

Rich Man, Poor Man, Beggarman, Thief?

Second time around the yard and the hens lift high on gold wax claws and kite past Elec with his legs spread like a cardboard standup in a Minit Market. He lunges for the last hen and nabs one wing, opening it like a Spanish fan, picks her up, frantic and flouncing, and tucks her under his right arm. She settles, clucking, pea eyes shining from her inset head.

The young woman on the back porch flips her long platinum hair and titters. "Go on and take 'em all," she says. "Teach June Bug to loaf off and leave me." Her butt is a bustle, how Elec likes his women.

He stoops to stuff the hen into a tomato crate, then stands with his blue jeans riding dangerously low. His nappy head spikes silver in the sun. He cocks his hip and lights a cigarette between cupped hands as if he's blowing on a mouthharp. "Yeah," he says, "I shore been wanting me some laying hens." He doesn't know if that is true exactly, though he has coveted the fat black hens since he first came by to get permission to clear the AT&T right-of-way through the couple's front yard.

The woman floats like an aired-up angel toward the end of the vine-twined porch and gazes up the dirt road. She's wearing a long denim skirt and a tight magenta shirt that shows her hiked balloon breasts. Her round face is a makeup masterpiece.

"Old man ain't gone get ahold of you for letting me have his hens, is he?" Elec's blue eyes bloom in his sun-pied face.

"Belonged to his mama," she says, "but I'm the one's been feeding 'em since she died." Her voice is whiney, wavery, sad.

Elec takes a final draw on his cigarette and thumps it to the parched white dirt. Then he idles off around the brittle-board corn crib where the hens are huddled. A cluster of crock jugs and rusty plows are banked against the back wall. He eyes a spalling lard jug, picks it up and sets it down, while listening for the owner's pickup, but hears only the forever cry of a hawk working the north woods between the house and the highway.

"Y'all ain't looking to get shed of none of these old jugs, are you?" he hollers.

"Belonged to June Bug's mama," the woman calls. "Ask him."

Elec elects the two hens tipping toward the far corner of the crib. He'd best take just the hens and go, he decides. Count himself lucky for pulling a fast one on the woman, who he wishes made his blood rise about half as high as the jugs do. That's what he'd like--that old feeling of being young and lusty again. He's 52, going on 90--that's how he feels.

He never leaves a job without something to carry home. He's

slick like that. But he's moved too quick, this time, can feel it in his bones, should have waited till he got permission from the owner of the jugs and the woman and the hens to plow in the fiber optic cable through their yard. Not get on the man's bad side.

The hens suspiciously eyeball Elec, then scoot around the corner of the crib as though not to alert him to their fear. He darts back and eases around the front of the crib, meeting them, and they scuttle to the rear again, fluttering low over the banked jugs and plows. And once more his eyes are drawn to the crock lard jug that he could place by his kitchen door for a stop. He can feel the froth of words inside, what he will say when he tells about making the trade. But he can't quite picture who he'll tell, who will care.

When he had brought home the birddogging boat from Florida, on another job, Peg had shamed him by asking where he intended to dock it--maybe God would send another flood, she'd said. She hadn't got the point, the point being that the boat was old and interesting, and more importantly important in that he'd been able to trade the widow-woman out of it simply by poor-mouthing her. Words, just words, all that he was out-of-pocket for, all it had cost him. That he could do that was important.

The hens are circling the unpainted cabin again, cackling and lacing through the twiggy Nandinas, weaving among the wood pillars under the house and out. Each time Elec heads them off, they panic and part and kite up squawking. He is sweating now, his pallor peeking through the brown splotches on his face. A downtrodden Paul-Newman type. Used to be daring. Used to fly his own plane, a red

and white cub with his name on the belly. Now he makes trades with women and specializes in looking pitiable.

The sun is low over the pinewoods where doves purl, and a train whistle sounds, far-off and lonesome. The woman still stands on the end of the porch with her cheeky face tilted north up the dirt road. "You might oughta give it up," she says to Elec stepping high past the watershelf--quick for such a big-bellied man. Long-bodied with wasted arms and legs.

