

RACE TO JUDGMENT

by Craig Faustus Buck

This horseshit's makin' me sick," said Homer Crood, slinging a shovelful into the back of Lizzie Johnson's '91 Ford F-150. "Whose frickin' idea was it to break into the fertilizer plant anyways?"

"Yours," said Lizzie.

"Since when do you listen to me?"

She leaned on her shovel and gave him a razor-edged glare. He was struck by how the moonlight turned her cornsilk hair all silvery, like an angel, but he knew she'd mock him if he mentioned it, so he swallowed his praise and shoveled another load. He could feel the weight of her gaze, keenly aware that the moonlight was probably gleaming off his scalp. He was only thirty-four, but his black mullet had already thinned to the edge of catastrophe. Life wasn't fair.

"Don't you wuss out on me, Homer. Your damn brother stiffed us eighty bucks, and he's gonna get what's comin'."

Lizzie went back to her scooping, breasts swinging loose into the thin flannel of her lumberjack shirt, a sight that tormented Homer. He'd lusted after her since middle school but she hadn't given him so much as a peck on the cheek since they were six.

"I come home reekin' like this," he said, "Mama gonna whup me with a fry pan."

"Don't make no never mind. Your mama like to whup you anyhow, just for the exercise."

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She put her hand all sexylike on her hip and his heart rate spiked.

"When you gonna get you a job?" she said. "Move on outta there?"

"Now you sound like my damn brother." Homer didn't mention the fact that he'd been looking for a job like crazy, but even at minimum wage, no one was hiring anywhere south of Memphis. And without a car, he wasn't about to take a job that required a two-hour bus ride each way.

He chucked another load of fertilizer into the bed of Lizzie's pickup. The two-tone red-and-gray truck was a year older than she was, and far worse for wear, but she loved it anyways. Homer had been with her the day her granddaddy died at the wheel, smote by a heart attack on a rutted back road. Luckily, the driverless Ford had threaded the needle through the windbreak trees as it

bounced into a cotton field, so the old coot died with something left to pass down to Lizzie.

"I do reckon the look on Enoch's ugly face gonna be blue ribbon," said Homer, snickering at the thought. "He gonna shit his Fruit of the Looms."

A gust of wind blew the stench up Homer's nose, causing him to cough up a dollop of phlegm that gagged him. He felt like he was having a seizure. It didn't help that Lizzie noticed and her blue eyes sparkled as she laughed.

"Pussy," she said.

The road back toward Clarksdale was so pocked with potholes that Lizzie had to pull over and tarp the manure to make sure too much didn't bounce out of the truck bed. When she got back in the cab, she reached up to her gun rack and grabbed the barrel of her thirty-aught-six Springfield to lever it downward. A Slim Jim slid out.

Homer frowned. "How can you eat with this stench?"

Lizzie gave him a caustic grin, like she'd just spat through the slats of his gym locker or something, then made a show of biting off a big chaw of the dried sausage.

"You been a jerkwad since kidney-garden," said Homer.

"Takes one to know one." Lizzie waved the meat stick under Homer's nose. "Wanna bite?" Homer felt his stomach roil the catfish and grits he'd eaten for supper.

Twenty minutes later they turned onto Jeff Davis Road, which wound through the closest thing to a ruling-class neighborhood rural Mississippi had to offer. The Honorable Enoch Crood, Judge of the Coahoma County Court, lived at the end of the road, with his perfect wife and two perfect

daughters, in a large, historic plantation house down a quarter-mile willow-lined drive. To Homer's never-ending vexation, Judge Crood also happened to be his pompous, lapsed-redneck brother.

It was Enoch's wealth that made it so galling when he refused to pay Homer and Lizzie the eighty bucks he owed them. He'd hired Homer to haul a dozen boxes of campaign materials ("Crood Has Tude on Crime") from the printer in Memphis to Enoch's in Clarksdale, and Homer had offered half to Lizzie for her truck. Then they'd gone and done the job. A deal's a deal.

Was it their fault four boxes bounced off the truck and burst open? Was it their fault Crood yard signs went sailing across a half-mile of country highway and surrounding fields? Was it their fault the campaign was fined five hundred dollars for littering? Was it their fault Enoch's precious name recognition was shredded by local wits and their pitiless punch lines?

To Enoch, the answer to all these questions was *yes*. Sure, Homer laid the blame on the printer for not strapping the boxes, but they all knew Homer should have double-checked the load. Begrudgingly, if silently, Lizzie allowed that Enoch had cause to stiff Homer. But there was no excuse for withholding her half of the deal. She had not only driven to Memphis and back as promised, but she'd put out her last twenty bucks for gas. It was his refusal even to reimburse her for her out-of-pocket cash that kicked the idea of retaliation from drunken rant to vengeful necessity.

There were still a few hours left before dawn, and the neighborhood was quiet with the exception of a few dogs. But they howled at every critter

in the woods, so no one paid them no mind.

