14. Differing Weights and Measures

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Differing Weights and Measures
t the end of Pigs Alley in Chicken Hill, outside a beaten-up old shack with a door sign that read "Fatty's Jook. Caution. Fun Inside," the proprietor stood on the front porch, his face a reflection of anything but fun. His gaze fell on a pile of firewood near the porch stairs. The pile, nearly three feet high, was a tangle of broken chairs, discarded wood, and tree branches used to heat the joint's woodstove. Fatty, clad in a flannel shirt, a gray vest, worn trousers, and a porkpie hat, walked down to the pile and sat on it, his arms crossed, lost in thought.
It was 2 a.m. and the joint was still jumping inside. Normally, the scratchy jukebox squawking the howls of Erskine Hawkins that floated above the chortling and laughing of the customers inside was good news. But right now, for Fatty, that was not good news. Not at all. There was a problem inside. A big one.
Nate Timblin was in there, sitting alone at one of the rickety tables, drinking.
Fatty leaned forward on the woodpile, silently cursing his luck.
The jook door opened. Rusty, holding an open bottle of beer, emerged and sat down on the woodpile next to Fatty and sipped.
"He still at it?" Fatty asked.
Rusty nodded.
"What's he drinking?"
"Sipping that shine, Fatty. One glass after another, the devil keeping score."
Fatty sighed and stared down Pigs Alley, considering the problem.
"What you so worried about?" Rusty asked.
"Nate Timblin running booster down his little red lane in my joint. That's what I'm worried about."
"You should'a thought it out before you rolled that gulp sauce up here."
Fatty silently agreed. Leaning back, he gazed out into Pigs Alley and mulled the issue calmly, like a lawyer. This was a complicated problem.
"You want me to ask him to stop?" Rusty asked.
"Do a donkey fly?" Fatty said.
"Nate wouldn't hurt nobody," Rusty said. "I never seen him mad. Ever."
"And you don't wanna."
"You seen him like that?"
Fatty, normally enthusiastic, suddenly grew irritated. "Who said I did?"
Rusty shrugged, rose, climbed the porch stairs, and went back inside.
Fatty watched him go, then licked his swollen top lip, from which twelve

stitches had recently been removed. It was because of that busted lip and missing tooth—care of his buddy Big Soap—that he'd blundered into that goddamned rotgut in the first place. If Big Soap had cleaned that fire hose like he'd told him to, the inspector wouldn't have shaken that peanut out of it. If he hadn't shaken the peanut out of the hose, the two of them wouldn't have gotten fired. If they hadn't gotten fired, he wouldn't have let Big Soap have a go at his mouth. And if Big Soap wasn't such a moron and took his invitation seriously and busted his lip in two places and knocked out his tooth, he wouldn't have gone to Philly and blundered into the moonshine and this whole mess in the first place.

"Goddamnit," he said. "I need some new friends."

He rubbed his jaw, trying to clear his thoughts. His lip had been sheared and his tooth was gone and he needed some kind of fix for both. There was no safe place in Pottstown to get that done. No colored in his right mind went to Doc Roberts even before that living witch got Nate's nephew Dodo locked up. The emergency room at the Pottstown hospital drew the cops, so that was out. That left the colored Doc Hinson in Reading. But Doc Hinson was one of those Booker T. Washington–type proper Negroes. He wasn't fond of coloreds who ran good-time jook joints. Philly was safer. So he'd jumped into his car and headed to his cousin Gene's house, where he'd walked into more catastrophe.

Gene, four years older and the guy from whom Fatty took all his cues when they were boys, was one of Pottstown's greatest Negro success stories—if you didn't count Chulo Davis, the fantastic drummer who got shot over a bowl of butter beans while playing with the Harlem Hamfats in Chicago. Gene, unlike Chulo, set his sights on Philly, where he'd stumbled into a high-society Negro girl whose father owned a thriving dry-cleaning business in the city's Nicetown section. The father dropped dead of a heart attack soon after the two met, and Gene, a bright, enterprising soul, suddenly found himself full of lovelorn desire, his heart full of yearning, overwhelmed with profound, ravenous longing for a girl who was, he told Fatty, "quite the dish." Fatty thought her face was sour enough to curdle a cow, but then again, Gene was ugly enough to shake the scare out of a thicket, so they were quite the pair. After the two married, Gene took over the cleaner's. He always enjoyed Fatty's visits. They were a respite from his wife's constant insistence that he prepare their daughter for her upcoming Jack and Jill cotillion, where high-siddity Negroes gathered to tut-tut, tisk-tisk, and hold cheery glasses of cheap champagne in hands gnarled by years of yanking and knuckling tobacco and slapping pigs in the mouth down South where most of them came from, something they forgot as they were now enjoying life in Philadelphia trying hard to be white. It drove Gene mad, and several times he'd asked Fatty, who wasn't married, to move in with him, declaring there were women aplenty in Philadelphia.

