

Runaway slave Mr. Fat and his rude mule Brownie will save the day by hook or by crook, cheat the cheaters and can always tell the right side of the law from the wrong one.

FORTUNE STORE AT YOUR DOOR

By Adrienne Bond

Appears here with the kind permission of Ms Bond's family.

DEWAYNE CAME running into Ma Minnie's mobile home. *Slam!* went the screen door behind him.

Right away he clapped his hands over his mouth. He tiptoed over and sat on the edge of the couch. Ma Minnie was watching church.

"Look at him strut!" cried Ma Minnie as the choir director moved across the television screen.

DeWayne had come looking for a story about Mr. Fat. Ma Minnie might tell him one or she might send him right back out the door. He tried not to fidget.

Through the trailer window DeWayne could see an old brick chimney and a pile of boards all grown over with honeysuckle and wild plum trees and blackberry bushes. He knew Ma Minnie had been born in that old house and lived there every day of her life until the hurricane blew it down.

Rabbits lived in that ruin now and spiders and little green snakes. Birds roosted there at night. DeWayne liked to pretend that Mr. Fat lived there too.

When the church service was over, DeWayne washed a bunch of green grapes for each of them, and he sat and watched Ma Minnie chew. Her skin was the color of baked sweet potatoes, and she wore a fluffy brown wig to keep her head warm.

DeWayne was the only one in first grade that had a great-grandmother. Ma Minnie spent the days in her rolling chair now because her legs were wore out, but she didn't take nothing off of nobody. When he got old enough to drive, DeWayne planned to take her to school for show-and-tell.

“Ma Minnie,” DeWayne said after a while, “I sure would enjoy to hear about Mr. Fat.”

Ma Minnie went on picking up grapes with her long bony fingers and putting them in her mouth. She acted like she didn’t hear him, but when the bowl had only a bare stem left in it, she tipped her head back, closed her eyes, and began.



“When Mr. Fat was in the grocery business,” she said, “he brought groceries right to your house. His wagon had a sign said, FORTUNE STORE AT YOUR DOOR.”

“When was Mr. Fat in the grocery business?” asked DeWayne.

“Way back then,” said Ma Minnie,

One time Mr. Fat was raising hogs over in Potterville. The little farm he was renting the most part of it was swamp. He had him a lot fenced off for the hogs, but there wasn’t no field where he could grow corn for them. So he had it figured out to feed them on slop.

“Yuck,” said DeWayne.

“You and I wouldn’t care for it,” said Ma Minnie, “but hogs would.”

“They like mud too,” DeWayne said.

“Ain’t that the truth,” said Ma Minnie.

What Mr. Fat done was to keep buckets at people’s back doors where they could put their potato peelings and their leftovers and what-all during the day. He had him an old farm wagon and a mule named Brownie, and every evening after supper he would go from house to house and dump the slop that win in those buckets into some old barrels he had on his wagon.

Well, they would go up one street and down the other and those wheels on that old wagon would go *squeak, squonk, squeak, squonk*, and dogs would run alongside them and bark and bark and the slop would slosh around and it would smell pretty strong in the hot sun.

One day they was headed down the road with their barrels full of slop and the wheels was *squeaking* and *squonking*, when all of a sudden Brownie let out a loud “Hawnk!” and kicked the backboard with both his hind feet and stopped there in the middle of the road.

Mr. Fat thought there might be a snake in the road, but he looked and didn’t see nothing. “Come up,” he said.

Brownie didn’t move. He turned his head around and looked at Mr. Fat. “Looks like you could grease those wheels,” Brownie said. “it ain’t enough I got to haul slop around all day, but I got to listen to them dam wheels squeak in my ears.”

“Ain’t we delicate today,” said Mr. Fat. “If I can stand it, looks like you could too.”

“You don’t have to stay in the lot with those hogs,” said Brownie. “I ain’t had a good night’s sleep this year.”

“I got nothing to grease them wheels with but lard,” said Mr. Fat, “but I’ll see what I can do. Now let’s go home and get them hogs fed.”

Brownie was mumbling and grumbling, but he went on home. When Mr. Fat put him in the lot for the night, though, Brownie got mad all over again.

“You be sorry when I commit suicide,” Brownie told Mr. Fat.

“Who ever heard of a mule commit suicide?” said Mr. Fat.

“I ain’t like other mules,” said Brownie, and he kick up his heels.

