

A Darker World

a novel by
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Among all men on the earth bards have a share
of honor and reverence, because the muse has
taught them songs and loves the race of bards.

-Homer, The Odyssey

Listening to him he'd make you think you were,
well... this can't be written down, but you know
what I mean. That is, you couldn't understand
what the hell he was singing, but you didn't
have to.

-Josh White, on Blind Lemon Jefferson

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"So there I am, I'm out there on the street, right? Doin' my lil' ole thing..."

T is hunched in the middle of the room, hands on his haunches, smoke streaming from his nostrils, looking like a big black dragon in the huddle with 4th and goal to go. As usual, he's illustrating his story with elaborate miming and exaggerated, almost vaudevillian facial expressions. The weed is hitting me, and it occurs to me that, in another world, T could have been a great actor. I can suddenly see him roaming the stage, thundering one of King Richard's soliloquies. I keep this to myself, though. And congratulate myself that I'm finally learning to control the marijuana babble.

"I'm out there earnin' a muthafuckin' living... you know, I ain't out robbin' and stealin'..."

"Not that day, anyway."

This is from Artie, who is rummaging through the mounds of cords and adapters somewhere in the back of the warehouse's front room, where we're congregated for the obligatory pre-gig joint. He's trying to hold his own with T and Fred but his feeble Caucasian attempts at "the dozens" are generally met with laughter at best, and more often totally ignored. Artie's hunched over, making a big show of looking for something in the piles, but one eye is cocked upward, waiting to see if anyone will respond to his jibe with anything like approval.

T merely looks at Fred and the two of them shrug. That universal black man's shrug that says so eloquently, and almost sadly: *poor old white folks*.

"Anyway, so, this freak comes dancin' up to me with that – you know that big ole' cross they tote up and down Beale Street?"

His trash talk having tanked, Artie shifts tactics, tries buddying up a little. "Yeah, he was out there doin' the same shit yesterday, man. He gave me a tuna sandwich. I told him, hey, I ain't homeless, you know..."

"Not that day, anyway," Fred says in a "for T only" sotto voice. The two black men chuckle. Artie laughs along too, but hesitantly. I see the confusion in his eyes. Artie always reminds me of a hurt child. He's probably in his early forties. Potbellied, gray hair

pulled back into a short ponytail, long hangdog face with a bulbous red ex-drunkard's nose planted in the middle like a mushroom.

He already looks like an old man, although to me – at nineteen – they all do.

"So, the dude comes dancin' up." T's 200-plus-pound body is convulsing in the mincing, jerky movements of the streetside holy roller.

"PLANTS that fuckin' ten-foot cross right in front of the stage and starts screamin' 'JESUS!'"

His head is thrown back, a barely contained religious fervor glowing in his stoned eyes.

"I love you JESUS!" and all that shit!"

Fred is watching, a lazy smile on his face. A man who's heard every joke in the world, but doesn't mind listening one more time – or pretending to listen.

"Right in front of me, right in front of my motherfuckin' TIP bucket! People passin' by, they be runnin' the other direction to get away from this dude, and I ain't makin' no money, not with his sorry ass preachin' that shit right in front of me. And he be all actin' like I ain't even there, right? Like he OWNS that corner for God, right? I gave him plenty of chances, man. I asked polite. Like, hey, I'm tryin' to get paid here, you know?"

"I heard that man. Messing with your money..."

"T, you using the big one today?"

This is Tommy, at the foot of the stairs, holding T's big bass amplifier. It's getting time to load up the van. I should be helping, since it's technically the only thing I have in the way of a job these days, but the weed has lazied me to the point that I can't imagine lifting and grunting the equipment down those long stairs and around to the parking lot. All I want to do is sit where I am on this beat-up couch and watch the dust swirling around in the late afternoon light. And I want to hear the rest of T's story. I'm already trying to memorize it so I can pass it off as my own later, in the bars.

He interrupts it, impatiently, to bark at Tommy to not forget his pedals. Then turns back to us, his audience. Artie has found the cord he was looking for and stands fidgeting with it, pretending he's not waiting to hear the end of the story too.

Fred lifts a bottle of Wild Irish Rose from the piano and takes a long slow, unhurried hit. As always, Fred manages to exude a kind of gentlemanly elegance, despite his shabby, Mission cast-off clothes, and the generally squalid surroundings of the warehouse. His leg crossed at the knee, a Newport between his long, knobby fingers, his sad eyes are full of indulgence for the noisy world.

"So, I'm playin' along, doin' Mustang Sally..."

T hums the riff as he moves his fingers, doing a little air bass.

"Take my hand off –"

He's playing one-handed now, miming a sudden short uppercut.

"WHAM! Right upside Jimmy Swaggart's head, man! He goes: *eeeerooop!*"

Nearly hysterical with glee, T moves his hand from vertical to horizontal, like a man falling, accompanied by a cartoon-like sound effect ending with the simulated crash of Baptist skull on Beale Street pavement.

"And I *finish the goddamn song*. I like to sent him on to *see* God – getting in the way of my money – but he ain't planted that cross in front of my bucket since that day, and I know that's right..."

"Damn right, man... that's how they do..."

"Sho' 'nuff."

I want to be able to tell stories. I watch T for clues the way I watch Fred's hands as they move over his guitar during the gigs, searching for the key that will unlock the mystery of the *ease* with which the thing – whatever it is – is communicated.

But now it's time to earn my daily bread. I hoist Fred's Twin Reverb up and brace it against my shoulder, move across the perilous topography of our living quarters – wrappers, bottles, upturned ashtrays, fast food cartons all forming an undulating tide that laps at my feet as I pick my way through.

Down the stairs and pause, fumbling in my pocket, in front of the steel door at the bottom. This door can only be opened with a key, from inside or out. A fine little insurance policy – one of many Boyd has hipped me to – that comes in handy when guests are around. Not all of whom are worthy of the kind of trust that an easy getaway would imply. Many a night we've been called away from our revelry by the frustrated curses of one of the neighborhood whores, trapped at the bottom with someone's wallet or car keys, suddenly realizing that these white boys might not be quite as dumb as they look.

"Looking for this, honey?" Boyd will giggle, dangling the deadbolt key teasingly from his thumb as he stands at the top of the stairs with that glint in his eye that those who've wronged him come quickly to fear. It's a look that says, *so now I know who you really are*. And she sees the gladness under the phony reproach, and knows that now, he would just as soon hit her as fuck her.

I haven't come up on the wrong side of that look yet. I'm always standing behind him, waiting to see how this one'll talk her way into the lesser of two evils.

I get the gate open and come out onto Union Ave. Weave my way through the small crowd of idlers in front of Ray's, nodding to a couple of the regulars. It's a warm, breezy Memphis afternoon, bits of trash

blowing down the sidewalk, the cicadas humming in the background, stray black men listlessly sloping their way along the sidewalk.

Ray is our downstairs neighbor. His liquor store serves as a kind of oasis in this bombed out, used-to-be neighborhood. Men drift over at all hours from a ten-square-block radius, jingling coins in their hand, hitting each other up for nickels and dimes, banding together to upgrade from a pint to a fifth.

I can feel the eyes on the amp as I hump it over to where Tommy's stretched, just inside the van door. A Fender blackface properly pawned equals one hell of a lot of wine. But it's too heavy for a snatch and dash. Most of these guys wouldn't make it five feet with the beast.

Tommy helps me get it in the van and we sit back for a minute. Tommy's rolling the next in the endless chain of joints that connects his mornings to his nights. Already high as a kite, I shake my head no, but accept the little half-pint of Wild Turkey that appears from his jacket pocket.

