

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.

MR. FAT AND THE WILD PLANT MAN

By Adrienne Bond

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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.



Long time ago when the slavers first catch Mr. Fat, they put him to work cutting sugarcane in the islands. That was terrible work and he hated being out there in all them snakes and biting flies, so he ran away and hid on a boat. Then they catch him again and put him to planting rice down on the coast. That come near to breaking his spirit and after a while he run away again.

Well, they catch him pretty quick this time and he wind up chopping cotton. That work wasn't so dangerous, but he had his mind made up now, so first chance he get, here he go running one more time.

Mr. Fat had it in his mind to go up the river into the wilderness. So he run and run and he walked and walked, all the time following the river. He eat berries and bird eggs and dug up roots and caught crawfish when he could. And when he couldn't find anything else, he eat clay.

Now, when Mr. Fat first got up here to the river swamp, folks was sparse and he liked it that way. He been abused so long he didn't care if he never saw another soul.

Remember he didn't have nothing. Even the little raggedy clothes he left the coast in had fell off in tatters. All he had on was a iron cuff on his ankle that had three links of chain still hanging from it. It kept his foot sore, but he didn't have no way to get it off.

Poor Mr. Fat, running wild in the woods, eating whatever he could catch and sleeping whenever he find a pile of dry leaves.

At first he stayed on edge all day and felt sorry for himself all night. But he built himself a little brush lean-to and made him a fire and got some rest, until one morning

he's sitting there by the fire roasting a little possum for his breakfast, and the had this funny feeling.

"I wonder what it is, this strange way I feel?" he think, and then he know that it's enjoyment. It had been so long since he been happy that he didn't know right off what it was.

'Bout that time he hear something stumbling around in the woods. Crash, bump, crash, thump. "Heeonk! Hawnk!" So he got up to go see what it was.

Turned out there was a young mule there in the woods with his bridle all hung up in the bushes and a packsack dragging on the ground where it had slid down under his belly. That mule was so sweaty and mad from trying to get loose, he was purely miserable.

"Ain't nobody said you could come in my woods tearing up my bushes and making all that dam racket," yelled Mr. Fat. "Shut up that fuss."

Well, that mule rare back and look Mr. Fat in the eye. "You got no call to talk to me so disrespectful. I may be loud, but I ain't the one running around the river swamp with no clothes on. Heeonk, hawnk, hawnk!"

Now, Mr. Fat had come over here talking African and all the English he knew he learned from taskmasters and rough types like that, so he knew he didn't speak too proper. But he wasn't used to having a mule talk back to him.

They stood there eyeball to eyeball until the mule decided he better be nice if he ever wanted to get loose from his tangles.

"I been had a bad time lately," said the mule. "Them drovers all the time yelling and hitting me with sticks, and if I shift around while they trying to pile all that weight on my back they bites me. Look at these raggedy ears!"

"I ain't seen no drovers through here," said Mr. Fat.

"They's more coming all the time," said the mule. "Them and their *gee* and *haw* and *what* and *come up*. Day I can kick a drover is the day I'll die happy."

"Let's see can I get this pack undone," said Mr. Fat. "You ain't said how you got way out here."

"Well, I reckon they didn't like me any better than I like them," said the mule. "They sold me to this fancy dude traveling through here picking flowers and drawing pictures."

“How about that,” said Mr. Fat. “How much did they have to pay him to take you off their hands?”

The mule pretended he didn't hear that. “At least them drovers let me catch my breath and get a drink of water now and then. This new fellow so sissified he didn't even know to take off my pack and gear at night so I could get some sleep.”

“Is that a fact?” said Mr. Fat. “Hold still whilst I get this bridle untangled.”

“I guess I showed him,” said the mule. “I kicked him ass-over-wangdoodle and run off. And I ain't looked back. What's that thing on your foot?”

“That's my business,” said Mr. Fat.

“Look like I ain't the onliest one run off,” the mule said. “Heeonk, hawnk, hawnk.”

“Shut up till I can get this bit out from betwixt your teeth,” said Mr. Fat. “You do love to talk, don't you.”

“Don't you worry about that,” said the mule. “I'll be gone the minute you get me loose, Mr. Mean Mouth. You won't be bothered with old Brownie anymore.”

“Good,” said Mr. Fat. “Good-bye and good riddance.”

Well, after the mule cavort off through the woods, Mr. Fat drag that pack up to his camp and look through it and it was full of all sorts of stuff. Some of it was little sacks of seed and roots and all, like somebody was planning to have a garden. There was little pictures of birds and flowers and leaves and snakes and I don't know what-all.

Mr. Fat wondered was the mule telling the truth about all those drovers coming through, so he decided to track back the way the mule come so he could see for himself.

He hadn't gone very far before the mosquitoes started eating him alive, so he stepped down to the creek bank and found him some wet clay and rubbed it all over him. It felt right gritty but it slowed the mosquitoes down.

Long about noon, Mr. Fat come to the old horse path. Now this was an old, old road the Indians had made, and it was worn down till it looked like a ditch running along with tree limbs hanging over it.

Mr. Fat got comfortable up there on the bank and waited. Sure enough after a while he heard somebody coming.

Well, it was a pitiful sight. Here come this little fellow falling and getting up, creeping along the path. “Oh, won’t somebody help me,” he moan. “I don’t want to die out here in these woods.”

He had on knee britches and a shirt with little ruffles at the neck of it, and he had a big lump on his head and a mule track on the seat of his pants.

“Well, I helped the mule so I reckon I better be fair and help this one too,” said Mr. Fat, and he jump down off the bank and land right in the middle of the path.

“Eeeek!” screamed the little fellow, and fainted dead away.

