

Toxic Bijou

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Charred timbers and a pair of native stone chimneys marked the site of what I took to be the original farmhouse. The current owner, Eugene McNab, resided in a mobile home up by the road. I found him struggling to get an oxygen bottle situated in the cab of his Ford pickup. In truck years, it may have been just about as old as he. Even the Hank Williams blaring from a single dashboard speaker sounded like original equipment.

I had to shout to get his attention. “Mr. McNab?”

He fiddled with his hearing aid, turned down the radio, and adjusted the plastic tube clipped to his nasal septum then fixed a glare on me. “You cain’t park where you’re at. I got a man coming to haul off my implements.”

I saw more than enough room for a semi to get by but I knew better than to argue with a feeble man likely to be selling his home under duress. I knew the cycle well. When land values go up, so do the taxes. Old folks who hoped to live out their days on the family homestead find

they can't afford to, even after it's paid off. Forced to sell what they thought their final refuge, some take out their frustration on everyone involved in the transaction.

Despite the occasional abuse, I felt a great empathy for those about to be displaced, even when I knew they were likely to be made millionaires. Whatever they were paid, they could never buy back what they had. I kept my tone respectful. "Where's a good place for me to park, sir?"

His mouth collapsed inward. He worked his uppers around for an angry minute before spitting out his words. "There's eighty goddamn acres, son! Find someplace out of the damn way!"

I dealt with many rednecks in my time but Eugene McNab had to be the orneriest to date. Even when not yelling, he projected an irritability that suggested we were engaged in a longtime feud.

My Yankee mother made it her mission to keep me from speaking like my father's kin, many of whom lived on farms or in trailer parks across the Georgia Piedmont. Despite her constant corrections, six years of parochial school and a genteel suburban environment north of Atlanta, I could usually bypass my mother's efforts by mimicking my Uncle Nate, a man from my father's side who actually ran moonshine until the 1960s. I channeled him for this occasion.

"Right nice piece of land you got here, Mr. McNab. I expect it pains you to part with it. I just have a couple or three questions. Don't reckon it'll take but a minute or so."

By his expression, I knew he was not buying it. I somehow did not physically meet his definition of a man he could regard as an equal. Looking at him, I counted off my failings. Too pale, hands too soft and hair just a little too long. I never plowed an acre of ground. Then there was my truck. Too new. Too clean. Too foreign. It never hauled a load of manure.

My cellphone spewed an obscenity-laden hip-hop chant. Searching the many pockets of my khaki vest, my fingers wandered across my handheld GPS, digital camera, MP3 player and other vital gadgets I carried on my person when in the field. The caller gave up before I retrieved the offending device. I muted the ringer and tried to do some quick damage control.

“Sorry about that, Mr. McNab. Some clown in the office must have put that on there when I left it in my cubicle to charge.” I silently vowed revenge on Parker, the office prankster.

Mr. McNab shook his head in disgust and cranked the engine. “I gotta go see my doctor. Have you your look around. You find any trouble, I’ll be back around three. Just remember this: everything here still belongs to me.”

Before I could respond that I had no need of rusted farm implements, broken appliances or any of the other crap within my sight, he spun gravel at me. An approaching van locked down to avoid hitting him as he fishtailed out onto the pavement. The man did not equate safety with health. At least I would be able to peruse the property for a few hours without him tagging alongside me, hounding me with questions or trying to steer me away from points of concern.

I headed straight for the barn, always the prime suspect on agricultural properties. A massive padlock and thick-linked chain through the door pulls ensured whatever secrets lay within were safe for the time being.

* * *

The environmental site assessment racket arose in the 1980s after a few banks were burned making loans on contaminated properties. An old gas station could go from being a hundred-thousand dollar asset to a multi-million dollar liability overnight when excavation or drilling revealed that product lines or fuel tanks had leaked for years, saturating the soil and

tainting the groundwater with petroleum. The new owner might default on the loan, leaving the lender holding the bag, cleanup costs and all.

A new industry arose within the engineering consulting business. Properties had to be thoroughly researched, inspected and sometimes tested for indications of past use that may have poisoned the site. My degree in geology somehow landed me in a business that was essentially a kind of Easter egg hunt. Instead of eggs, my quarry was fifty-five gallon drums, underground storage tanks, electrical transformers and whatever else made the list of potential hazards.

