

# **William Putnam is . . .**

by Darnishia Bolden

Sheriff Putnam isn't a young man, his face is young but his hands are not. The face is smooth, in a rugged country boy manner, with hot silver eyes and a stone cold smile. The hair, what little is left, sweeps around his head like a sash - a cheap sad attempt at hiding his head from the glare of lights. If he'd been a vain man, he would have had the baldness repaired with fake hair. But vanity was not his favorite sin.

His hands are large and calloused from doing boy scout stuff, hunting with his dad and uncles when he was a boy, building things and taking them apart - repairing appliances and tearing things up. Now arthritis creeps into the joints but still he ties excellent knots. His belly, used to be firm and flat, is now fat and round, practically a bowl of jelly.

The same charms dangled from his gut year after year - a gun, handcuffs, flashlight, and keys jingling with the loose change in his pockets.

William Putnam isn't a very reasonable man to most, nor is he fair. The law is crooked, he has justified - lets off all of the wrong people - if followed correctly. As far as he is concerned the wrong people were those folks hell bent on diversifying the county. Life, as his father used to tell him, isn't fair. So if life isn't fair why should he? Being fair, could get a lot of criminals off.

Being fair reeks of communism - everybody receiving the same type of bread, standing in the same lines. He knew that he didn't possess the education of certain men, so why should he expect to be allowed into their country clubs or into their homes. He understood the laws of nature and of man. A lamb couldn't lay down with a lion and expect to rise up whole. A black man shouldn't expect the same rights as a white man. A gay man wasn't a man at all. But the new laws were set up to protect those people. Forget that the founding fathers of this country were all white and distinguished men. They knew what they were doing when they arranged the laws to keep specific people in the places where they belonged. Now the country, specifically Swainesboro, is overcome by aliens. Aliens with skin so black, it pissed him off - trying to tell decent white men what to do and how to feel, what's right and wrong. It wasn't right. Sure blacks were human but just not on the same level as a white man.

Books were written as proof, written by scientists for God's sake! The rabbit knows he cannot outrun the leopard but he's still an animal yet even he knows his place in the world, inferior to the leopard. Why couldn't these aliens realize that? Rather than put up a fuss, Putnam melted into the background. His heart wasn't as strong as it used to be. Sure he could still tie a good knot but it wasn't like it used to be when he was young. Old age really fucks up the good men.

He had seen many things, witnessed atrocities that would be taken to the grave, when his time arrived because being unfair didn't mean he wouldn't honor his word. And there was his wife to

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respect. A beautiful woman with green eyes that cried clear tears. He had only hit his wife once - just once. Sometimes violence is a necessary thing. Makes people listen, talk is cheap and a thief, will rob a man of his time. Violence is quick and sure - gets the world's attention.

His home and childless wife were all that was precious to him. His home was almost a castle when compared to those who made the same amount of money he collected from the county. He never relied on the assistance of the state, even though he was an officer of it. But had he been loud and angry like some of the men back in his day - he would not have acquired so much. In his silence, turning the other cheek so to speak, to men who were strong because of their wealth, he was allowed to live quite well. Had he not known his place as a man, and a sheriff, with limited means and education, the wife he had would not have said "I DO" on June 17th. No he did the right thing for himself. That was important. That was the most important thing to do for his family. His poor family.

He called up times when he'd steal biscuits and eat them hot from the oven - scorched his tongue. His father, when he wasn't drunk, was a hard-working man when he worked. Most often the alcoholism got in the way of his bringing home a paycheck. Said there was too much stuff fucking with his mind and the alcohol helped chase the ghosts away. So it was left up to William to work and steal . . .

"I got mouths to feed at home." And he stole those biscuits that day, cooled by the summer winds. Stole them from a windowsill. Fresh and home-made, shaped by the hands of the black woman living there. She saw him when he snatched them up. Didn't mouth a word, so unlike Old Man Jud who owned the only farmer's market in town. If he caught you stealing from his store, he would beat you 'til your spit turned salty with blood. She wasn't like Jud, but those black eyes sliced at his throat. He'd taken things like that before but never been caught, except by Jud and that was one time. Violence is sometimes a necessary thing.