The whiskey splashes down my throat and I smile up at the ruined buildings, the vacant lots, the dead boulevard. It's all lovely – exactly the opposite of anything that makes sense for me, and for that I am grateful. Forty years ago and four doors up, a greasy mama's boy named Elvis was getting up the nerve to change the world, or so it's said. Across town, the old

Stax Records building sits in shards and tatters, a lone plaque in the dirt telling of the deeds of men named Otis and Duck, while teenagers sling vials of crack on the corner and break the few remaining windows for kicks. And why not? Old ghosts can't fight back. Downtown Memphis is eighty per cent black, and gaining fast. There is actually a suburb called "Whitehaven." But I've made my own "white flight". I have escaped from my destiny to this place, and I'm young and loaded and mostly unemployed and feeling fucking fine.

I don't know what Tommy's feeling, or if he feels at all underneath the perpetual sensemilla fog. His light gray eyes are empty and peaceful, and he seems content to wait for whatever comes next. We are quiet together for a moment, then Tommy gulps down the roach and flips his cigarette into the gutter.

"Guess we better get on it," he says.

We hump it upstairs and back a few more times, stopping for refreshments between each piece of gear. There is never any hurry in this life with the Cadillac Blues Band. Officially, our slot in the park is from three to six, but we rarely arrive before four. No one seems to care. The previous band just gets to work the crowd a little longer. And there are always local guys willing to jump up during the open spaces and busk a little for themselves. There's always music in

the park this time of year, but, unlike the club scene, things are pretty loose on the street. The people attract the musicians – rather than the other way around – and aside from the pretense of the daily line-up (printed up by someone's secretary in the Parks and Recreation Department and posted on a bulletin board under a tree in the Southwest corner of the park), it's basically every man for himself.

Somehow Tommy has been saddled with helping me on equipment duty, although he doesn't get any extra for it. He doesn't seem to mind. And if he does mind, he doesn't say – he doesn't say much in general really, even though he's often asked by one of the others to dish out my wages from his own pocket. But he doesn't squawk about that either. Tommy plods through life the way he drums: unwavering, unadorned, and seemingly unburdened. A regular gig, a few bucks a day, weed and whiskey and a girl once in awhile. As far as I can tell, this is Tommy. He has a mother somewhere in Midtown with a tiny house. I'm pretty sure he doesn't even like blues much – his tastes run more towards classic rock, judging by the T-shirts he wears. But he's not good enough for the clubs, and blues is all they play on the street here.

Finally, the van is loaded and locked and the Southern humidity has left my California-acclimatized self soaked and dripping. Tommy and I pop into Ray's and buy another bottle. Six-foot light brown cardboard

women beckon me from all sides to drink Crown Royal, because that's what *they* prefer.

We holler upstairs for the others and hunch on the curb, waiting and passing the new bottle.

I'm staring at the traffic, at all the tight faces in suits and ties headed away from Downtown, toward wherever home is. It's quitting time for the working world. But we're just getting out of bed.

Tommy's voice filters into my stoned trance.

"Hey, you think I been soundin' OK?"

"What? Yeah, you've been sounding real good. Why?"

A little white lie, sure. But what's it going to hurt?

"T keeps yellin' at me about my time. Says there's ten other drummers better than me."

"He's just fucking with you. I know those other guys. Believe me, T doesn't want any competition for stealing from the bucket. Your job's secure."

This, at least, is mostly true.

"I never saw him take nothin'."

I shrug.

But Tommy is remarkably persistent on this one. "But you think them other guys play better than me, Oscar?"

I hesitate. "What's his name – Bobby? He plays good. He used to play with Phineas Newborn."

"Who's that?"

I reach my hand out for the bottle. "Piano player. Jazz. He died a few years ago."

"You read about all these guys out in California?" I see his brow furrow as he grapples, in his addled way, with the unknowable motives of the world beyond Memphis.

"That's right."

Tommy shakes his head. "You never know," he says, seriously. "You never know what they're readin' up on out there."

To my relief, I hear Boyd's voice booming down the stairwell from above:

"Shit, look at our equipment manager! Turnin' into a fuckin' drunk! Must be all this bad company!"

I grin up the stairs. "It's all your fault, you damn redneck..."

This is a running joke between us. Boyd is endlessly amused at *my* amusement regarding his backwoods upbringing. Now he shifts into a grotesque, hillbilly falsetto, mimicking me in his Arkansas drawl:

"Shoot, ma, I dropped outta college to hang out with these no good niggers and crackers out in Tenn-*uh*-see, and now I just ain't no good no more..."

Cuffing me on the head, he pulls a cigarette out of his shirt pocket and stands there on the stoop, three hundred pounds of solid Southern peckerwood. Long

dirty blonde hair, arms a blur of faded India ink, and hard blue Irish eyes that can turn mean in a flash.

"Anybody pay you yet, kid?"

"Nope."

He hands me some crumpled bills. His exaggerated redneck-ese becomes a slightly higher-pitched, motherly nag. "Don't spend it all on the same whore, now..."

I stuff the bills into my pocket, feeling better already. I can't get used to being dead-ass broke. It makes me feel hollow and weightless. Like I don't exist.

"You white folks ready to make some fuckin' money?" This is T, appearing at the bottom of the stairs now.

Boyd gives him a pair of slitted eyes. "Well, here he comes. Surprised you made it down the stairs you jelly roll motherfucker."

"I don't need but one hand, boy." T mimes his one-handed punch from the earlier story. I can feel something growing lately between these two. Like they're sniffing around each other, taking measure for some eventuality.

I met Boyd not long after I arrived in Memphis. I first saw him in the park, blowing harp with Alabama on a slow Tuesday, the tourists milling disinterestedly around the tip bucket and squinting their tired eyes at sad old Beale Street. Alabama played an amplified, yet

countrified Lightnin' Hopkins style blues and sang in a deep, weathered voice about how "raisin' good cotton just like a lucky man shootin' dice."

I remember watching them for awhile, thinking that the big white guy didn't have much finesse, but he did have a hell of a lot of enthusiasm. Boyd lurched around the stage, narrowly missing the cords and mic stands. His eyes above his cupped hands were fierce and violent and he blew so hard it seemed he'd pass out from the combination of the exertion and his considerable girth.

The next time I saw him was in front of the New Daisy theater. I'd just watched the great bluesman Jimmy Rogers lumber perfunctorily through a two-hour set, backed by four eager young white kids with slicked back hair and alligator boots. Boyd and I struck up a conversation, and I quickly impressed him with my knowledge of old Little Walter records.

We fell into a routine after that. I'd head over to his rooming house in the evenings and we'd drink cheap wine and play records. In between smoking Thai stick and swapping venereal diseases with his fellow recruits, Boyd had picked up a slight limp during some type of munitions accident in Da Nang, and he drew a small check every month. My money was slowly running out, and I was scratching around with the want ads, hating the idea of a job when there was so much else to do.

Boyd quickly figured out that I didn't know half as much as I pretended to about the world, but I did seem to know something about music. I was a nut for the blues he was learning to play, and even though I didn't play any instrument – couldn't even carry a tune – he respected my opinion for some reason. I think in part, he saw me as a younger version of himself, one who could still be saved from the disaster his own life had been up until he had discovered music in his late thirties and pulled himself, by sheer stubborn will, out of the freefall of liquor, flophouses and jails that had been his trajectory.

