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It's more difficult when it's solo

The Payment

By Joanna Thurston Roper

"Son, Son. Wake up. Wake up, Kenny." Kennys sat up in the dingy-gray, scrambled sheets and tried to focus on his father's bearded face and listen to his words edged with panic. "Now listen to me. You've got to get out of here, Son. Go down to the draw back of the house. But don't stop. Cut on across to the corner of the farm and wait up there close to the Y. Now move on, Son. Run! A good run'll scare the sleep out of your eyes."

Lamar Holland swatted his son on the seat as he scuttled barefoot out of the house. The door banged limply behind the boy, its spring barely moving. The rusty screen wire bulged outward, and the flimsy unpainted dividers sagged loose. The day was hazy. Hazy near, hazy far, Lamar thought. His son's pale uncombed hair blended into the haze. Boy, he looks like his mammy. Macy was a good woman — he'll be a good man.

The boy stopped, rabbit-like, at the corner of the hen house. With one hand on the corner of the old building, he turned and looked back at his father. Fear showed in every line of his frail body. Haze swirled in pointy wisps between Kenny and his father. Lamar pushed open the door and waved the boy on. Kenny darted from sight. Gone.

Lamar felt an urge to yell at him — call him back — protect him. A gruff chuckle rose to his lips, and pain constricted his throat. Protect!

Lamar moved back into the kitchen — dingy and small. Last night's dish water sat on the cabinet, cold and streaked with scum. The chipped perculator was on the stove. Cold. He turned toward the kitchen table and sat down. A stack of bills, letters, faded brochures had slid into profusion. Another letter, crisp and milky white, lay apart, still partially folded in half.

Lamar touched the letter with fingers heavy and awkward, yellowed with nicotine. But he pushed it aside. I've read it, he thought. There's no way out. He turned suddenly in his chair, and placing one hand flat on the table and the other on the top rung of his chair, heaved himself to his feet. The chair tipped, and he sat back unexpectedly. The whiskey's gone, anyway, he thought. Why bother.

He plucked at an envelope that was dogeared and yellowed with age. "Doc Busby's bill," he muttered. "From back when Macy died." He squinted at the date. "Lordy, June, 1933. Macy'd already been dead two years." How's I get it paid, he wondered. "But I paid it," he said aloud as if there were someone there to convince. "Probably Buford lent me the money. Yeah, that's where I got it."

Lamar's mind swirled back to the miserable summer of 1933. Macy finally and mercifully out of her misery. Buried out on that hill with her family. Then facing old Doc Busby across his black, cluttered desk and listening to his soft, resonant voice.

"You gotta pick yourself up, Boy. Macy's dead, and it's a shame, but the living go on. Her dying doesn't cancel your debt — you've got to pay it, Lamar. It's been long enough now."

"I ain't got the money right now, Doc."

"You didn't have it a year ago either, and I let it go. Maybe Buford can help."

A flash of fear when he thought of asking his brother for more money. But he went to Buford and listened while Buford ranted and raved — "Lamar, get a job!"

"I'll pay you, Buf. I'll get the farm back in shape. Just as soon as I get back on my feet."

"Hunh! You'll get back on your feet when you stop boozing and gambling and chasing every floozie that comes in on the Rock Island."

Lamar listened to the whole spiel — again. Buford finally gave him the money — signing the check with his usual flourish.

"And I want to see Doc Busby's signature on that," Buford warned as he jerked the check toward his brother.

Lamar was tempted briefly to stop at Mutt's Bar. Just one drink. But he didn't. No, he paid the debt. That day. And for a while he worked in his field all day and stayed home at night with Kenny.

He smiled now, thinking how Kenny had ridden on his cotton sack that fall or stayed at the wagon in the hot afternoons. Then there was the day he had let Kenny stay at the house after dinner. Kenny had whined and begged and promised to sleep. It had been close to quitting time when Lamar first saw the wisps of smoke, and it was long after midnight before the fire finally flickered out after feeding itself on the furniture, the quilts, the dishes that Macy had made them a home with.

The neighbors had stayed on, poking through the burned timbers of his house for signs of anything not totally destroyed. They piled up a motley collection in the side yard — blackened dish pans, bed springs, chains, hammer heads with the handles burned out, even Macy's old metal box which held nothing but duns and messages from the new Triple-A thing in Washington. Lamar had pried open the warped box and looked with despair at the clean, white envelopes, all opened across the end, some with the jagged little strip of paper clinging to a corner. Faced with the total destruction of his house, there were still those debts.

But that other bill — the debt that needed a dun — it loomed larger to him than the ones with letterheads and dates written in. The next night he went back to Mutt's Bar.

Buford and Maurice had agreed to keep Kenny for a while, but not without Buford's warning. "Now don't you go off gettin' drunk just because Kenny ain't home."

"No, Buf, I won't. I'm gonna get me a job in town for awhile."

"Well, your cotton needs hoein' right now."

"I know. I know. But I gotta get some cash money."

