

Getting By

by Adam Sifre

There were two things and two things only older than Bella in the town of Comfort, Alabama. There was her porch where she spent most of her time these days watching the sun that had baked her into something resembling broken clay, come and go. On cloudless days, she could follow her sun's travels, as easily asleep as awake. Time and countless days of triple digit southern heat made her more dust and tobacco smoke than flesh. Even asleep, her papery eyelids did nothing to hide God's bright pendulum from her sight. The porch faced east, more or less, so Bella saw more sunrises than maybe anyone else in Alabama, maybe the world. She hadn't seen a sunset in quite a spell, though. She didn't miss them much. Sunrise was plenty.

The other ancient artifact, chained to a weather-stained oak rocker on the same porch, was the zombie. It too spent the day following the sun, mostly ignoring Bella these days. She supposed that if she sat in its lap, it would try to kill her. For the most part, though, her zombie seemed content just to let time pass. *He's as tired as I am*, she thought.

The zombie had built this very porch ninety-two years ago, come October. The wood, like Bella, had lost most of its color. In their youth, both had been dark, smooth and cool to the touch. Like the porch, Bella held on to only a smattering of black spots against the light gray background of her face. She leaned forward in her rocker and spat. It was a dry spit, more noise than water. The zombie moaned and made a half-hearted attempt to stand, but the weight of the chains was sufficient to disabuse him of the notion.

A dust cloud about half a mile down the road was slowly making its way toward them.

“Braaaaiinsss.”

“Hush now, Charlie. Eat you chicken.”

“Braaaai ... “ Charlie sputtered out like an old candle run out of wick. His head fell forward, looking for all the world like a man taking a nap. After a moment, his hands wandered over his lap until they found purchase on the dead bird. Its feathers were a cherry-stained mess, and the head and feet were already a grisly memory, but Charlie didn't mind. Not that Bella could tell, anyway. The rest of the bird eventually found its way into his mouth. Charlie and his dentures went to work.

Bella frowned. Charlie always had been a loud eater, a habit that never failed to irritate her. She leaned over and untangled a loop of chain that somehow had come between Charlie and the chicken. The chains were just there for show, mostly. Some mornings Bella would come outside to drink her Sanka and Four Roses and find Charlie standing by the rail, the rusted links piled near his feet. Bella would sit him back down in his rocker, usually without incident. The trick, she learned, was to push it.

“Oh, baby, baby. Oh, baby, baby, push it!” Charlie had listened to The Salt ‘n Peppa song the very morning he had turned. Bella would sing softly, and Charlie would calm right down and return to his chair. Go figure. She wasn't in a charitable mood today, though. Too much sun and not enough Four Roses had soured her and dampened her enthusiasm for singing.

“I said hush up now,” Bella warned. “No one cared to hear what you had to say when you were breathing, and I damned sure don't care to hear what you have to say now.” Charlie was undead, and craved human flesh, but he hushed soon enough.

The dust cloud had turned into a dusty car and was pulling into the long dirt road leading up to the small house. Bella squinted against the morning light, and absently removed the chains from Charlie's lap.

"Looks like a government car," she told Charlie. She cleared her throat a spat a good one. It sailed over the old porch landing and got itself caught on the big Holly Bush.

In truth, it didn't look like a government car any more than anything else, but Bella knew it was what it was. No one came to visit them these days unless they had to, and no one had to unless they were government.

No sooner was the transformation from dust cloud to car complete, then a small, white boy wearing a faded blue suit hopped out.

Been a long time and then some since I hopped out of anything, except the frying pan and into the fire with Charlie here.

Bella struggled to her feet. "This here is private property, Mr. Gumvermint man. Nothing here to interest you."

The white boy coughed into his arm, and dust flew off his jacket. He looked to Bella like a slightly cleaner version of that Peanuts boy in the Sunday papers, back when there had been Sunday papers.

Yes ma'am. Sorry ma'am —" He coughed again. The man's face was streaked and dirty as if he'd been crying. He worried out a handkerchief and started to blot his face. "The air-conditioning broke on me a while back, and I've been driving up and down these roads with the windows open and, uh..."

The man finally noticed her Charlie. Bella almost laughed at how big his eyes got. *A scared white boy, with big white eyes. Now that ain't sumthing you see at the picture shows. No sirree.*

“Ma'am? Is he —“

“My name is Mrs. Washington. Friends call me Bella.”

Dusty white boy cleared his throat. “Yes ma'am — uh Bella. It's just —“

Bella shot him a look.

“Sorry ma'am — Mrs. Washington. It's just that he's a ... he's a —

“I know what he is, gumvermint man. He's a poor excuse for just about everything these days, but he's my Charlie. Now, if you've had your fill of gawking, you best be off.”

“Yes Ma'—Mrs. Washington. I mean, I'm afraid I can't leave just yet.” He took a step toward the porch and stopped, apparently having second thoughts. “My name is Lawrence Higgins. I'm with the Federal Social Security Administration.”

Bella's eyes narrowed, and she took a shaky stepped closer to Charlie and grabbed a fistful of chain. “Well, I wish I can say I was pleased to meet ya, Lawrence. But I'm not. You go on and climb back into that there car and find someone else to bother. We're all full of bother here and don't need no more.

Higgins shot a nervous glance at Charlie and Bella thought she saw him try to stand a little straighter. “Mrs. Washington. Our records show that you've been receiving two social security checks each month. One for you and one for a Mr. Charlie Washington, your husband.

“Smart records.” Bella gave a gentle tug on the chain. Charlie moaned and dusty white boy took a step back. She laughed. “That's good. You're heading in the right direction.”

“Mrs. Washington, our records show that your husband died during the first outbreak and —”

“Dat's right, Pigpen. Old Charlie died, but then he come back. 'Cause Charlie never did a damn thing right, God bless him; couldn't even die right.”

The man's dirt smeared face became serious. “Be that as it may, Mrs. Washington, you can't collect social security after you die, and Mr. Washington here has not been eligible since, well, since he was dead!”

Bella took a step forward, giving the chain another tug. Charlie moaned again and started to rise, slower than a fag's pecker at a peep show, but he got there eventually. “Now you listen here. Charlie may be dead or he may be not. Either way, I still have to take care of him. He still eats — more now than he used to. He still needs clothes and he still needs me. All three of us cost money and the only money he has are his guvermint checks.”

The man grew bolder. Apparently the novel effect of Charlie was wearing thin. “Yes, well I'm afraid I am going to have to recommend that we cancel his future payments, and bill you for the fraudulent payments you accepted after his death .”

“You sure about that?” Bella took another step closer. “You real sure.”

Now the white boy in the man's suit did stand a little taller. "I'm afraid so. And I don't think either you or — or whatever that thing is — are in a position to tell me differently."

Charlie had finally made it all the way to his feet, but somehow he had managed to face the front door, his back to Mr. Higgins. *Jesus and crackers*, Bella swore to herself. *I swear*.

"Billy!"

A loud, deep groan came from inside the house. The dusty man looked up.

"What was that? Mrs. Washington, if you're trying to intimidate me I can assure you —"

"Billy! Get on out here now. Dinner!" Bella did a quick two step to the side just as Billy came barreling out the porch door. He was big, he was mean, he was dead, and he was hungry. The dusty man gave a high scream and tripped over himself trying to back away toward the car, but Billie was on the man quick as mercury. Lickity split, dinner was served.

Bella turned and went into the house. It was too noisy out there right now and she didn't need to see anymore. Later she'd have to do something about the car, but that could wait for now. She closed the door behind her.

"Thank God for children," she sighed.