And too: I was a good audience. I took it as a given that the mastery of blues harmonica was a worthy goal for a man approaching middle age who hadn't held down a real job in at least ten years.

At the same time, Boyd was starting to school me on the finer points of inner city living. Who to trust, and who to keep away from. Where to buy dope and where *never* to buy dope. Which girls were bad news, and which guys were bad news. And these were things I badly wanted to know, to get behind me as soon as possible so I could erase that greenhorn smudge that seemed to mar me wherever I went.

As we drank in his tiny room, the fan buzzed overhead, caked with a hundred years of grime and failure, and Boyd – like all drunks – talked about his plans. To my great relief, he never asked me about

mine. Still, I was surprised when one of what I'd assumed to be his pipe dreams actually materialized: the inner city music pad.

He rented the old warehouse over Ray's liquor store for next to nothing from some blind old church woman who thought it was disgraceful to have property standing empty. We'd found our headquarters. The rehearsal space from which Boyd was going to take the local blues scene by storm. With my guiding counsel, of course. Who was I to blow against the wind of another man's dreams?

The first night we slept there, a rat the size of a small dog jumped up onto the bed and casually took a sandwich right out of Boyd's hand as he was eating it. This settled the argument Boyd and I had been having about the necessity of shelling out for an exterminator.

We cleaned out the trash, nailed bars in front of all the windows, got the power and water going and moved in. Other people trickled in and out, crashing in spare rooms and on floors and in bathtubs, but Boyd and I were the only official residents. I had my own little apartment, adjacent to Boyd's, with a front window that looked right out at Ray's big neon LIQUOR sign, blinking on and off just like in every good film noir. I waited to feel my old self falling away. Isn't this how you did it? Leaning in the window, I could imagine myself a corrupt detective, a

junkie trumpet player, a seedy poet or a man on the
run. It was perfect, I figured.

Now Fred appears at the bottom of the stairwell, and I note him catching whiff of the scent in the air between Boyd and T. He merely raises an eyebrow and says easily, "Come on, children. Let's get to gettin'."

"Where's Artie?"

"ARTIE!"

Artie appears at the top of the stairs, struggling with his guitar and some cables.

"Shit, Artie. We're waiting on you."

"Yeah, shake the lead out son. We got appointments to keep."

This is from T, and, in the corner of my eye, I see him nudge Fred discretely. A look passes between them and I feel a sinking in my stomach. It's going to be one of *those* days. More often lately, it seems.

I feel the splintering coming, and even as it's happening I feel a sadness for this strange little family that must inevitably bust open, scattering its members across different lives and paths. And for some reason I want to prevent it. I want to repair the damage somehow, although I barely understand it.

I know that, halfway to the gig, T will lean forward and instruct Tommy to make a sudden left over onto Vance Street. And before anyone can notice the deviation, T will be out the door and vanishing into one of the tiny, ravaged storefronts – one that looks, to all outward appearances, to be completely abandoned. He will open a door that you would not expect to open, that appears to be padlocked, concealing nothing but rats and darkness. Which isn't far from the truth.

And when he returns he will have the strange, violent giddiness, and his eyes will be wide and white and impervious. He will not even bother replying to Boyd's complaints: about how we're going to be late again, about how that shit makes him sing like a damn frog.

And Artie and Tommy and I will make nervous chit-chat, while Boyd steams in silence, waiting to blow.

But maybe not, I think. Right now, everyone's united temporarily, in ridicule of Artie, whose nervous dazed look betrays a pleasure at the only kind of attention he knows how to get.

"Sorry guys. I got the running shits. I think I got a fuckin' tapeworm or something."

"Artie, you better not have clogged up my fuckin' toilet again."

Fred finally rescues him, saying, "This *is* fascinating, but are we gonna make this gig or not?"

We pile into the van, where Tommy's been waiting in a cloud of smoke so thick I can barely see the front seat from the back.

"Tommy, you OK to drive?" I say, nervously.

I hear T booming from the back. "You best be OK behind them drums, boy. Got my eye on your replacement already. You too, Artie. You white folks gotta start holdin' up yo' end. Me and Fred can't be responsible for *all* the soul..."

We pull out of the lot and onto Union Ave. It feels good to be moving, and I lean my head out the window, into the moist air. Boyd leans forward and sticks an Elmore James tape into the deck, and Elmore's piercing, frantic slide guitar fills the car, coiling around my eardrums and sending fingers of electricity through my lobes.

"There's something inside me... that just won't let me be..."

... as I feel the air shift in the car, smell the musk of T's body as he leans over me to the front seat, gesturing for the left turn, feel Tommy applying the van's tired brakes, open my eyes in time to see "Vance

St." move by outside the window, a battered green sign
on a bent pole, surrounded by broken bottles glinting
like teeth in the yellow weeds.

The city has a yellowish quality in general, a kind of gleaming decay that draws me in, and others too. A certain kind of oddball that finds their way to this place. Palo is Danish, I think. Originally here to train at some obscure culinary institute, he has long since been derailed from his initial arc of relative respectability. Now he sits in front of me in a shit-brown easy chair, stuffing spilling out like guts, scratching a three-day's growth of beard and relating his latest conquest.

"They are marvelous, the negresses," he says to me, in conclusion.

"Damn, Palo, nobody uses that word. Just call them girls."

"Yes," he says nodding. "I am appreciating that, Oscar. The right word is very important here in America. I forget that. I will try."

He stretches lazily. Smiles at the ceiling.

"In my country, it is very important the amount you have to offer. I am talking about money. Without it, you know... lonely."

"Sure."

"But here, with these black girls. It is different. They see that I have a job, yes. But it does not matter the job. I get off work at the Citywide Parking Company, and I walk through the park wearing my uniform – you have seen before my uniform, yes? It is very ugly. A thick fabric that I think is quite old."

"You don't know how many people have worn that thing, Palo."

"Yes," he says musingly. "It must be so. But it does not matter the color or the style of my uniform, not to the black girls in the park. It is no matter that I am a janitor. They see the uniform from the Citywide Parking Company and they see that I have a job, and that is good enough. It is... beautiful."

"You want to watch yourself, Palo. You could get taken advantage of."

He smiles at me, greatly amused.

"I... cannot imagine how."

We are sitting in his living room. Outside, a cluster of young black kids are banging away on what's left of a stop sign with what looks like a tree branch.

Palo shakes his head, a man still struggling to fully grasp his good fortune.

"I do not understand what is the matter with the black men in this town. They have no jobs, none of them, it seems to me. They sit on the steps and drink the malt liquor. And they smoke the cocaine. I drink the malt liquor, yes. But *after* work. My landlady comes and drinks it with me. She is nice woman, but too old for me."

"Listen, Palo, I have to get going."

Palo used to come by the park while the band was playing. He'd hang around grinning at the ladies, all wide-open and available. Something simple in his smile I don't like, though. Some kind of way, he makes me feel dirty. I call a cab and we sit down on the front porch to wait. Passing neighbor girls look curiously at us and Palo beams his smile at each of them in turn.

"You may come by anytime, Oscar. I have seen you with the black girls. I know many who would be good for you. We will have very much fun."

"Yeah, we'll see, Palo."

The cab finally arrives, and when I get in I can smell the booze wafting back from the front seat. But to hell with it, I'm ready to be gone from here. As I climb in, the cabbie hollers back at me, "Hey listen,

you mind sharing? I got another guy headed your direction."

So, a few blocks later, we pick up a skinny black kid – maybe sixteen or seventeen years old. He climbs in with barely a glance at me through his Malcolm X glasses. He leans back, rubbing a very recent-looking goatee, and gives the cabbie his address.

