Hard Times

Burning Bright, #1

by Ron Rash, 1953–

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For Sue Holder Rash

Jacob stood in the barn mouth and watched Edna leave the henhouse. Her lips were pressed tight, which meant more eggs had been taken. He looked up at the ridgetop and guessed eight o'clock. In Boone it'd be full morning now, but here

light was still splotchy and dew damped his brogans. This cove's so damn dark a man about has to break light with a crowbar, his daddy used to say.

Edna nodded at the egg pail in her hand.

„Nothing under the bantam," Edna said. „That's four days in a row."

„Maybe that old rooster ain't sweet on her no more," Jacob said. He waited for her to smile. When they'd first started sparking years ago, Edna's smile had been what most entranced him. Her whole face would glow, as if the upward turn of her lips spread a wave of light from mouth to forehead.

„Go ahead and make a joke," she said, „but little cash money as we got it makes a difference. Maybe the difference of whether you have a nickel to waste on a newspaper."

„There's many folks worse off," Jacob said. „Just look up the cove and you'll see the truth of that."

„We can end up like Hartley yet," Edna replied. She looked past Jacob to where the road ended and the skid trail left by the logging company began. „It's probably his mangy hound that's stealing our eggs. That dog's got the look of a egg-sucker. It's always skulking around here."

„You don't know that. I still think a dog would leave some egg on the straw. I've never seen one that didn't."

„What else would take just a few eggs at a time? You said your ownself a fox or weasel would have killed the chickens."

„I'll go look," Jacob said, knowing Edna would fret over the lost eggs all day. He knew if every hen laid three eggs a night for the next month, it wouldn't matter. She'd still perceive a debit that would never be made up. Jacob tried to be generous, remembered that Edna hadn't always been this way. Not until the bank had taken the truck and most of the livestock. They hadn't lost everything the way others had, but they'd lost enough. Edna always seemed fearful when she heard a vehicle coming up the dirt road, as if the banker and sheriff were coming to take the rest.

Edna carried the eggs to the springhouse as Jacob crossed the yard and entered the concrete henhouse. The smell of manure thickened the air. Though the rooster was already outside, the hens clucked dimly in their nesting boxes. Jacob lifted the bantam and set it on the floor. The nesting box's straw had no shell crumbs, no albumen or yellow yolk slobber.

He knew it could be a two-legged varmint, but hard as times were Jacob had never known anyone in Goshen Cove to steal, especially Hartley, the poorest of them all. Besides, who would take only two or three eggs when there were two dozen more to be had. The bantam's eggs at that, which were smaller than the ones under the Rhode Island Reds and leghorns. From the barn, Jacob heard the Guernsey lowing insistently. He knew she already waited beside the milk stool.

As Jacob came out of the henhouse he saw the Hartleys coming down the skid trail. They made the two-mile trek to Boone twice a week, each, even the child, burdened down with galax leaves. Jacob watched as they stepped onto the road, puffs of gray dust rising around their bare feet. Hartley carried four burlap pokes stuffed with galax. His wife carried two and the child one. With their ragged clothes hanging loose on bony frames, they looked like scarecrows en route to another cornfield, their possessions in tow. The hound trailed them, gaunt as the

people it followed. The galax leaves were the closest thing to a crop Hartley could muster, for his land was all rock and slant. You couldn't grow a toenail on Hartley's land, Bascombe Lindsey had once said. That hadn't been a problem as long as the sawmill was running, but when it shut down the Hartleys had only one old swaybacked milk cow to sustain them, that and the galax, which earned a few nickels of barter at Mast's General Store. Jacob knew from the Sunday newspapers he bought that times were rough everywhere. Rich folks in New York had lost all their money and jumped out of buildings. Men rode boxcars town to town begging for work. But it was hard to believe any of them had less than Hartley and his family.

When Hartley saw Jacob he nodded but did not slow his pace. They were neither friends nor enemies, neighbors only in the sense that Jacob and Edna were the closest folks down the cove, though closest meant a half mile. Hartley had come up from Swain County eight years ago to work at the sawmill. The child had been a baby then, the wife seemingly decades younger than the cronish woman who walked beside the daughter. They would have passed without further acknowledgment except Edna came out on the porch.

