

Big Dam Foolishness
By Jerry Peterson
www.jerrypetersonbooks.com

“Dammit, I told Harley he was gonna get himself in trouble. I didn’t know he was gonna get himself dead.”

The sheriff – Jim Early – kicked at a tuft of grass as he and the county coroner and a deputy stood together, gazing at a body strung up to a protest sign that proclaimed BIG DAM FOOLISHNESS to all who passed by.

Doc Grafton rubbed at the back of his neck, his ‘I Like Ike’ button glinting in the sun. “You want me to call it a suicide and we just bury him?”

“Somebody knows it’s not,” Early said. He slapped his deputy’s shoulder. “Cut him down. Let’s see what we got.”

Hutch Tolliver, Early’s chief deputy for the past three years, didn’t need a step ladder. At six-eight, he towered over most others and despised those who laid that tired joke on him: How’s the weather up there?

He flicked out a switchblade and sawed at the rope that held Harley Wilson upright. On the last slice, the rope let go, and the dead man slumped down, his knees buckling. He tumbled forward.

Early, a mustached, leathery cowboy himself, rolled the dead man onto his back. “What you wanna bet somebody croaked him before they strung him up?”

“You’ll bet on anything,” Grafton said as he hunkered down to inspect the corpse.

“I bet on ranching, and I lost.”

“That may be, Cactus, but you’ve never lost an election since you picked up a badge.”

“Guess there is some justice in the world then. . . . So what do you think?”

Grafton, chunky from eating at the table of a wife who was a superb cook, and he, an honest-to-God surgeon when he wasn’t on the county’s tab, felt around the dead man’s neck. “It’s not broke. Could have choked to death, but his face would be more purplish.”

The coroner glanced up at the sign. “What’s that, a blood smear?”

Tolliver leaned in. He touched the reddish swipec. “Tacky.” He put the tip of his finger to his tongue.

Grafton grimaced.

“A little salty,” the deputy said. He smacked his lips. “Tastes like blood.”

“Hutch, you some kinda vampire?”

Tolliver didn’t answer.

“Well, then let’s roll him over,” the coroner said. He grabbed the dead man’s shoulder and Early his belt. Together, they hauled the body over. When it flopped on its chest, it revealed a smallish stain on the fabric of the shirt, low, about two-thirds of the way down the back, to the right of the spine.

Grafton examined it. “Look at that nice slice, what, about an inch wide? Knifed him.”

“One stab kill him?”

“Look, if you come up under the rib cage and your blade is long enough, you can pierce the heart. Didn’t they teach you nothing in the war?”

“Taught me to keep my head down so I wouldn’t get it shot off,” Early said. He sat back on his haunches. “I’d expect more blood.”

“Not with so slim a blade. It’s not a bullet hole, Cactus, or like being hit by a shotgun blast.”

“So we’re looking for a pro.”

“I’d say, someone who knows how to kill.”

The sheriff of Riley County combed his ragged mustache with his fingers. He twisted around. “Hutch, whaddaya think?”

“Old Harley wasn’t easy to get along with.”

“That’s sure.”

“And he got right miserable, with that dam proposed to flood the Big Blue Valley.”

“Yeah, he was gonna lose his farm.”

“Damn hard to plow ground under forty feet of water.”

“So who do you think might have done him in?”

Tolliver scratched a thumbnail at the end of his eyebrow. “Well, he hassled every federal man who came by his place to talk to him, but I’d say it was Buck Hamilton he really had it in for. The Corps of Engineers hired Buck as an appraiser. You know Harley told Buck he’d kill him if Buck ever stepped on his property.”

Early pushed his cattleman’s hat forward, low over his eyes. “Do I ’member right?”

“Yup,” Tolliver said, “those two old boys have never gotten along since they were kids.”

“And something else – ”

“You got it. Buck’s a hunter. Always has a skinning knife in a sheath on his belt.”

Grafton nudged Early. “How do you two know all this stuff?”

“Hutch and I get our butts out of the office. We drink a lot of coffee with a lot of people in a lot of cafes, and we sit on the liars’ benches out in front of stores, plus,” Early said, thumbing at his deputy, “old Hutchy’s a valley boy, grew up on a little place outside of Winkler. It’s going under water, too.”

“Flood control, that’s important, Cactus. Remember all the hell that flood raised in Manhattan a couple years back?”

“Try to tell that to the eight hundred families who are going to lose their land, and those who live in the valley towns. They’re gonna lose their homes.”

Tolliver interrupted. “What do you want to do, chief?”