Fatty ignored those entreaties, but after he got his lip busted, Gene was the perfect answer. His plan was to go to Gene's house, find someone to fix his mouth, hole up at Gene's for a day or two, then get back to Pottstown as soon as possible. Instead, he arrived two days after his dear cousin had fallen into a disaster.

Gene had purchased a horse-pulled water pumper from a local Philadelphia fire company just down the street from his house. The pumper was a relic, a leftover piece of junk that the fire company wanted to part with, having moved to gas-powered vehicles years before. Gene paid for the old contraption, pulled it into his backyard with his old truck, filled the tank

with forty gallons of water, then ventured up to a tony Chestnut Hill horse-riding outfit where, in a burst of good Pottstown friendliness and Southern partiality toward white folks that the Pottstown colored had plenty of practice with, many having spent most of their working years as janitors and maids, he talked the white proprietor into letting him rent one of his riding horses. The steeds of the Chestnut Hill Riding Company were magnificent creatures: retired racers; gorgeous, well-bred animals spared from the bullet by the horse lovers of the city's well-to-do. The proud creatures enjoyed the remainder of their lives on easy street, trained to trot on a twelve-mile riding path through Fairmount Park, one of the largest city parks in America. The Chestnut Hill Riding Company was an exclusive club—closed to Negroes and Jews, of course, and the idea of a Negro even meandering into the entrance to request to join the club and ride one of its pride mounts was preposterous. But it just so happened that on the Sunday afternoon Gene arrived, the proud owner of the institution, an old Quaker named Thomas Sturgis, fully aware of his group's abolitionist history and affiliation with the Negro, had just received a letter from a dying fellow Quaker reminding him of a glorious sermon about Negro self-sufficiency the two enjoyed in care of Booker T. Washington, one of the Negro's greatest leaders, who had spoken at their Quaker meeting house some years before. The reminder of that great Negro leader's words, and the thought of his now dying friend encouraging him to attend that stirring lecture, moved Sturgis, and the old Quaker decided that here in the year 1936, seventy-one years after the end of the Civil War, which ended chattel slavery, it was high time a good Negro joined the ranks of the Chestnut Hill Riding Company. Sturgis had just come to this conclusion that morning when Gene, nattily dressed in a suit, tie, bowler, and riding boots (having made a habit of nicking various "lost" clothing from his dry-cleaning customers), arrived, announced himself as the owner of his very own business, and declared he'd like to rent a horse. To Sturgis's eyes, the polite young black man with an infectious smile who owned his very own dry cleaner's was a perfect example of the kind of Negro needed to break the ice, and Sturgis happily acquiesced, believing that the Lord had sent him a sign. He led Gene to the stable and pointed to a large white horse. "Will he do?" he asked. "He's a palomino."

"Any pal of Mino is a pal of mine," Gene tooted, though the sight of the mighty stallion, which stood nearly six feet tall at the shoulders, made him nervous. So he said, "I don't need such a young horse. I'll take an older one. Or even a mule. You got a mule?"

The old Quaker chuckled, thinking the finely dressed Negro was joking. "Thy four-legged creatures of God are better judges of thy inner soul than thy man creatures," Sturgis said. "Size makes no difference."

"Indeed you is right, sir," Gene said.

"Thy horse is often a better judge of thine character than thy women, or even thine children, who are much more adept at it than one might imagine," Sturgis said. "Though not as keen as a horse. A horse instantly senses thine nature."

The fact that Gene, a clever snout who never finished sixth grade, was neither offended nor thrown by Sturgis's use of "thee" and "thy," for which the Quakers were known, and even used the words himself as he responded, helped the matter, for he had no notion of what the man was talking about. But he sensed victory and responded, "And I sense thee's kindness in the privy," not realizing until he uttered the words that they were probably an