"Scared the old man's gone come up, huh?" He laughs and lights another cigarette, watching the hens converge at the corner of the crib again.

"Me? No, I ain't specially scared of June Bug," she says, "I'm just sick and tired of this place." She jerks her head and her nylon hair riffles like wind on water.

Makes Elec's insides riffle. "How long y'all been living out here at Withers?"

"Five, six months--since June Bug's mama died. Feels like a lifetime though."

"Don't like the country, huh?"

"Can't sell my Mary Kaye out here, that's for sure." She cuts her blown blue eyes about the woods where the hot sun sparks the pine needles.

"Where y'all from?"

"Augusta, that's where I'm from; June Bug's from right around here."

"So you a Yankee, right?" Elec laughs, glances back at the road, a white ribbon stitched onto the green fabric of palmettoes, pines and myrtles.

She doesn't even smile.

"Bet this June Bug's rough on you when he gets mad?" Elec says to keep her talking--he loves her voice when it turns coy and bolting.

"June Bug's a mess, but he makes me laugh." She floats in her long skirt to the doorsteps facing the crib.

Elec has just flipped his cigarette to the bare dirt and started around the rear of the crib when he hears June Bug's pickup thundering down the road. Since Elec and his crew started clearing the right-of-way, two weeks ago, he has seen June Bug up and down the dirt road, but each time Elec stops by the house, only the woman is at home. He has one of the hens hemmed up between the plow and the lard jug when he hears the truck stop, the door open and shut, and June Bug talking to his wife.

"Hey, Candy Block! What the hell's he doing out there?"

"I'm giving him them hens, that's what."

"Ma's hens?"

"I'm the one's been feeding 'em."

Elec clamps the blue-black hen's wings and lifts her squawking and starts around the crib, facing June Bug, stocky-strong with a round, boyish face.

"Put that hen down," says June Bug, takes off his cap and resets it. He has bangs.

Elec laughs. "Looks like that's betwixt you and your old lady there."

"I'm telling you, June Bug," she calls from the porch, "I ain't messing with no more chickens."

"Hush up and get in the house!" June Bug stays her with his right hand out while staying Elec with his eyes.

"I ain't minding these chickens no more while you're off gallivanting."

June Bug turns to Candy Block, then turns back with arched eyebrows as if he has delayed changing expressions. She ambles across the porch and through the screen door, slamming it. Elec stuffs the hen into the crate and wires it shut, and when he looks again, June Bug is pointing a pistol at him.

"Hey!" Elec says and steps back, holding both hands up like they do on tv. "You better watch out who you pulling a gun on, boy."

June Bug tilts the gun and levels it at Elec's heart. Or where it would be if he had one.

"Lord amercy, June Bug! Have you lost your mind?" Candy Block yells through the screen door. "Put that gun down!"

Elec chuckles, scratches his head, and lights a cigarette. He's shaking, the flame of his lighter trembling and melting into the sun that seems to generate from the stark sand and the silver pistol. "Ain't no call," he says, blowing smoke, "for taking this all so serious."

"Serious enough you come stealing my chickens," says June Bug and punches the gun toward Elec as if to goose him in the ribs, though they're still standing a couple of yards apart. "How come you to think you could come here and take over what's mine?"

"Take over?" Elec squeaks. "Take over what? I was just taking these hens off your old lady's hands."

"Uh huh," says June Bug. "Ever since you been working that line out there you been nosing around my house."

"Hey, gal!" calls Elec. "Tell him you the one give me the chickens."

Candy Block steps through the door, holding it open. "He ain't... I ain't... I can give what's mine away if I want to."

"What else you give him?" asks June Bug. He doesn't even look at her, and she just stands curiously watching.

"Now wait a minute," says Elec, "I got girls her age, I ain't..."

"Shutup!" June Bug grabs the pistol with both hands, still aimed at Elec, and braces his pointy-toed Western boots in the sun-charged sand. "Now," says June Bug, "how bout letting them chickens out of that crate. Then I want you to go in yonder." He nods toward the house.

"Huh!" Elec laughs and scratches his head incredulously. "I ain't fixing to do no sech." Already, he is unhooking the wire on the crate where the chickens cower with their heads retracted in blue-black feathers.