“Suppose you and Doc put old Harley in the back of my truck. The two of you can take him to Brown’s Mortuary, and I’ll take Doc’s car and go see Moll, tell her what happened to her husband.”

“And Buck?”

“Guess we’ll have to run him down.” The sheriff turned back to Grafton. “How long you think he’s been dead?”

The coroner put a hand on the side of the corpse’s face. “Well, he’s been cooking out here in the sun, so that screws up the body temperature as any kind of clue. With the blood not dry behind his back, I’d say no more than an hour.”

Early stepped out of Grafton’s dust-covered Cadillac. He strolled toward a porch where a

woman sat on a hard chair, snapping beans into a wash basin in her lap. “Moll,” he called out.

“Sheriff,” Moll Wilson said with only the slightest glance away from her work, her fingers snapping string beans into short pieces.

“Half runners?”

“Yup.”

“They are the best. Pretty good harvest?”

“Bit on the puny side. Been dry. What brings you by, sheriff?”

Using his hat for a broom, Early swept a mess of curled bean strings from an area of the porch boards and sat down. “Kinda got bad news, Moll.”

The woman’s fingers neither stopped nor slowed, nor did she look up, her face as leathery as Early’s but with worry lines trenched in her forehead, like furrows in a new-plowed garden.

“There’s no gentle way to put it,” Early went on. “Harley’s dead.”

Moll Wilson’s fingers danced over several beans, snapping them, dropping pieces in the wash pan. “Well, don’t expect no tears from me.”

“Yup, I know it was a hard marriage. A weaker woman wouldn’t have stuck it out.”

She paused just long enough to wipe the back of her hand at the tip of her nose. “So what I gotta know?”

“About Harley?”

Moll Wilson took another handful of beans from a dented bucket at her side. She snapped an end off one and pulled away the string. This she tossed aside, then went to snapping the bean into the basin.

“Well, we found him up by that protest sign he’d erected beside the county road. Somebody put a knife in his back. . . . Moll, if you don’t mind me saying it, you don’t seem too surprised.”

“Just a matter of time, sheriff. I don’t think even Harley’s brother liked him. Way back when, though, I thought he was nice enough.”

“Yeah, well, Hutch and Doc Grafton took the body into Brown’s. Sherm and his boy do most of the funerals for the people up here. That all right with you?”

“I guess. I’ll have to go by.”

Early pushed himself up as if intending to leave. “I could take you in.”

“No, I got evening chores to do now that I’m alone.” She set her basin of snapped beans on top of the bucket and rose, stiff. Moll Wilson, in her worn bib overalls and work shirt, patched at the elbow, limped as she came toward the steps.

“You all right?” Early asked, reaching out to help her down.

“Fell in that damn barn this morning. . . . Who do you think done it?”

“Harley? No way to be sure just yet.”

The two walked in silence, Early rolling his hat in his hands, Moll Wilson brushing back strands of gray that kept sliding down over her forehead. Early stopped at a chopping block in the yard.

“You been killing chickens?”

“Got some wore-out hens. Done a couple in yesterday for the stew pot.”

“Come fall, you going to butcher a hog like you always do?”

“Come fall, I hope to be the hell out of here, pardon my French.”

Early raised an eyebrow.

“Don’t go gettin’ all surprised. This farm provided a poor living for Harley and me. Now the government wants to buy it.”

“But Harley would never sell.”

Moll Wilson crossed her arms as she turned, to get the afternoon sun out of her eyes. Again she winced. “You know, he said he’d make war on the government before he’d give up this place, that he’d fight ’em off at the fence line. I couldn’t talk him out of it, but now I don’t have to.”

“Guess so.” Early tugged at an earlobe. “Well, I’ll be on my way. You can count on Thelma and me being at the funeral.”

The sheriff left Grafton’s Cadillac in front of Randolph’s Jayhawk Bank, a squat brick structure built in Nineteen Forty-Nine after the old bank went up in a midnight fire. Early had an idea who torched the place but could never prove it.

He went inside, waving to the lone teller in the cage of marble and bulletproof glass, barbed wire across the top. “How-do, Mavis?”

“Sheriff,” the well-endowed woman said, “here to open an account?”

“No, I gotta see that fella at the back desk.” He pointed his hat at a hulking presence working over files near the vault.

“You know I give special gifts to handsome ones like you,” the woman said.

Early’s face twisted into a half-smile. “Yeah, and if you did, Thelma’d have me sleeping in the next county.”

“She doesn’t need to know.”

