

REDFISH, POSSUMS, AND THE NEW SOUTH

*by Ron Rash*

I'm sitting in Greene's café drinking coffee and reading the want ads, just like I've been doing for the last few months, ever since Darlene quit me and I quit my supervisor's job at Hamrick Cotton Mill. There isn't much out there as far as job opportunities, especially for a guy who has made a solemn vow that he won't ever wear a necktie or dress shirt the rest of his life or even death, if they follow the instructions in his will. I'm looking for a job working on a farm, but there's nothing like that. All the blue-collar jobs are factory or construction. Nobody seems to be farming in the New South. Every time I turn around there's a mall where there used to be a cotton field, a factory where there'd been a pasture.

Gerald Crawly comes in and sits down on the stool beside me. He must smell my desperation, because the first thing he does is fold up my paper.

"You don't need to look at them want ads no more, buddy. I got a business deal gonna make us both rich."

*"Yeah," I say, but at least a catfish doesn't have a long, pink tail, like a rat. People aren't gonna eat something with a rat's tail on it, Gerald."*

Now six months ago I'd have just got up off my stool and told Gerald to take a hike, preferably to another state, but these are desperate times. I've been sleeping in the camper on the back of my pickup and bathing down at Broad River. It's primitive, the way I am living. The way things are going, I'll be Cliffside's first street person, one of those guys that hasn't had his beard trimmed or hair cut in about four years, like the guys you hear about in New York City who go around grabbing their crotches and mumbling to themselves.

I've known Gerald long enough to know he is, as my granddaddy, a carpenter, used to say, half bubble off plumb. But like I said, things are getting tight, so I wave at Marvin Greene to bring me a refill.

"So how are we gonna get rich Gerald?" I say.

"Possum farm," he says, talking low, so no one else can hear him.

"What?" I say, already wishing I'd asked Marvin for my check instead of a refill.

"A possum farm, ranch, whatever you want to call it. A place to raise them."

"For what?" I say.

"To eat, of course," Gerald says.

I almost choke on my coffee. I put the cup down and wave at Marvin again. "Check," I tell him when I get his attention.

"Now just wait a minute," Gerald says. "You got to keep a open mind, like me."

"That's exactly your problem," I say. "Your mind is so open that peanut you call a brain had done fallen out."

"Well, you could at least listen to my idea." He points to my paper. "Don't look like you're exactly coming up with many brilliant ideas of your own."



Marvin brings me the check but I don't get up because Gerald's right. I haven't come up with anything on my own. It's already August, and that camper, and that river, are only gonna get colder come fall.

"Alright, Gerald," I say. "You got the time it takes me to drink this half cup of coffee to convince me."

"O.K.," he says. "First thing. You remember how during the depression a lot of people ate possum. My grandparents did, bet yours did too."

I nod. My grandparents had eaten possum, called them Hoover hogs.

"Yeah," I say, "but I never heard anybody talk about how good they were, and you may have noticed quick as people could find anything else to eat, they did."

"True," says Gerald, "but it proves one thing. It is physically possible to eat a possum."

"So?" I say, taking a big gulp of coffee, trying to finish it off.

"Don't you see?" says Gerald. He's starting to get excited now. "All we got to do is start a trend. Then we got it licked."

"What kind of trend?" I say. "It's gonna take more than a trend to get people around here to eat possum. Too many people around here already know what a possum tastes like, or their parents or grandparents can tell them. Another thing, Gerald. People around here know what possums eat."

Gerald looks at me and smiles. "Who's talking about selling them around here? I'm talking about New York. Them people up there will eat *anything* if it's a trend. They'd eat baked cow shit if it were a trend."

Gerald reaches for his billfold. He takes out an article torn from a newspaper. He reads it aloud. "The two fish dishes most in demand this season are blackened redfish and catfish." Gerald looks at the word for a few seconds and then gives up. "Catfish something." He starts reading again. "According to the chefs of the most famous restaurants in New York City."

Gerald hands me the clipping.

"Now I know you know what a catfish is," Gerald says. "But you probably don't know what a redfish is, right?"

I nod.