A shot sounds like the screen door has slammed--a mere clap--and rings out over the field of weeds behind the house. Elec's guts knot with fear. He stands up and the chickens burst like trick flowers from the crate and scuttle to the rear of the crib.

"Next shot," says June Bug, "and you one dead white man."

"Hey, fella!" says Elec, "you can't shoot me; you gone be in big trouble if you do."

"June Bug!" Candy yells. "What you think you doing?"

"I ain't worried about no trouble," says June Bug and glances about the pine woods empty of all sound save the buzzing of locusts, the concentric peeping of frogs. Elec's work crew has knocked off for the day. "Get on in the house," June Bug adds.

Hardly aware of crossing the yard, Elec finds himself on the dipped board porch and passing through the screen door to the dim kitchen where Candy Block stands pressed against the south wall.

"I wish you wouldn't bring him in here," she says to June Bug coming through the door behind Elec with the gun in his back. She steps to a square table in the middle of the kitchen and begins picking up magazines and makeup and a standing mirror that blares her cheeky face, her stretched blue eyes, rimmed in black, and rouge from her temples to her hard doll nose.

Her high, light voice makes Elec feel that this whole business is less than serious, that it really has nothing to do with him. And he feels small again.

"Set down," June Bug says and points with the pistol to the ladder-back chair to his left at the table.

"I'm all to pieces, June Bug," says Candy Block trailing to the front of the house and back for another load of magazines and makeup. "I ain't into this."

"You gone be singing a different tune in a minute," says June Bug, smirking.

"What you up to now, June Bug?" She starts toward the front of the house again, but stops and looks around.

June Bug pulls out the chair next to Elec and straddles it. "Let's just say he's my hostage."

"Hostage?" she says, and laughs. "You're crazy!"

And now Elec feels less small, less assured of his safety, the way her voice has changed to almost playful--that coupled with the new fact.

June Bug digs in his jeans pocket and takes out a fold of cash. His thick lips twitch as if he might smile. But he's counting with the gun still trained on Elec.

"What you gone and done now?" says Candy Block and floats to the table.

June Bug keeps counting, sucking in and whispering--"422, 423, 444. 444," he repeats and beams.

"You ain't got the sense God give a billy goat," says Candy Block, almost gleeful, proud.

"Hey!" says Elec. "You ain't the one's been hitting them Minit Markets in Valdosta, are you?"

June Bug laughs and tilts back. "Can't keep your mouth shut, can you?" The pistol wavers, it's hollow barrel boring bigger the longer Elec gazes into it.

"Woman," June Bug says, "if you going with me, you better get your going duds."

"Going?" she squeals. "Where? What about my...?" She touches her hair, pacing.

"Going where?" says Elec.

"Atlanta," says June Bug. "Guess who's driving?"

"Who?"

"You."

"Me?"

"We ain't needing no slowdy-poke like that old man," says Candy Block. "You gone let him drive your truck?"

"Slowdy-poke?" says Elec.

"They done onto me," says June Bug. "Got my truck spotted. Me too."

"I ain't driving y'all nowheres," says Elec and stands up with his britches low on his hips, as if he guesses he'll go home now.

"Not me, I ain't..."

June Bug stands, still straddling the chair with his stocky legs and pokes the pistol point in Elec's ear. "I can take your old truck just as easy. Leave you here for the buzzards."

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Candy Block has changed into tight white jeans and a red knit halter top for the trip; she is lugging a blue-metallic train case and a huge brown suitcase toward Elec's old green pickup out front. A stuffed denim bag swings from her shoulder. Elec sits under the steering wheel with June Bug in the middle, waiting in the burnished light of the setting sun.

"I tell you what," says Elec, "when Mama sees I ain't in by dark, she comes looking." Mama is what he calls Peg when he calls her.

"And what's she gone find?" says June Bug.