"Say what? Speak up, boy!"

The curious thing is: I know the cabbie heard him. And I can see that the kid knows it too. He stiffens, his eyes going unreadable, the little placard sliding into place: this station closed.

The cabbie turns to me and gives an elaborate wink, like a bad actor playing to the back rows. "Niggers always be mumblin'," he says.

The kid repeats his address, and I notice that now his voice is deliberately low, and very calm. The words seem to be disappearing even as they are formed. Some kind of sound vacuum has opened up in the cab and I wonder if we'll ever get moving.

"What?" shouts the cabbie again. "I can't hear you!"

The kid is almost whispering now, looking out the window, moving just the corners of his lips like a ventriloquist.

We all wait, idling, for something to change.

T's up there at the mic, doing his spiel.

"That's the great Fred Saunders on guitar, let's hear ya, Memphis! And over to his right, that's Artie on guitar, all the way from New York City to play for y'all... The big man up front on harp... the mighty Boyd Ford! Back behind the drums, he might look like he's sleepin' but that's as wide awake as he gets, folks... Tommy on drums!"

Tommy lets loose a clumsy-sounding drum fill as T winces slightly to the crowd.

Now Fred leans over to the mic. "And stage center, he's workin' hard for you, people... the one and only... Big T!"

Scattered hoots and applause. T grins out over the mic and starts really getting warmed up.

"Now look, ya'll. We don't get paid to be up here, no sir. We rely on your kindness and generosity. So if you heard something here today that moved you, let us know. Come on up and drop somethin' in the bucket. Don't be shy now. We accept anything... fives, twenties, fifties... and a special offer right now only, drop a hundred in the bucket and we'll play any song you want. That's right... one hellova good deal. This is the real thing folks, the blues live on Beale Street, the *home* of the blues..."

A wizened bench-sleeper drops a dollar in the bucket and grins toothlessly up at the band.

"Thank you, sir! We do appreciate it. C'mon folks, let us feel ya now, we fixin' to get ourself a fifth of wine and from what I see down there, we ain't got enough for but a half pint... there's the bucket, don't duck it..."

Waving one meaty hand, T leads the band in a closing flourish, then wraps it up.

"Thank you very much, folks. We'll be back tomorrow at three. See you here. Comin' up next, stick around, 'cause Levi's gonna play some blues for y'all, so don't go nowhere."

This is my cue. I stroll up from where I've been watching and start wrapping cords around my arm, breaking camp as quickly as possible.

Levi is standing by, waiting stoically with his bright red hollowbody guitar. He watches T staggering off the stand and clucks his tongue, country-style.

"Goddamn..." he drawls out. "Y'all actually made it through without nobody falling down."

Fred ambles over and he and Levi do the multiple handshake thing.

"Hey my brother. How you been?" says Fred.

"Takin' care of business, my man. Doin' what I do."

T snorts from behind his bass amp.

"Well, if it ain't his royal highness hisself. Come to see how it's done, old man?"

"Well, I learned lots about how it *ain't* done, watchin' y'all..."

Levi's a closed, hard guy. Blue black face with several teeth missing in front. Nothing but business. He stands there watching us move our gear off, clucking his tongue. Levi's got his eye on greener pastures – aspires to the club scene. He'll most likely be out of the park in a few months, doing the happy hour show in the Rum Boogie club down Beale Street. Moving booze and charming tourists. Most of the guys who play in the park had a gig in the clubs at one point and were "86'd" for some type of behavioral disorder: showing up late, cursing on the bandstand, stealing from the register, drunkenly grabbing at the tourists in

a familiar way, etc. The park is the last stop before the soup kitchen for the wayward Memphis musician.

Artie comes blustering up. He's still high from the gig. Only in town a few months, the novelty hasn't worn off for him yet. For Fred and T and Boyd, it's a job. For Tommy it's just kicks. But Artie still loves the *music*, which is one of the reasons I like him.

Now he pulls off his blue Stratocaster, wiping it carefully. "Hey, how'd we do, Fred?"

Fred sits on an amp with his leg crossed and a small, battered pair of spectacles perched on his nose, managing to look like some small-town banker, counting the crumpled bills – mostly ones. "We done OK... we done OK..."

Artie slaps his hands together, full of nervous energy. "And it ain't even tourist season yet. Hey, Fred, whaddya think of that stuff I was playin' behind you, huh?"

Fred, absently: "Oh, yeah, man. You gettin' on it..."

A couple of elderly black folks have approached Boyd. They're pure country: the man gripping a gnarled oak cane, John Deer hat perched on his head and an actual corncob pipe stabbed between his lips. She's got a floral print sack-like dress and scabs on her knees. Both of them peering at Boyd through thick lenses and clucking at him like grandparents.

"Hey, you sure can blow that thing, son. That's the *blues*. I said that to Florida here, I said 'that big white boy can blow that thing.' Yessir."

Boyd shakes the man's hand politely. "Hey, thanks a lot, man. Where you folks from?"

"We come over from West Helena..."

Gathering up the cables, I reach around Artie, who's perched on his amp, practicing this one blues lick over and over, oblivious. He's trying hard to get it all down, watching Fred for clues. Trying to find those notes. He's getting there, too. But when you hear Artie and Fred play alongside each other, you hear the difference between the notes and the *sound*. It's nothing you can nail down. But it's the only thing that matters.

I finish with the cables and start piling T's pedals into the little orange crate we truck them around in. T is deep in conversation with two young girls. They both have smooth, coffee-colored skin and are smacking gum loudly, maintaining a "whatever" pose while rolling their hips and eyes in a kind of studied girlishness at T's verbal groping.

"...So what I think – Damn, Artie, will you stop that squawkin'!"

Artie mutters a sarcastic apology. I can see he's hurt, though. He turns his back and keeps practicing the lick, quieter now.

T turns back to the girls. "Anyway, what I think you girls should do is go home, put your *smallest* dress on, you know, get all *foxy* and everything, and come out to Wild Bill's with us later on. We drink a little, dance a little..."

Girl Number One gives a teasing laugh. "Oh, *that's* what you think we should do?"

"Girl, for you I'll even be a gentleman. Now I don't usually do that, but – "

Girl Number Two: "How you know she *wants* a gentleman?"

They both explode into peals of laughter, seem to be recalling some previous incident.

T cackles, moving in closer. "Ooooh... see how you are? I knew it. I knew it all along..."

-7-

Cables looped around my neck and shoulders, I hoist two amps onto the hand truck and start wheeling.

The bums wave black hands at me from the benches. Half jest and half menace.

"Hey, big man! You need some help with that?"

"Nope."

Wheel it across the cracked ground, between the bottles and the butts and the weeds jutting up through the gaps in the stone. I smell the sweet tang of pipe tobacco, feel the sputtering of life all around me. Sallow faces curled on benches. Sleeping away the day while it's safe to close an eye. Crazy street corner preachers shaking a finger at the tired bums, holy fury burning in blue eyes. Gangbangers and their hos, strolling slow along Beale, laughing to themselves.

Thieves, tourists. Sailors on leave. Everyone stumbling along looking to each other, wondering: where is it? Where did it go? *You* got it?

Over in the doorway across the street, old Uncle Ben plunks away on that ugly pawnshop guitar, head down, grumbling at anyone who comes close. His music is lurching and solipsistic and gutbucket, and no one knows how long he's been in that doorway, mumbling those same tunes like prayers to himself.

