

# HANDOUT

## *A Story*

BY JOHN D. WEAVER

THEY picked the blackberry seeds from their teeth, sucking in the last of the blackberry taste. The pie had left a sticky warmth in their mouths. They were thirsty.

"Just owney one trouble with that'r pie," Brick said.

Hank, sprawled out on the floor of the old freight car, broke a yellow straw, waiting.

"Trouble with that'r pie," Brick said, "was they wan't enough of it."

Hank made a pillow of his finger-locked hands, resting his head in the cupped palms.

"What's the most pie you ever ate?" Hank said. "At one time, I mean."

"I doan know," Brick said, in his slow, velvety Mississippi drawl. "I'd have to think back."

"I ate three whole pies one time," Hank said. "Fellow bet me."

"I could eat three, I reckon," Brick said. "Nobody never bet me."

"Fellow said he bet I couldn't

eat three whole pies," Hank said, brushing the bits of straw from his hand. "There was two custards and a cherry."

"I like cherry," Brick said.

"I like custard," Hank said.

The prairie heat was already working through the slits of rottenness in the narrow boards of the freight car. Hank rolled back from the open door, burrowing into the cool darkness of the far corner. Hank always felt the heat more than Brick. Hank was from the North. The heat never bothered Brick much, long as he didn't have to stir around in it.

"It's gonna be worse than yesterday," Brick said.

"Couldn't be worse than yesterday," Hank said.

With the sun glaring up from the rails, they'd covered nearly twenty miles of track, their stomachs throbbing with the hollowness of hunger. About dusk they'd hobbled up to an abandoned way station, not uncommon in the ranch.

country. On a siding which forked away to the southeast three or four old freight cars had been left to rot in the prairie heat. They'd crawled into the first car, kicked off their shoes and, after rubbing some of the cinder soreness from their feet, they'd slept, Brick sprawled out like a half-open duffle bag, Hank curled up like a just-fed puppy.

Awakened early next morning by the sun, Brick had slid down from the car and, leaving Hank still doubled up, he'd explored the flat, dry land stretching out in an infinity of rank prairie growth. The small, once-yellow station house apparently had been unused for many years. The benches in the waiting room had been ripped from the floor, evidently hacked for kindling. An axe had bit into the partition separating the passengers' room from the ticket agent's cubbyhole. Brick stepped out into the shade of the long overhang. There was no evidence of life on the unending flatness, not even a lizard. The land was like the back of an old skillet. Brick climbed up on the loading dock, shading his eyes with his flattened hand, staring out at patches of high wild mustard, the leaves powdered with a fine gray dust. For the first time he noticed a thin corkscrew of smoke boring into the white sky. The

gray spiraling was almost invisible against the glare of the prairie. Brick jumped down from the dock, lumbering toward the smoke, his throat pinched with thirst. A slant-roofed shack squatted lopsidedly in the thick-growing prairie grass. The smoke was thinning up from a lean-to kitchen. Brick crept closer, the smell of burning wood hanging over him. He kept his back flat to the outer wall, feeling his way with his hands. A large Negro woman in a faded gingham workdress was cooking at an old kitchen range with shiny feed-door handles. She had set a blackberry pie and a pan of corn bread on the window ledge to cool. She was humming.

Brick had eaten the corn bread first, then he'd taken the pie to Hank to divide. They shared everything fifty-fifty, even the dollar Hank had found in Kansas City. The pie juice was soothing to Brick's flannel throat after the pan of corn bread. Brick didn't mention the corn bread to Hank.

"You know what'd be good?" Brick said.

Hank shook his head.

"Coffee," Brick said. "A cup of coffee."

"Go back there and tell the woman you want some coffee to kind of wash her pie down."

Brick grinned. He had red hair

and a heavily freckled face. When he grinned the freckles all ran together.

"Maybe she'd give us some coffee," Hank said. "Maybe if we just went up and asked her, she'd give us a cup of coffee."

"I'd feel mighty funny," Brick said. "Asting a nira woman for somepun to eat."

"What's the difference between asking, and just taking?"

"It's different, all right."

"I don't see how."

"You weren't raised in Mississippi."

"No," Hank said, thinking of Brick and that town in Kansas, a sleepy summer morning, Brick striding along whistling, glancing in the Main Street windows, and all of a sudden his face got red under his freckles, and he cussed and pointed across the street at a group of Sunday School children, the white children and the colored children strolling along together, laughing and swinging their arms, white and brown, all going to church together. Same church.

"In Mississippi," Brick said, "a white man doan ast a nira for somepun. He just takes it."

"Don't the law get after him?"

Brick chuckled. "You ain't spent much time in Mississippi," Brick said.

Hank licked his tongue over the front of his teeth. All the pie taste had gone. And he was still hungry, especially for coffee.

"I tell you what we could do," Hank said. "I'll ask the woman for coffee."

"Well," Brick said, thinking it over, squinting his thick, reddish brows.

"I'll tell her we're hungry and would she mind giving us a cup of coffee if she's got it handy. You won't have to do a thing except drink the coffee when she brings it to you."