Lizzie rolled up on Enoch's antebellum mansion and cut the headlights and the engine. They glided to a stealthy stop beside Enoch's shiny new Krypton Green Camaro ZL1 convertible—as Enoch put it, a steal at seventy-five grand—parked right out front in the semicircular drive for all the neighbors to covet.

"Stay here," said Lizzie. "I'll get the magic wand."

She slipped out of the truck, closing the door just enough to kill the light without making a noise. Homer watched her disappear from view as she rounded the corner of the house to sneak in the back door. It was just like Enoch to lock up his car, including a Club on the steering wheel, but leave his house wide open for any pervert to creep in and sniff up the girls' dirty laundry. Homer shook the image from his mind and hoped Lizzy could get into the house and grab Enoch's key fob off the gold-plated horseshoe nail by the kitchen door without waking anyone up. Sure enough, a minute later she reappeared, fob in hand. The Camaro's lights flashed as she unlocked it.

Homer cracked his knuckles in anticipation.

Enoch Crood lay awake thinking about moving to Jackson. After five years as county judge, he was ripe for the picking and the Grand Old Party knew it. Enoch couldn't wait until tomorrow, when he was going on the nationally syndicated *Race Hannibal Show* to announce the party's endorsement of his candidacy for State's Attorney General in the upcoming election. He'd been trailing in the tight race, but party support could push him to the top, and if he won, he'd become the youngest AG in

Mississippi history. His mouth watered at the prospect. If the county judgeship had been a gold mine of graft, he could only imagine the fortune that awaited him statewide. Goodbye Camaro; hello Lamborghini.

The very thought made him hard, which led him to ponder the aphrodisiac effect of state office on Southern belles. His reverie was fouled by the sound of metal scraping on metal. *What the hell?* He slipped quietly out of bed so as not to wake the missus, but Wanda's eyes shot open anyway, from the bounce of the mattress.

"What are you doing?" she said. He knew that no matter what he replied, she wouldn't remember in the morning. She was in that wakeless dream state she'd drift through every time he got up to pee in the middle of the night. He loved her childlike vulnerability at these times, how she'd believe whatever he'd say before drifting back to sleep.

"It's just the tooth fairy," he said.

She rolled over onto her side and her dyed-blond hair fell over her face. He watched her breath shift her hair with each of her soft snores and felt a tender, primal need to protect her, fueling his concern over the noise.

He stepped to the second-story window and looked out. There were no lights on outside, and the dimness of the new moon didn't help, but in the starlight he could just make out a pickup parked next to his car. He noticed movement and stared hard into the darkness to make out what appeared to be two people moving around in the back of the truck. He was baffled by a faint reflection from his Camaro until he realized he was seeing the gleam of the satin-chrome twin binnacles on his center console. The damn convertible top was down. Someone had already broken in!

He'd presided over enough car-theft

cases to know that it took only a few seconds to hot-wire an ignition and take off. His pride and joy could be in a Tennessee chop shop within the hour!

Enoch threw a robe over the candy-corn boxers Wanda gave him for Valentine's Day and raced for the stairs.

Homer and Lizzie were both in the back of the pickup, shoveling the last of the manure. They'd succeeded in filling the Camaro's passenger compartment to the top of the gearshift, so their job was essentially done. Now they were just housekeeping, cleaning the last of the fertilizer out of the pickup. That's when Homer's shovel scraped the bottom of the bed, making an ear-piercing screech.

They froze.

"She-it," said Homer.

"Let's git," said Lizzie.

They leapt to the ground from opposite sides of the truck and jumped into the cab. Lizzie fired up the Ford. Homer let out an adrenaline-fueled whoop. The front door of the house flew open. Lizzie stomped on the clutch and jammed the stick into first gear.

Two gunshots blasted in quick succession and Lizzie flinched as a warm, viscous liquid burst across the right side of her face. Her foot slid off the clutch and the truck jerked to a stall. She was seeing red and realized it was splattered across the inside of the windshield. She felt like her brain was in a spin cycle. She turned to Homer and saw a mess of roadkill where his head was supposed to be. She couldn't comprehend what her eyes were force-feeding to her brain. Time slowed to a crawl and what must have been a split second felt like hours before a scream exploded from her soul.

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Enoch grabbed his shotgun from the coat closet and threw open the front door in time to see the pickup taking off. The stench hit him at the same time as the light through the open door illuminated what they'd done to his car. He boiled over with rage and vented it with both barrels.

The truck came to a stop a few yards down the driveway. Through the near-deafening ringing in his ears, he heard a woman start screaming. He was smacked by the realization that he'd made a horrifying mistake.

"What the hell are you shooting at out here?" It was Wanda, behind him, shivering from the cold as she cinched the belt of her dressing gown.

"Get back in the house," he said.

She ignored his command but remained in the open doorway as he slowly descended the porch steps, approaching the truck with his shotgun raised just in case. The woman's screams had died down to a sobbing, endless chant: "Ohmygod ohmygod ohmygod ohmygod." He peered through the passenger window and still couldn't see much, but the smell of blood was overwhelming.

