

Karl Plank

KILLED ON THE GROUND

“Go ask your Daddy,” she said. “He’s on the porch.”

It’s where he goes when he comes back from Olive Hill. Everyone calls him Fireman. Once he shoveled coal to keep the kilns hot, but that’s a young man’s job. Now, he’s a setter, loading green brick. He says, “That’s a young man’s job, too.” But Fireman’s not young. His bones sit heavy at day’s end.

I ease out the screen door and join him. “Daddy, I need to hear about Link.” I wait, sure he won’t rush. When Fireman talks, it’s like the words rise from a well the rest of us can’t see. Slow to come to the surface and struggling against gravity, knowing the chill of what’s deep-down and underneath. “Words are too important for idle talk,” he once said, and left it at that.

“Linken Binion,” he began, “lies buried at the Barker farm out from Grahn. A sudden end. It wasn’t his fault. Wasn’t anyone’s fault.” I thought Fireman might stop there. But he had more on his mind. “Link was in the field with Mr. Sellers. They wanted to fly. To leave the ground. You’ve got to understand how it might feel, to get beyond the split-rails, the hedgerows. To get up, that’s to get out. Do you see?”

I nodded, but wasn’t sure I did see. This was more than Fireman tended to say in a sitting. He rocked a time or two, oak runners gentling to their groove across the boards, and finished his thought. “On that October day, in 1911, Link stood with Mr. Sellers at the helm of the airship. He did his part, getting it started. But then the machine bucked backwards. Eh, Law. The propeller, it caught Link dead-on in the head. *Killed on the ground*, the newspaper said. Yes, just like the rest of us.”