But for a small vegetable garden and a few acres of cattle pasture, Mr. McNab's property had not been properly farmed since Lester Maddox served as governor of Georgia. Thirty or more years of neglect allowed privet, briars and sweetgum to invade the fields that once produced cotton, making my job almost as difficult as that of the pickers.

By four o'clock, I had finished searching the wooded areas. Sweaty, bleeding from a dozen scratches and certain every minor irritation inside my pants signaled some insect making its way to my crotch. I still had to look inside that old barn before I could consider 'due diligence' satisfied. Then I could trade my concerns about ticks, chiggers and snakes for fear of bats, rats and brown recluse or black widow spiders.

I saw Mr. McNab's truck by his trailer and I approached reluctantly, hoping his mood had improved or his doctor had prescribed some pain killers. There being no bell, I had little choice but to rap on the aluminum frame of the screen door and hope the man had his hearing aids on. The sound of what I took for a flushing toilet gurgled through the plastic pipe that ran just inches from the concrete blocks that served as the front steps.

The old man's voice came through an open window. "About goddamn time you got here! I was ready to sell that bush hog and scraper to ---". He paused as he opened the door and

scowled. “Aw, hell. I thought you was Curley, coming for my implements.” He adjusted a knob on the oxygen bottle that stood in a two-wheeled cart at his side and lit a filterless cigarette.

“I have just a few questions, Mr. McNab. How long have you owned the property?”

He coughed into his hand for several seconds and kept it cupped. I imagined a gelatinous mass that I did not wish to see. “My daddy left it to me and my brother in 1948. He had farmed it since 1933, when he bought it at auction down at the courthouse. Some --- colored man couldn’t pay his taxes no more.”

I suspected he might have phrased things a little differently to friends and kin. Not there to reform anyone, I stuck to the topic at hand. “To your knowledge, has the property ever been used for the storage or disposal of hazardous waste, petroleum products, pesticides, herbicides or other chemical products?”

“Son, I done told the man at the bank all you need to know. He left me a damn form with the same shit you’re asking me and I give it back to him with all I could remember or cared to allow. If that ain’t good enough, y’all can kiss my ass.” He went into a long coughing and hacking spell that brought forth unsavory visions. I wished I could just go.

“That’s fine. I’ll see if I can get a copy of that for my report. These are just the standard questions. No big deal. One thing I do have to do is have a look inside the barn back yonder, if you don’t mind.”

His expression made it clear that he did mind. “They didn’t say nothing about you going through my buildings.”

Red flag there. I pictured leaky drums stacked to the rafters. Of course the old man didn’t want me to see that. It would be a deal killer. I had to press the point now. “I’m sorry if they didn’t warn you but it is standard procedure to inspect the interior of all outbuildings.”

“And what if I say you cain’t. What if I was to say that is off-limits.”

“Well, that is your right. I can’t force you to do anything. Thing is, my report will have to explain that certain structures were not inspected. The bank won’t accept the assessment as complete, the developer won’t get the loan and your sale falls through.”

“Won’t you take my word that there ain’t nothing in there that interests you?”

“I still have to provide some photographs for the record.”

He eyed my digital camera as if it were some sort of vermin then craned his head out the door and looked around. “So, it just gonna be you goin’ in there. You ain’t got no helper?”

The question made me a little nervous, but I didn’t really think I had much to fear from a man whose life depended on bottled air. “Yes, sir. Just me. Shouldn’t take but a few minutes.”

He reached one hand into the shadows and brought out a key tethered to a large wooden cross. He spoke solemnly. “This here will open the padlock. See that you put it and the chain back just like you found it. That door needs to be held tight. Got it?”

I wondered what awaited me. “Yes, sir. I understand.”

“Good, but understand this too, don’t be taking no pictures that ain’t none of your business. You got that?”

Though I did not get it, I nodded and turned to go. The key and cross felt heavy in my hand as I walked the hundred or so yards down to the barn. Hardly quaint nor elegant, the building looked like it had been cobbled together over many years, added to according to need or chance availability of materials. An enormous black walnut embraced the roof like a monster.