Something in the girl's voice rang a bell.

"Lizzie?"

He lowered his gun and gently opened the passenger door. The dome light came on to illuminate the carnage. There was nothing recognizable about the virtually beheaded man, but there was no mistaking Lizzie, even covered in blood.

"Jesus, Enoch!" she shrieked. "You killed your brother!"

He reeled away from the truck and threw up.

Wanda Crood had to close Lizzie's hand around the glass and lift it to

her mouth to get her to take a sip of sweet tea. It did little to shake Lizzy from her trance as she slumped on the rattan sofa at the far end of the front porch. Wanda wrung her rag into the bucket of pink water and wiped more debris from Lizzie's hair, which was clinging to Homer's remains like a grieving mama in denial.

Enoch had pulled his brother's body from the truck and now knelt beside it on the ground, bawling. Wanda paid him no mind, knowing he'd hate for her to watch him cry. His manly facade was high on the long list of things that annoyed her about him. What was he so broken up about anyway? In eleven years of marriage, she'd never heard him say one kind word about Homer. And on those rare occasions when the two brothers socialized, Enoch liked to grind Homer down like a pencil shoved in an electric sharpener. Such a hypocrite.

She would have left him long ago if it weren't for his earning capacity, not to mention their girls. She was relieved that Lacy and Macy had managed to sleep through the shotgun blast and the screams. She knew it would fall on her to tell them about Homer's death, and it wouldn't be pleasant. The girls, unlike their father, were quite attached to Uncle Homer. He'd taught them to catch fish and hunt squirrels and gut them both. They loved to watch him blow smoke rings through smoke rings and make quarters disappear up his nose and come out his ears. Maybe she could tell them Uncle Homer went traveling for a while. Maybe North Korea, where he couldn't get to Facebook or Skype.

She watched Enoch wipe his snot on the sleeve of his robe, leaving dark stains on the silk like skid marks. *Typical*. She could only imagine how

disagreeable he was going to be, stigmatized as the moron who shot his brother over a prank. If there was one thing Enoch worshipped more than his car, it was his lordly image around town. Little did they know it was she who had engineered his rise to fame and fortune. Now he was a contender for one of Mississippi's most powerful offices, a position of great prestige and staggering perks, and she'd be right there with him, basking in the envy of the state's highest society.

Through teary eyes, Enoch watched Wanda continue to sift through Lizzie's hair, like a chimpanzee picking nits. He wondered what she was thinking. There was no way this was real. No way he'd committed fratricide. No way Homer was gone. No way his Camaro was full of manure. No way his life had become a nightmare in the blink of a muzzle flash. He pinched himself, hoping to wake up in another reality. No dice.

"Did you call nine-one-one?" he said.

"What's the point?" said Wanda. "He's dead. You want to kill two birds with one stone?"

Lizzie looked up. "Two birds?" Enoch saw focus creep into Lizzie's eyes. Her expression grew wary.

"One life is gone. No point in ruining another," said Wanda.

"For God's sake," said Enoch. "It was an accident. We need to call the police."

"And then what?" said Wanda. "Have this killing hang over your head for the rest of the campaign? The Dems'll have a field day. You won't even be able to count on the damn NRA. They wouldn't touch you with a ten-gauge pole after this. You call the cops, you can kiss your election goodbye. Goodbye Crood's place in history. Goodbye political future.

Goodbye Maserati.”

“Lamborghini,” he said, staring miserably at his brother’s corpse.

“How about goodbye Wanda and the girls?”

This got his attention with a bang.

“What are you talking about? It was you and the girls I was trying to protect.”

“I married a winner, Enoch. If that’s not who you are, I’m out of here.”

“How can you even say that? I love you. I love those girls. I need you now more than ever.”

“Then do as I say,” she said. “You’re too rattled to think for yourself right now. And get away from that corpse while I figure this out.”

As he struggled to his feet, he noticed Lizzie eyeing Wanda like a cat watching a gopher hole, fully sobered from her shock. With subterfuge in the air, he suspected Lizzie’s bullshit detector was bleeping like a Geiger counter.

Wanda put a finger on Lizzie’s chin and turned her face to look her in the eye.

“You with me on this?” said Wanda.

Lizzie considered her answer for a moment. “You gonna shoot me too, if I ain’t? ’Cause I surely don’t see what’s in it for me except maybe a jail cell down the line for coverin’ up a murder.”

Her tone and glare were defiant.

Enoch wandered up, eyes red, and looked from one to the other.

“You know damn well it wasn’t murder,” said Wanda.

“That’s for a court to decide, ain’t it, Judge?”

Enoch didn’t appear to register the question, as if she were speaking Chinese or Bantu. Wanda looked him in the eye.

“You go hose off your hands,” she said. He seemed relieved to have

marching orders as he headed across the yard.

Wanda turned back to Lizzie. “Let’s have it,” she said. “What do you want?”

