



ON THE ROAD TO YAZOO CITY





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My life at twenty-one was never in tune--like a D-string on an antique Gibson with a peg that wouldn't hold--and I'm walking up this two lane side road about ten miles West of Canton and North of Jackson where I have just come from. Haven't seen a car in maybe an hour, the straps of my pack digging into my shoulders, the sun burning my eyes because I lost my shades leaning over a riverbank to fill my water jug, and dragging the guitar case cause it's just too heavy to lift off the ground. Pure shit. But I got to make it work. I'm flat broke.

About half a mile down the road I see this man on a bike peddling like to die and holding straight on the faded centerline. I flag him down and drop my backpack. He stops the bike, straddling the bar and breathing hard.

"Mister!" I say. "You point me to Yazoo city?"

He points to his mouth and pulls out a little broken piece of slate and a piece of chalk from his pocket.

"Why?" he writes in block letters on the slate.

I guess it is a Mississippi kind of question. Someone asks you something. You ask them back something different. Then you spend a lot time being sure you don't tell them what you know they want to know.

"Gig," I say. I'm not about to give him the scoop. Truth is I was feeling so bad about this sweet girl--damn near a virgin--in Biloxi, I got drunk and missed a whole week of gigs with a band I'd been working with for two months. Manager left a note in the F-hole of my archtop acoustic. "No job. No more. Try Yazoo."

The guy's eyes light up when I say "gig," as if he dreams of being me someday. He points straight ahead, smiling, and he draws an X on his slate and circles the right upper branch.

"Yazoo City?" I ask again to be sure.

He grins a grin-with-gaps and gives me a thumb up. Before I get my stuff mounted again, he's back on the road, peddling like mad now.

I plod toward the crossroads, about to drop. In Jackson, I'd missed the once-a-week bus to Yazoo City, then I'd spent my last money on a meal of crackers and Coke out of the vending machines. A woman who mops the toilets told me I could walk the distance in few hours. There's some good information for you. I'm close to six hours walking now, and I ain't seen nothing, much less Yazoo City.

Sun's about half way down on the afternoon. Up ahead I see a crossroad; I imagine this is what the mute guy had been drawing because there's a paved road going off to the right.

I go about half a mile, and this little girl comes out of this cabin that's got a washing machine on the porch and a rusted Ford pickup--vintage mid forties--jacked up on concrete blocks in the yard. She runs out to me.

"You want some gum?" she says taking a wad out of her mouth.

"Pass on that one, baby," I say.

"Where you going?"

She's got a way of asking the tough questions up front. "I ain't sure," I say, thinking in the broad sense. I have a direction, but no purpose.

"What's in that?" she says, pointing to the guitar.

"Guitar. You know what a guitar is?"

She nodded once. "Play."

I'm zonked, so I put things down and stretch out on the roadside gravel. "Two strings busted baby. Don't play good." But I dig an "A" harp from my back pocket. "I play you a tune, you like?" She doesn't say anything, but I play her a tune, "Oh, Susanna." She doesn't look real excited, so I play her "The Saints Go Marching In."

"You like it?"

She shrugs, which, in my state, I take as a real downer.

"Look, here's another." I sing with this one. "Empty Bed Blues." And I'm about to cry, thinking about my woman. When I'm finished, her eyes seem to have a little more interest.

"My gal left me," I explain to her. "She was a waitress in Biloxi. Madeline's her name. Dear God, I love that girl. And I thought we would be together forever because she said 'I love you, too.' But two weeks later, she said my life was 'unstable,' that's exactly the word she used, and then she went to Atlanta to 'sort things out' at her mother's house. Unstable! Can you imagine that?" The girl is still just staring at me.

"Me blow that thing?" she asks.

I'm thinking I don't want the spit or nothing. But she looks about to cry so I explain. "Sorry, honey. You got gum and these harps is really personal. It's like a toothbrush." Well, that was something I hadn't had in a few days, and I don't think she'd seen one for a while either.

I'm thinking about just putting my head back and sleeping a while, maybe the night, by the side of the road. It's not like traffic's a problem keeping me awake.

She grabs the harmonica and starts running like the wind. It's my Big River, twenty-four bucks new, and I take out after her. She runs into the house and I run in right behind her, mad as hell but admiring that she's willing to go for what she wants.

Inside, the shack is a big room with a stove and a refrigerator with the door open. Stuff inside the fridge looks hot. I hear moaning, and the little girl pokes her head out the door of the room off to the right and stares at me.

Now there's a yelling. I go into the room.

Goddamn. There's a woman on the bed, on a bare mattress, with a pillow behind her head, and she's got her dress up and her knees up and I'm looking straight into her private parts that are bulging. I see this little football of hair, and then she stops yelling and the hair goes back in.

She's breathing hard, and all of sudden I am too. She whispers, "Get me some water in a bucket. Bring me the blanket from the couch." And the kid walks out, calm, like this happens every day. I'm ready to get back to my guitar and backpack, and get moving.

She begins a moan, and then stops. "Excuse me, Ma'am," I say, thinking I might tell her her daughter, at least this girl, stole my harmonica.

Then she moans short and starts screaming, and I back to the door. I see the football of hair growing larger. I wonder where the water is. But I'm not knowing at all what to do with it. At least the blanket seems like a good idea, to wrap the kid in if it gets here.

"It's coming," she screams.

It's damn obvious it's coming, and I am scared shitless.

"It's coming," she screams again.

And I'm looking at this woman's parts and thinking about all the times I dreamed about being down in there and believing I'll never be thinking that again.