“That’s for dam sure,” said Mr. Fat. “Be quiet and go to sleep.”

Well, the next afternoon the wagon go along pretty quiet for a little way but the hot sun melt all the lard and the wheels start to squeak again. And one of the houses where they stop at, the bird dogs had got out and they run and bark and get on Brownie’s nerves so bad he bite at them and he kick the backboard and honk and bray, and he won't go another step.

“I declare,” said Mr. Fat. “I never seen you act so bad. Straighten up now and let’s get on home.”

“That ain’t a home,” Brownie said. “It’s a hogpen. It ain’t bad enough I got to stay in there with them nasty hogs and hear them slurping and grunting and snorting all the time, but I got to drink out of the same water trough with them.”

“I’ll give you a bucket of water from the well, if you’ll do right,” said Mr. Fat. “I

can't sit here in the middle of town like this talking to a mule. Folks will think I'm crazy."

"I'm going to pull this wagon," said Brownie, "but this is my last day. After I commit suicide, you have to pull this wagon your own self. See how you like it."

Now, like lots of towns, Potterville had a train track running right through the middle of it, and anywhere you wanted to go you had to cross those tracks. In the old days, trains was pulled by locomotives and they burned coal, and they went *chooka, chooka, chuff, chuff, chuff* all the way down the track and black smoke come out of the chimney, and the steam whistle blew *whoeee*. It was a sight to see. But this time I'm telling about, they had invented a new kind of engine that burned oil and it was smooth and quiet. They call it a streamliner.

Well, that day it was the first ride of the first streamline engine to ever be on our railroad, and when it left Savannah they had speeches and all, and the President of the Railroad and the Lieutenant Governor of Georgia and a newspaperman all got to ride on the trip.

And here come this train now slowing down so everybody can see the beautiful new engine, and the folks standing in the front car have the window of it open and they be waving and grinning like they was running for office.

At the same time, Mr. Fat's wagon be crossing the railroad track, and Brownie stop again and this time he stop the wagon right on the tracks.

"Come up, Brownie!" yelled Mr. Fat. "The train coming."

"I see it," said Brownie. "I told you I was goin' to commit suicide. I been pulling this here wagon full of slop in the hot sun and the cold rain, winter and summer. That ain't no sort of life. You sitting there in your chair with your bad foot on a pillow, but I'm the one do the work. I'm goin' to stay here on the track and let the train run over me."

"You ain't on the track, you dam fool," yelled Mr. Fat. "I am!"

About that time, here come the train, and Mr. Fat jump off the wagon, bad foot and all, and right then the train hit the wagon, *WHAM!* It broke that wagon in a million pieces and throwed slop all over the county.

Well, Brownie look around and he start in to laugh. "Heeonk, heeonk, heeonk." So Mr. Fat turn around to see what Brownie laughing at. The newspaperman have

spaghetti all over his shirt and the Lieutenant Governor have peas and carrots all in his hair, and the President of the Railroad have a pancake sitting right on top of his bald head and turnip greens hanging off his cigar. "Lord have mercy," said Mr. Fat.

Mr. Fat laughing so hard tears running down his face. He try to get ahold of himself 'cause here come the folks out of the train looking all serious, but he couldn't stop.

"Heeonk!" said Brownie, and Mr. Fat say, "Hee, hee, hee," and hold his belly.

Then the President of the Railroad come over and pat Mr. Fat on the shoulder. He say, "Don't cry." He take the pancake off his head and tell Mr. Fat not to worry.

"The railroad will buy you a new wagon," he say, "and replace all those groceries you lost too."

Brownie whisper to Mr. Fat, "Tell him we want a green wagon with red wheels and a big umbrella over it, so we can sell tomatoes and peaches.

Right away, Mr. Fat like that idea. He whisper back, "And roasting ears and watermelons and little bags of boiled peanuts."

"I believe we might as well get rid of those hogs," said Brownie.

"You win, Brownie," said Mr. Fat. And that's how Mr. Fat got into the grocery business.

"That's what I'm going to do when I grow up," DeWayne said. "But I'm going to have snow cones on my wagon."

"No, you ain't," said Ma Minnie.

"Why not?" asked DeWayne.

"Because your daddy says you're going to law school," she said. "Get you and me a glass of tea and let's eat this chicken before it gets any colder."

"OK," he said, and they ate up every bite.