Lizzie put her finger to her cheek with a mockingly thoughtful look on her face. “Money?”

“How much.”

“A hundred grand.”

“That’s a lot of money.”

She rinsed her cloth and went back to cleaning Lizzy’s hair.

“Not as much as it would cost for a lawyer to fight a murder charge,” said Lizzy. “Not as much as it would cost to lose the election.”

“If I agree to a hundred thousand dollars . . .”

“Per year,” Lizzy interjected.

Wanda yanked the tuft of hair she was cleaning. Lizzy yelped and slapped Wanda’s hand away.

“You want me to call nine-one-one and get this over with?” said Wanda. “Because I will, I swear it. We can make this tragic accident disappear to our mutual benefit, but that’s a big risk that I’m only willing to take if you’re going to be reasonable.”

Lizzy gestured toward Homer’s decapitated body. “You call that reasonable?”

“You did your part to make this happen,” said Wanda. “So don’t you go thinking you’ve got all that much leverage.”

“Then you go on and call the cops, *Mrs. Coulda Been Attorney Gen’ral*. ’Cause I got nothin’ to lose if you don’t make this worth my while.”

Wanda struggled to keep her fury in check.

“I’ll make it worth your while. Don’t you fret. But I’ll need to get Enoch on board, and he isn’t exactly in a negotiating mood at the moment.”

“Well, I ain’t gonna wait till the chickens stop layin’.”

“You want to speed things along? Go

get those shovels out of your truck.”

The derelict storage sheds were almost two hundred years old, originally built to house slaves. Tonight the forced labor fell to Lizzie and Enoch. They'd chosen the fallow field behind the sheds for Homer's grave, but were finding the ground hard to dig up, as if the earth were resisting their efforts. Enoch cracked at the crusty surface with his shovel blade again and again, his face aglow in the moonlight from a salty blend of sweat and tears.

Lizzie had never seen Enoch express the slightest vulnerability before, much less weep. She'd been in awe of him since kindergarten, where she'd become friends with his little brother. Everything about Enoch overshadowed Homer. Enoch had always been athletic—second-string quarterback on the high-school football team, varsity wrestler, pole vaulter. Homer, on the other hand, had been a wimp who measured his weightlifting prowess in increments of twelve ounces, bottled by Budweiser. She'd rarely been alone with Enoch without Homer around until the summer vacation of her junior year in high school. Homer and his parents went to visit an ailing aunt in Alabama and Lizzie wound up playing house with Enoch for two weeks. It had been a magical affair for them both, but Enoch left for college at the end of the summer and they'd never rekindled the fire. This was a painful regret she relived every time she heard his name or went out with a loser.

If Enoch had a flaw, it was his predictable habit of belittling Homer. Enoch was the model of confidence, Homer was the model of its lack, and Enoch never let Homer forget it. But at the moment, Enoch's confidence seemed to be flagging. As she watched

him dig his brother's grave, he seemed fragile for once, like a robin's egg, which only poured propane on the fire of her attraction to him.

It took them about an hour to dig their way through the sunbaked foot or two of crust, but once that was breeched, the digging went faster. For the first hour, they both dug from opposite ends, but when the hole got so deep that they had to dig from inside, there was room for only one person, so they took turns. Three hours later, they were both covered in the rich earth of the Mississippi Delta, arms and hands aching. Lizzie ran out of steam and they decided that the grave, which was taller than Enoch, was deep enough. He jumped into the hole to help her out. Putting his hands around Lizzie's waist, he gave her the boost she needed. She felt tingly where he touched her. She brushed at the dirt on her clothes as he collected the shovels and tossed them out of the grave.

“You need me to fetch you a ladder?” she asked.

“I can manage.”

Enoch reached up and got a firm grip on the edge of the hole, then muscled himself up and out, arms bulging large from the strain.

“I swear,” said Lizzie, “you've got some impressive biceps on you.”

“I work at it,” he said, and flexed for her.

“Let me feel.” She gave him a suggestive grin and felt his arm. Then, on a whim, she dropped her hand to his crotch for a playful squeeze.

“Whoa!” he said.

“Just checking to see if there's still a correlation,” she said. “It's been a spell since I've squeezed the produce.”

He glanced over his shoulder and saw Wanda, in the distance, cleaning the interior of the truck with paper towels and Clorox Clean-Up.

"You're lucky Wanda didn't see," said Enoch. "She'd shoot us both."

"But she ain't lookin', is she?" She put her hand back on his fly, this time caressing more purposely. "Do you ever think about our time together?"

"Jesus H, Lizzie. Homer isn't even cold." But he made no attempt to remove Lizzie's hand.

"I think about it all the time," she said. "We was hot at it day and night, remember? I reckon it was the best sex I ever had, and I've had more than my share."

She felt him growing hard beneath his clothes.

"I do wonder sometimes, what it would have been like for the two of us, but I can't imagine a more inopportune time to think about it," he said, gently pushing her hand away.

