

BLUES LEGEND

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For Robert Michael Smith

WILLIE G WAS LEANING OVER THE sideboard working his gums with a toothpick, bloodshot eyes scouring the Daily Racing Form for scratches and changes in the weekend events at Racino Park. He glanced over, unimpressed, and saw me sit down.

“How’s it going, Chief?”

“Not bad, Willie. How’s it with you?”

He closed the form. Laid it on the formica next to the twin Hamilton Beech blenders.

“What can I get for you?” He hooked his thumbs in the knot of his apron strings. “Cheeseburger? Patty melt? How about a hot pork barbecue?”

“I shook my head. “Some other time, Willie.”

“Uh huh.” He looked at me. “What’s it gonna be then?”

“Just coffee.”

He made a disappointed face and tapped his finger on the wooden counter, turning away with a sigh. “There go that handsome gratuity I been counting on all week.”

An old guy in dirty jeans and a weatherworn Resistol two stools down paused with his fork before his mouth and glanced my way. He was finishing a plate of bacon and eggs.

“What happened that nice girl you come in here with that one time?”

Willie G said. “Tall one with the black hair?”

“She dumped me.”

He poured coffee into the bottom of my cup and slid the metal cream caddy my way. “Why that?” He raised his eyebrows. “You do her dirt? She find somebody prettier?”

I shrugged.

“So you got yourself, what, now?” He frowned, pursing his lips. “Nothing? Nobody?”

“Just this.” I curled my fingers and, with a bored-looking face, stroked a handful of air.

The old guy two stools down gave out a sympathetic chuckle. But Willie G found no humor in the gesture. He tugged the bar towel from his shoulder and pointed it at me. “That ain’t no good, baby. No good at all. Fella gotta save hisself.” He bent at the waist so our faces were level. So his white hair was inches from my eyes. “Nature only give a man so many shots,” he said, wiping down the counter. “And when they’s used up, they’s used up. Chamber’s empty. See what I’m saying?”

I picked up my spoon and stirred cream into the coffee. “How many’s so many, Willie?”

“That ain’t the point.”

He straightened up and flung the towel back over his shoulder, wiping his hands on his apron.

“Point is, thing’s gotta mean something in this life. Everything got a purpose.”

I put my fingers inside my shirt and pulled out the little red bag. The one I’d found looped around my neck when I awoke this morning. “You know what this is, Willie?” I asked, setting the sack on the counter.

He eyed it suspiciously. “I know what it *ain’t*.”

“What’s that?”

“*Yours*.”

We looked at one another.

“You recognize it, then?”

“Yeah, I reckonize it.”

“So you know who it belongs to.”

“Yeah, I know.” He crossed his arms and made a serious face. “I also know it ain’t doing him no good sitting in your pocket.”

I drew the mojo hand across the counter and returned it to my shirt. “That’s why I’m looking for him, Willie. I need to get it back to him.” I lifted the steaming cup of coffee and brought it to my mouth. “I’ve been looking for him high and low, but I can’t seem to find him.” I took a drink. Set the cup back on the saucer. “He’s gone missing.”

“Missing, huh?” Willie said, his eyebrows arched, mirror opposites on either side of his broad, handsome nose. “He in trouble with the Man again?”

I shook my head. “I don’t know, Willie. All I can tell you is, I’ve known Joe Hobbs a long time and I’ve never seen him go anywhere without it. So there must’ve been a reason he left it with me.”

“How you lose track of a man?” Willie said disdainfully. “I thought he your best friend?”

Joe Hobbs had been crazy for as long as I'd known him. Even when we were kids. We used to get stoned in his bedroom after school and make plans for a future that only the lost or truly sick at heart would ever hope to live. We'd take long, languorous hits off the pipe while listening to Sun House and Robert Johnson, then drift off into solemn musings over the road trips we were going to take after we graduated—drug-addled pilgrimages to Chicago, Memphis, and the Mississippi Delta—the wakes of which would be littered with skag needles, corn liquor jugs, barroom whores, and hand-rolled Bull Durham cigarettes. We told ourselves we were going to travel to all the hard-road shrines of American music. Worship at the birthplaces of the greatest bluesmen who'd ever walked a cotton row.