Mr. Fat had lived alone so long he had forgot how scary it might be if a bush-headed naked man covered with red clay come flying out of the bushes and land right in front of you.

Mr. Fat tried his best to get the young fellow on his feet, but after a while he give up and throwed him across his shoulder and toted him back to his camp. He realized this was just a boy all sunburnt with bites all over him and that big lump on his head. “I bet he ain’t drank any water today either,” Mr. Fat said.

After a while the boy was propped up under the lean-to watching while Mr. Fat chop up some leaves and pour a little hot water on them. Then Mr. Fat mixed the steep-water with some possum fat and stirred it up good.

“What’s that?” the boy asked.

“Salve,” said Mr. Fat, “for your burnt-up face.”

“What’s those leaves called?” asked the boy, getting all excited.

“Soothing weed,” said Mr. Fat. “Hold still till I get this on you.”

“Wait till I get my notebook,” said the boy. “I’ve got to put it in my notebook.”

“That ain’t the way it work,” said Mr. Fat. “It got to go on your face.”

“*Salvia fortuna*,” said the boy. “That’s what I’ll call it.”

“How you expect it to help you if you go calling it out of its name?” asked Mr. Fat. He had begun to think this boy was as crazy as his mule had been.

The next morning the boy felt better, and while they ate some breakfast he told Mr. Fat how he had come to be a wild plant man.

Now, this was in the old days when all this country belonged to the King of England. At least the King thought it did. That boy had got him this job going all

through the back country drawing pictures of what grew there, collecting roots and seeds and sending them to the King. He got paid for it too.

Well, Mr. Fat just flew off the handle. “Here’s black folks chained up and put out among the snakes and wild hogs to cut cane and plant rice and chop cotton in the hot sun till they fall down in a fit, and the Indians dying of the fever and being run off their land, and the crackers trying to make a crop with snakes striking at them and panthers carrying their hogs off, and the hurricane blowing everybody which way. There’s the King sitting on his cushion with all that money and what does he do with it? *What does he do? He sends children out into the river swamp to draw pictures of WEEDS!!!*”

Mr. Fat was fit to be tied. “How’d he get to be king anyway? Surely to God they got somebody over there that’s got more sense than that.” Then Mr. Fat went down to the creek and splashed water all over his head to cool down.

Well, it took the wild plant man a week to get well enough to travel on, and Mr. Fat found out they could get along. That boy had a little music pipe and Mr. Fat made himself a log drum and they played in the evening and scared all the little animals with their racket.

They both knew a lot about plants, but they knew different things, so they had a lot to teach each other. Mr. Fat begin to think maybe the boy have good sense after all.

One thing the wild plant man did was, every morning and every evening, he’d get out this little bitty book. Sometimes he would say little poems and prayers and things to the book and sometimes looked like he’d just sit and listen to it.

Mr. Fat couldn’t hear what the book was saying back, and he wondered about it a good bit. He’d heard about books before, but that was the first time he’d seen one up close.

When the boy left he wanted to give Mr. Fat a present for saving his life. He offered him a picture of a bird, but Mr. Fat said he had the real bird right there in the tree over his head. Then the boy offered him a knife, and Lord knows Mr. Fat needed a good knife, but he asked the wild plant man for the book instead.

That boy was surprised , but he gave it to him. ”What do you need the book for?” he asked.

“Might be it will tell me something I need to know,” said Mr. Fat.

Well, after the wild plant man was gone on his way Mr. Fat's standing there looking at the book and he hears a noise and turns around, and here come the mule through the bushes.

"Your owner ain't been too long gone," said Mr. Fat. "You can still catch up with him if you trot."

"I know," said Brownie. "I was beginning to think he wasn't never gone leave. I may be lonesome, but I ain't lost my mind. I figured it out to stay here with you."

"I got to be honest with you," said Mr. Fat. "I got no work for a mule."

"Time might come when you do, though," said Brownie. "I don't mind just being a pet for the time being."

"Well, come on down here and help me read this book, then," said Mr. Fat.

Mr. Fat opened the book and said some little riddles he knew and waited for the book to talk back. He waited and waited and waited.

"What's happening?" said Brownie.

"Dam if I know," said Mr. Fat. "This book supposed to have something to say."

"You expect me to believe that?" said Brownie.

Then all of a sudden the book cried out, "*Mr. Fat, Mr. Fat, ain't it time you got that chain off your leg and put you on some britches?*"

Mr. Fat was so surprised he dropped the book and put both hands over his mouth.

He turned around and looked at Brownie and Brownie was standing there with his ears laid back and his eyes bugged out and his tail straight up in the air.

"Whoeee!" whispered Mr. Fat.

"What's that laying there by your foot?" asked Brownie.

Mr. Fat look down and there's that iron cuff, broke in three pieces and laying on the ground.

Mr. Fat picked up those pieces quick as quick and threw them in the river. They was so hot they went *biss!* When they hit the water. "Lord have mercy!" he said.

"This been a big day," said Brownie. "I think I better take me a nap."

"That's the best idea you had yet," said Mr. Fat. "I believe I will too."

And that's what they did.

That book never said another word from that day till this, but Mr. Fat kept it as long as he lived.

“Wow,” said DeWayne. “What happened to it?”

“Bring me that tin box on the floor of my closet,” Ma Minnie said. Then she opened the box and took out something wrapped in old yellow newspaper. It was the littlest, most beat-up book DeWayne had ever seen.

“I wish I could read,” said DeWayne. “I been going to school for weeks and all I can read is my own name and I already knew that.”

“When you get grown this book can be yours,” said Ma Minnie, wrapping it back up.

“Maybe it’ll tell me something I need to know,” said DeWayne.

“I wouldn’t count on it,” said Ma Minnie. “Run on now, and let me catch a nap before supper.”