She lifted her hand to his chest and started brushing moist earth off his clothes.

"I'm sorry, Enoch," she said. "I know you're all ramped up over what happened to poor Homer. And I am beside myself too. I truly am. But life is movin' so awful fast. And we was screwed by bad timin' that summer. Maybe this terrible tragedy was the Lord's way of throwin' you and me back together, so's at least one good thing could come of all this."

She stood on tiptoe and kissed him. He didn't react for a moment, but then she felt the tip of his tongue on her lip, like a toe testing the waters.

"I'm a married man," he said, as if excusing his tepid response. "Wanda's the mother of my children."

Lizzie cast her eyes downward, looking more embarrassed than she felt. She pushed a rock into the hole with her foot.

"I'm sure she means well. But you look me in the eye and tell me she ever got your hormones to spinnin' like you know I do. You and me had

the kind of somethin' special you only come across once in a life. And I don't think it ever ended."

He looked warily back toward Wanda and Lizzie knew she had her hook in him. Then his brow furrowed with concern.

"Where'd she go?" he said.

Lizzie followed his gaze and saw that her truck was now empty. Then her head seemed to explode.

Enoch stared dumbfounded at Lizzie's body on the ground. Wanda felt blood drip on her hand from the shovel. She lowered the blade in disgust. Her eyes were on Lizzie, watching for movement in case she needed another whack.

"Are you crazy?" said Enoch. "What if she's dead?"

He sounded panicky. The last thing Wanda needed right now. The idea of being first lady to the attorney general sort of lost its luster if the AG were to be convicted of felony murder and obstruction of justice. Especially if he implicated Wanda too.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I don't know what came over me. But maybe it's a good thing. We need to protect your future. Isn't that the most important thing? You could be governor someday if we put all this behind us."

"My brother's death was an accident. This wasn't. I'm a judge, for Christ's sake."

"If that girl talked, you could spend the rest of your life in state prison. We can't afford to take that chance. What would happen to me and the girls? I'm sorry, Enoch, but this chore had to be done and I stepped up to protect you from having to do it yourself."

"You're not thinking straight." He dropped to one knee and took Lizzie's pulse. Wanda prayed that he wouldn't find one. He looked up, eyes

glazed. "Thank God she's still alive."

"Praise the Lord," said Wanda, wondering how she might kill Lizzie without Enoch knowing.

"What the hell were you thinking?" he asked, laying Lizzie's hand on her chest as if she were pledging allegiance.

Wanda knelt and grabbed one of the front tails of Lizzie's shirt to rip open the side seam.

"I was thinking of setting your mind at rest so you could go on *Race Hannibal* tomorrow and seal the deal. I'm sorry about Homer, Enoch, but what's done is done. There isn't a thing we can do for him except pray for his soul. I know it's painful, but our future is in your hands. You've got to step up."

She yanked at Lizzie's placket, sending buttons flying, turning the right front of Lizzie's flannel shirt into a long flap attached at the yoke. Wanda bunched up the soft fabric to compress Lizzie's head wound, where blood was soaking through her hair. In raising the flap, she exposed Lizzie's breast and noticed it catch Enoch's eye.

"I'll tend to her," Wanda snapped, surprised by the snarl in her voice. She softened her tone. "You go wrap Homer's body in a blanket and bring him on over here."

"We need to call the paramedics for Lizzie," said Enoch.

"She'll be fine. I didn't hit her that hard."

"Her head's bleeding. She could have a concussion."

"Trust me, she's okay. You go on. We've still got a lot to do and you've got a big day tomorrow. You need to get your beauty sleep."

He snorted as if sleep seemed preposterous, but followed her instructions and headed off to find something to wrap the body in. She wondered if he was fool enough to

call an ambulance anyway.

As soon as he was out of sight, Wanda raised the shovel and gave Lizzie's head another wallop, then rolled her into the grave. Working quickly to be done before Enoch returned, Wanda pitched enough dirt onto the body to cover it, hoping the reduced depth of the hole would be obscured by darkness.

A few minutes later, Enoch returned with Homer, rolled up in a horse blanket, slung over his shoulder. Wanda noticed Enoch had been crying again. She appreciated the emotional blow of losing a sibling, especially by one's own hand, but Jesus . . . he needed to suck it up. They had too much at stake.

"Where's Lizzie?" he said.

"She came to," said Wanda. "And she was furious. Lit into me like a hellcat, then just ran off."

Enoch eyed Wanda, seemingly weighing the credibility of her story.

"She didn't look like she was fit to crawl, much less run," he said.

"That's what I thought," said Wanda. "But there you go."

He sighed and dumped Homer in the grave, then grabbed a shovel and began to cover his brother.

"I think we should give that girl some money when this all shakes out," said Wanda. "I feel bad about what she's been through."

"You're a kind and generous woman," he said.

What a blind fool, she thought. "I love you," she said.

"I love you too." Something in his manner made her wonder.

"We're going to get through this," she said. "Together."