Two men in long black coats pushed through the door. The taller of them glanced up at the tinkling shopkeeper's bell mounted above the jamb, then followed his companion to the counter where they sat, rigidly, on the chrome stools and ordered coffee. The short man's face bore a stubbled blond beard, and he wore a small gold earring in the shape of a cross. The taller man, a Cholo in a plaid shirt, clean-shaven with distant brown eyes, wore his hair gassed back in the manner of a big-city pimp.

The one with the gold earring lit a cigarette, taking a single drag. He laid it, carefully, in the groove of the tin ashtray before him and pulled out his smartphone. He tapped the screen and held the phone at arm's length to Willie G, inquiring in a low flat, nasal voice, "You know this guy?"

Willie G stared at the man without saying a word. Then he turned his bloodshot eyes to the phone, where he leaned forward and frowned. When he leaned back again, he pulled the toothpick from between his teeth and stabbed it lightly at the air as if he were going to say yes, he knew the man. But instead, he shook his head.

"No?" the blond man said, as if surprised.

The old cook shrugged, repairing the toothpick to his bottom lip. "Nuh, uh."

"You're telling me you don't know this joker? You've never seen him before?"

Willie G folded his arms and feigned embarrassment at not being able to recall the man's face. But he refused to step back from his assertion. He said he'd never seen the man before, and turned to his work, snaring me in a desperate, sidelong glance.

The man with the gold earring saw him.

“What’re you looking at him for, Willie?”

Willie looked over his shoulder. “Say what?”

“I said why are you looking at him? I’m the one asking the questions.”

He smiled thinly, his beard bristling at the corners of his mouth. He held up the phone again. “You’re *sure* you’ve never seen this guy before?”

Willie G squinted and turned up his palms.

“Maybe?” the man persisted.

“Maybe,” Willie conceded grudgingly. “Or then again, maybe not.”

The man turned to his partner, the Cholo, and chuckled. Then he drew back the flap of his coat to put his phone away. When he did, the butt of a nickel-plated pistol showed itself in the waistband of his trousers.

Joe Hobbs was an easy man to spot. Luling, Texas was a town of ranchers and railroaders, hardened, blue-collar men whose days began and ended in dung-crusting stock boots and broad-brimmed cowboy hats fouled with grease and bird shit. But Joe, ever the bluesman, ever the hipster, had never bought into the life to which he was born, and he dressed now the same way he’d done when we were boys. Dark glasses and a porkpie hat. Lace-up shoes, black trousers and a pressed white shirt buttoned at the collar. How these men had not stumbled into him was, at its worst, the sort of cosmic joke God reserves for the truly wicked. But it was also luck, good luck for Joe, and for his sake I hoped it would not run out.

“We heard he comes here sometimes,” the Cholo said. “We heard he’s got a jones for your hot pork barbeque. You make good hot pork barbecue, Willie?”

Willie G said nothing, and the men laughed. When they stopped laughing Willie G unfolded his arms and snatched the toothpick from his lip and said, “I ain’t meaning to bust on you, boss. But that there? That pitcher you got? It ain’t nothing but a beat-up photograph of some old white boy. Could be any old white boy from what I seen.”

“Yeah, sure,” the Cholo said, pinching the crease of his chinos. “Except for one thing, Willie. This white boy thinks he’s a black boy. He plays a blues harp and wears a pork pie hat. Sports one a them, uh—waddaya call em, Ray?” He snapped his fingers. “Them *soul* patches. You know, like the bruthas do. Like Dizzy Gillespie.”

“A *dap*,” Ray said.

“Yeah, right,” the Cholo grinned, exposing a gold-rimmed tooth. “A *dap*.”

Willie G stood there like a grainy image on a low-rent album cover. Motionless and dreary-eyed. Tapped of everything but his last nickel and the addict’s need to spend it.

“He wears a little red sack around his neck,” said Ray, the man with the gold earring. “You don’t know anything about that, do you? Little red sack full of goodies?”

Willie G pursed his lips and pretended to think, and as he did I closed my eyes. Waiting. Counting the seconds before he gave me up. But it didn’t happen. The old cook stayed as cool and hardened as the black iron fry pans hanging from the skillet rack over his griddle.

“What kinda goodies?”

Joe claimed the little red sack—the *mojo hand*—had been given to him by a hoodoo woman he’d met in a music shop in Chicago the year he ran away from home. Back when we were teenagers and his mother died, and he made a crazed cross country run to escape his abusive father, who he swore he was going to murder some day.