Lamar went to work at the depot, delivering for the dray line. And he lost his first paycheck in a poker game.

Old Man Mooreland was letting Lamar live rent free in the two-room shack across the road from the house that burned, and the neighborhood ladies had taken up collections of old furniture and sheets and dishes and pans, and clothes for Kenny. Wonderful ladies — the same ones who had sat up with Macy night after night. So Lamar had Kenny back with him while he tried to keep up with his farming and the dray line in town.

But money, Lamar remembered. There never was enough. His hand slid toward the crisp letter he had pushed away — then slid back as if it might burn. The debts were unrelenting — as unrelenting as Buford's exhortations to "pull yourself together," "get your farm in shape," "don't make any more debts," "don't come to me if you're gambling."

The dead end hopelessness, the treadmill of despair confounded Lamar. He had to farm to pay his bills, but he didn't have the money to buy the seed for a crop. In 1934 he had had a complete crop failure and couldn't pay anyone when the bills came due in the spring or again in the fall. He remembered sending Kenny down to the country store two miles away one night for a quarter's worth of sugar and a box of matches. Kenny had come back, embarrassed and afraid, with the note from Mrs. Tipton that she couldn't extend any more credit.

Lamar had walked into town that night — the old car had long ago ceased to run. There was a little game going on at Mutt's Bar. Lamar felt two strong emotions — desperate enough to risk it, and lucky enough to win. And he did win. It wasn't but twenty-two dollars, but he felt wealthy. He asked Wiley Abbott to keep his money for him until tomorrow and he curled up on the wooden bench outside the back door of Mutt's and slept. The next morning he bought Kenny a pair of overalls and some high-topped shoes. It was getting too cold for the kid to go to school barefoot, and he was outgrowing the overalls the ladies had given him after the fire. His purchases and his success

at the poker table raised his confidence. The guys at Mutt's had told him about a game that would be played in the basement of the Russell Hotel next weekend.

"With your savvy, you oughta be in that one, Lamar," someone had said.

"Course, it takes a hunnerd dollars just to buy in," Wiley warned.

"Yeah. It's a big game!"

"I ain't got a hundred dollars," Lamar said.

"Ahhh-they all know Buford," Wiley said. "They'll let you in on credit."

Lamar felt a stab of fear when Buford was mentioned. But on Saturday he got his blue striped suit out of the box where it had been since Macy died, heated an iron, and tried to press the worst creases out. His shirt had yellowed over the years, and his loss of weight made his pants too long. But after he tried to polish his old work brogans, he decided that the extra length helped.

That weekend Lamar did win — only enough to pay for his chair in the game, but the boost to his ego was tremendous. He began the six-mile walk home at eleven o'clock Sunday night in high spirits. He felt bouyant enough to have walked twice as far. One hundred dollars, he thought. I made it. I won it. But the high spirits faded. I was better off winning twenty down at Mutt's, he thought. He remembered the stillness in the room at the Russell when he asked to sit in. Some of the men shifting in squeaky chairs — probably all of them thinking about things they'd heard. Lamar Holland owes the gin for last year; owes the grocery store; owes the elevator for seed wheat. Slowly the joy went out of the big game.

But by morning he had recaptured some of his spirit. He reasoned that with more practice, he could soon win more than it cost to buy in, and with the extra money he could begin paying his debts. It won't ever involve Buford, he thought. I've got to have some way to get squared away so me and Kenny can live a little better.

So each month Lamar got dressed up and walked into town to the Russell. More times than not, he lost, though. And the crowd he played with became hostile and surly because of his inability to pay. However, they would let him buy more chips when he went broke. He knew that it was because they knew Buford could pay if he got in too deep that they let him continue. When he won, he always paid off the markers

he had made to the other players. He had also been able to pay a little bit to his creditors. But a very little bit.

So the playing and the meager winning continued throughout the summer months of 1936. Then abruptly the games were over. At least they were over for Lamar. Ernest Neeley accompanied him out of the hotel one night.

"We-lll, Lamar, we're going to close it down for awhile."

"Oh! We-lll, looks like we'd go on during the winter."

"We-lll, no, Lamar — nights are shorter. Most of the boys say the little woman's gettin' a mite testy. You wouldn't have that problem!" Ernest laughed loudly as if he realized too late that his joke about the wives was in poor taste.

"It's just me and Kenny, and he doesn't mind."

"We-lll, Lamar, since we're splittin' up, we all need to pay the banker. I b'lieve you got some markers still out, don'tcha?"

"Yeah - but -"

"We-lll, Lamar, you take a day or two, but I'd get 'em paid off." Neeley's voice was soft but insistent.

"Ernest, unless I win some games and make some earnings, I don't have any way —"

"We-lll, Lamar, we gave your markers to a man we know. None of us could afford to carry you, and he said he'd do it."

"Who?"

"We-lll, Lamar, you just get your markers paid real fast, and it won't bother you who he is."