I park the hand truck by the van door and listen, lighting a cigarette, watching an old black woman on the east end of the park. She is wearing rags, a shredded whisper of a red dress and she must be eighty years old or nothing at all. And she is dancing. A lewd, stripper's bump and grind, scrawny gray chicken legs and round pot belly rotating, arms in the air, head back, eating the sky and thrusting her pelvis improbably forward, until it seems that gravity is ignoring her just like the man in front of her is. He sits slumped, an equally aged and raggedy old dude, barely even glancing up at her. He looks old and tired and like he only wants a drink, and then to sleep for a hundred years.

She puts her hand out to his face in a kind of coy tease, and he slaps it away tiredly.

Here's Artie now, cupping a joint in the breeze.

"Another day, another dollar, hey, kid?"

"Artie, you coming out to Wild Bill's?"

"Yeah, later on. I got a meeting now."

I don't know anything about AA. Don't care to, particularly, but it's considered polite to at least feign interest in the guy whose dope you're mooching. A universal rule of etiquette.

"Oh, yeah? How long you been dry, Artie?"

Artie sucks the smoke in and hands the roach over. "Six months."

"Hey, that's great. I mean, that's cool that you can do it, you know?"

He smiles sadly at me. "You know what I miss the most?"

"What?"

His voice is far-off, squinting into another world. "That first taste of a beer. A Budweiser beer. None of these fuckin' *micro*-beers. A good old Budweiser beer."

"You sound like a commercial."

He doesn't miss a beat. Eyes soft now, almost tender. "A good old bottle of good old Budweiser beer right out of a cooler, with like, beads of water on the bottle. Nice and cold. Not even gettin' shitfaced, but just that first sip."

"So, why not just have the first sip? Then stop."

This jolts him out of it, for some reason. Now he's back to earth, nervous and agitated like always. Fantasy time is over. He gives me a vaguely belligerent look. Sounds suddenly like he's repeating

someone else's words. "Yeah, I could say that. I could say, 'just have a sip, then stop'. But I'd be lying to myself. I know that..."

The old lady in the red dress has joined her man on the bench. They're huddled close, passing a bottle back and forth.

"That's the one goddamn thing I know."

Interview: Uncle Ben:

"Well, I been out here for a *long* time... longer than any a' the rest of these folks out here. Found me my doorway here, right where all the folks go by, and got me my little bucket here, and lemme say, I does okay. Yass..."

"And ain't nobody can pick guitar with me, 'cause I got my own thing going... it ain't any motherfucker can just sit in with me, 'cause my kind of blues, you got to *live* it to play right... you gots to practically be me, Ben... and ain't but one, you know, heh, heh..."

"B.B., he came down here once. That's B.B. King I'm talkin' about. He got that nightclub up Beale Street but he stays away from me. 'Cause I take all his

women, that's why. Damn right, he knows better now. I cut him on guitar too, and I took his girl. That's a true story I'm tellin' you now..."

"Yeah, I tried playing with all these white boys with the long hair who come down here with they *guitars* wanna play with Uncle Ben, but I just settle on doin' a solo show. A partner ain't about nothin' but headaches, man. 'Cause all these cats down here, they be fussin' and fightin' and lemme tell you, you can't trust none of these motherfuckers.... "

"That's right, can't trust nobody but yourself, and that's the way I do best, by myself, 'cause I ain't never gonna be stealin from myself you know... and if I do, well I'll always forgive myself, heh, heh, 'cause I'm all I got in this world, all anyone got..."

"Yass... so you best find where you belong and git there, 'cause ain't nobody gonna help you, and lots of folks gonna fuck you up, try to throw you off, uh-huh, that's right, but you just got to throw *them* off, see? And that's what I done and I been doin' it for years..."

"*Years...*"

Fred ambles into the front room of the warehouse, stretching and yawning and very casually lifting a cigarette from my pack on the table. He stands there, looking out the window at the Union Avenue traffic, tapping the one cigarette absently against his palm as if he's forgotten it.

"I ever tell you about back in the day? Me and T had this beautiful gig in the lounge down at the Peabody. Playing jazz. Johnny London was on sax. Uh-huh..."

As he's talking he has slipped the first cigarette behind his ear and is now lighting another.

"That was an *all right* arrangement, you know?"

And he says this with a sort of conspiratorial warmth, flattering me with the implication that these

are *shared* experiences. As if we're two jazz cats talking shop. And I forget about the cigarettes.

"You play jazz, Fred?"

"Ahhh... well, yes, I did play a little."

He is nodding modestly, his eyes on the bottle of brandy that is perched on the piano.

I pour us each a drink, throw mine down right away. But Fred doesn't touch his. Seems not to notice it at all. He's idly tuning one of our battered old acoustic guitars.

"A beautiful gig... nice crowds over there. Nice people. And we could play whatever we wanted. The owner was a fan, you know. Like you." He strums a few chords. "They got some DJ in there now. No goin' back to the age of melody..."

Perched on the piano bench, Fred closes his eyes and, accompanying himself with simple chords, sings the intro to "Mood Indigo," his voice taking on a more formal, supper club intonation.

His fingers dance in little arpeggio flourishes, and he plays with the vocal melody, dropping notes off suddenly cabaret-style and beaming a beatific showbiz smile, all toothy white and summer's evening.

And even after he is gone, backing out the door with a warm handshake and courteous goodbyes, the music remains in the room, hovering in the corners like a warm red mist. He *has* left me that, after all, I think,

as I return to the couch and pick up his empty glass
from beside where my cigarettes used to be.

7 a.m. I am seated before Mr. Larry Fox of such-and-such, Inc., and I am attentive and straight of spine.

"Hmm... hmm... yes, I was very impressed by your resume..."

Me nodding: "Thank you."

Will he check the references? Will he actually phone those former employers? What will he think when his ringing falls on deaf lines? When he is unable to *verify* me? Well sir, they must have gone out of business. Couldn't make it without me, I guess, ha ha.

Sitting, sweating, sleepless. My sleep schedule as of late has been a bit erratic. The warehouse has no alarm clock, so I simply stayed up, with the assistance of a few of Boyd's little black pills. But still feel

stretched thin and unfocused. I'll have to grab a nap before we go out tonight.

"So, what do you hope to accomplish here with us, Oscar?"

How do people do this? Fox's face shimmers blurrily on the other side of the desk. How I'd like to drive a fork into that ruddy cheek. What would he think if he knew that the only other time I've been in this particular warehouse district of South Memphis was at 4 a.m., with a zombie-eyed whore? She had no cheeks at all. Only bone.

Have I hesitated too long? He's still waiting. Sometimes my absence can be mistaken for a quiet confidence. But I can feel myself blowing it, burning it. Because tell the truth, Oscar, you fear this man. You hate him and fear him and envy him and despise him and feel superior to him, and inferior, and you want to shake his hand, and you want to run from the room screaming, and you want to sleep, most of all you want to sleep.

There's just too much ballooning in the space between us. I can scarcely even *see* him, and he's barely said a word. Hell, he's probably a decent guy. Could be a good job.

"Well, I'll be honest with you, Mr. Fox..."

Him leaning forward, interested. Honesty?

"The most important thing with me is not money. Don't get me wrong, money is obviously

important and I won't try to tell you I don't care about it..."

Him nodding furiously. Americans don't trust people who don't care about money.

"And I'll admit I've taken jobs solely for the money. But what ultimately matters – what *keeps* me, you understand – is the *people*."

I carry that last off with just the right touch of piousness. Some speech I must have heard on TV once. This might work. And I suddenly feel that I'm not really lying, which is a good indicator for success here. After all, if I'd ever had any of those jobs on the resume, I *might* have chosen them exactly on this basis. It seems reasonable.