insult but guessing correctly that the old man probably either didn't hear well or know what "privy" meant; but just to be safe, Gene quickly upended the whole business by further chatting up his background, offering luminous praise about his upbringing in lovely Pottstown, Montgomery County, which he described as a "land aplenty with horses and cows and mermaids," leaving out the part that he was born in Chicken Hill and that the only horse he'd ever actually touched was a nag named Stacy he'd led around for a half-blind Jewish rag peddler named Adolph whom he'd fleeced out of a week's earnings before bolting for Philly four years before. The deal was done, the fee was paid, and Gene mounted the horse and took off on the riding trail, enjoying the view atop the proud animal. The beast knew the trail by heart and they proceeded without incident. When the trail meandered toward the park entrance near Nicetown, just two blocks from Gene's home, Gene, in a burst of enthusiasm, veered the creature off the trail, out of the park, onto the cobblestone street, and into his yard. He hitched the horse to his newly purchased 1865 fire company water pumper, still filled with forty gallons of water, and attempted to take a quick rock-around-the-block to show off the new toy to his North Philadelphia neighbors. The poor horse, unused to the harness and traces of a wagon, bolted, careering wildly down the cobbled street, flinging the pumper onto its side and tossing Gene, who cracked three ribs and punctured a lung. The horse dragged the overturned pumper half a block before bystanders could corral it. By the time Fatty arrived two days later, Gene lay in a hospital bed, the furious Chestnut Hill Quaker had pressed charges, and there was no one left to run Gene's dry-cleaning business save his wife, who was too distracted by cotillion chatter to man the counter of any business. She begged Fatty to stay for a couple of weeks and run the dry cleaner's until her brother could make his way up from North Carolina.

"I can't run no cleaner's," Fatty said. "Look at this." He pointed at his mouth and missing tooth. "I got to get my tooth fixed. Who's gonna leave their clothes to a man with no front tooth?"

Gene's wife waved her hand dismissively, and to Fatty's surprise, her oinky-boinky haughtiness vanished and she got down-home on him. "You ain't got to eat the clothes, Fatty. Just collect 'em and give 'em out. I'll get you a dentist. I know a good one."

"Can't you get somebody else to run things?" Fatty pleaded.

"Nobody can run a business better than you," Gene's wife countered. "Gene said you can run any kind of business."

She had a point. In addition to owning Chicken Hill's only jook joint, Fatty drove his 1928 Ford as a taxi, delivered ice with his own mule and cart twice a week, cut back trees from neighboring houses, collected the old junk in town from whoever wanted it taken away, operated a hamburger and soda pop stand from the front of his jook during the day, booked a colored photographer out of Reading to shoot colored folks' weddings, and worked the 3 to 11 p.m. shift at Flagg with his Italian buddy Big Soap until he got them both fired. Fatty was a busy man.

He explained to Gene's wife that he had several businesses to get back to. But a guarantee of a week's profits from Gene's thriving business moved him, that and the promise that her brother would bring up several gallons of homemade moonshine—"the good stuff," she said, "not that watery crap they make up here"—for him to take back home. That sealed the deal, not to mention her knowledge of moonshine that convinced him she wasn't so hoity-toity after all.

Thus Fatty found himself behind the counter of Gene's Dry Cleaner's and Laundry for two weeks before returning to Chicken Hill.

At the time, it seemed like a good deal. He got stitches in his lip. His cousin's wife made good on her promise, sort of. She found a dentist who replaced his missing gold tooth with a wooden one. And when it was all done, he headed back to Chicken Hill, his gasping 1928 Ford loaded with fourteen gallons of some of the best moonshine he'd ever tasted—enough to sell well into the spring.

It had worked out just fine until tonight, when Nate Timblin walked in and ordered a drink.

Still seated on the woodpile outside as Erskine Hawkins wailed from the jukebox, Fatty glanced at the door and weighed his options. He actually considered walking down the alley to Miss Chona's store, going in the back door, which was unlocked—she never locked it, why steal when she gave you what you wanted on credit anyway and never asked for payment—and using the pay phone to call the cops to bust his own joint. He worked it out in his head: make the call, sprint back to warn Nate and the others before the cops came, hide the booze in the woods behind the jook, and let the cops bust the place, where they'd find nothing and leave. But that plan had a big hole. He knew all four cops on the town's police force. Two were drunks, easily bought off with booze. The third, David Hynes, was a devout Christian with a kind heart who looked the other way unless you gave him lip. But the fourth, Billy O'Connell, was a rascal who was also a lieutenant at the Empire Fire Company. Fatty had done everything he could to get on O'Connell's good side: He got the fire company cheap beer at a discount—actually stolen, but the good-hearted firemen didn't care. He fed the firehouse fellas free chicken from Reverend Spriggs's annual dinner sell-off. He'd even dragged Big Soap there and handed him over, since Soap was strong enough to pull the wet hundred-foot leather fire hose to the top of the fire company tower to let it dry out after use. The guys at Empire were crazy about Big Soap. They all liked him.

Except for Billy O'Connell.

Billy O'Connell did not like Big Soap, or Fatty, or even his own firemen. Billy O'Connell liked no one. Fatty had never met an Irishman like him. That made O'Connell dangerous.