„That hound of yours," she said to Hartley, „is it a egg-sucker?" Maybe she wasn't trying to be accusatory, but the words sounded so.

Hartley stopped in the road and turned toward the porch. Another man would have set the pokes down, but Hartley did not. He held them as if calculating their heft.

„What's the why of you asking that?" he said. The words were spoken in a tone that was neither angry nor defensive. It struck Jacob that even the man's voice had been worn down to a bare-boned flatness.

„Something's got in our henhouse and stole some," Edna said. „Just the eggs, so it ain't a fox nor weasel."

„So you reckon my dog."

Edna did not speak, and Hartley set the pokes down. He pulled a barlow knife from his tattered overalls. He softly called the hound and it sidled up to him. Hartley got down on one knee, closed his left hand on the scruff of the dog's neck as he settled the blade against its throat. The daughter and wife stood perfectly still, their faces blank as bread dough.

„I don't think it's your dog that's stealing the eggs," Jacob said.

„But you don't know for sure. It could be," Hartley said, the hound raising its head as Hartley's index finger rubbed the base of its skull.

Before Jacob could reply the blade whisked across the hound's windpipe. The dog didn't cry out or snarl. It merely sagged in Hartley's grip. Blood darkened the road.

„You'll know for sure now," Hartley said as he stood up. He lifted the dog by the scruff of the neck, walked over to the other side of the road and laid it in the weeds. „I'll get it on the way back this evening," he said, and picked up the pokes. Hartley began walking and his wife and daughter followed.

„Why'd you have to say something to him," Jacob said when the family had disappeared down the road. He stared at the place in the weeds where flies and yellow jackets began to gather.

„How'd I know he'd do such a thing?" Edna said.

„You know how proud a man he is."

Jacob let those words linger. In January when two feet of snow had shut nearly everyone in, Jacob had gone up the skid trail on horseback, a salted pork shoulder strapped to the saddle. „We could be needing that meat soon enough ourselves," Edna had said, but he'd gone anyway. When Jacob got to the cabin he'd found the family at the plank table eating. The wooden bowls before them held a thick liquid lumped with a few crumbs of fatback. The milk pail hanging over the fire was filled with the same gray-colored gruel. Jacob had set the pork shoulder on the table. The meat had a deep wood-smoke odor, and the woman and child swallowed every few seconds to conceal their salivating. "I ain't got no money to buy it," Hartley said. "So I'd appreciate you taking your meat and leaving." Jacob had left, but after closing the cabin door he'd laid the pork on the front stoop. The next morning Jacob had found the meat on his own doorstep.

Jacob gazed past Hartley's dog, across the road to the acre of corn where he'd work till suppertime. He hadn't hoed a single row yet but already felt tired all the way to his bones.

„I didn't want that dog killed," Edna said. „That wasn't my intending."

„Like it wasn't your intending for Joel and Mary to leave and never darken our door again," Jacob replied. „But it happened, didn't it."

He turned and walked to the woodshed to get his hoe.

The next morning the dog was gone from the roadside and more eggs were missing. It was Saturday, so Jacob rode the horse down to Boone, not just to get his newspaper but to talk to the older farmers who gathered at Mast's General Store. As he rode he remembered the morning six years ago when Joel dropped his bowl of oatmeal on the floor. Careless, but twelve-year-olds did careless things. It was part of being a child. Edna made the boy eat the oatmeal off the floor with his spoon. „Don't do it," Mary had told her younger brother, but he had, whimpering the whole time. Mary, who was sixteen, eloped two weeks later. „I'll never come back, not even to visit," a note left on the kitchen table said. Mary had been true to her word.

As Jacob rode into Boone, he saw the truck the savings and loan had repossessed from him parked by the courthouse. It was a vehicle made for hauling crops to town, bringing back salt blocks and fertilizer and barbed wire, but he'd figured no farmer could have afforded to buy it at auction. Maybe a store owner or county employee, he supposed, someone who still used a billfold instead of a change purse like the one he now took a nickel from after tying his horse to the hitching post. Jacob entered the store. He nodded at the older men, then laid his coin on the counter. Erwin Mast handed him last Sunday's *Raleigh News*.