"The last position I held, you'll see..."

He glances down at my resume, nodding further. Where was I going with this?

"Well, I knew I wasn't going to get *rich* with them, frankly. But they were good people, doing good work, and if it weren't for those budget cuts..."

Trail off with a resigned sadness. The bureaucratic bastards won't just let us simple folks do our jobs... Everyone knows about that. Mister Fox may be doing the hiring, but odds are he's not high enough up on the chain to be 100% secure. Anyone's neck could be next on the chopping block. It's the way things are these days, it seems. Or so I'm told by the

old guys in the bars. Useful information. He's with me now.

And then I yawn.

It's a gesture grandly out of place. I should be closing the sale now, but I feel the yawn approaching and rather than stifle it, I *overblow* it. Raise my arms and lean back as if I'm surveying the fields from my rocker on the porch. I think, what am I doing? And I recognize the absurdity of the move, but figure I can save it by committing to it full bore. Make it seem normal to be yawning leisurely in the middle of an interview.

His eyebrow goes up and all I can do is smile stupidly at him from the chair. Tense beads trickling down my crotch, and I can feel an eyelid twitch commencing, courtesy of the pills.

A small thing, the yawn, but just incongruous enough to throw him a bit. And then that sickly smile, and the fact that I stopped dead in the midst of talking and just stared at him as if I was daring him to comment on the fact that, apparently, it was all I could do to stay awake.

It might not have been so bad, might have even been salvageable – oh, late night, y'know (wink, wink) – but for that the yawn resembled less the honest fatigue of a hard-working, hard-playing company man, and more of... boredom.

And I wonder, as I stroll, still jobless, head ringing with fading reverberations of "we'll let you know" if this is what one could call a subconscious impulse? Could it be that the interview was surreptitiously sabotaged by my fetid inner nature and desires? An intriguing thought. Ah, the complex organism that is me. I'm liking this angle. No job for me today, because I *refuse* to submit. Plenty of time for all that later, and maybe some wiser inner part of me is doing its best to keep me steered on the right course. There will be girls tonight. I'll try again for real next week. Get myself a new tie from somewhere and make sure to be better rested....

I suddenly realize that I am whistling.

One of the girls drops the bottle and there is a pause, followed by peals of drunken laughter. Boyd is staring at the girl ruefully.

"Honey, why you always gotta do that when I buy a *good* bottle...?"

"Well, maybe you best go get another."

"Yeah, boy. Fetch us a bottle, now, y'hear?"

Glittering eyes and red nails. Boyd loves this type.

"Well, maybe I will if you ask me nice..."

They lean in close, dripping sincerity, lips open, teeth flashing.

"Oh, honey. Don't you know? Don't you know how nice we can be...?"

Boyd reaches into his coat and a pint of Canadian Mist appears like a rabbit in his hand.

"Well, see – we're just three *nice* people..."

Shards of glass and expensive little rivers of Crown Royal settling into the grooves in the bed of the pickup truck where we're crouched, hurtling through the night. In the front cab, T is shaking his head at us.

When the pint comes my way, I take a small shot and hand it leftward to Fred. He takes an easy swig and resumes studying the sky peacefully.

I lean back next to him and watch the girls. They are loud and hard and painted, jaws working whiskey-flavored gum, lighting cigarettes, waving long press-ons in accompaniment to stories of dubious veracity.

The truck finally lurches up in front of Wild Bill's and we pile out, straggling in the direction of the music and the lights, feeling deliciously wound-up. A couple of the cool-eyed old dudes at the door raise an eyebrow at we white folks, but nothing more.

We hit the door and the smell of smoke and sweat washes over us welcomingly. The band is spanking it hard up there, four black men in their sixties on up, nattily dressed, frozen in some endless blues time warp, even as the strip mall has slowly sprouted around what was once an isolated roadhouse.

But they know T and Fred here. On the stand, Lucky breaks off a guitar lick and leans over to his microphone with a wicked grin.

"Thank you so much, kind folks. Well, looks like we got royalty in the house tonight. Big T and the Cadillac Band all the way up from Beale Street. Maybe if we all ask 'em real nice, they'll get up and play us something."

T is already stageside, strapping on an extra bass, grabbing the keyboard player's mic and using the opportunity to call for a round of drinks, hamming it up to the delight of the late-hour patrons. These are his people, and his pleasure is as obvious as it was absent in the park, before the tourists.

"Well, well, well. Looks like everyone's having a good old time... a *high* old time.... yeah. Let me do one for ya by Clarence Carter. Now Clarence was a bad man... and he used to say... "

His eye has come to rest on a table of young women near the stage.

"Mmm hmmm... I'll tell ya, when there were some ladies in the room, he used to say somethin' like this..."

As T kicks into his burlesque version of "Strokin" I make my way to the bar, a long low counter in the back. I stand and wait, watching the lanky black man behind the counter hustle to get set-ups for the clientele. No hard booze served at Wild Bill's. Just cold quarts of beer and various juices and tonics to mix with whatever you came in with.

Finally, he sees me and I nod at him. "Hey, James."

His sweating face breaks open in a grin. "Heeey, it's the kid."

He slaps a Bud on the counter and we do the handshake thing.

"Whatchoo been up to, kid?"

"You know... the endless saga of the Cadillac Band."

He chortles. Then, seeing T up onstage, his expression darkens. "That one better behave hisself tonight."

"Aw, he didn't mean nothing."

"Well, I won't mean nothin' either when I '86' his ass." He shakes his head. "That man ain't got no sense."

"It was just a little misunderstanding."

"Misunderstanding, my ass! Men come here with their *wives*, man. That fool gonna get his throat cut the way he carries on. And I ain't gonna clean up his mess again, man. I ain't his babysitter." He pauses, wiping a glass with quick, righteous strokes. "You best watch yourself too."

I give him my "dumb white boy" grin. "What do you mean?"

"You think it's funny, man. I told you before about foolin' with these black women. You gonna find yourself in a mess of trouble one day."

But I'm feeling cocky. The whiskey from the ride over is lighting me up. Nothing matters, just the way I like it. It's night and I'm in a blues bar full of women who are already looking curiously my way. "Hey, I'm careful, James. You don't have to worry about me."

"Shoot! Look at him! Thinks he's all slick and everything! Why don't you go find yourself some nice white girls?"

"Where are they?"

"They ain't in here."

"Good."

Wherever they are, I know from past experience that we seem to only come up short for each other. The world of kids my age, of college and straight jobs and unblemished white skin is distant and unreal. Yet it's only a stone's throw away. Maybe I'll throw that stone later. Telling myself I've got plenty of time. Pushing back down the nagging murmur: it's not that you won't, it's that you *can't*.

Across the room I see Fred whispering with a skinny young junkie who's on permanent vibrate, limbs and saliva shooting every which way. They vanish out the side door together. I close my eyes and feel T's bass coming across the floorboards and up my barstool into my gut.

"Somebody's eyeballing you, man."

Snap my eyes open and turn to grab my beer. James is exchanging eye-rolls with a stocky middle-aged dude on the stool next to me. They cluck their tongues like schoolmarms.

"Hope you got some money, kid."

"He won't have it for long..."

I see her at the end of the bar. Long, dusky legs and cool, mocking eyes. A degree of reserve, of appraisal, but... something else too. A slight moistness to the lips, something... *anticipatory* about the whole of her. Like a wrong turn that ends up right. An accident waiting to claim you. A whole side of town you never knew existed.