Fatty leaned on the woodpile, considering the idea. It was Thursday. O'Connell was off duty today—unless he wasn't. If one of the other three cops had called in sick, O'Connell would be summoned, since the town always kept three cops on duty.

He considered the plan. Who would know if O'Connell was on duty? Paper would know, he thought. That woman knew everything. But she was asleep or maybe busy loving up some Pullman porter. He beat back his own jealous feelings. What a song she was. If only she knew his heart. He closed that feeling off quickly and considered the matter again. A raid would bring all three cops, since anything on Chicken Hill brought the entire force. Was O'Connell on duty or not? Was it worth it just to get Nate out before he did some damage? He thought it through. Yes! But then he remembered he'd been told that O'Connell was the cop who'd chased Dodo down and took him to Pennhurst. Suppose Nate knew that O'Connell was the cop who had helped Doc Roberts send Dodo off? That wouldn't work, Nate being drunk and O'Connell showing up.

This town, he thought grimly, is too damn small.

He discarded the idea, briefly considered a scheme to empty his joint by

walking in and announcing that several Negroes from Hemlock Row, a tiny black neighborhood just outside Pottstown, were headed over mad as hell with guns and baseball bats—he'd heard some crazy fool over there named Son of Man was apparently scaring the pants off everyone—but then diced the idea. The Hill Negroes might cotton to a good fight with the Hemlock Row guys. That was no good.

Finally, he decided to take the direct route. He stood up, took a deep breath, climbed the porch steps, went back into the jook, strode to the wall, lowered the volume of the blasting jukebox, and announced, "Closing early, y'all. I got to work tomorrow."

"C'mon, Fatty," one of the men said. "Let Erskine Hawkins finish."

"Erskine'll be on the box tomorrow. G'wan home now."

There were seven souls in the place, and they stalled, nursing their drinks, until they saw Fatty move toward the back corner table where Nate sat in silence, a gallon jug of North Carolina Blood of Christ and a half-empty glass on the table before him. That got them moving. They downed their drinks and lumbered toward the door, except for Rusty, who remained behind the bar, a makeshift piece of claptrap wood and pine slabs.

Fatty sat down and motioned at Rusty to join them. Rusty came over and sat as Fatty spoke. "Evening, Nate," he said.

Nate was staring at his glass. After a long moment, his glazed eyes slowly rolled up from the glass to lock in on Fatty, then slowly rolled back to the glass again.

It was just a moment, that look from Nate, but that was enough. Fatty found himself staring at the floor, the hairs on the back of his neck standing on end. Goddamn, he thought, what have I done? When Fatty was nineteen, he'd served two years at Graterford Prison for a mishap he preferred to forget, and after fighting his way to better food and treatment, he'd mistakenly insulted an old prisoner named Dirt, a leader in his block who was serving a life sentence for three murders. Dirt was, at first glance, a butterfly: a thin, frail-looking elderly man with thick glasses and small shoulders, whereas Fatty was a stout, spirited youth, wide around the shoulders. Fatty didn't think much of the insult until a couple of days later. He was sitting at a cafeteria table when Dirt, seated at another table, got up, stretched leisurely, strolled over to Fatty's table holding a fork, and calmly gouged out the eye of the man sitting directly across from Fatty. He did it with the serenity of a housewife nursing a baby.

Fatty was sitting close enough to hear the squish of the fork landing in the poor fella's eye, and he never forgot the calm in Dirt's eyes as Dirt put the fork to work, the poor fella's eyeball popping out and rolling across the floor like a marble. It was a clean, clear operation. The sense of purpose shook him. The minute Dirt emerged on the block from solitary—and Fatty noted that it was a short stay, another nod to the little man's pull and power—he nearly fell over himself getting to Dirt's cell to apologize for his slight transgression. The older man was surprisingly gracious.

He asked, "You come from Pottstown?"

"I do."

"Then you know Nate."

"Ain't but one Nate in Pottstown. Everybody knows Nate. He's married to one of my cousins. We're all related out there in some form or fashion."

"Nate was here some years back," Dirt said.