She watched him dig his shovel into the dirt pile and marveled that such a rube had ever survived the mental rigors of Ole Miss Law. She vaguely recalled Homer, at someone's

wedding, taunting Enoch about forsaking his roots. *Once a redneck, always a redneck.*

Then Lizzie's arm punched up through the earth. Enoch screamed. Wanda cursed under her breath.

Enoch bent over the kitchen sink, working gently around Lizzie's wounds to prevent them from opening up again as he rinsed Mississippi mud out of her hair. He sensed Wanda's eyes on the back of his head.

"This is inexcusable, Wanda," said Enoch. "Outright shameful, even for you."

Lizzie's bleeding, it turned out, was minimal, as Wanda had smacked her with the flat of the shovel so each point of impact made only a small, shallow split in her scalp. The blows, however, had concussed the girl, judging by her wooziness, moaning, and caterwauling.

"I'm sorry, baby," said Wanda. "She threatened to turn you in if we didn't pay her a hundred thousand dollars a year for the rest of her life. I panicked."

"You've turned an accidental shooting into attempted murder in the first degree, dammit. I'm an officer of the court. I swore an oath to God almighty!"

Lizzie cried out in pain and Enoch realized he'd allowed his anger to stray to his fingers.

"Sorry, Lizzie," he said.

"I need some aspirin," said Wanda. Then, looking at Lizzie, "I'll get some for her too."

As soon as she left the room, Lizzie said, "Please, Enoch. Don't let her kill me."

"No one's going to kill anybody," he said.

"She clobbered me with a shovel with you standin' right there. Then she tried again when you was gone, and

lied to you about it. How do you know she ain't plannin' to make three times the charm? Three strikes and I'm out."

"She knows I won't stand for it," he said.

"Ow!" She batted his hand away from her wound. He'd hurt her again.

"Sorry. I'm not too good at this," he said.

"You did that on purpose."

"Now you're getting paranoid."

"That can happen to a girl when someone tries to kill her twice in one night."

Wanda came back with a bottle of aspirin. Enoch looked up and said, "Go get her something clean to wear. These clothes are filthy."

Wanda's eyes flared angrily, but she turned and headed upstairs.

"You and me, we share a background," said Lizzie. "She ain't got nothin' in common with us. Her kin ain't even from around here. You got no idea what she's thinkin'."

"Of course I do. We've been married eleven years. We've got daughters."

"So you wasn't surprised when she whacked me behind your back."

His silence answered her question.

"I thought as much," said Lizzie. "And now that she gone and done that, she's got even more to lose if I talk. I'm not being paranoid, Enoch. That woman is crazy and you know it. You think she's gonna chance goin' to Parchman as a convicted felon instead of Jackson as the belle of the ball?"

He wrapped a yellow towel around her hair, taking extra care not to touch her wounds. She turned to face him, the last clouds of her concussion offset by fear.

"She's just using you, Enoch. If she wasn't drooling so bad over bein' queen of Jackson society, she'd let you hang out to dry for Homer's murder and take all your money for herself. And you know why? She don't love you."

“That’s a low blow, Lizzie.”

She gave him a look filled with empathy and pain as she stroked his cheek.

“I’m sorry, Enoch. But she told me so her damn self with a big ole belly laugh, like she was gloatin’ about it. Just before she smacked me upside the head and dumped me in that grave.”

Enoch threw an ice cube in his bourbon as he watched Wanda mop up the last of the mud from the kitchen floor. He could hear the water running upstairs, where Lizzie was taking a neck-down shower before changing into the sweat suit Wanda had given her, instead of lending her. Though Wanda only used those sweats for grungy chores like weeding or occasional housework, he knew she wouldn’t want them back after they’d touched Lizzie’s body. A good laundering could wash out Lizzie’s physical presence, but that wouldn’t help Wanda exorcise the cooties of a younger, sexier woman. Wanda could be annoyingly touchy about such things.

“You know she’s going to milk us dry of everything we’ve worked so hard for,” Wanda said, plopping the mop in the bucket and wiping her hands on a tea towel. “The minute you take your oath of office she’s going to have us over a big old barrel, and I don’t mean that kind.”

She nodded at the shotgun that now lay on the kitchen table.

“She’s not like that, Wanda.”

But he could see in Wanda’s face that she didn’t believe him. She was projecting her own mindset on Lizzie, a mindset he’d lived with but never really thought about until tonight. It struck him that an expert witness in his courtroom last week could have been describing Wanda when he’d defined “narcissistic personality

disorder.” Wanda checked off all the boxes: lack of empathy, self-righteousness, shamelessness, superficial charm, egocentrism, envy, sense of entitlement, grandiosity, hubris, manipulation, rage, perfectionism, vanity, and the list went on.

How was it possible that Enoch had never noticed before? Had he been blind to it for years? Or had he been in denial all this time? Had she changed so slowly he’d acclimated? Or had Homer’s death flipped a switch to pop it out of her like a jack-in-the-box? No matter. Any way he looked at it, Lizzie’s cynical description of Wanda’s feelings for him suddenly seemed not just plausible but probable.

