

Claiborneville, Yazoo County 31180

Dawn Munro

Yazoo Mississippi in the 1930's was the worst place to be. And that's exactly where I was stuck. Being a black man in the south was a struggle but add on the lack of work and nonexistent pay and you got the dreary existence that was my life. I couldn't leave because there was nowhere to go and no money to go nowhere.

The Great Depression was named fittingly. It was awful to watch my town; my people go through the heart ache. I've lived in Yazoo County since I was a boy. My Daddy was a barber, and a damn good one, and my Momma did the washing for the townfolk. I loved this town, never wanted to leave, not until the depression came at least.

I was a barber just like Daddy but nobody could afford a haircut when the depression rolled into town so I turned to day labor. Which was few and far between but I had put food on the table for me and my wife.

Edith Mulligan, my wife, was the most gorgeous woman in the world. She was the reason I stayed in Yazoo. (Well her and my lack of money.) She was my world and I wanted to give her everything she'd ever wanted..... and I couldn't. That damn depression. Took everything good out of life. No matter how happy you were it always lingered in the back of your head.

If I could have I would have punch that depression straight in its mouth. Hit him till he bled. He took everything from me. My town. My people. My job. My money.

My wife.

Every day in Claiborneville, Yazoo was the same. I would wake up with the sun and head down to town. The day laborers would mill around and look for work and the earlier you were the more likely you were to get some. On a good day, you would get a simple job helping someone out. They would give you a small sum or maybe even feed you lunch. After the job was over or after you got tired of waiting around you would head back home.

One particularly busy day, and by busy, I mean I got one job that lasted past 1 o'clock, I started to head home earlier than usual. As I walked down my street, a small sum of change jingling in my pocket, I noticed that all the windows on the house were closed. In the middle of summer in Mississippi you had leave your windows open or your house would turn into a furnace.

I walked into the house, which was hot as hell, and began calling out for Edith and opening the windows. Once I was done I realized that Edith was in the house so I headed out back and checked the garden. Edith loved her garden, it was her favorite place in Claiborneville. She would spend hours out there and with the lack of work that's about all she did but that day she wasn't there. I sat around for a while assuming she went to talk to one of the neighbors. I walked around the garden. It was perfect, prim and proper- just like her.

Finally, I decided that the house had cooled off enough and went back in. I sat down in the living room on our dusty old couch and stared out the windows waiting for Edith. The Mississippi sunshine was blaring through the open windows and reflecting off of something on the mantle. Curious, I got up a saw Edith's ring, a simply band of metal with a small diamond. She always took it off when she was gardening, said she didn't want to lose it. She always left it on the mantle but today was different. The ring was shining, in the sunlight it was almost blinding. It was freshly polished and there was a small folded paper under it.

I slowly unfolded the paper and suddenly I realized exactly why the Great Depression was called that. I read that note over and over and over. And finally, when I realized that the words on the page weren't gonna change no matter how much I looked at them, I put it down.

I stared at her ring, remembering the day I put it on her. I worked so hard for that ring. I saved all my tips for a full year to buy that ring. I wanted to get her something better but I just couldn't. That's probably why she left. After what felt like hours I picked up my heavy body and headed into the back yard and grabbed 2 old logs, all that was left of the fire wood from winter.

As I went back in I walked straight over Edith's flowers instead of her nicely trimmed path. I placed the logs into the fireplace and, like a crazy person, lit a fire in the middle of summer in Mississippi. I sat right in front of it, sweat dripping down my face, and placed the paper in the fire. I watched it blacken and change and then completely disappear, just like she had.

Life after this night only got drearier and drearier. Slowly everyone began to leave Claiborneville. The group of day labors got smaller and smaller. Families left. My best friends left. Until I was the only one left. My town, my home, became nothing more than a ghost town.

When the last family left, when all the houses were cleared out, when all the businesses were shut, that is when I lost it.

I kept thinking of that letter, burnt and shriveled away. I wanted nothing to do with this town. I wanted to burn every memory from this town and that's exactly my plan.

Tonight, exactly 3 years since the depression started, 6 months from when my wife left and a month since the last person in town left, I'm gonna burn this hellscape to the ground. I'm gonna tack this letter to the welcome sign for anyone to read.

So, if you find this letter I hope you learn about the great town that Claiborneville used to be and the broken man that turned it to ash.

-Mulligan