It always comes down to this in the end. The band long since gone home. Puddles and ash. Only the long-haulers now.

"So these fellas, right? They wanna find out what happens when they mate a man with a monkey..."

T is sheets past the wind. His head lolling, but feet planted and a death grip on the bottle of wine in his fist. He sits at the head of the long table, eyes lidded, but deep into one of his endless jokes like some dissolute king during the last days of the empire. Carnage everywhere now. Men face down every third chair. The jukebox low: Albert King squeezing out those five perfect notes.

I have reached the point where it is wisest to remain still. I'm encased in a warm, blurry pool that threatens to overflow with rapid movements. I reach

forward to where I see the cigarettes, miles away on the table in front of me. Miss them on the first grab, fumble them up and dig around for a match.

"Light me onea them, baby."

I can feel her sweet breath on my neck, can feel the warmth of her, like an engine, buzzing and humming against me where she's slumped. Her eyes closed, with a sleepy feline smile. You can almost see the canary feathers around her lips. I kiss the top of her head, which is a kind of helmet of grease and hair spray, with a musky sensual throb beneath.

I light one Camel and hand it to her. Light a second for me, lean back feeling content, knowing where this evening will end. It's nice to be on the sidelines of the 2 a.m. frenzy for company. Around the room scattered pairs of dark shapes are negotiating their shared passage into tomorrow's daylight. But I'm signed up and set with my coffee-colored honey here. I'm pretty sure, anyway.

One young guy with a newsboy cap and wild, nappy, natural black hair raises up his head from a puddle of beer.

"They wanna mate a man with a fuckin' monkey?"

"I'm tellin' it here, man.... so, they go cruisin' down on skid row – you know, man, down where you stay at..."

"Down around South Third..."

This from an older man in gold sunglasses.

"Fuck you, man. I done moved away from there."

"So they go ridin' around, find some old wino... say they'll give him fifty bucks..."

"I stayin' at my sister's now, man. She got a nice place..."

"OK, man, OK.... they take this wino back to the laboratory, man... and they strap this big fuckin' gorilla to the wall..."

T's doing some sloppy miming from his seated position.

"They got her arms and legs all shackled up against the wall, with a big ole' muzzle over her mouth, and they say to the wino: go to it, man!"

I feel soft lips against my ear.

"Oooh, honey, I don't know where my girlfriend's at..."

"Why don't you let me take you home."

She pats my cheek.

"I just love these nice white boys..."

From the other side of her I hear a loud snort from Artie.

"Nice white boy, my ass..."

T's getting more animated as his story builds.

"So he figures, what the hell, fifty bucks, you know..."

An older man, sternly: "Man, I wouldn't fuck no gorilla for fifty bucks."

"Yeah, you do it every night for free..."

"That ain't right, man..."

"I *seen* your old lady, cuz..."

"*Quiet*, y'all...So, the wino figures, OK.... so he gets up on that gorilla, man, starts workin' away... all of a sudden – BOOM! – onea the gorilla's hands break the shackle off the wall and wrap around him..."

Across the room James is pulling the shades. Shaking some old-timer who's asleep with his hat on.

"Then – BOOM! BOOM! – the other arm and both the legs bust off the wall and wrap around the wino, like to crush him... but he's still workin' away...!"

She's whispering something in my ear. I don't catch it, but I laugh anyway. Artie's looking bored.

"So, all the scientists, they all gather round, and they're sayin' 'hold on, man! we gonna help you, just hang on, we gonna tranquilize her, just hang on!'"

I slide my hand up the back of her shirt. Warm black skin. It even feels dark under my palm.

"And they hear the wino, from inside that gorilla, man, he shouts out..."

Now T staggers to his feet, clutching the wine bottle and bellowing the punch line:

"FUCK THAT NOISE, MAN! TAKE THE MUZZLE OFF THIS BITCH SO I CAN KISS HER!!!!"

Across the room James is hollering that it's closing time, and in my ear I hear: "Mmm... you ready to go home now, honey?"

I lean across her with some urgency. "Artie, let me have your keys."

"Oh, I knew it was coming."

"Come on, man. You can get a ride with Boyd."

"Where is that big dumb motherfucker?"

"He's in the van."

"What?"

"Yeah, he's out." I mime a quick drunk, passing-out motion. "Come on, Artie..." I gesture to the girl. *"Please."*

"Oh, great. Shit." At last he sighs heavily and starts digging for his keys. "I don't know why I'm encouraging you. Aren't there any white women in this fuckin' town? Don't you have any sense of race loyalty?"

I glance down nervously, but the eyes on my shoulder remain closed.

"Thanks, Artie. I owe you."

"Oh, yeah. Don't worry about me. Back in New York, man, I had women all over the goddamn place. I had 'em comin' in and out the front and back fuckin' door, man..."

I'm already edging away. I'm familiar with this litany.

"Yeah... thanks a bunch, Artie..."

"Sure, sure... go have your fuckin' fun. Don't worry about me."

"Hey, y'all don't have to go home but you gotta get the fuck outta here!" James is shaking the nappy-headed young guy, who has taken another dive tableward. T, beside him, rescues his bottle of Wild Irish Rose from flailing arms, takes a long hit, then pours a small shot over the prone Afro. Amidst mumbling, the guy's tongue snakes out and fumbles for the booze like a hand feeling its way through a dark room.

"Automatic, man!" laughs T. "Automatic reflexes on this motherfucker...!"

My girl and I make our swerving, four-legged way to the door as the lights come on. A collective groan moves through the room as hands shield eyes from the always-too-bright end of the night, and we are all spit back out onto the sidewalk, clambering into cars and trucks, taking the side streets home to avoid cops, driving with one eye open and the window all the way down.

I wake up hard, all at once. No gentle drift through twilight, no easy resurfacing one level at a time. My mouth is dry and caked. Feels numb and tastes like death. I'm shaky all over, waiting for the pain to kick in for real, knowing that this isn't even the worst of it yet. My eyes flutter open and I'm looking at a blank white wall.

The noises outside and the relative coolness of the air tell me it's early. I close my eyes again, and wish for a moment that I was in my own bed, and could just drift off again, maybe sleep away some more of the hangover.

But I roll over and study her in the weary, honest light. Her mouth is open and she is breathing heavily, like a wounded animal. Eye shadow is

smear across her face, and she is wearing what appears to be my Muddy Waters T-shirt.

And it is still something of a marvel to me that these creatures will allow me to do what I do. That I am here, after all, as if it is all perfectly normal.

I search my mind for the guilt that my college friends told me I should feel. Back then, when I returned from my various midnight haunts, poorer and wiser, they could not or would not see that it was nothing important enough to warrant outrage. But, lacking first-hand knowledge, they wagged at me from the easy place. To those earnest young liberals – seeing not *people*, but only symbols of some larger institutional offense – "free choice" was just a white lie. As maybe it is. But what about it? How superior I felt then, seeing their squinty, smug little eyes. They knew about *exploitation*. They had taken *sensitivity training*. It felt all right to be so wildly miscast as a heartless villain. They were whores, those women of my after-class nights (and to be honest, sometimes days) but I never thought of them badly – or grandly. I was simply glad to be briefly lost somewhere where I couldn't fail.

Now I make my way across the floor and into the bathroom. Stand swaying, peeing and looking at the ragged army of putty jars and scalpels and brushes ringing the counter. The stones that sharpen Beauty. A strangely intimate moment there with her junk and her

tweezers and her scattered Q-tips. Feeling the chaos of my own life in hers and wondering if she still assumes, like I do, that one day she'll get it all together.