"I do," he says. "When I was in the army I was stationed in Louisiana. Sometimes I'd go fishing with them cajuns. Everytime they'd catch one of them redfish they'd throw it back on the water or on the bank. Nobody ever took one home. They wouldn't let their cats eat them. A redfish ain't nothing but a cajun carp."

Gerald pauses, lets me think about that for a minute.

"You go up to New York City today and order you a blackened redfish, you better get ten Abe Lincolns out of your billfold, cause that's what it's gonna cost you. I done researched it."

"Yeah," I say. "But a possum. They're so ugly. People ain't gonna eat something that ugly."

"Ugly," says Gerald. "You don't think a catfish is ugly? Or a mud turtle? They eat them too, you know."

"Yeah," I say, but at least a catfish doesn't have a long, pink tail, like a rat. People aren't gonna eat something with a rat's tail on it, Gerald."

“Well,” says Gerald. “You might be right about that. But I’ve been studying on it. We can cut their tails off. Maybe if we keep cutting their tails off, we can breed it out of them.”

I look at Gerald, his Cro-Magnon jaw and sloped forehead, and I’m thinking evolution is beyond Gerald in a number of ways, but the thing is, what he’s saying, if you don’t think about it too long, makes sense in a crazy sort of way.

“How much money we talking about, Gerald,” I say, taking a sip of coffee.

“Two thousand dollars each,” he says. “Profits divided sixty-forty my way, because it’s my idea.”

“What’s the money for?” I ask.

“DeWayne Caldwell’s chicken farm. He’ll sell us his four chicken houses and the acre of land under them for four thousand.”

“What about the possums, and feeding them?”

“That’s the beauty of the thing,” says Gerald. “Like you said, a possum will eat anything.” He nods his head toward Marvin Greene. “I done talked to Marvin. We can get all the leftovers and table scraps we want for free. All we got to do is haul them off.”

“Yeah, but first we need some possums,” I say.

“They’re all over the place,” Gerald says. “There ain’t a day passes you don’t see a possum around here. All we got to do is catch us a half dozen males, half dozen females. Boy, you think rabbits breed fast. You ain’t seen nothing.”

I take my last sip of coffee, get up to pay my bill.

“I’ll have to think about it, Gerald. Think about it long and hard.”

“Well,” says Gerald, “don’t think about it too long, because Larry Rudisell’s already shown me two thousand dollars, cash money. But I’d rather do business with someone I can trust, which is why I’m giving you the first shot.” Gerald pauses, looks over at the booth closest to us to make sure they’re not listening. “But I can’t wait too long. It’s too good an idea for nobody else not to think of.”

Larry Rudisell being interested gives me pause. Larry’s crooked as a mountain road, but he’s smart, businesswise. He’s not gonna put his money into something unless he’s pretty sure it’s a good investment.

I turn around at the door. “I’ll let you know something by tomorrow,” I say.

I drive on down to Broad River, get my soup out of the camper and wade into the river. I’m buck naked when a bunch of teenagers come floating around the bend on innertubes. They’re laughing and pointing at me as I scramble back up on the bank and hide behind some willow oaks. My life can’t go on like this.

I’ve got an insurance policy I can cash in for twenty-five hundred dollars. I ain’t got a wife. My daddy and mamma are dead. My sperm is dead too, at least that’s what the doctors told me and Darlene. So it’s not like I’ve got anyone else to think about. Besides, another six months and I’ll have spent it anyway on staying alive. As soon as I get dressed, I head for the bank in Shelby. Then I drive over to Gerald’s house. Gerald and DeWayne Caldwell sign the papers right after supper, and that night we’re out on the blacktop cruising for possums. Gerald’s right about there being plenty of possums around. The trouble is finding one alive. We count twenty-two, some that are probably still warm and some that are nothing more than a handful of hair and crushed bones.

It’s past midnight when we crest a hill near Sandy Run Creek and see one alive, wad-



dling down that white line in the middle of the road like a drunk failing a sobriety test. We're coming right at it but it doesn't even flinch, just stays right there in the middle of the road, like there's nothing in the world that it would enjoy more than having two thousand pounds of steel flatten it to the thickness of a Greene's Café pancake. I'm thinking there can't be anything stupider than a possum. Then I think about what time it is and what I'm doing and I reconsider.