Elec doesn't answer; he knows Peg won't come. She has given up searching and worrying since accepting that Elec will come and go as he pleases. If he doesn't want to go home, he doesn't; now she does the same. Could be at the picture show right now for all he knows. Or out to eat with one of the girls from Wal-mart, where she works in Valdosta. He wonders where he went wrong. What has happened since the kids got grown and on their own? He used to keep all of them on their toes. Once, he got drunk and landed his cub plane in the yard and drove its nose through the kitchen wall where Peg and the kids were sitting down to supper.

"Get the hell on here, Candy Block," hollers June Bug and slaps the truck seat with his palm. "Women!"

"June Bug!" Candy Block hoists the brown suitcase into the back of the truck, gets in, breathless, and places the train case on the floor and closes the door, scooting June Bug with his pistol closer to Elec. Her platinum hair makes her look like she's melting; her hot body sends off excited vapors of perfume.

Elec fiddles with the key in the ignition--you have to touch the starter just right or it won't catch. He decides not to do it just right and feels the cool, sweet metal of the pistol barrel in his ear and tips the ignition in that way that he has of coaxing the old truck into starting.

The sun goes down and the moon comes up, opposite and the same, facing one another, the moon silver and the sun gold, filigreed light. As the sun withdraws its golden glow, the moon lends a silvery skim to the smooth gray dirt of the road ahead.

"Gone keep to the back roads till we get up about Adel," says June Bug, "then hit I-75 to Atlanta."

With June Bug giving directions, Elec jutters the rattly pickup north from one dirt road to the next, crossing two major highways, which he knows but hardly recognizes from that angle and in the queer silver light of the moon. Not another house or moving automobile in sight.

"Ain't you got no headlights on this thing?" says June Bug.

"Nope," says Elec, "I ain't."

June Bug stamps the floor with his boots.

Candy Block sits forward with her decorated face craned. "We ain't getting on no I-75 without lights, are we?"

"I be damned!" says June Bug. The pistol is stuck between his knees like a bag of popcorn.

For a minute, Elec feels tough, in control, his old fly-boy self, then feels weak, hungry, lonesome for Mama.

"Hell!" says June Bug. "You don't mean... You always tinkering around with this old trap. How come you ain't got no lights?"

"Ain't needed none." Elec is always home by dark--here lately.

"Shit!" says Candy Block. "I say we go back and get your truck, June Bug."

"Can't, Candy." June Bug sounds whipped. "They got my tag number."

"How you know?"

"Heard it on the radio."

"You done messed up, fella," says Elec.

"Hush yo mouth, old man." June Bug raises one hand, preacher like. "Stop this rattle-trap."

Elec stops in the middle of the road.

"Cut it off and get out," says June Bug.

Elec switches the key to off but the engine stays on. "You have to give it a minute." It goes dead and the frogs' peeping comes alive. Katydid ring in the myrtle bushes lining the ditches.

"Now get on out and see can't you get them lights to working," June Bug says.

While Elec fingers the moonlit guts under the hood, June Bug guards him and Candy Block brushes her hair, a shredding sound on the other side of the truck.

"Ain't gone do a bit of good," says Elec, straightening up and brushing his hands on his jeans. "Bubs is burnt out." He slams the hood, watching the moonlight spin in Candy Block's hair.

"Shit!" says June Bug, kicking dirt over his squat shadow as if to bury it.

"I wouldn't rile June Bug if I was you," says Candy Block.

"Let's get in," says June Bug, "see if we can't find a filling station somewhere."

"They gone cost you," says Elec, "them bubs will."

They get in again, June Bug still riding in the middle, and again Elec has to pet the starter into action.

"You can speed it up some," says June Bug, motioning with the pistol. "We ain't got all night."

"June Bug," says Candy Block, "I don't see how come..."

"Shutup!" snaps June Bug.

"I just..."

"Shutup!" He whacks the metal dash with the pistol barrel and moonsparks fly.

She sits huffy with her plump arms crossed. Elec drives, both hands now. June Bug holding down the middle of the seat. Miles of dirt roads with mosquitoes whining wreaths around their heads.

"How fur you reckon before we get to Adel?" says Elec. "Derned if I ain't lost."

"You fixing to come out on 136," says June Bug. "Two or three crossroads up."

