

*F7
keep Candy Block
F7 control
spellcheck*

SP

Rich Man, Poor Man, Beggarman, Thief?

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

The woman on the back porch flips her long platinum hair and
titters. "Go on and get the rest of 'em," 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 *miraculously* mysteriously low. His nappy head spikes silver
in the sun. He cocks his hip and lights a cigarette with his hands
cupped, 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 white hens since he came by to
get permission to clear the AT&T right-of-way through the couple's
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 white 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."

"Huh!" 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, and hears only the forever cry of a hawk working the north woods along the dirt road to 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. 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 and 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} ~~again~~ his eyes are drawn to the crock lard jug which he could place by his kitchen door for a prop. He can feel the froth of words inside, what he will say when he tells about making the trade. But 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. 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 and specializes in looking pitiable.

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

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

✓ "Me! I ain't scared of June Bug," she says. "I'm just sick and tired of this place." She jerks her head and her ~~white~~ nylon hair quivers.

Makes Elec quiver. "How long y'all been living out here at Mayday?"

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

"Don't like the country, huh?"

"Can't sell no Mary Kaye out here, that's for sure." She cuts her wide 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 woods.

She doesn't answer.

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

"June Bug 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 the roar of June Bug's pickup wallowing up 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 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 the owner talking to his wife.

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

"I'm giving him the 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."

"Here me, June Bug," she calls from the porch, "I ain't messing with no more chickens."

"Hush up!" June Bug says and raises one hand, still watching Elec.

"I ain't staying out here and minding no chickens while you ^{ne} go off galivanting."

June Bug turns to Candy, then turns back with arched eyebrows as if he ~~has~~ ^{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 up again, June Bug is staring down the barrel of a pistol.

"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 ^{up}, then levels it at Elec's heart.

"June Bug, Lord amercy! Put that gun down!" yells Candy behind the gray mesh screen.

Elec chuckles, scratches his head, and lights a cigarette. He's shaking, the flame of his lighter trembling and melting in the sun that seems to generate from the ^{white} sandy ~~dirt~~ 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 touch him, though they're standing a couple of yards apart. "How come you to think you could come ^{up} 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 here."

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

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

"What else you give him?" June Bug says. 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 hollers, grabs the pistol with both hands, still aimed at Elec, and braces his ~~tooled~~ ^{painty toed} leather cowboy boots in the sun-charged sand. "Now," says June Bug, "see can't you be letting that bunch of 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 unlatching 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 poop sound--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."

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

Unaware of crossing the yard, Elec is on the dipped board porch and passing through the screen door to the dim kitchen where Candy is standing at a square white table, peering into a magnifying mirror that blares her cheeky face: wide blue eyes, rimmed in black, and rouge from her temples to her ^{doll} pinched nose.

"Don't you go bringing your mess in here," she says to June Bug, coming through the door behind Elec with the gun in his back. She picks up the mirror and places it on the counter under the north window.

Her high, light voice makes Elec feel that this whole business is less that 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 ain't cooking for him," says Candy, plucking her brows-- what's left of them.

"You ain't got to feed him," says June Bug. "He can starve for all I care."

"What you up to now, June Bug?" She turns 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 coice 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 like he might smile. But he's counting with the gun still trained on Elec.

"What you robbed now?" says Candy 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, almost gleeful, proud.

"Hey!" says Elec, "You ain't the one's been hitting them Minit Markets, 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. "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 riding dangerously low, 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."

Candy 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. Elec sits under the steering wheel and June Bug in the middle, waiting in the ^{burnished marigold} orangy light of the going 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 at all.

"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 she ^{learned} that Elec ^{will} come and go as he pleased. If he didn't want to go home, he didn'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 plane in the yard and ^{drove it's nose} the nose of it rammed through the kitchen wall where Peg and the kids were eating.

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

"June Bug!" Candy 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 coazing the old truck ^{to start} ~~to start~~.

The sun goes down and the moon comes up, opposite and the same, facing one another, the moon silver and the sun gold, ^{SP} filigreed light. As the sun diminishes 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 Adele," says June Bug, "then we 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 eerie silver light of the moon. Not another house or moving vehicle 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 sits forward with her decorated face craned. "We ain't getting on no I-75 without ~~no~~ 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 week, hungry, lonesome for Mama.

"Hell!" says June Bug. "You don't mean... You always tinkering around with this 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 the tag number."

"How you know?"

"Heard it on the radio."

"You done messed up, man," 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 raod.

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

Elec switches the key to off but the engine ^{is still on} ~~still~~ runs. "You have to give it a minute." It goes dead and the frogs' chirruping comes alive. Katydids ring in the ^{myrtle bushes} ~~scruboaks~~ lining the road ditches.

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

"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} ~~now started~~ moving north to south, he's ^{is} wrong. Elec is driving with the moon, west. He doesn't say anything. They have to be headed to 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 good 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 ~~high~~ ^{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 elbows her ⁱⁿ across the neck, she squeals and rams the door.

Crying like a baby.

✓ ^{How come you wanta do that?}
"You ain't got no call to go hitting no lady," says Elec and

✓ hits the brakes.

Bright?

How come you won't go
"You ain't got no call 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 moonlit head shaking.

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

"Now shoog, hell!" hisses Elec.

"If it wadn't for him, June Bug," she says in a high teary whine, "we wouldn't be in this fix, lost and all."

"Me!" Elec yells. "I ain't the one stuck up them Minit Markets."

"June Bug ain't bad," she says. "He's just had a *Streak of bad luck!* hard life."

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

"What say we turn around," says Elec, "and get a fresh start? 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 withered oak is hung with moss. "That'll bring us out on 136."

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

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

"Hold it a minute."

"I done have."

"Stop the truck."

Elec sidles the truck along the rim 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 the back glass; Candy Block squeals and June Bug yells "Whoa!" 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 bumper to the ^{right} ~~right~~ of the tailgate 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, we going back for my truck."

She gets out, panicky, ^{looking} holding the blue-metallic case with both hands and follows them along the truck tracks. By the time they reach the first crossing, she starts complaining that her feet are blistered and June Bug has to carry her and the case. The pistol is now lost in the complexity of shadows and denim-swaddled flesh, and Elec could hike out through the woods if he liked. 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 interest or 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, ^{sunderline bare} ~~barefoot~~--ramble ahead, and then strikes out west with the moon. 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 hitch ~~hike~~ 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 ^{free left} trudging sand toward him. He starts to dart out in a patch of pine sapplings, but they look so whipped and pitiful that he doesn't even bother. "Y'all come on," he 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 again. But when he turns, he sees June Bug's hand on his own arm and knows he has slapped a mosquito. "Y'all ain't got no bug spray in that case there, have you?" Elec calls back, keeps walking. So do they.

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

"Valdosta's more like it."

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

June Bug stops in the road, ~~stamping~~. "If you ain't hungry, you gotta pee, if ^{you ain't gotta pee} your feet ~~ain't~~ hurting, it's your head." ^{if your feet ain't hurting, it's}

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

"Women!" says June Bug. And in a minute, "You ain't married, are you?" he says.

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

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

✓ "Not too bad. 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 it is stuck. "Man, you take her."

"I got girls her age," says Elec.

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

"How old are you?" says Elec, sticky with her hot body close to his. No feeling except that.

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

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

She loosens up and places one arm around his body 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 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 by the time they reach the next scruboak in the row, June Bug darts out behind them.

v "Boo!" he says and laughs, waving his arms, a pinwheel of shadows on the dirt. "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 the girl 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.