Gerald swerves and slams on the brakes, pulls the car off on the shoulder of the road. He gets a burlap sack and a pair of leather gloves out of the backseat. The possum's still out in the middle of the road. We run up and hem it in between us, Gerald in front and me in the back.

"Grab him by the tail," Gerald shouts. "I'll hold the sack."

I bend down and the possum wheels around and hisses at me, bares a couple of yellow teeth that could do serious damage. I notice Gerald has put the gloves on.

"You pick up that son-of-a-bitch," I say. "I ain't letting that thing bite one of my fingers off. I'll hold the sack."

Gerald hands me the sack.

"Look," he says. "This is all you got to do."

He claps his hands together, hard. The possum flips over on its back. Its eyes are closed and its tongue is hanging out.

"That does make it easier, Gerald," I say. "But I'm still holding the sack."

The next morning I drive over to DeWayne Caldwell's place, our place now. Gerald's already there. He's hanging up a freshly painted sign that says "Possums for Sale: Wholesale or Retail." On the second line, it says "The Cuisine of the Rich and Famous."

"You left an 'i' out of *cuisine*," I say.

Gerald squints his eyes and looks at the sign.

"I can fix that later," he says. "Let me show you something."

Gerald takes me inside the chicken house closest to the road. Fresh straw covers the concrete floor. A pail of water is in one corner. The trough near the far wall is filled with scraps from Greene's café. The possum is up on a beam about four feet above, a band-aid wrapped around the nub where its tail used to be. The possum doesn't look like it's planning on coming down anytime soon.

"It's just going to take him a little time to get used to his new home," Gerald says. "Get a couple more possums in here and he'll be fine."

Gerald looks around. It's obvious he's pleased.

"I give him a name," he says, looking up at the possum. "The Opossum Paul."

"What" I say.

"You know, like the disciple," he says.

Gerald knows as much about the Bible as he does evolution, but I don't even try to explain.

"The way I see it," Gerald says. "These possums are like the loaves of bread Jesus and his disciples fed the multitudes with. They just had a few at first, but then the bread kept multiplying, just like our possums are going to do."

"Does this mean you're going to name one Jesus too?" I say.

"I ain't sacrilegious," Gerald says, and walks off in a huff.

By the end of the weekend, we have Matthew, Mark, Luke, and Peter as well as Paul,



but instead of the disciples it's more like that old singing group Peter, Paul, and Mary, because one of them has birthed a litter of eight.

In two months we have two chicken houses filled with possums. They're breeding like crazy, and I'm thinking if possums ever evolved into being smart enough to stay out of road they might take over the world.

By this time I've moved into the back chicken house, the smallest one. Fall's here and it's starting to get a little chilly at night. There's a portable heater in every henhouse, and while the possums have enough hair to stay warm I don't so I crank the heater up every night. There's a spigot with hot and cold running water, so I've even rigged me a shower of sorts. All of my stuff that was in the storage shed is here too. The chicken house is beginning to feel like home.

Although I'd been thinking about it for a while, it was Gerald who brought up my living out here. We'd been losing some of the smaller possums to weasels and black snakes, and Gerald was getting tired of driving out every night to make sure they were all O.K., so it made sense for me to be out here so that whenever there was a commotion I could chase off whatever was after them.

About this time I see Darlene for the first time in three months. Besides carrying off the scraps, I've been spending a few hours every afternoon at Greene's Café washing dishes, getting a free lunch and supper plus enough money to sustain me until me and Gerald strike it rich. She comes strutting in to pucker up a takeout order. Darlene still looks fine with her long black hair and jeans so tight you'd think they'd been tattooed to her.

She sees me looking at her from the kitchen and of course has to start bad-mouthing me.

"I've heard what you and Gerald Crawly are doing with those possums over at De-Wayne Caldwell's old place, and I want you to know that I think it's disgusting you're locking those poor creatures up and then cutting their tails off. I heard you all are trying to get people to start eating them." Darlene pauses to catch her breath and shake her head. "I didn't think even you would sink this low. Stanley's head of the Western North Carolina Veterinary Association, and he's already reported you and Gerald."

Stanley's her husband. He and Darlene are living in the home I worked ten years to help pay for, while I'm living in a chicken house.