„Don't reckon there's any letters?" Jacob asked.

„No, nothing this week," Erwin said, though he could have added, „or the last month or last year." Joel was in the navy, stationed somewhere in the Pacific. Mary lived with her husband and her own child on a farm in Haywood County, sixty miles away but it could have been California for all the contact Jacob and Edna had with her.

Jacob lingered by the counter. When the old men paused in their conversation, he told them about the eggs.

„And you're sure it ain't a dog?" Sterling Watts asked.

„Yes. There wasn't a bit of splatter or shell on the straw."

„Rats will eat a egg," Erwin offered from behind the counter.

„There'd still be something left, though," Bascombe Lindsey said.

„They's but one thing it can be," Sterling Watts said with finality.

„What's that," Jacob asked.

„A big yaller rat snake. They'll swallow two or three eggs whole and leave not a dribble of egg."

„I've heard such myself," Bascombe agreed. „Never seen it but heard of it."

„Well, one got in my henhouse," Sterling said. „And it took me near a month to figure out how to catch the damn thing."

„How did you?" Jacob asked.

„Went fishing," Sterling said.

That night Jacob hoed in his cornfield till dark. He ate his supper, then went to the woodshed and found a fishhook. He tied three yards of line to it and went to the henhouse. The bantam had one egg under her. Jacob took the egg and made as small a hole as possible with the barb. He slowly worked the whole hook into the egg, then tied the line to a nail head behind the nesting box. Three yards, Watson had said. That way the snake would swallow the whole egg before a tight line set the hook.

„I ain't about to go out there come morning and deal with no snake," Edna said when he told her what he'd done. She sat in the ladderback rocking chair, her legs draped by a quilt. He'd made the chair for her to sit in when she'd been pregnant with Joel. The wood was cherry, not the most practical for furniture, but he'd wanted it to be pretty.

„I'll deal with it," Jacob said.

For a few moments he watched her sew, the fine blue thread repairing the binding of the Bear's Claw quilt. Edna had worked since dawn, but she couldn't stop even now. Jacob sat down at the kitchen table and spread out the newspaper. On the front page Roosevelt said things were getting better, but the rest of the news argued otherwise. Strikers had been shot at a cotton mill. Men whose crime was hiding in boxcars to search for work had been beaten with clubs by lawmen and hired railroad goons.

„What you claimed this morning about me running off Joel and Mary," Edna said, her needle not pausing as she spoke, „that was a spiteful thing to say. Those kids never went hungry a day in their lives. Their clothes was patched and they had shoes and coats."

He knew he should let it go, but the image of Hartley's knife opening the hound's throat had snared in his mind.

„You could have been easier on them."

„The world's a hard place," Edna replied. „There was need for them to know that."

„They'd have learned soon enough on their own," Jacob said.

„They needed to be prepared, and I prepared them. They ain't in a hobo camp or barefoot like Hartley and his clan. If they can't be grateful for that, there's nothing I can do about it now."

„There's going to be better times," Jacob said. „This depression can't last forever, but the way you treated them will."

„It's lasted nine years," Edna said. „And I see no sign of it letting up. The price we're getting for corn and cabbage is the same. We're still living on half of what we did before."

She turned back to the quilt's worn binding and no other words were spoken between them. After a while Edna put down her sewing and went to bed. Jacob soon followed. Edna tensed as he settled his body beside hers.

„I don't want us to argue," Jacob said, and laid his hand on her shoulder. She flinched from his touch, moved farther away.

„You think I've got no feelings," Edna said, her face turned so she spoke at the wall. „Stingy and mean-hearted. But maybe if I hadn't been we'd not have anything left."

Despite his weariness, Jacob had trouble going to sleep. When he finally did, he dreamed of men hanging onto boxcars while other men beat them with sticks. Those beaten wore muddy brogans and overalls, and he knew they weren't laid-off mill workers or coal miners but farmers like himself.

Jacob woke in the dark. The window was open and before he could fall back asleep he heard something from inside the henhouse. He pulled on his overalls and boots, then went out on the porch and lit a lantern. The sky was thick with stars and a wet moon lightened the ground, but the windowless henhouse was pitch dark. It had crossed his mind that if a yellow rat snake could eat an egg a copperhead or satinback could as well, and he wanted to see where he stepped. He went to the woodshed and got a hoe for the killing.