"I done a lotta things," Brick said, sitting up, scratching his fuzzy hair, "but I never set down and et with a nira."

He shrugged and hopped out of the car. Hank sprang down after him, and they started up the siding, walking between the rails, their stride adjusted to the placing of the ties. They would take one long step, then two short ones, their legs swinging along in an uneven rhythm.

"I don't like the looks of this land," Hank said, biting his underlip the way he always did when he started having fun with Brick.

"Too flat," Brick said.

"Ain't only that," Hank said. "There ain't any good trees for lynchings."

"That's a lotta stuff," Brick said, "all that lynching talk. Hell, I grew up in Mississippi and I never heard of a lynching anywhere around our county, except once they tried to string up a nagra buck that was getting fresh with white girls, and the sheriff stopped 'em. So they shot him. The nagra, I mean, not the sheriff."

"I always heard you couldn't put on long pants in the South till you'd lynched at least one nigger," Hank said.

"A nagra's much better off in the South than in the North," Brick said. "People down home understand 'em. You got to know nigras to handle 'em."

Brick slouched along in his slow, lazying shuffle, his blunt-toed shoes scuffing the cinders. Hank liked to get Brick started on Negroes and when the argument flared up, Brick would get mad and his freckled face would flush tomato-colored and he'd say, "All right, dammit, suppose some nagra come around wanting to marry your sister?" And Hank would always say, "Both my sisters married nigger men." Hank didn't have any sisters, really.

"If a nagra knows his place, he gets treated fine in the South," Brick said. "Just like you'd take care of a good bird dog."

## II

Hank rapped on the door, a corrugated sheet of metal reinforced by three strips of wood forming a Z inside. The Negro woman opened the door part way, suspicion and fear in her eyes, large and brown, like a cow's.

"What you want?" she said.

"We're hungry," Hank said. "We thought you might have a cup of coffee around close by."

"What you doin' way off here next to nowhere?"

"We're heading west," Hank said. "We slept in one of the cars."

The Negro woman hesitated, then opened the door. Hank stepped in briskly, smiling his thanks. Brick frowned and followed him. Hank took his hat off and laid it on the table by the Bible. Brick left his hat on.

"Hafta bile me some water," the Negro woman said.

Hank sat down at the table. Brick leaned in the doorway opening from the square room into the lean-to kitchen. The heat from the wood stove wrapped around them like a heavy wool blanket.

"Goin' far?" the Negro woman asked.

"California," Hank said.

"Thas far," the Negro woman said. She grinned, measuring out

the coffee. "Reckon thas 'bout as far's you could go."

"Less you want to swim," Hank said.

"Whas th' matter with your fren," the Negro woman said. "Doan he want'r set down?"

"I'm awright," Brick said. He didn't like the woman. Fresh.

"Nice little place you got here," Hank said.

"It does," the Negro woman said.

"You raised around here?" Hank asked.

"No," the Negro woman said, "no, we come from Georgia, my husban' and me, come out the same year Pres'dunt Hardin' died. I know it was the same year cause a man with one eye come along one day sellin' extracts, and he ast us did we know the Pres'dunt was daid, said he died of somepun he et."

"That was 1924," Hank said.

"No," Brick said, "1923."

"You sure?"

"Yeah. Thas the year I got out of Leavenworth."

"My husban' got his leg cut off workin' for th' railroad company in Georgia," the Negro woman said, "an' they give him so much money then an' a little ever month, an' we come out here where we could live cheap."

She poured the boiling water for the coffee.

"My husban' useta work 'round th' little depot here," she said. "They doan use it any more." She buttered a half dozen cold biscuits. "They's big ranches all 'round here, an' folks useta come to th' depot to take th' train. Now they just drive their cars on to th' city."

She set two places at the square, homemade table. She motioned to Brick and he sat down across from Hank. He sugared his coffee and munched one of the biscuits, not troubling to break his in half like Hank. The coffee was strong and very hot. The heat was exciting to their stomachs.

"I'd of had pie for you," the Negro woman said, "owney somebody stole it."

"That's too bad," Hank said.

Brick stirred his hot coffee.

"An' corn bread," the Negro woman said. "I made me some fresh corn bread."

Hank frowned at Brick. Brick popped another biscuit in his mouth.

"I'm gittin' hungry watchin' y'all eat," the Negro woman said. She buttered some more biscuits, then poured herself a cup of coffee and sat down between Hank and Brick. Brick shifted his high-backed kitchen chair away from the table.

"My husban' couldn't live nowhere 'cept 'round railroad tracks," the Negro woman said. "He was a plumb crazy fool 'bout trains."

"I used to railroad in the South," Hank lied.

"Well, whatta you know." The Negro woman seemed pleased. "I've got so used to train sounds, I doan reckon I could git along without 'em now." She handed Brick another biscuit. With her bare black hand. "They's nothin' in th' world prittier'n a train whistle on a winter night, 'specially a long ways off. Ole train whistle gittin' closer and closer, then th' engine puffin' an' snortin' like a bull."