Elec is sure he's wrong: unless the moon has taken to moving north to south, he is wrong. Elec is driving with the moon, west. He doesn't say anything. They have to be headed toward Valdosta--fine by him. There, the law will stop him for not having headlights and he'll be home-free, home to Mama. If she's home, that is. He'll tell her all about the chickens and June Bug, about Candy Block--what kind of name is that?--making eyes at him. He's got to think about the last part. But it would be exhilarating to make Peg believe that some woman found him sexy, sure, in shape.

"Take a right up here," says June Bug, pointing with his pistol, and Elec does and angles east into the moon, a fired disk in the arched sky. "Ain't you got no map?"

"Ain't had nare use for one till now," says Elec.

"I got a notion we fixing to end up back at the house," says Candy Block. "What I say."

"I ain't asked you," says June Bug.

"Well, June Bug, looks like to me you could listen for a change."

"A woman ain't got no sense of direction," he says.

"I got about as much sense of direction as you have."

He backhands her; her head rams the window; she squeals. Crying like a baby.

"How come you wanta do that?" says Elec and brakes.

"How come you wanta go sticking your nose in my business?" says June Bug, goosing him in the ribs with the pistol. Elec flinches, drives, watches Candy Block with her mantle of hair riffling.

"Now, shoog!" says June Bug, turning to Candy Block and placing one arm around her shoulders.

"Now shoog hell!" hisses Elec.

June Bug whirls on the seat and socks Elec in the right jaw. Light looms before Elec's eyes, as if the truck lights are finally working. His right elbow flies up automatically and hooks June Bug's nose, and in a flurry of tusseling and holding his foot on the brake, Elec can hear Candy Block squealing and feel the truck lurching as if it is rolling sideways. Then the point of the silver pistol rises between his and June Bug's face, trickling blackish blood.

"Now, drive, you sonofabitch," says June Bug.

"Man," says Elec, "if they's one thing I hate, it's a thief."

"Look who's talking," says June Bug.

Candy Block is whimpering and dabbing at June Bug's nose with a tissue. "Look what you've done," she says in a high teary whine. "If it wadn't for you, we wouldn't be in this fix, lost and all."

Elec glances her way and sees she's looking at him. "Me? Me!" he yells. "I ain't the one stuckup them Minit Markets."

"June Bug ain't bad," she says, still dabbing. "He's just had a streak of bad luck."

"Shit!" says June Bug and sits straight with the tissue poked in his nose holes and the pistol again between his knees, butt up.

Elec knows now that June Bug won't shoot him. He knows that it would have happened already if it was going to happen. "What say we turn around and get a fresh start?" says Elec. "Go on back to y'all's house and see if we can't find the way from there."

"You mean," says June Bug, "you go on home, and we set there and wait for the law, right?"

"Or turn yourself in, one. Four-hundred and forty-four dollars ain't gone get you far nohow."

"Turn left up there," says June Bug and points to the moonlit cross of sandy dirt where a skeltal oak is hung with moss. "That'll bring us out on 136."

Elec takes a left and is driving with the moon again.

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"I need to stop," says Candy Block, "I do, June Bug."

"Hold it a minute," says June Bug.

"I done have."

"Stop the truck."

Elec sidles the truck along the lip of the ditch as if there is traffic behind, and Candy Block opens the door and steps into the woods.

When she gets in again, Elec starts to shift into first, hits reverse, and backs into the ditch with the right rear wheel dropping and the hood tipping up. They rock and wobble, all three heads knocking glass; Candy Block squeals and June Bug yells "Whóa!" Elec cuts the engine and all sound sinks beneath the throb of the woods.

Elec opens his door and gets out with June Bug behind him. "Ain't worth wasting a bullet on," he says, though not exactly to Elec.

Elec leads around the rear of the truck where the right side of the bumper is flush with the dirt. "Ain't gone be getting it out of there," he says, "not without a tractor."

"Don't say," says June Bug. "Bail out, Candy Block, we going back for my truck."

