

Silver Arts – Literary Arts Submission

The Meanest Man in the County

Short Story (Fiction)

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The Meanest Man in the County

Ainsley Blackwood stood precariously on the edge of the makeshift dock, shot gun in one hand and bamboo fishing rod in the other. An acid-sucking snarl spread across his face. Flinging the rod against the dock, he pointed the gun at a spot well above the top of an enormous stand of honeysuckle that seemed to be giggling uncontrollably.

"Get the hell off my land!" he bellowed.

Clear, grey eyes, a gift from his momma, scanned the sandy shoreline of the expansive pond that lay at the lower half of the parcel of ground he now called home. For years, the pond had been waging a futile battle with algae that now encroached over at least a third of its surface; but the water was deep and clear enough to support a substantial population of fish.

Fifteen acres was all that was left of the once rich and well-tended holdings that his grandfather purchased with pain and sweat almost a century before. He'd grown tomatoes, corn, and sweet potatoes, the best in Johnston County, North Carolina to hear tell of it. Up near the house, he'd kept a small orchard yielding fresh fruit in the warmer months and a surplus plentiful enough for winter preserving. He'd managed his farm with pride and made a good living. Carter Blackwood, Ainsley's father, inherited it – 400 acres, all of a piece.

Small farmers always need up-front money to survive until they bring in the crop. Carter Blackwood was no exception. Applying to private lenders offered no solution, as it was clear to anyone with eyes and a grain of sense that they subscribed to the belief that farmers such as he, Black and strapped for cash, were not creditworthy. Suggestions put forward by the larger banks were patronizing and useless. They encouraged him, as a smallholder, to apply to the government for funds, but Federal loans and grants, though much talked about, never seemed to be available, the requirements for acceptance being just out of his reach.

With the passage of years, what little fight there was left in Carter Blackwood diminished to nothing. Between an increasing burden of debt and the tax man, it was no surprise to anyone when Ainsley's father lost it all, save this tiny cover where he'd lived out his remaining years.

The pure truth of it was Carter never had a heart for farming. While Ainsley's momma didn't chide her husband about it, she had no delusions. She knew life would be difficult for her son so, from the time that he was able to read, she pushed him to learn all he could. "Get your education, child." she'd preach. "Once you got it, there ain't nobody can take it away." She was the light in Ainsley's life, but in August of his thirteenth year, that light went out, and Carter Blackwood quit trying.

Ainsley did not.

At seventeen, Ainsley received a rare scholarship to NC State University. In late August, nearly four years to the day of his mother's passing, he packed his few belongings, boarded a bus for Raleigh, and moved into a claustrophobic room at the very top of one of the oldest dormitories on campus. There he stayed, to do his momma proud, until he graduated with a Master's degree in English and a freshly minted license to teach in the state of North Carolina.

For thirty-five years he'd done just that, taught English to belligerent Wake County high school students who didn't give a damn and took his courses only because WPSS required them. He was closing in on sixty, and he was tired.

Then his father died and left the remnant of the farm to him, along with four years of unpaid property taxes. That, in itself, was mighty unusual, since he'd always sent the old man money to pay those taxes and to keep the place up. But he hadn't been home in over forty years, and figured he had no right to question what Carter decided to do with money that was freely given to him. Somehow though, it still rankled. So, he threw out everything that spoke of his father, cleared up the back taxes, and moved in. Just as if he'd never left

In the two years since he'd come back, he hadn't made a single friend. And that was just fine with him.

"I said git!"

BLAM!

The retort from the shotgun ripped through the otherwise quiet countryside, and a handful of squealing youngsters made for the hole in the undergrowth that led to the river bordering the Blackwood property. Thelma Miles, on the other hand, stood firm. Flat-footed, arms akimbo, she called out defiantly, "Ainsley Blackwood, my momma said you 'bout to be the meanest man that ever lived in this county. I think you the meanest man that ever lived on this earth!"

"Your momma's going to be minus one smart-mouthed daughter if you don't get moving."

Ainsley leveled the shotgun as if he meant business. He'd barely enough time to draw a breath before Thelma shot through the rabbit hole as if she was on fire and the only water in the county was on the other side.

The man looked around and sniffed. It was a pretty spot, and it was *his* spot. No bunch of river rats was going to come up into it and spoil his comfort. He pulled down the brim of the faded Dickey's cap that he'd bought at the Walmart on a trip down to Siler City.

"Why the hell do they call it a city?" he'd wondered aloud. "It isn't even much of a town."

Pulling an old paisley handkerchief from his tackle box, Ainsley mopped his brow. That's when he caught it, just peripherally, but it was there – a slight movement in the line of stunted trees bordering the edge of the pond. It had neither the natural flow of the wind, nor the stealth and grace of a foraging doe. Again, the leaves quivered.

"Come out of there, swamp rat!" the man spat.

Nothing.

"I said come out! Law says I can shoot anyone trespassing on my land."

"I'm no rat." A proud, but disembodied voice replied.

"Rat or not, come out!"

A boy emerged from beneath the brush; thin, but strong, hair neatly combed, ill-clad, but not ragged. His clothes were clean. Every button was on his shirt, though some were mismatched, and the places in his jeans that had been torn were carefully mended.