"We're doing those possums a favor," I say, taking off my apron, ready to get out of here. "Gerald and me are getting them off the roads, protecting them. They'll live a lot longer inside our possum hotels than they will outside. They'll eat better too. And after they've lived a long and happy life, we may kill them, but at least their death will have more benefit than being squashed out on some two-lane."

Darlene gives me a look as withering as the July sun.

"Besides," I say. "Since when have you become so enamored with possums? Every time one got in our garbage, you wanted me to go out there and blast it to bits with my shotgun."

"Stanley's enlightened me," she says.

"Yeah, right," I say. "You tell Stanley he's killed more animals on his operating table than Gerald and me will kill if we stay in business a hundred years."

I throw the apron on the counter and walk out the back door of the café house before she can reply. I'm not married to Darlene anymore so I don't have to talk or listen to her.



The constitution protects me from cruel and unusual punishment.

By late November we have all three chicken houses filled to the max. It's clear we've got to start selling or start letting some go.

"Alright," says Gerald on Thanksgiving eve. "The hard part's over. Now all we got to do is start the trend."

"How we gonna do that?" I ask, already knowing whatever he's about to say is going to be as harebrained as the rest of this scheme.

"Don't you worry about that," says Gerald. "By the way, I want you to eat Thanksgiving lunch with me tomorrow."

"At your mother's?" I say. I haven't had turkey and dressing in a year, or much of anything homecooked, so I'm hoping hard.

"Naw," says Gerald, "at Greene's Café."

"But he's closed tomorrow."

"Not for us," says Gerald. "You just be there at twelve tomorrow and bring an appetite. I'm buying."

Gerald takes his leather gloves out of his back pocket. "By the way, I'm going to take Paul with me tonight. He's been here the longest and could use a change of scenery. I'm gonna let him run loose in my basement, have some time to himself."

The next day right at noon I walk into Greene's café. Gerald is already there and so is Frank Moore, from *The Cleveland County Messenger*.

Gerald walks over and slaps me on the back.

"Hungry?" he asks, wearing a smile a little too wide to make me comfortable.

"For sure," I say. "I didn't eat any breakfast, just a glass of orange juice."

"Good, good," says Gerald. "Just have a seat at our booth. Lunch is on its way."

"What's Frank Moore doing here?"

"Reporting," Gerald says a little too fast. "Just go have you a seat."

Marvin Greene is back at the grill. I can't see what he's cooking but I sure as hell can smell it, and it ain't turkey. I'm not even sure it's edible. Marvin's shaking salt, pepper, oregano, Texas Pete, and anything else he can find on the shelf above him onto what he's cooking, but it's not doing any good as far as I can tell. Then I realize.

"Oh, no," I say, getting up. "You can forget it, Gerald."

I'm halfway out the door before he catches me. Gerald pulls me back inside, talking fast and soft because Frank Moore is looking our way.

"You got to," he whispers. "Somebody's got to go first, and it it's got to be us."

"No way, Jose." I turn back to the door.

"This is it," he says. "I called up Frank Moore so he'd write it up. We back down now and we'll never sell a possum. Frank will make a laughingstock out of both of us."

Gerald looks me in the eyes. "But if we eat it, it's the beginning of a trend. This is just how that redfish craze started, one dinky restaurant down in New Orleans started serving it. One newspaper article later they were on their way. Next stop, the Big Apple."

I look back into Gerald's eyes, and I know he is completely crazy, a lunatic, but I also know that only a lunatic would have listened to him in the first place. Crazy or not, Gerald and his plan are my last hope.

"Besides," says Gerald, "I done paid Marvin twenty-five dollars to open up and cook it for us, and that don't even include the new skillet I have to buy him when he gets

through.”

“O.K. Gerald,” I say. “O.K.”

Marvin brings us our tea and silverware. Then he brings our plates which have a roll, sweet potato, and grey piece of meat Gerald is calling possum steak.

“Do you want to bless it?” Gerald says, “or me?”

“I think both of us better,” I say.

Frank Moore comes over to our booth with his camera.

“Bon appétit,” Frank says as Gerald and I lift a forkful of the grey meat, put it in our mouth, and slowly start chewing.

Monday afternoon Gerald’s car screeches to a stop outside the possum hotel closest to the road. I’m inside pouring fresh water in the pails when Gerald rushes in and thrusts a newspaper in my face.

