

Andy Duncan: The Executioners' Guild

When the stranger walked into Blackburn's that Friday morning, there were no other customers in the store, unless you counted Stumpy Turlis, which Mrs. Blackburn, a woman of standards, certainly did *not*. The stranger's entrance set the cowbell above the door to jangling, but Mrs. Blackburn did not look up. She figured the bell was just the youngest Cooper child skipping, or, more accurately, stomping outside with her fistful of already-sodden licorice. The child's penny, suspiciously shiny, still lay on the counter where she had, on tiptoe, placed it. Before putting it in the register, Mrs. Blackburn would give it a chance to dry. In the meantime, she had returned to the task at hand, the slicing of a fresh wheel of cheese, always a delicate operation, and one that couldn't wait until noontime when the sandwich crowd came in, jamming up to the counter and talking at once and wanting everything right *then* and not even having the decency to wash the horse sweat and axle grease and chicken feed off their hands before they unwrapped the wax paper and bit into the cheese-and-baloney sandwiches that would not get made, Mrs. Blackburn felt, if she had to waste her whole morning waiting hand and foot on every white-trash ragamuffin in town. Do I look like some old nigger mammy? she sometimes asked Mr. Blackburn in the quiet of the evening, I am not being hateful but I genuinely want to know, because if that is what I *am*, the lowliest servant of every ditch-born lint-picker in the county, I suppose I should claim my rightful place, and collect my meager belongings, and leave this bed that my very presence defiles, and sleep in the stable with the *other* dumb beasts of God's dominion, and having said this, Mrs. Blackburn would dab her eyes with the corner of an apron, and enjoy what, from Mr. Blackburn, passed for reassurance. All that clomp, clomp, clomp, Mrs. Blackburn thought (biting her lip as the wax skin welled up on either side of her sharpest knife), you'd think the child was trying to dig postholes in the floor, and it *just* now polished to a fare-thee-well, and that only after nagging at Mr. Blackburn for a solid month—and thus preoccupied, she allowed Stumpy Turlis to be the first person in Andalusia, Mississippi, actually to speak to the stranger, a humiliation that would gall her to her grave.

"Morning," said Stumpy Turlis.

"Good morning," said the stranger, and Mrs. Blackburn looked up, startled.

"I'm not in your way, am I?" asked Stumpy Turlis.

"Not at all."

"Cause if I *am*, I'll move. I don't want to be no trouble. I can find me some other place to lie."

"You're fine. No trouble at all. Please stay where you are."

Stumpy Turlis, as usual, was lying full-length on the hardware counter, hat on his chest, arms outflung and hanging down on either side. His right hand held a cigarette; his left hand, though it was behind the counter and temporarily out of sight, certainly held a Coca-Cola in some stage of emptiness. On the crown of his hat was a crumpled paper packet commemorating the headache powder he had taken when he came in.

Standing over Stumpy, his back to the grocery counter and to Mrs. Blackburn, was a tall, white-haired, broad-shouldered man in a derby hat, striped gray trousers, and a black knee-length coat. In his right hand was a gray suitcase. Some drummer with a line of brushes, Mrs. Blackburn decided, or liniment, or iron pills. Well, let him talk to that old fool Turlis, and waste *his* time for a change. I must be deaf sure enough, Mrs. Blackburn thought, as she added a fresh cheese slice to the growing pile on the cutting board, he's a big man and I didn't even hear him walking. That a *winter* coat? When she'd swept the porch at nine o'clock, the Royal Crown thermometer had already said eighty-six degrees.

"I'm just lying here waiting on my Goody's to kick in," said Stumpy Turlis. "You get headaches much, mister?"

"I can't say that I do."

"Be glad, then. I get 'em something awful. Last for a week. You know why?"

"No, I don't."

"Septum. That's what they told me down in Meridian, I got a septum, a deviated nasal septum. You know what that is?"