"It's coming," she screams, and damn if it doesn't come in a flush of piss and blood and shit. It's half out, and she's trying to sit up like a crunch and help it, but she falls back. I step up and try to grab its head, but it's slippery as snot, so I get it by the shoulders trying to figure out a way for a pull, and here it comes itself, sliding down the bed and if I don't stop the little devil, it goes right on into the iron pipe cross the foot of the bed. The first thing I see is it's a boy--a soul brother--and I feel a little better about knowing it and I touch him on the head.

I seen enough TV to know you hold him up, and I take one hand on each leg. I think I have to whack him on the bottom, but I don't have a free hand. Thank the dear Lord he just cries on his own. I look down, and the woman is crying and smiling and mumbling, "Thank you, Jesus," over and over, and she's bleeding now so blood is running off the end of the bed in a little stream. The cord is still dangling, and she tells me to hand her the little guy.

The girl comes in and puts the blanket on the woman's crotch, and after the woman's got the little boy, I'm thinking about how to get out of there.

"Get me the knife, Pearl," the woman says.

Out goes the kid. "Ain't here," she yells back.

The woman sits and just chews on the cord until the end drops. Then she makes a little tie like ribbon candy.

She moans again. But not for long.

"I'm sorry, Ma'am."

She don't say nothing.

“It was like an accident.”

She’s still silent.

“I was just walking by. On the road to Yazoo City.”

“This ain’t the road to Yazoo City,” she manages to whisper.

She moans again. “Could you sit a spell?”

I don’t answer, and after a minute I pull up the only chair in the room. The baby is cradled on her chest, stuff like wax all over it with flecks of blood on his closed eyes. But he seems content.

The afterbirth comes after a mild moan. Then the blood pretty much stops. The little girl plops the water bucket down, but I don’t move. The woman holds out her hand and I take it, her fingers soft and tired feeling.

“What about your husband?” I ask.

“He don’t cotton to birthing,” she whispers.

I sit there maybe five minutes.

“You got a sweetheart?” she asks.

“Had one,” I say. “She left me. I ain’t felling too good about women right now,” I say.

“Man needs a good woman,” she whispers.

I close my eyes and feel the woman’s fingers weave into mine, holding tight. I’m afraid to let go, afraid she might drift off somewhere like a dandelion seed, and I’d be alone. After another five minutes or so, I let go. The feel of her hand lingers on my skin in a way that I won’t forget it.

“You get the doctor,” she says.

“I don’t know the doctor.”

“Phone at the store. Mile past the crossroads.”

“Back up the road?”

“Yeah, take the fork to Canton.”

“Okay,” I say.

I walk out to the big room. On the sink is another piece of broken slate with some smudged writing on it. I go to pick it up thinking it might have some information about the doctor but the little girl grabs it.

“I gotta find the doctor,” I said pointing to the slate.

She looks at me with a blank stare. She ain’t the best communicator. I’m wondering about the harp. Getting it back. But then I think what the hell, maybe it’ll do her more good than it did me.

“Let the good times roll,” I say to her and give her a little wave. She doesn’t move and her stare is still fixed on me.

I get back to the roadside, look around a little, but my backpack and guitar are gone. Every last thing I have in the world.

Jesus, I think, angry as hell, maybe I should track down the thief. That guitar is big bucks. I’d beat the hell out of him. Then I’m thinking about my promise about the doctor--I can’t go back on a promise--so I start moving again. After a while I’m surprised. Walking is a lot easier without lugging that damn guitar. I’m trying to be positive. I’m feeling lighter, like a balloon that broke away from being tied down. I’m thinking this is a sign. A new direction. Screw the gigs. Maybe I could try a career in fast food.

Just as I’m about to make the turn toward the phone place, the guy on the bike peddles up and whips out his slate. He writes a question mark. He’s got more schooling

than I thought. He's wearing my Chicago Cubs baseball cap, too, the one I had in my pack. He points up the road the way I come. He's grinning at me like he just slipped an ace into a losing hand of poker.

"It's a boy," I say. He jumps up and down a couple times, still straddling the bike, and waves his arms over his head.

"Good looking, too," I say.

He wipes the slate with the heel of his hand. I see he's wearing two of my fingerpicks. Damn! For a second, I want to strangle him.

"OK?" he writes. He cups his hands in front of his chest like breasts, I guess as a sign to tell me he's asking about the woman.

"You got to get the doctor," I tell him, but he starts shaking his head, pointing to his mouth.

"Okay," I say, "Okay!"

He wipes the slate clean again and writes, "U OK?"

I'm feeling light on possessions and I need to find some money for a burger and fries. I know I could sell my metronome that I still got in my pocket. Maybe sweet-talk a loan for a couple days.

"I'm cool," I say.

He puts the slate back in his pocket and slaps me on the shoulder like I'm his best friend. He makes the peace sign with his hand, and looks worried. That's too much my-buddy stuff for a guy that just ripped off my guitar. I have the thought to mangle him on the spot. But I can't stop seeing in my mind his woman and my Madeline, all at once. Maybe he's doing it for his family. So I slap him on the back, friendly.

"I like your groove," I say, with more meaning than I thought I had in me.

He gets ready to crank up his bike.

“Hey, my man,” I say pointing down the road. “Is that the way to Atlanta?”

He writes another question mark on his slate with “Yazoo” after it.

“My woman in Atlanta,” I say.

He points the other way toward Atlanta. His grin is so wide I can see where his back teeth are missing.