"Ernest —"

"We-lll, Lamar, I gotta go back now. You have a pleasant walk. This fresh air'll clear your head."

The trip home had never been so long or accompanied by such desperate thoughts. For weeks he had been refusing to look at the amount that he owed. He had stopped paying the gin and the elevator, so he had been unable to plant cotton in May and there wouldn't be any wheat either. Last April he had planted a little bit of maize because Buford had given him the seed.

Then the man Ernest Neeley had spoken of sent a messenger to pick up the money — a total he told Lamar, of \$3100. Lamar had begged for a little more time.

"My kid's been sick," he said. "You know how it is with doctor bills."

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so there was no reason for him to come back."

"Is he still in Hawaii?"

"No, Sir, we heard later that he died from poisoning. Dr. Bradley escaped to Puerto Rico. For a long time, we thought she was still there, but then we heard that the Hawaiians had picked her up and charged her with murder."

"How did they connect her with Potter?"

"Well, when they went to that hotel, Mr. Potter put Miss Addie in one room and then registered himself and Dr. Bradley as husband and wife."

"I guess Dr. Bradley left in a hurry."

"Yes, she left too fast to please the Five-O people. They checked her room and found an assortment of needles. That was all the evidence needed."

"So Dr. Bradley-Potter is rotting in prison now."

"That's the story, and she never realized anything from what she helped Bill Potter do to Miss Addie."

"What about her property on Poplar?"

"Well, there had to be a sheriff's sale to dispose of everything; the woman was heavily in debt."

"Was it a combination of all these things that did **this** to Addie?" He gestured at the limp, velvet-attired figure in the only chair in the room.

"Yes, it was only about a week after she returned home that she became completely uncontrollable. Mr. Lowry, as her executor, made the decision to send her out here to Hilltop Manor. He said that there would be barely enough money left to see her through the remainder of her life. But he told me that he wanted me to be her paid companion."

"I don't know how she would have made it without you, Bernadine."

"Really, Dr. Norwood, it's been an act of love. How could anyone turn away from someone like Miss Addie?"

"How long has she been speechless?"

"For only about six months."

"Does she ever try to speak?"

"Never."

"Do you think she knows what's going on?"

"She definitely does. Don't you, Honey?" Bernadine squeezed Addie's arm. Addie looked as though she might be

about to say something.

"Does anyone ever come to see you?" He decided to use a new approach.

"Well, actually, Dr. Norwood, most of Miss Addie's friends are already dead. The only ones I can think of who have been here were Mrs. Goltry, Miss Hanks, and Mrs. Fairbanks."

"Myrtle Fairbanks? Why in the world?"

"Well, she had her reasons. Grimes had a centennial celebration last month, and Mrs. Fairbanks won the title Mrs. Grimes Centennial. She had to come out here to strut her okra."

"Oh yes, that would be Myrtle Fairbanks' immediate reaction—pour vinegar into Addie Harp's gaping wound."

"If it had been anyone else, I wouldn't have believed it."

"How did Addie react?"

"There wasn't any change in her expression, but she seemed to be pushing herself away. I hope Mrs. Fairbanks pays for this."

"She will. Be assured."

"Well, Dr. Norwood, I've enjoyed this chat. But now I have to go look in on my mother. She's out here too, you know."

"You go right ahead, Bernadine. I want to say a few words to Addie."

"You come back, Dr. Norwood. I have the feeling that this visit has been a help to Miss Addie."

As Bernadine left the room, Doug began trying to talk with Addie. "Addie, thank you for so briskly stealing into my world. Having you for a friend has been one of the most interesting things in my life. I'm going to try to come back to see you often. When you get those hands back, we can play dominoes or canasta. I remember how you have always liked table games. What else can I bring? You know you can depend on me."

For the first time in several months, Addie seemed to want to speak. It was painstaking work. "D....d.... d ...d....d....d....g....g...."

"Bernadine, come quick," Doug screamed as he ran down the hall. "She said **Doug!**"

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"The messenger glanced at Kenny and back at Lamar, silent and supercilious, unbelieving. "I'll tell my boss you'll have the money in a week." And he left.

In a week and one day the letter came. Lamar's fingers fluttered toward it again — and moved back.

A car pulled into the yard. From the kitchen table, Lamar could see the black roadster bounce over the rain-

washed gullies in front of the house. Lamar was standing when the front door opened. The same young man had returned — the same fixed smile and flat brown eyes.

"Mr. Holland, I believe you have a packet of money for me."

"Why don't you just sit down — we'll talk —" Lamar's voice was weak and breathy. He put his hands on the table to support himself.

"No, Mr. Holland, I didn't come to

talk. If you'll just give me the money, I'll be on my way."

"Mr —. It just wasn't possible. I didn't have enough time. Give me awhile. I'll manage some way. I'll —" Lamar watched, mesmerized, as the young man's hand moved slowly toward the inside of his coat.

Kenny, crouching under an April-green mesquite behind the hen house, heard the shot.