“I’ve known Lizzie all my life,” he said. “She’s a good person. She’ll be satisfied with a fair shake.”

“The hell she will. I saw her pawing at you. She’s playing you like the rube you used to be, and you’re falling for it. Grow up, Enoch. You’re a statewide politician now. Your next stop can be Congress or the governor’s office, but you’re going to need to thicken your skin and do as I say.”

“Do what, exactly?”

He stuck his pinky in his drink and gave it a stir.

“I’m just saying you have a family and a future that should be your top priority. Your only priority, if push comes to shove.”

He licked the bourbon off his finger, mulling the word “shove.”

“Are you listening to me, Enoch?” she said. “That girl is nothing more than a pothole in the road. You need to hit the gas, grit your teeth, and take the bump or you’ll never get to Jackson.”

“Are you suggesting what I think you’re suggesting?”

“I’m suggesting you be decisive for a change,” she said.

She reached across the kitchen table for his drink and chugged it.

“Because if you’re suggesting what I think you’re suggesting, we’re committing a felony just talking about it. In this state that’s worth twenty years and/or five hundred thousand dollars. So I’m suggesting we end the discussion right now.”

He cracked open the shotgun and pulled the two empty shells out, then tossed them in the trash.

“Do you love me, Enoch?”

This caught him by surprise. “Of course I do,” he said, though he was growing increasingly doubtful.

“Do you love our girls?”

“What kind of a question is that?”

He snapped the gun closed and put it back down on the table, then grabbed his glass for a refill.

“Because love makes us do all sorts of things we wouldn’t otherwise consider. You see that in your courthouse every day, am I right?”

“I don’t think I like where this conversation is going.”

Now it’s his turn to chug his drink. He hears the water stop upstairs, and imagines wrapping a towel and a protective hug around Lizzie’s lovely, wet body.

“Your brother’s dead because of her,” said Wanda, pulling out a whole new set of artillery. “You know he never had the initiative to come up with a prank like that on his own. He’s always had a hankering for Lizzie and she used that to talk him into trouble. Now he’s dead and it’s her fault, not yours. If it wasn’t for her, he’d still be walking God’s green earth, and we wouldn’t be in this mess.”

“That argument wouldn’t stand up for ten seconds in my court.”

“Welcome to the real world, Enoch. Dumb, love-struck Homer paid for that girl’s crime with his life and, unless you want the whole state to know about it and flush this whole family down the toilet, justice can

only be served by us right here, right now. Vandals and trespassers are fair game in this state. You had every right to shoot that girl, but sadly you missed, and now she’s looking to profit from Homer’s tragic death. You may have pulled that trigger, but that girl put Homer in your sights. If she goes unpunished, your poor brother will have died in vain.”

Enoch tried to unravel her argument, but by some bizarre, circuitous route, Wanda seemed to have found her way to a logical conclusion, compounding the weight of his guilt.

Lizzie walked into the bedroom feeling clean and comfy in her sweats, but only slightly better. Her head still felt like it was in a vise. She could hear Enoch and Wanda downstairs, deeply engrossed in a discussion she couldn’t quite make out, but she assumed they were talking about her.

She opened Wanda’s top bureau drawer. There was a large assortment of lingerie, including at least a dozen lace panties arranged by color. She pushed them aside and found a jewelry box underneath. *How predictable.* She pocketed a diamond tennis bracelet, two gold chains, and a Rolex. Her next stop was Enoch’s nightstand. She found a half roll of Certs by the clock radio and popped one in her mouth. Then she opened his drawer and began to rummage.

Wanda struggled to get back in the saddle. Her dire predictions weren’t getting through to Enoch, and she needed to be confident that he was willing to follow her lead. Things had gotten a bit wobbly when he’d discovered what she’d done to Lizzie, but she’d managed to make him face the ugly reality his actions had unleashed. Now she just had to persuade him that Lizzie had to go for them to put

this nightmare behind them. He was nodding in agreement, like the toady she'd spent a decade training him to be, but she knew he wasn't really on board yet. It was going to take some finesse to get him to abandon his morals for the greater good.

"You shot Homer when they were driving away, Enoch. That's not self-defense, and she knows it. If we don't bury her in that grave . . ." She heard movement in the living room that caught her up short. Lizzie walked in.

"Did I miss something?" asked Lizzie.

The women stared at each other, then Lizzie sat down at the kitchen table and turned her gaze to the shotgun lying before her.

"I should pick up that gun and shoot you right now," she said to Wanda.

"You can't blackmail me if I'm dead."

Lizzie picked up the shotgun and aimed it at Wanda.

"Maybe I'll just blow off a limb or two."

"That's not funny," said Enoch.

"Who says I'm joshin'?"

"She knows it's not loaded," said Wanda. "She's just toying with us."

Lizzie cracked open the break action and stared down the breach.