I was thumbing through peach crates of vintage LPs, looking for this Chess recording of Elmore James, he told me as he lay there on the floor of his room, eyes closed, a joint burning between his fingers. And she came sidling up from around a counter and said, I know what you’re lookin’ for, boy. And you ain’t gonna find it lest you come through me.

She was his soul mate, he said. A root doctor. A reader of bones. She cast a spell on him with sachet powder and conjured him to her bed with lips smothered in blackstrap molasses.

The *mojo hand* contained great stores of magic, he said. The hoodoo woman had seen to it. She’d snipped three strands of hair from between his legs, weaving them together with three of her own. Then she’d filled the bag with charms—talismans that would see to his safekeeping no matter where he went—Devil’s shoestring ... graveyard dirt ... a black cat bone ... and John the Conqueror Root.

There’s a pinch of anvil dust in there, too, he’d said in his hemp-induced stupor, and a square of camphor for cleaning out bad things of the past.

My fingers had pressed themselves against my chest, lightly kneading the little sack inside my shirt. Searching, I suppose, for the otherworldly comforts it was alleged to possess. When I caught them at their fumbling, I put a quick end to it. But the man with the gold earring had already seen everything, and when our eyes met, he scowled.

“You,” he said with an upward lilt of his head when he caught me staring at him.

I turned away, putting my eyes into my cup.

“*Hey, you. Nickledick.*” He swiveled on his stool, anchoring his elbow on the counter. The cigarette burned between his fingers. He pointed it at me. “The fuck’s your problem, huh?” He canted his head so he could get a better look around the old guy in the shabby Resistol. “You trying to mind my business for me? You go putting your nose where it doesn’t belong, I’ll have Manny here cut it off.”

Manny chuckled over his coffee, not bothering to look in my direction.

The old guy who’d been sitting down the counter from me, minding his own business, slid from his stool and thumbed a few bills and some loose change on the countertop. He’d heard enough to know he didn’t want to be here any longer.

Joe Hobbs’s hoodoo woman was dark skinned, witchy and angular. She wore her hair close-cropped—a nap of tight ebony curls clinging to her scalp like moss on an oiled stone—and carried a Nation Sack on her hip filled with herbs and potions ... a Mercury-head dime and other small concerns by which she could summon good luck, or ward off evil. Joe swore she could see into the future as well as the past. He said when she’d opened her hand a tattooed eye blinked up at him from her palm, and he saw the days of his life fan out before him like playing cards on a game table.

The door opened, and I started at the polite little tinkle of the bell. The men in the long black coats turned in the direction of the door as well, but only to exhibit a passing interest in the late-arrived guest. They noted his face, glanced casually at one another, grinned, and went back to their coffee.

The customer unzipped his filthy blanket-lined coat and limped my way, taking a seat on the stool beside me without removing his Stetson. Though he bore no resemblance to the photo on the thug’s cell phone, or to

the Joe Hobbs I'd known since I was a boy, there was little doubt they were one and the same person.

"How about a cup of mud?" he said cheerfully, turning what-used-to-be-his-face to Willie G.

Willie G did a better job of concealing his shock than I'd been able to manage. Without a word—without giving away even the smallest gesture of recognition—he took the coffee pot from the warming service and brought a cup down from the shelf. "Quasimodo done got hisself a baby brutha now, huh?" he said, pouring. "Ain't nobody round here gonna tell you how to ring no bells, is they?"

Joe lowered his head and snorted.

The men down the counter, who'd overheard the remark, laughed as well.

Willie G was nobody's fool. Joe was still Joe Hobbs, but he was no longer the man you could have spotted on street corner from a mile away. He was a monster now. His face had been beaten beyond recognition.

He turned to me and smiled. One of his front teeth was broken—sheared off into a perfect fang—and his eyes had been reduced to puffy blue-black slits. His nose, which had once been almost handsome, was now a knob of bruised, swollen flesh layered over with gauze and surgical tape.

The Cholo, Manny, looked down the counter admiring the lopsided shape of his head, the zipper of stitches over his left eye, and asked if he'd gotten the number of the truck that hit him.

Joe laughed and drank his coffee.

Manny lit a cigarette and, as the lighter clicked shut and found its way back into the pocket of his perfectly laundered chinos, an unsettling silence settled upon the room.

We sat there, no one saying a word until Ray, the thug with the gold earring, rose from his stool and rolled his shoulders like a prize fighter. He looked sideways at Manny, then slipped his hands into the pockets of his long black coat and shuffled across the room to Joe's side.