She gets out, panicky-looking, holding the blue-metallic case with both hands before her, denim bag hanging from her shoulder, and follows them along the truck tracks. By the time they reach the first fork, she starts complaining that her feet are blistered and June Bug ends up carrying her and the case. The pistol is now lost in the complexity of shadows and denim-swaddled flesh, and Elec is free to hike out through the woods if he likes. No point: he's lost

and he knows June Bug has given him up as a hostage, the game is up. He doesn't know when the game was up, but it's up. June Bug has lost either the interest or the nerve and has abandoned his original plan.

At the next crossing, Elec hangs back and watches June Bug and Candy Block--her on foot now, barefoot--ramble ahead, and then strikes out west with the moon. The green-peanut scent of cooling earth fills his head. He looks back once to see if June Bug is following, but sees only his own footprints in the silvery sand. Coming home, Mama!

At the next crossing, he spies his tire tracks, where he had turned left before, and decides that if he follows them beyond the turnoff, he'll end up on 84 and can hitchhike into Valdosta. He is hungry and thirsty, out of cigarettes. His sinuses burn. His belly is like a sack of bricks, which he can see shadowed on the sand and knows he's heading west again without even looking up at the moon, westbound too. How did he do that?

At the next crossing, he spies June Bug and Candy Block, on his left, trudging sand toward him. He starts to dart out into a patch of pine saplings, but the couple look so whipped and pitiful that he doesn't even bother. June Bug is pinching his nose, bleeding again. "Y'all come on," Elec says and ambles south, for sure this time.

He can hear them breathing behind him, her sniffing as if she's been crying again. The sound of flesh slapping flesh. At first, he thinks June Bug has slapped her, but when Elec turns, he sees June Bug swatting mosquitoes. "Y'all ain't got no bug spray in that case there?" Elec calls back, keeps walking. So do they.

"How far you reckon before we get back to Withers?" says June Bug.

"Valdosta's more like it."

"Valdosta," says Candy Block. "I'm starving to death."

June Bug stops in the road, stamping, his face smeary with blood. "I swear and bedamned! If you ain't hungry, you gotta pee; if your feet ain't hurting, it's your head."

She starts to cry, and they trudge off again in Elec's tracks, June Bug and then Candy Block.

"Women!" says June Bug, snuffling. And then to Elec, "You ain't married, are you?"

"Me?" says Elec. "Yeah, I am. Been married going on 35 year."

"She ain't no nag, is she?"

"Not no more. How long y'all been married?"

"None yet."

"Oh," says Elec, "y'all just living together."

"Candy Block's been married before, ain't divorced yet."

Elec turns to look at her, waddling up the road, sniffing but barely crying. Her hair shimmers in the moonlight. Just a child. He circles back and drapes one arm around her shoulder, and she lays into him. "Don't cry," he says, "June Bug don't mean half what he says."

"Hell I don't!" says June Bug, in the lead again. Pistol shining from the waist of his pants where the barrel is stuck. "Man, you take her."

"I got girls her age," says Elec, wondering if the gun is a Smith and Wesson, if June Bug could be talked into parting with it. If he stole it?

"Well, have another girl." June Bug stalks off ahead.

"How old are you?" Elec asks Candy. He feels sticky with her hot body bogging into his. No feeling except that.

"Twenty-four," she says, "last birthday."

"Well," he says, "you just starting out, got your whole life before of you."

She loosens up and places one arm around his waist with her ballooned breasts pressing into his side. He feels hotter, and as they say, more otherwise than weatherwise. "Bet you wish you hadn't never laid eyes on that scandel, huh?"

"Who, June Bug?" she says and grazes Elec with her wide blue eyes. "Why, course I don't. He's mean as a snake but he makes me laugh."

"Yeah, looks like it!" says Elec. "Look ayonder, he's done gone off and left us."

"June Bug'll surprise you," she said. And when they reach the next scruboak in a row across the left ditch, June Bug jummps out behind them.

"Boo!" he says and laughs, waving his arms like a Halloween spook. "I swannee to goodness," he says, "a man can't turn his back without another one trying to beat his time."

Elec lets go of Candy Block and edges over on the road so that June Bug is walking between them. "Fella," Elec says, "I got one waiting on me at home." He hopes so, he hopes Peg is worried sick. What time is it? Twelve, maybe one. He hopes one.