“That man calls himself a journalist?” screams Gerald, his face red as a beet. “Just look at this.”

On the front page is a picture of Gerald and me looking a little grim and peaked. Underneath the picture the headline reads “Local Men Eat Possum, And Live.”

“You call that objectivity?” Gerald says. He snatches the paper from me and begins reading. “The smell of rancid flesh per, per...”

“Permeated,” I say.

“Permeated Greene’s Café Thanksgiving day.”

Gerald looks at me. “Rancid. How does he know it’s rancid? He wouldn’t even taste it.”

Gerald throws the paper down, stomps on it while possums scramble into the corners.

“He’s ruined us,” Gerald moans. “That four-eyed son-of-a-bitch has done gone and ruined us.”

Gerald kind of half kneels, half collapses onto the floor.

“I spent all morning calling restaurants in New York, just begging them to try our possums. I offered them free of charge. I even offered to pay the shipping. They hung up on me, every one of them.”

Gerald stops talking. A car has pulled up outside. A man in a dark business suit gets out.

“Oh no,” whines Gerald, assuming a fetal position. “This can’t be nothing but more trouble.”

The man comes inside, doesn’t even look surprised that Gerald is wallowing around like a rabid animal. As a matter of fact he acts like it’s about what he expected.

“I assume you two gentleman are the owners of this establishment,” he says.

We nod.

“My name is Pinkney Boatwright, and I am from the Western North Carolina Alliance to Prevent the Imprisonment of Wild Animals.”

“Now look here,” says Gerald, getting up off the concrete floor. “We got all the required licenses. You go check at the courthouse in Shelby if you don’t believe me.”

“At the request of Dr. Stanley Burns, I have checked,” says Pinkney Boatwright. “Unfortunately, you are correct.”

“So why are you here?” says Gerald, starting to bristle up. “What business you got with us?”

“We, my organization, want to make a deal with you,” Pinkney Boatwright says as a possum comes over and sniffs his shoe, decides it’s not edible and moves on. “We don’t believe this opossum cuisine fad you’re trying to start will catch on, but we don’t feel we can take

a chance.”

Pinkney Boatwright clears his throat, starts talking to us like he’s giving us a lecture. “As I’m sure you are not aware, the sudden popularity of the redfish led to overharvesting and an ecological nightmare in Louisiana. If the opossum were suddenly to be overharvested as the redfish was, the ecological balance could be seriously disturbed.”

“So?” says Gerald,

“So,” says Pinkney Boatwright. “Dr. Burns and his wife assured me that appealing to you to release the opossums as a matter of propriety and conscience would be useless, so our organization is willing to offer you eight thousand dollars if you will release the opossums and sign a statement that you will not raise opossums or any other undomesticated animals.”

“Eight thousand dollars,” Gerald shouts. “Man, that doesn’t even begin to cover our costs, the blood and sweat we’ve poured into this business. The chicken houses and land are worth that alone.”

“I’ve researched the deed,” Pinkney Boatwright says. “You paid four thousand dollars for the land and these chicken houses. Eight thousand dollars is extremely fair, especially considering we do not want either the chicken houses or the land. We will also coordinate the release of the opossums so that they do not overpopulate one region of the county.”

“Fair,” screams Gerald. “It’s twelve thousand dollars or nothing.”

“I suppose then there is no need to further pursue this matter,” says Pinkney Boatwright.

I grab Gerald and push him outside, out of hearing range.

“Listen,” I say. “If you don’t tell that man that we’re taking his deal, I’m going to kill you and feed you to the possums.” I shake him hard. “You understand, Gerald?”

Gerald nods.

“O.K.,” I say. “Let’s get in there and take that man’s money before he realizes what a mistake he’s making.”

I take my forty percent share and buy out Gerald’s part of the farm, buy me some chickens from DeWayne Caldwell’s son, and refurbish my chicken house, make it into a real home, with a kitchen and a bathroom and even a screened-in porch. It’s April now and I’m selling enough eggs that I no longer have to wash dishes at Greene’s café. Every evening after I check on the chickens, I put a Patsy Cline album on the stereo and a beer in my hand. Then I sit on the front porch as me and the chickens start to settle down for the night.