"How's it going, friend?"

"Terrific," Joe said. "How's it going with you?"

Ray drew back the flap of his coat and reached inside, his hand momentarily concealed in the lining. I felt my heart take off at a slow, steady trot, all but certain the nickel-plated pistol was about to appear. But when the hand revealed itself again, the only thing it was clutching was the cellphone.

“Help me out, will you?” he grinned. “You know this guy?”

He held up the phone for Joe to see.

Joe leaned forward, then back, as if adjusting his swollen eyes to the proper focal length. “I don’t know,” he said. “Who is he?”

Ray shrugged, smiling. “You tell me.”

Joe bent forward on his seat again, bringing his battered eyes within inches of the screen. Then he pulled away, innocently, and said, “Sorry. Picture’s too blurry.”

“Is it?” Ray said.

Joe raised a lazy finger and pointed, happily, to his face. “I guess I’m probably not the best guy to ask.”

“His name’s Hobbs,” the Cholo piped from down the counter, tapping his cigarette on the lip of the ashtray. “Joe Hobbs. He plays the harmonica, and sings a little. Wears this red sack around his neck.”

Joe pursed his bruised lips. Shook his head. “Sorry.”

“You’ve never seen him, huh?” Ray persisted.

“Friend,” Joe said with a grotesque display of tooth enamel, “I haven’t seen anything for days, except the insides of my own eyelids.”

The man, Ray, smirked. “Yeah, yeah. Sure.” He turned as if to leave, but stopped after only half a step and, reaching out, parted Joe’s shirt with his finger. “You haven’t got that bad boy stashed in here, have you?” His eyes worked their way around Joe’s bare chest, searching. But disappointment soon settled on his face. He tugged Joe’s shirt together again. “No,” he said, stepping away. “I guess not.”

They stared at one another, eye to blackened-eye. Neither man blinking. I waited for the gunman to wheel around and finger my shirt as well, but it didn’t happen. By some remarkable stroke of luck, he never even looked my way. He just laughed and gave Joe a friendly pat on the shoulder.

“Well, you see the man, tell him we’re looking for him. Okay?”

“Will do.”

“Be a whole lot better, whole lot easier, if he comes to us.”

“Understood.”

Ray looked down at his fingernails. Then up again, scratching at the corner of his eye. He signaled his partner with a casual toss of the head. “Yo, bro,” he called across the room. “Pay the man.”

Manny the Cholo pulled a five from his coat and pushed it across the counter toward Willie G, after which he rose from his seat and swaggered to

the door. Ray wandered outside into the cold air and lit another cigarette, but Manny lingered a moment, his back against the white tile wall. He grinned, and lifted his chin, gold tooth gleaming. “Hey, Lone Star,” he said in a hoarse whisper.

Joe looked over. “Yeah?”

“I gotta know.”

The two held one another’s gaze for what seemed to me a lifetime, then Joe set down his cup and smiled.

“My old lady got after me,” he said, lying through what few teeth he had left. “How do you like that for a hard luck song?”

“Your woman?” Manny leaned back, head cocked. A perplexed frown darkening his face.

“She got pissed,” Joe said. “Asked me how I’d like it if I didn’t see her for a couple of days.”

“And?”

“I said sure, why not? I could use the break.” He picked up his cup and stopped it just shy of his split, swollen lip. “Next thing I knew I was lying in a hospital bed. Blind.”

Manny let out a mean little laugh. “Ouch. What’d she smack you with, man? Fucking bowling ball?”

“I’m told it was a bat.”

“Bat? Like, what? A *baseball* bat?”

“That was the speculation of the attending physician,” Joe said, lowering his cup. “Based on the nature of the injuries.”

Manny the Cholo glanced through the glass door at his partner, Ray, who had pinched his collar to his neck and was doing a little tap dance on the sidewalk to stave off the chill. “That’s hard, man. Real hard.” He shook his head, and turned to leave. Paused. “You come down on the bitch? Press charges?”

Joe pretended to consider the notion, but shook his head. “Nah,” he said in a somber voice. “I had it coming.”

Manny and Ray drove away in a black lowrider with fender skirts and suicide doors. When their vehicle was out of sight and the last rumble of its engine had faded away, Willie G yanked the towel from his shoulder, balled it in his fist, and threw it on the floor.

“Sorry, Willie,” Joe mumbled.

