped glass as the sherriff's silhouette disappeared into the lastt rays of the setting sun. It was the first time that the sheriff had ever called him by his first name.