"Lookie what I found in Enoch's drawer." She pulled two shells from her pocket, and before Enoch or Wanda could react, she slipped them into the chambers and clacked the gun shut.

"Way I figure," said Lizzie, "you tried to kill me twice. So I got every right to settle that score." Then, to Enoch, "Ain't that a fact, Judge?"

"You've got every right to be angry," he said. "But you don't want to do anything hasty that might land you in prison for the rest of your life."

"Oh, I won't do nothin' hasty. We got work to do first."



Wanda and Enoch led the way to the grave. Lizzie trailed with the shotgun.

"Okay," said Lizzie. "Start shovelin'."

Wanda and Enoch each picked up a shovel and began filling in the hole.

"Don't break a nail, now, Wanda," said Lizzie.

"Eat my tampon," said Wanda.

"How 'bout I just bury you alive? Then me and Enoch can be together in love like we was always meant to be."

"You must be joking," said Wanda. "He's got no interest in trailer trash like you. He's got a shot at state office. You think someone like you can help him do that? You need something between your ears, darling. Not just between your legs."

Lizzie glanced at Enoch, hoping he'd come to her defense, and Wanda took the opportunity to whack her a third time with the shovel.

Enoch stared in disbelief as Wanda rolled Lizzie back into the grave.

"This time she's staying there," said Wanda. "And if you want to be AG, you'd better start looking at the big picture. You want to go all the way to Washington? You need to be ruthless."

"If you say so."

Then he picked up the shotgun and blew a hole in Wanda's gut.

"My friends, I have the pleasure today of speaking with the Honorable Enoch Crood," said Race Hannibal, "former Coahoma County judge and soon to be sworn in as the chief law-enforcement officer of the great state of Mississippi. Welcome to *The Race Hannibal Show*, Your Honor."

"Thank you, Race," said Enoch. "I feel privileged to be here. I just wish my dear departed wife Wanda Sue was alive to see this. Of your twelve million fans, she was number one."

"I must tell all you loyal listeners out there, on the rare chance that

you've been living in a cave lately, that for this man to be here today is a true testament to courage. It was only a few months ago that he had to cancel an appearance on this show due to the most heart-rending of catastrophes. His loving wife and dear brother were murdered by a shotgun-wielding Democrat she-devil, who would doubtless have killed Judge Crood as well, had he not defended himself with the lethal blow of a shovel to her cranium. The emotional fallout alone, of this horrible tragedy, would have felled a lesser man. But Judge Crood picked himself up and said, 'No sir, I will stand tall in the face of adversity with the Lord by my side! Is that not so, Your Honor?'

"It is indeed, Race. When disaster strikes, you can either let it beat you to a pulp or you can stare it down and move forward. I chose the latter."

"It was surely by the blessing of Jesus that you had that shovel in

your hand when Lizzie Johnson went bananas. But it looks like your loss will be Mississippi's gain. The polls showed you losing before this all happened, but the big-hearted folks of this state rewarded you with the sympathy vote you needed to gain election."

It occurred to Enoch that Wanda had always claimed to be the key to his success, and she had proved it with her death. He smiled at the irony.

"I'm just hoping," said Race, "that you can assure my listening friends that you won't let this violent experience turn you into a gun-control nut like certain other gunshot victims whom I shall refrain from glorifying by naming."

"No chance of that, Race. I'm just thankful that the Lord preserved me to go to Jackson and fight for law and order."

"And justice for all," said Race.

"Amen to that." ●

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THE JURY BOX (Continued from page 118)

*** Fred Van Lente, *The Con Artist*, Quirk, \$26.00. Also new from Van Lente is this aptly titled mystery set at the San Diego Comic-Con, the world's largest science fiction and comic industry event. The convention is barely underway when comic-book artist Mike Miller finds himself the number-one suspect for the murder of his former editor and archenemy Danny Lieber. Miller's only alibi is a cute missing rickshaw driver. *The Con Artist* is filled with lively dialogue and an inside look at the comic industry drawn from Van Lente's experience writing for comics. Most readers will find themselves mired in the comic book and SF references, leaving the mystery itself often hard to follow.

**** Amnon Kabatchnik, *Blood on the Stage, 1800-1900*, Rowman and Littlefield, \$150.00. Theater director and historian Kabatchnik has previously written six encyclopedic works chronicling the milestones of crime and mystery plays spanning more than two thousand years, as well as a volume about Sherlock Holmes on the stage. This newest book, more than 700 pages in length, covers plays of the nineteenth century, including Goethe's *Faust*, Lord Byron's *Cain*, several plays by Wilkie Collins, and adaptations of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, and *Dracula*. It concludes with the 1899 play *Sherlock Holmes* written by and starring William Gillette. As usual, Kabatchnik provides detailed synopses, background, and fascinating anecdotes for each of the fifty-one plays. This book completes the series, unless Kabatchnik sticks around to do a volume about the twenty-first century, which at the rate he's going, is a genuine possibility. ●

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