“Yup, well maybe.” He waved his hat again. “Buck, I got to talk to you.”

Buck Hamilton looked up, a slashing scar down one side of his face, a souvenir he’d brought home from his time in the South Pacific as a Marine, that and a legful of mortar fragments that had a habit of working themselves up, one by one, through the surface of his skin.

“Something I can do for you, Cactus?” Hamilton asked.

“A couple questions.”

“Come on and warm a chair.” He motioned toward the captain’s chair at the side of his desk.

Early settled himself. He gazed around as he rested his hat on his knee. “How’s it going with you and the people whose places you’re having to appraise for the Corps?”

“None of them too happy, but when I tell them I’m losing my house, too, we kind of commiserate together.”

“Any give you a hard time?”

“A couple.”

“Harley Wilson?”

Hamilton glanced away before he answered. “You wouldn’t be asking if you didn’t know. Yeah, he’s the worst. Threatened to shoot me, castrate me, then whip me ’til I wished I was dead.”

“He try it?”

“Not yet.”

“Where you been the last couple hours?”

“Now why would you ask that?”

Early worked the tips of his fingers against their opposites, the picture of a spider doing pushups. “Harley’s dead. Knife in the back.”

“And you think I did it.”

The sheriff, with the longest face he could muster, nodded.

Hamilton came forward, his elbows on his desk. “Sorry to disappoint you. I been here. Ask Mavis. Hell, ask Rance.”

Early whipped his hat at the door to a side office, *President* lettered in gold on the glass. “Rance!”

“Yeah, what is it?” came a voice.

“Buck been here all day?”

Rance Dalby leaned out. He pulled his necktie loose, the sleeves of his white shirt rolled to his elbows, plate-sized sweat stains under his arms. “Came in this morning when I did. Said this was his day for paperwork. He’s sweat out there like I’ve sweat in here.”

“You wouldn’t lie to me would you, Rance?”

“Have I ever?”

“No. And that I appreciate.”

“Well, what’s this about?”

“Somebody killed Harley Wilson.”

“Oh Lordy.” Dalby ambled out of his office. He mopped at the beads dribbling down his temples and gave Early a fisheye look. “This heat doesn’t bother you?”

“Not particularly, but I’m driving Doc Grafton’s Cadillac. It’s got one of those new refrigerators in it that pours out the chilled air.”

“Oh gawd. . . . Were you thinking Buck killed Harley?”

“He was a good candidate. But if you say he was here, that squashes that. . . . Sorry, Buck, I gotta check these things out.”

Hamilton waved a dismissing hand.

“I was out to Moll’s, telling her what happened,” Early said. “So you go see her, but not before the funeral. And I want you to offer her a better than decent price because she’s a widow now.” He tapped on Hamilton’s desk. “If you don’t, I’ll haunt ya.”

“Cactus, I got people in the Corps I got to answer to.”

Early leaned in so close Hamilton could smell the onions he’d had on his meatloaf sandwich. “They don’t live here. I do.”

“You wouldn’t be threatening me?”

“Oh no no no no no.” Early pushed himself out of his chair, the damp back of his shirt ripping itself away from the wood. “Well, I got to go scratch me up a new suspect. Buck, you keep a good thought when you go out to see Moll with your appraiser’s book and, Rance, you look out for the community’s money.”

The sheriff recovered his hat from where it had fallen by Dalby’s office door, then on his way out of the bank, he waved to the teller. “Mavis, always good to see you, particularly on the other side of that glass.”

She waved a fistful of money, beckoning at Early.

He came over and, when she pointed to the voice hole in the glass, he learned down.

“Buck wasn’t here all morning,” Mavis whispered. “Slipped out around eleven with some big envelopes. I thought maybe he was going to the post office. Now I don’t know.”

Early glanced up at the teller’s face. He saw doubt and a questioning. “Thanks, Mave,” he said. “I appreciate this.”

She went back to balancing her cash drawer.

Outside, Early paused to pull at his sticking shirt, then strolled next door to Morgan’s Grocery where he slapped a dime on the counter and helped himself to an RC from the cooler. He asked the bespectacled man stocking boxes of corn flakes, “Morg, this where Moll Wilson buys her groceries?”

“What little she needs.”

“You know Harley was killed today?”

Everett Morgan glanced over his shoulder. “No, you don’t say.”

“Yup. Knife in the back.”

“Know who did it?”

“Got an idea.”

“Jim, maybe I oughtn’t to say this, but if Harley’s dead like you say he is, it’s kind of a blessing.”

Early looked up as he pressed the cold bottle against his forehead.