Jacob crossed the foot log and stepped up to the entrance. He held the lantern out and checked the nesting box. The bantam was in it, but no eggs lay under her. It took him a few moments to find the fishing line, leading toward the back corner like a single strand of a spider's web. He readied the hoe in his hand and took a step inside. He held the lamp before him and saw Hartley's daughter huddled in the corner, the line disappearing into her closed mouth.

She did not try to speak as he kneeled before her. Jacob set the hoe and lantern down and took out his pocketknife, then cut the line inches above where it disappeared between her lips. For a few moments he did nothing else.

„Let me see," he said, and though she did not open her mouth she did not resist as his fingers did so. He found the hook's barb sunk deep in her cheek and was relieved. He'd feared it would be in her tongue or, much worse, deep in her throat.

„We got to get that hook out," Jacob told her, but still she said nothing. Her eyes did not widen in fear and he wondered if maybe she was in shock. The barb was too deep to wiggle free. He'd have to push it the rest of the way through.

„This is going to hurt, but just for a second," he said, and let his index finger and thumb grip the hook where it began to curve. He worked deeper into the skin, his thumb and finger slickened by blood and saliva. The child whimpered. Finally the barb broke through. He wiggled the shank out, the line coming last like thread completing a stitch.

„It's out now," he told her.

For a few moments Jacob did not get up. He thought about what to do next. He could carry her back to Hartley's shack and explain what happened, but he

remembered the dog. He looked at her cheek and there was no tear, only a tiny hole that bled little more than a briar scratch would. He studied the hook for signs of rust. There didn't seem to be, so at least he didn't have to worry about the girl getting lockjaw. But it could still get infected.

„Stay here," Jacob said and went to the woodshed. He found the bottle of turpentine and returned. He took his handkerchief and soaked it, then opened the child's mouth and dabbed the wound, did the same outside to the cheek.

„Okay," Jacob said. He reached out his hands and placed them under her armpits. She was so light it was like lifting a rag doll. The child stood before him now, and for the first time he saw that her right hand held something. He picked up the lantern and saw it was an egg and that it was unbroken. Jacob nodded at the egg.

„You don't ever take them home, do you," he said. „You eat them here, right?"

The child nodded.

„Go ahead and eat it then," Jacob said, „but you can't come back anymore. If you do, your daddy will know about it. You understand?"

„Yes," she whispered, the first word she'd spoken.

„Eat it, then."

The girl raised the egg to her lips. A thin line of blood trickled down her chin as she opened her mouth. The shell crackled as her teeth bit down.

„Go home now," he said when she'd swallowed the last bit of shell. "And don't come back. I'm going to put another hook in them eggs and this time there won't be no line on it. You'll swallow that hook and it'll tear your guts up."

Jacob watched her walk up the skid trail until the dark enveloped her, then sat on the stump that served as a chopping block. He blew out the lantern and waited, though for what he could not say. After a while the moon and stars faded. In the east, darkness lightened to the color of indigo glass. The first outlines of the corn stalks and their leaves were visible now, reaching up from the ground like shabbily dressed arms.

Jacob picked up the lantern and turpentine and went to the shed, then on to the house. Edna was getting dressed as he came into the bedroom. Her back was to him.

„It was a snake," he said.

Edna paused in her dressing and turned. Her hair was down and her face not yet hardened to face the day's demands and he glimpsed the younger, softer woman she'd been twenty years ago when they'd married.

„You kill it?" she asked.

„Yes."

Her lips tightened.

„I hope you didn't just throw it out by the henhouse. I don't want to smell that thing rotting when I'm gathering eggs."

„I threw it across the road."

He got in the bed. Edna's form and warmth lingered on the feather mattress.

„I'll get up in a few minutes," he told her.

Jacob closed his eyes but did not sleep. Instead, he imagined towns where hungry men hung on boxcars looking for work that couldn't be found, shacks where families lived who didn't even have one swaybacked milk cow. He imagined

cities where blood stained the sidewalks beneath buildings tall as ridges. He tried to imagine a place worse than where he was.