Fatty was surprised. "He never mentioned that to me," Fatty said. "He's a lot older. Listen, Dirt, I wanna say I'm sor—"

Dirt raised a hand and cut him off. “I took that fella’s eye out because he took something that belonged to me. But if Nate were to take something that belonged to me, I wouldn’t twitch a muscle. I wouldn’t cross Nate Timblin for all the cheese and crackers in the world.”
“Old Nate? We talking about the same Nate? Nate Timblin?”
“That ain’t the name he had in here, son. Ask around.”
And Fatty did. He learned from the other older prisoners that the Nate he knew—trusty, calm Nate, the old man who came to Pottstown from the South and worked for Mr. Moshe at the All-American Dance Hall and Theater, who followed his wife, Addie, around like a puppy, who took his deaf nephew Dodo hunting—was not the same Nate Timblin who served time in Graterford Prison. Rather, he was a story, a wisp, a legend, a force, a fright. Why he was in no one seemed to know, but there were rumblings and they were not good. No one seemed to care much about the where or why except for one matter: Nate’s name was surely not Nate Timblin. The prisoners called him Love. “Nate Love,” they said, “not Timblin. Love’s his name. Nate Love. We don’t know no Timblin. We seen it on his paperwork. Love. That’s his family name, son. Nate Love, said to be from down South Carolina way. The Low Country they call it. As good a man as you’ll ever meet; as kind a soul that has ever walked round these prison walls. But God help you if Nate Love calls his family name on you, son. If he starts in on you that way, you’re flower of the week.”
When Fatty learned this, he returned to Dirt’s cell and asked, “Did you know Nate well?”
“I knew him very well,” the old man said.
“What’d he do to get here?”
Dirt shrugged. “It ain’t what he’s done to get here, son. It’s what’s inside him. Call it a curse or a devilment. Whatever it is, it lives in some people. There’s not many types like ’em in this world. But Nate’s one of ’em. He got that thing in him, son, deep inside. It’s too bad really, on account of he’s a good man, my kind of man. But a man can’t control what’s in him once it’s turned loose no more than you or I can hold on to a bag of groceries if we was to get hit by a bus. Some things is just there, waiting to get turned loose. That’s the way it is. You wanna keep clear of that side of him, son. If you thick enough to turn that devil loose in him, you in deep water.”
Fatty, seated at the rickety table across from Nate, felt his mouth go dry. He swallowed his spit as he watched Nate stare at his half-empty glass of moonshine. Nate’s eyes glowed eerily. Fatty saw it then. Saw what the men saw. Nate Love, beaming in from another world, his eyes calm and intense, brimming with calcified white-hot rage. Fatty felt as if he were looking at a volcano covered by a clear lake. He resisted the urge to leap to his feet and run out into the night. He silently cursed himself, cursed Big Soap for screwing up back at the Flagg factory, cursed his cousin Gene and Gene’s wife and Gene’s wife’s brother, too, who gave him the North Carolina Blood of Christ moonshine, and then lastly cursed himself.
“I should’a never brought that shine up here,” he said aloud.
Nate ignored him and sat, not moving, his long fingers still cradling the glass. Fatty glanced at Rusty, who was shaken, too. Rusty was a big man, strong and wide and young, and Fatty was no small man himself. But at the moment, seeing the fear climb into young Rusty’s face and feeling his own fright pawing at him, he knew that even if both of them pounced on Nate, it would be like trying to douse a house fire with a glass of water.
Fatty decided to say nothing else. It was Rusty who spoke. He pointed at

Nate's half-empty glass. "How's that coming, Nate?"
Silence.
"You all right?"
Nate didn't respond, his eyes unwavering, staring at the glass.
Finally, Fatty found his voice. "Nate . . . I got to close soon."
Nate's eyes slowly moved from the glass to Fatty's face and Fatty looked away. Christ, he thought. I done it.
Fatty glanced at Rusty, who, thank God, broke the ice in the oddest way.
Young Rusty was tired. He leaned on the table, placing his hands on his face and rubbing his eyes. There was an innocence to Rusty that seemed to pull fresh air into any room he walked into. Everyone on the Hill loved Rusty, who would do anything for anyone. The simple yawn, his weariness, seemed to yank a bit of tension from the room. It thinned it out just a little, and Fatty decided to keep quiet for a change. He was glad he did, for Rusty pulled his hands from his face and continued.
"I don't like what happened either, Nate. It's not right. Dodo didn't do nothing wrong. Doc Roberts . . . he's just no good."
Nate's eyes moved to Rusty. The calm rage in his eyes that burned so brightly that looking into them was like staring at the sun locked in on Rusty's innocent face and the raging glow dimmed a bit. Rusty started to say something else but clammed up, finally sputtering, "Maybe there's a way to get out of it."
"That's right," Fatty chirped. "I know a few people over there at Pennhurst."
Nate looked at him, and Fatty felt as if an electric buzzing in the room had lowered. The sharp edge of the man's rage dulled, the energy of hate in the force that sat before him eased as Nate fingered his glass, moving his hands for the first time. Then Fatty saw his lips move and heard, as if in a dream, Nate mumble something.