The apology went unacknowledged. The old hash-slinger kicked the towel aside and glowered at us, tears raging in his eyes. He turned, cursing, and walked to the door where he plucked a book of matches and a pack of Camels from the pocket of his apron.

My hands were trembling. I wrapped them around my coffee cup to keep them still. “How did you get into my apartment last night?”

“The window was open.”

I nodded, working my tongue over my teeth. I couldn’t make myself look at him.

“Why didn’t you wake me?”

“You were sleeping.”

I nodded again.

“And this?” I said, still not looking at him, drawing the mojo hand from my shirt. “Was this supposed to mean something?”

“I wanted you to have it.”

“Have it?”

“Yeah. For a while. Otherwise I couldn’t have done what I needed to do.”

My heart went numb. It felt as if it had fallen out of my chest and rolled into a rusty drainpipe. I didn’t ask what it was that the little red bag would have prevented him from doing. If he had a reason for stealing into my apartment in the dead of night and stringing a sack of curses around my neck, I didn’t want to know what it was.

“Those guys,” I said. “Who were they?”

“They work for a man. Up in Dallas.”

“Why are they here?”

“There was a disagreement.”

“Over what?”

He shrugged as if it hardly mattered, Ray and Manny being the type who didn’t concern themselves with the troubling details of other men’s squabbles. They were professionals. Big-picture boys.

“Do you know how lucky you were they didn’t recognize you? If it wasn’t for that *face* of yours, you’d be tits up in a ditch right now.”

His broken lips twisted into a queer sort of smile. He reached over, and took the little red sack from my hand, slipping it into the pocket of his trousers.

“That’s God’s own truth, is it?”

I sneered at his nonchalance. “They’ll be back you know. When they realize it was you.”

“Let them come,” he said.

I closed my eyes and knotted my fingers together. If, as he’d once claimed, he’d seen the days of his life fan out before him like playing cards on a game table, then he must have known—sensed in some crude, visceral way—that it was only a matter of time before his luck ran out. So why go on bluffing? The hand had been played, the joker had shown his face.

“Who messed you up?” I said.

He let out a tired breath, whispering something I didn’t hear.

“If it wasn’t those two,” I pressed, “who was it?”

He cleared his throat and looked into his coffee cup.

“Well?”

“It’s hard to explain,” he said, attempting to convince me it was more a case of not wanting to waste my time than dodging the question outright.

But I refused to leave things as they were.

“Try,” I said. “If someone else is coming, I deserve to know.”

We looked at one another. A dreary, painful look. He refrained from answering for as long as he could, then laughed, sourly, and held up his hands in a comical attempt at surrender. “It was an inside job.”

“Inside? Inside, how?”

A smile found its way to his lips, and he calmly pantomimed the answer, pretending to batter himself about the face with an imaginary hammer.

I closed my eyes and told him to stop.

He did, and without further comment, rose from his stool and stepped back from the counter.

“Jesus,” I muttered.

He tugged a handful of loose bills from the pocket of his jacket and let them fall across his fingers onto the formica, next to his coffee cup. “There’s a train over in the yards,” he said. “A northbound freighter, heading for Illinois. I believe I might avail myself of the accommodations.”

I glanced across my shoulder to the door. Willie G was leaning against the wall, smoking. Staring out into the empty street like an orphan who’d just come to the hard bit of news that his parents were dead. When I looked back, Joe was turning up his collar.

“Things have to mean something in this life,” I heard myself say, mouthing the words Willie had spoken to me that morning as if they were my own. “Everything has to have a purpose, Joe.”

He looked at me, face full of childlike approval. “Yeah,” he said. “Yeah, sure.”

We stood there. Wordless. Each waiting for the other to speak. The future—the one we’d dreamed for ourselves when we were boys—had come to an end, and all that remained was *this* moment, the here and now of who we were. Of what we’d become. He took me by the sleeve and pulled me to his chest, forcing me to endure a suffocating embrace, the memory of which would linger in my muscles.

Willie G refused to look at him as he left the restaurant. But I had no such difficulty. I watched as he hobbled away toward the rail yard, shoulder to the wind, and in the wake of his gloomy departure imagined a day when a stranger—some down-and-outer in search of a hero—would shuffle up to me on a street corner and surprise me by uttering his name.

“Hey, mister,” the man would say, peering up at me with tragic eyes. “You knew Joe Hobbs. Was he as *bad* as they say?”