Now that I had access, I felt apprehensive about going in. I left the key in the padlock, lest I lose it inside. It seemed like a good idea until I was about halfway into the building and the door swung closed, leaving me in near darkness. There being no sound of the chain being

dragged through the door pulls and fastened by the angry old man whose honor I had offended, I stood still and let my eyes adjust to the low light that seeped through gaps, knotholes, and the filthy glass of a few windows. After a few minutes, I could make out basic shapes and my panic subsided.

Going all the way back to my truck for a flashlight might mean dealing with Mr. McNab again. Besides, I noticed an overhead power line entering the front of the building. There had to be some electric lights in a structure this big. My cell phone and keychain each contained LED's that would have to suffice until I found a light switch. I shuffled along taking great care to not trip.

The still and musty air betrayed no odor of chemicals or even recent occupation by large animals. The floor was hard-packed clay. I could make out the usual clutter, a few tires, several decrepit lawn mowers, garden tools. The only steel drum was in the form of a crudely welded barbeque grill. I could only wonder at the old man's reluctance to let me inside.

A loft at the back of the building appeared to hold a few pieces of kitchen furniture. No need to go up there. An oddly constructed plywood wall partitioned off a portion of the area beneath the loft. Braced by four-inch posts angled into the ground, it essentially formed a ground floor room filled with a darkness that defied my feeble lights. I braced myself and entered.

Three steps in, I felt something soft brush my cheek. My first thought was 'spider' and I thrashed the air and slapped my hat and clothes to kill the menace before it bit me. Feeling nothing foreign on my person, I aimed my keychain light at the floor, hoping to see a dead bug. What I saw instead was a thin string with a chain of small beads just like those one would find

attached to a lamp. I pointed the beam straight up, revealing a swaying light bulb, just out of reach.

From what I saw from the outside, I knew the room was about fifteen feet long and eight feet wide. In the blackness, I could not help feeling a little claustrophobia on top of my fears of all the other little hazards I imagined gathering at my feet or dangling from the ceiling. Much as I wanted to leave, I had the feeling this room held whatever secret the old man hid and it was my job to find it. I would have to rely on my tiny lights and investigate a few square feet at a time.

Twelve folding chairs were neatly arranged in three rows of four, all facing down the long axis toward a low table covered by a lumpy blue tarpaulin. Anxiety gathered in my gut as I considered my situation: alone in a tiny dark room in an old barn that could collapse or burst into flame at any moment. Worse, I could be locked in from the outside by a hostile old man who had probably murdered whoever lay beneath that tarpaulin.

I concentrated on my breathing, taking air in deep and letting it out slowly. The only thing to do was lift the cover from that table. I slipped a pencil through a grommet at one corner and pulled slowly sideways. The fabric spoke in a whispering rattle as it settled on the ground, filling my mind with images of snakes weaving their way toward my ankles.

A tiny bulb in my keychain fob cast a shaky circle of light. There was no body. Instead, I found a pair of familiar objects, old fashioned projectors, one for slides and the other for eight millimeter movie film. It was then that I caught sight of a shimmering surface against the wall, a roll-up screen, hanging from a nail. It suddenly all made sense and I laughed aloud. I stood in the secret clubhouse of dirty old men; classic porn aficionados. I pictured a group of wheezing geezers hyperventilating over some flickering black and white movie featuring large breasted women with beehive hairdos, corsets and fishnet stockings.

Mystery solved, my work done, all I needed to do was take some pictures, cover everything up and get the hell out. Given the size of the room, I knew the camera's flash would be more than adequate. I wedged myself into a corner that would show the chairs, table and two of the four walls. Remembering to close my eyes when pushing the button, I still failed to allow for the light sensor delay and thus experienced the full power of the flash, leaving me with a strange pulsating afterimage. The details were a little murky but the sense I got was a medieval horse, front hooves raised in the air, bearing a white-robed and hooded rider holding a large cross. A long banner with bold lettering arced unnaturally above the figures,

When the strange image faded, I pulled the shot up on my camera's review screen. Zooming in on the banner, I could just make out the words "You are under the protection of the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan".