"A real railroad man never gets far away from railroad tracks," Hank said. "If he can help it."

"Now ain't that th' truf?"

The Negro woman got up from the table and hobbled into the square room. While she was gone Brick poured himself the last of the coffee. The Negro woman came back carrying a gold watch in her hand.

"You bein' a railroad man yourself," she said, beaming at Hank, "you'll be in'rested in this'r watch."

She handed the watch to Hank. He turned it over, shaking his head admiringly. On one side of the watch was a train engine with a

suggestion of endless track threading behind it. On the other side was engraved:

For  
Harrison Purdum Carver  
in  
Everlasting Gratitude.  
1920

"You know how come my husban' to git that?" the Negro woman said and when Hank shook his head, she drew her chair up to the table and laid her thick arms on the faded oilcloth. "He was out huntin' one day, an' he come 'cross this man'd shot hissef, an' Hair'son, thas my husban', Hair'son toted him all th' way to town. Eight'r ten miles, an' Hair'son toted him all th' way, never set 'im down once. Doctor wouldn't believe it, said it just wan't so."

She stirred the no longer hot coffee left in her cup.

"Th' man'd shot hissef was Mister McFarland," she said, "an' I guess they ain't a bigger railroad man in Georgia than Mister McFarland. Thas how come Hair'son to git th' watch, an' a year or so later when Hair'son had his accident an' got his leg cut off, he just sent a little note down to Mister McFarland, an' th' railroad company paid all th' hospital bills, an' give Hair'son a check for a thousand dollars, an' Mister McFarland

said he'd see to it we got a check ever month long's we lived."

"That was sure nice of him," Hank said.

"He's a real fine gent'mun, Mister McFarland."

Hank handed the watch back to her. She shined the heavy gold casing on the breast of her gingham dress.

"You know what that watch cost?" she said. "Two hunnert dollars."

"Think of that," Hank said.

"Lemme see it," Brick said, wiping the crumbs of the last biscuit from his mouth. He weighed the watch in his right hand. "Lotta gold in it," he said.

"I wouldn't take th' world an' all for that watch," the Negro woman said. "I ain't got much, an' since Hair'son died of th' snakebite I ain't had nobody to do for me, but poor's I am I wouldn't take a thousand dollars for that gold watch with Hair'son's whole name spelled out on it. Hair'son Purdum Carver. Hair'son's people all b'longed to th' Carvers 'fore th' war. Carvers was real quality."

"That's the best watch I ever saw," Hank said.

"You could put the works in a cheap case," Brick said, handing the watch back to the Negro woman. "Then you could sell the

gold. That's one hellofa lotta gold."

"They ain't made money enough to git this watch away from me," the Negro woman said. "Sleep with it under my pillow ever night." She held it up to her ear. "They's a kind of music in th' sound of it."

Hank pushed back from the table and drew himself up. He brushed the crumbs from his cotton shirt.

"I sure wish I had the money to pay you something," Hank said.

"Nothin' pleasures me more'n feedin' a couple railroad men," the Negro woman said.

"We want to get us a railroad job out in California," Hank said. "Once a fellow's railroaded, he don't like to do no other kind of work."

"Ain't you said it right?"

The Negro woman put the watch on the table by the sugar bowl. She rubbed her right palm on her shoulder, drying it, then shook hands with Hank. Brick brushed past her, squeezing around Hank. He put his hands in the pockets of his jeans.

"If y'all step along pritty keen," the Negro woman said, "you can hop a ride on that hotshot that waters just a half mile down the tracks. They's a heap of high mustard weeds along the tracks, and it ain't hard to hide."

"Thank you," Hank said. "We sure do thank you."

Brick tugged at Hank's jeans, jerking him toward the path.

"We better hurry up," Brick said. "We doan want'r miss that ride."

"Goes by here at 'leven six," the Negro woman said.

The kitchen clock said ten forty-seven.

"Well," Hank said, opening the front door, "we sure do thank you."

"Doan menshun it," the Negro woman said.

They walked as far as the tracks without saying anything. Hank was picking his teeth with a kitchen match.

"You feel any different," Hank said, "after eating at the same table with a colored woman?"

"Fell'r on the bum'll do just

about anything," Brick said, "but I never thought I'd set down next to a nigra and eat."

"You ate plenty," Hank said.

"Eating with a nigra," Brick said, shaking his head wonderingly. "Kind of makes a fell'r feel funny just to think about it."

"You try to stop worrying about it and get a move on," Hank said, chuckling.

"We got plenty of time," Brick said.

Hank stared at the glint of the prairie sun on the heavy gold watch in Brick's hand.

"Twelve, thirteen minutes yet," Brick said.

He slipped the watch back in his pocket, spitting out over the rails.

"In Mississippi," he said, "a nigra woman wouldn't think of setting down with a white man."

---

## FOR CHRISTMAS EVE

The shelter of no other tree  
Can quite so deeply solace me,  
Nor any beacon burn so bright  
As this one star, one tree, this night!

— VIRGINIA SCOTT MINER