"Anyone that trespasses on my land is anything I say they are."

"I'm no rat." The boy repeated. "You can't call me that. I got a name."

"Oh, so you have a name. I'm sure that it will be useful in court when you and your friends are brought up on charges."

"They ain't no friends of mine."

Ainsley regarded the boy skeptically. Deep, intelligent eyes almost matching the dark copper of his skin, stared back, then darted away.

"*They are not my friends.*" The teacher said, emphasizing the corrections. "Speak English properly or not at all. How old are you boy?"

"Ten."

"All of that, huh?" Ainsley locked the safety on the shotgun and laid it gently onto the dock. "You said you have a name. What is it?"

"J."

"That's J-A-Y?"

"Naw, just J."

"That is not a name, that's a letter. How do you expect anyone to respect your name if *you* don't?"

The boy looked slightly perplexed. Lowering his head, he said haltingly, "Jeremy... Jeremy Llewellyn Woodall."

"That's a good name... a strong name. Hold your head up when you say it. There's been Woodalls in these parts for generations. You ought to be proud of that. So, you're Miss Amy's grandson, Willa Woodall's boy?"

"Yeah, that's me."

"Alright, Mr. Woodall, you say that the others are not your friends. Then why were you here with them?"

"Wasn't. I was here first... fishing. When I saw 'em coming, I lit for the woods."

"Why did you feel the need to hide?"

"No reason. I just lit out, okay?"

"Okay. But there is always a reason behind our actions, Mr. Woodall."

Ainsley knew all too well why the boy felt it necessary to hide. Looking at Jeremy brought back thoughts of his own childhood, a childhood of extremes. Too cold, too hot, too hungry, too poor to be noticed by anyone unless it was to be mocked or ridiculed. To be viewed as the one that didn't matter because he surely wouldn't amount to much in the first place. After all, he was Carter Blackwood's son and anything Carter Blackwood put his hand to was of no consequence. He pulled himself back from the soreness of memories that even after forty years were still too raw.

"You said that you were fishing. Where's your pole?"

"I got a line and some hooks."

Jeremy dug into his jeans and extended his hand to show Ainsley a tangle of black fishing line, then slipped the precious ball of string back into the safety of his pocket.

"Have any luck – with the fish, I mean?" Ainsley asked.

"Some. I got three good sized bream and a large-mouth before Thelma and the rest of 'em showed up. Got 'em in a bucket of water over there near the honey bush." The boy shot a glance toward the left.

"That's a jasmine there," corrected Ainsley, "honeysuckle is a little different. Humph. Come over here son." It was a request rather than a command. The boy sensed it and complied. He stood looking up at the older man, waiting.

"You know," Ainsley continued, "I left Johnston County as soon as I was able, but while my father was still here, I called him once a week, regular. Just to keep up. Never said much, but I knew he was alive. Hadn't been back here in a while, but it felt kind of strange to lose him. Now, I didn't know your daddy that much, but I was sorry when I heard about him last year."

"It's okay," the boy replied. "He got shot. Ma wants me and Desiree to believe he got robbed in the street, but Momma Amy said that he was shackled up with some woman in Raleigh and got caught short. Momma Amy don't believe in lying, even if it's about her own."

"Well, you need to listen to your grandmother," the older man said, stifling a smile. "She has the right way of thinking."

"I guess."

"Desiree, that's your younger sister, I take it. How old is she?"

"Six and a half."

"She goes to school?"

"Yeah. First grade."

"That's good." Ainsley took a breath, while the boy waited. "Well, you take care of her." he continued. "Make sure she knows that she's got value. She'll probably buck up against you now and then, but she'll thank you for the lesson one day."

The air after a storm makes room for the unseen, and a tenuous connection began to take form between two men. One grown from the passage of years, the other from the intrusion of circumstance.

Ainsley coughed. "Didn't have the kind of luck that you wanted with your fish today, huh? Got to keep the bream numbers down, you know, or you'll wind up losing all of your bass. Might be good to have somebody else to help with that. Coming back tomorrow?"

"You said trespassers ain't welcome here."

"That's right, they *aren't*, but if a body has permission, then it's not called trespassing. It's called visiting. Don't forget your fish."

Jeremy stared silently for a moment and turned away.

"Hey swamp rat!"

The youngster spun on his heels. "Don't call me that!" he demanded, anger flaming behind his eyes.

"Okay, okay, Mr. Woodall. No need to get all heated. Thing is, I have a few more of these in the house and was sort of wondering if you could use this one here?"

Ainsley held out the bamboo fishing rod that had been lying on the dock. Something resembling understanding paused in the lines of his face.

"You sure?" Jeremy asked.

"I wouldn't offer it otherwise."

Walking forward, the boy took the rod, turned and ambled back toward the pond.

"That kind of rod works better off the dock." the older man called out. "So tomorrow maybe that's where you should be, if you decide to come down. Maybe I'll come over and watch a while.

Unless, of course, you would see that as an intrusion."

"Nope, wouldn't mind." the boy said, nodding his consent.

Adjusting his cap, Ainsley nodded back.