“Oh yes,” Morgan said, “he was one difficult critter. Got to be a relief for Moll.”

“Why’s that?”

“He’s been beating on her for the last few years.”

“I didn’t know.”

“Well, it didn’t get around. The only reason I know is I’m kinda the father confessor to the community.” The grocer, finished with his chores, came to the counter. “Oh yes, I saw the signs and got it out of her, but she made me promise not to tell anyone.”

“You just told me.”

Morgan shrugged. “Harley’s dead, so makes no nevermind.”

“I guess. You see everybody who goes by?”

“Just about.”

“Around eleven, by chance did Buck Hamilton walk by on the way to the post office?”

“Not that I recall. Why you interested?”

“Oh, nothing.” Early chugged the bottle of pop, then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “Tell me, what’re you going to do when they flood the valley?”

“Oooh, the Corps’s going to build a whole new Randolph up on the high ground,” the grocer said. He took the empty bottle from Early. “I get me a brand-new store.”

“Well, then some good’s going to come of all this.”

“Gonna be a bright day, sheriff, a real bright day.”

Early nodded his goodbye as he backed out the door. On the street again, he got into Grafton’s car and drove off, wondering. Something ate away at the back of his mind. When Early came to the road that ran up to the Wilson farm, rather than go on to Manhattan, he turned off. At the farm, he saw Moll Wilson coming from the barn with a pail of milk and a calico cat and

three kittens trotting after her.

At the porch, Moll Wilson took down a pan from a nail. She poured a generous quantity of milk into the pan and set it down for the cats.

“Chores done?” Early asked as he strolled up.

“All except for makin’ myself a bite of supper.”

“Thought I’d better stop by and tell you what I’ve learned so far.”

“Oh?” Moll Wilson picked up the pail of milk. She headed through the screen door.

“Better come back to the kitchen then. I got to put this milk up.”

The two tramped through a messy front room, down a short hall and into a kitchen that looked like it belonged to somebody’s grandmother – a wood-burning cookstove, pitcher pump at the sink, open shelves rather than cabinets, but there in a corner stood an oversized Kelvinator, the biggest Early had ever seen.

Moll Wilson pulled open the door. A light came on, and she set the pail in on a shelf. “The one luxury I got,” she said as she rummaged around, opening food containers, checking contents. “Wasn’t too long ago I had to keep everything in the spring house. Next place I get, maybe I can get me one of them fancy gas stoves.”

She brought a bowl and a half a loaf of store-bought bread to the table. “I got some cold pork here. Can I fix you a samich?”

“That’s kind of you, but if I don’t eat supper with Thelma, she takes it personal.”

“Wouldn’t want to create discontent for you.” Moll Wilson took down a plate and a jelly glass. “So you see Buck Hamilton?”

Early leaned against the porcelain sink, several large chips broken out of the white. “Why would I do that?”

“You kind of think he killed Harley.”

“Well, you’re right. I thought so, and it’s possible, but he says he’s been in the bank all day.”

The woman, her face weary, slapped two pieces of bread on the plate. She slathered them with butter and laid on a thick slice of pork roast. After she filled her jelly glass with cold milk from the Kelvinator, she sat down.

“Stopped by Morgan’s,” Early said, rolling his hat in his hands.

Moll Wilson took a large bite from her sandwich and chewed without looking up.

“I know how you got banged up, and it wasn’t a fall in the barn. . . . How long’s Harley been hitting you?”

Moll Wilson picked at a piece of meat stuck in her teeth. When she got it out, she wiped her fingers on the leg of her trousers. “That’s over now.”

“I expect it is.” Early picked up a butcher knife from beside the sink. Something about it caught his eye, and he took a small magnifying glass from his shirt pocket. Early squinted through the glass, playing it over the joint where the blade came together with the handle. “You didn’t wash this too good. There’s blood here.”

“Chicken blood. Told you I killed chickens yesterday.”

“Boys up at the college lab, they have ways of telling chicken blood from human blood.”

“Are you saying?”

“I’m not saying anything, but I am going to keep this knife.” Early put his spy glass back

in his pocket. “If you ever say anything, even if you’re ninety-three and on your death bed, I’ll rise up from my grave and arrest you.”

Moll Wilson pushed her sandwich aside. “You could arrest me now.”

“What good would be served by that?” Early eased his cattleman’s hat back up onto his head. “I’m gonna go now, Moll. I’ll see you in a couple days at the funeral. Never miss a good funeral. Election’s coming up and there’s always votes to be had.”