Once he walked right into a home and sat down at the table. His feet had him wandering all day. And he was tired. He hadn't been invited into the strange home but he knew the folks. An elderly couple taking care of two kids. The elderly woman had spoken softly. "Can I help you son? Are you lost?"

"Naw, he ain't lost, That's Mr. Jenkin's son," her husband proclaimed then stuck a pipe into his mouth, pulled and puffed until smoke curled out of it, adding a cherry aroma to the air already thick with spices, chocolate and apples. William turned his head towards the little boy. His lips were pink and his skin was so dark it had a blue hue to it. He was mesmerized by that. He wanted to touch him, see if he was real but didn't want to get his hands dirty. His father said he could get his hands dirty that way, touching niggers. But he didn't touch him, yet could tell by the uppity grimace on the little boy's face that he was disgusted at having a dirty little white boy sit at his table.

"I'm hungry." Was all William had replied to the elderly woman while looking into the big

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brown eyes of the little black boy who didn't smile at him. His father had told him all niggers smile. "They smile, cause if you catch'em out at night on a country road you can't see 'em. So they smile. Their smile is like the lights on a car, bright and shine, shine, shine." Laughter, much too loud, had followed. He had not understood. Everybody had white teeth, if they brushed them every day with baking-soda. His father glared down at him and chucked him in the pit of his back. Maybe that had been a joke, that's why the other men had laughed about the "shine, shine, shine". With the ghost of knuckle prints still on his back, he laughed for his father and his friends.

The woman had an apple pie cooling in the sun. He never understood why women let things cool in the sun, in the summer. But it must have had something to do with the heat, something about the summer heat made the juices all the more sweet. He had followed the aroma. Crossing the tracks. They lived so close. Too close. Always smelled like pennies, his father claimed. Worthless change.

The woman sliced him a piece of the pie and gave him a tall glass of milk to go with it. Since it wasn't proper for a white to eat at the same table with blacks, according to his father, he left. He picked up the glass, the white napkin that had been washed and ironed and folded precisely. He picked up the sterling silver fork and the plate that held the pie. He picked it all up, without a goodbye or even a thanks. This was his welfare he thought. Yes. Black people, his father said, was always getting something from the government while whites got nothing. Nothing at all. So he took those things because they really belonged to him, you see. His father, when he was sober, worked hard and some of that money helped blacks eat good meals, like the elderly couple taking care of the two children.

William, called Bill by his peers, took those things and ate them on the porch - belched loudly afterwards. "That's my gratitude," he threw over his shoulder towards the old woman peering through the screen. He was still hungry but wasn't about to go back into that warm home, where the children were clean - fat and round. And the little boy was so healthy his black skin glowed with a blue hue.

William looked down at his own arms. Scrawny and the color of abused putty. Black bruises still present on his arm where his father had shaken the shit out of him, literally, on yesterday.

He hated that little fat blue boy. He hated him because his home smelled like apple pie, not copper - not even dead things, spoiled meat or sour apple cores. He hated the little boy because he felt an air of superiority exude from him. He despised the little boy because he spoke another language to the elderly man, then laughed as if he'd said something that Bill wasn't good enough to hear. His language was even pretty just like his hands, his clean hands - light on one side and dark on the other. He hated the little boy because he was strong. He hated him for having two elderly people care. He hated the world because he was poor and his mother had died giving birth to him, leaving him alone to be with a father and two brothers and a sister who ate sometimes and other times did not, who left things out on the counter to spoil and sour. And he hated the world for allowing him to live with a man who made jokes that were not funny and

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drank white lightening instead of milk or wine. A man who'd rather be drunk than face the cruelties and unfairness of life. He felt it rising inside of him, like a rooted oak tree - big, strong and overwhelming. He thought to turn, charge into the house and slap the round chubby colored cheeks but did not. He could have gotten away with the slap. But he couldn't bear to hear what might have come from the blue boy's mouth. A fluid language that rolled easily from the lovely scarlet tongue - rich and smooth as the cold milk he'd drank with the hot apple pie. The little boy spoke languages, when he - Putnam - could barely speak proper English. He could have slapped every one of them but did not. His feet, he realized, were taking him far up a hill. Running fast and fast and he felt the tears stinging his eyes as he ran, the hot summer winds almost lifting his frail body into the air. Never again, he thought. Never again.