I felt queasy. Feeling my way to the front row of chairs, I sat down. The shaking plastic water bottle practically abraded my lips as I took a long drink and considered what I had just seen.

I had heard of this sign. Camping out one night with my high school pals, drinking beer and talking about everything, the subject of the Klan came up. One guy recalled seeing a billboard featuring a mounted Klansman along the interstate highway nearby in the mid-1960s. Someone else remembered it too but in a different location. Their descriptions of the wording and the hooded figure on the horse were about the same, but they ended up fighting, though they would have anyway, no matter what the topic. If this was indeed the same sign, they had also exaggerated the size. The content mattered more.

On a hunch, I took a flash shot of the opposite wall. No surprise to see the stars and bars of the Confederate flag. This particular one had special yellow embroidery identifying the local

chapter of the White Knights. That didn't help my nausea. My great-grandfather fought for the Cause with Jeb Stuart, and I had always been proud of that fact. I even attended a rally to protest the changing of the Georgia flag, which bore the colors of the Confederacy until just recently. I remembered chanting "Heritage, Not Hate" and believing it too. I was not so sure anymore.

When I regained my composure, I scouted around the projectors, pulling a few slides from the carousel and holding them up to my cell phone light. The first one showed men on ladders, wrapping a large wooden cross in fabric. Another shot showed the outline of a cross in flames. Others showed men, women and even children wearing white pointy hoods and carrying signs with slogans I could not bring myself to repeat even in jest.

A small label taped to a metal movie film canister by the movie projector identified the contents as "Preparing for the Race War." It occurred to me then that even my mama would prefer rather it were porn.

I checked around the chairs, hoping to find a leaflet, button or anything related to this group's activities and philosophy. I found nothing of the kind there but I did notice a few peculiarities. For one, only four of the twelve chairs showed any signs of recent use. All of the rest bore a veneer of dust and splotches of white bird crap. Another thing took me a little while to interpret: little concentric circles in the dust on the floor. I finally recognized them as the imprints of rubber cups like those on aluminum walkers. My grandma left such marks on the floor of my mother's kitchen whenever she came to visit.

Recalling the old man's admonition about taking pictures, I took several more. They would not be going in my report, but I would show them to my children if they ever showed signs of needing a reminder.

* * *

Mr. McNab sat on his front steps when I reached his trailer. Just as I handed over the key that I noticed the words on the attached cross: “God Save the White Race”. I was glad to be rid of it.

“You lock it back tight, like I said?”

“Not even a spook could get in or out.” I regretted my choice of words immediately.

The old man gave me a sly smile that seemed to suggest we shared a secret and therefore some kind of new kinship. “Find out what you needed to know?”

“Pretty much the same old shit.” I did not care how he took that.

His mouth puckered and he spat off to one side. “I’m going to be getting me a copy of your report, so I’ll know what’s in it.”

I handed him one of my business cards. “You have any questions, give me a call.” I turned to go. It was my turn to sling gravel.

As I drove down the road, I thought of a dozen things I should have said in response to Eugene McNab’s question about what I had found. The best might have been “What I saw was probably more toxic than PCB’s, benzene and dioxins mixed together.” I doubted he would make any sense of that. The same went for everything else I thought of. Nothing justified turning my truck around to try again. Besides, the moment had passed.

I considered the situation in the parlance of my profession. The problem was self-mitigating. Natural attenuation would take care of Mr. McNab and his bottle-breathing comrades. Soon enough, dust and bird shit would cover all those chairs. Bulldozers would be on their way to splinter McNab’s sign and take out his little klavern of ghosts. For once, a subdivision or a cluster of warehouses might actually be an improvement.

A roadside billboard featuring a larger than life plywood rendition of the Grim Reaper caught my eye. The bony specter, highlighted in fluorescent colors, demanded that I turn right one-mile ahead to tour the most terrifying haunted house ever. I had received my fill of terror for one day, but I had a sudden inspiration. I imagined the dark-robed reaper in a face-off with the white-hooded Klansman.

My money would be on the man with the scythe.

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Awards/Recognition:

- 2007 Asheville Writers Workshop (Hon. Mention)
- Arizona Authors Assn. Competition 2008 (3rd Place).
- Published in *Arizona Literary Magazine*, 2008 (out of print)