Wandering out into the one main room. One dirty window looking out onto the street. A couch and two chairs. Plain things with no frills. A small Manhattan of wine bottles on the coffee table. I pick up a cigarette and just hold onto it, feeling suddenly nauseous again.

In the fridge, there is a large jar of what looks like Kool-Aid. I am sniffing at it cautiously when I catch a movement in the doorway and turn to find a small boy, watching me.

"Hey there," I say.

He says nothing, just stares at me with calm dark eyes. He is very small and brown and dirty, with kinky black hair and wearing some kind of football jersey that is way too big for him. The hems of the thing are dragging along behind him like a cape, torn and soiled.

I notice he is holding a small, plastic toy machine gun.

"What's your name, kid? Do you live here?"

He glowers at me, a quick, adult expression rolling across his face and vanishing.

"Where's my momma?"

"Um, in bed, I guess. Is that your momma's room there?"

He walks to the bedroom and kicks the door open, not trying to be quiet. I hear a muffled groan from the next room. Then, silence.

He stands in the doorway for a moment, then turns and walks back through the kitchen, exiting the way he came, the machine gun bumping along the floor behind him.

The Memphis train station, like most American train stations, is stashed in an exceptionally scuzzy area of town. I'm told it was different at one point, and still is in other places: Europe and such, supposedly. Undoubtedly, there is some socio-economic explanation for this, likely owing to my country's fondness for the single-occupant automobile. But I owned no car, and besides, it seemed far more fitting to enter Memphis by train. I could already picture myself, years from now, casually letting slip the words "So, then I caught a train to Memphis..." My voice would have just the right touch of world-weariness, implying that if I got started telling all the places I've been and the things I've seen... boy, we'd be here all night.

Prior to arriving, all I knew of Memphis was gleaned from books and record sleeves, and one viewing of Jim Jarmusch's "Mystery Train," which I watched at a friend's house once while high on mushrooms. But images from that film stayed with me: the romantic, broken-down streets, the eccentric characters, the feeling of mystery that the whole place evoked to my California-bred self.

Amtrak rolled in at around 3 a.m., with me on it, nose to the window, sucking in the sights as they blurred by. The actual disembarking was something of an anticlimax. The platform was deserted and the train station was a far cry from the old, high-ceilinged, art deco monstrosity in the movie. They must have shot that scene somewhere else, because the actual station was a tiny little box of a room, painted a sickly green and staffed by one old black woman in her sixties who looked to be fast asleep. I had been halfway planning to sack out on one of the benches until dawn, but one look at the "lobby" changed my mind. For one thing, there were no benches, only some small black chairs equipped with coin-operated televisions. A couple of obviously homeless people dozed in the only two occupied seats. I got out of there.

Outside, I shouldered my bag and began to walk in the direction of the lights. The streets were empty and foreign-looking. Only every third address or so appeared to even be occupied. Many of the vacated

places still displayed the ghostly remnants of their former tenants: faded advertisements, broken signs, dangling shingles. You could squint your eyes and almost see the streets as they used to be – like on all those record covers: bustling tributaries of life and music and food.

I was lucky with imagination, is how I thought of it.

My reverie was interrupted by the blaring of a horn. A cabbie was pacing me, leaning across the seat and gesturing out the open passenger-side window at me.

"Hey, man – you need a cab?"

I shook my head. "No, thanks."

I had no intention of blowing dollars needlessly on a cab ride. The night was warm and the walk was feeling good.

The cabbie's dark face was worried. "Where you comin' from, man?"

"Train station," I said, and immediately felt annoyed with myself for even answering. When strangers approach you asking personal questions, they are trying to hustle you for something. Every traveler knows this. I'm told this is another thing that's different overseas, although it's hard to believe people are that different from place to place.

But he was insistent. "Look, man, you don't want to be walking around here this hour of the night. Let me give you a lift. Won't cost you much."

"No, thanks," I said firmly, not looking at him.

There was a pause in our conversation for a moment as he continued to pace me. Then he slowly pulled away.

In a twist of nearly cinematic timing, he was only just rounding the corner ahead when I glanced down a side street and saw them. They were leaning against a car, smoking, and the second I saw them, I knew. But I pretended not to, and simply continued walking, my bag hooked over my shoulder, furrowing my brow slightly, like I was late for some appointment. I had business in the area, you understand...

I waited to hear their footsteps behind me, and when I did, I felt a wave of something that was more annoyance than fear. I was irrationally pissed at these two for confirming the stereotypes that I was perfectly willing to resist if they were. They were young-ish black guys, tall and muscled and mean-looking, dressed in the usual baggy gangbanger attire that makes young men look like swaggering infants. But I could feel the hate steaming off them, even though after that first glance, they were behind me and I couldn't even see their faces.

So then I did a dumb thing. I reached, very casually, into the webbed outer pocket of my bag and

pulled out the bottle of Coke I had bought in the diner car an hour earlier. I twisted the cap off and took a big swig. I had seen plenty of movies where a guy had held off a whole room of thugs with nothing more than a broken bottle and a vicious sneer. There was, of course, the question of whether I was capable of actually slicing someone up with a piece of broken glass – a scenario so remote from my life experience so far that I was unsure of how to assess its feasibility. The thing that worried me most though was the actual *breaking* of the bottle. In the movies, the tough guy just snapped the bottle against the bar, and the glass broke neatly, leaving a jagged, deadly edge to be brandished, knife-like, at onrushers.

I figured the curb to be the best substitute bar-top in the vicinity. And I decided it would be best to close my eyes just at the moment of impact; flying shards made me nervous. Although, so did closing my eyes in the middle of a street fight. And then, there was the lurking fear that I would somehow or other fail to rap the bottle correctly, and it would either break into a million pieces in my hand, or – worse case scenario – remain totally intact. Is it possible to die of embarrassment, even while being jumped in a strange city at three in the morning?

None of these thoughts went through my head in any linear fashion, of course. I had taken out the bottle without really even thinking. But, with sickening

luck, one of the guys behind me read my subconscious mind. And only then did I realize why I had grabbed the bottle in the first place. Too many movies.

"Look at this motherfucker, man. He must be a goddamn fool."

"Sho' you right – he must be *tired* of livin'."

"Whatchoo gonna do with that bottle, huh? You hear me talkin', punk?"

"He hear me when I shoot it out his hand."

They weren't jiving or laughing. This wasn't one of those "have a little fun with the white guy" situations. Their voices were low and deadly serious and dripping with pretty good menace.

I reached the corner and looked around. There was nothing but deserted streets and parked cars. My options were limited here. It was either run or fight. I doubted I could outrun them unless I ditched the bag, and the fighting option didn't sound too hopeful either. I had a pretty good mouth, though. Maybe I could talk my way out of this somehow. I took a breath and turned to face them.

They were young, younger than me maybe. But their dark faces were furrowed, mad-dogging me with such intensity, that I knew all at once the futility of words against such a generalized loathing.

One of the guys, I found myself noticing, was quite handsome beneath the threatening expression. I wondered if some day he'd grow out of this phase, if

he'd look back with chagrin on these young and wild days. Even facing an ass-kicking I was incapable of being fully in the moment. This struck me as momentarily amusing, and I actually smiled, doing my best to wipe the look off my face as soon as it arrived.

But they were no longer looking at me. Both of them were warily eying something over my right shoulder. I turned and got an eyeful of headlight, as the cabbie pulled slowly to the curb beside me. Without a word I stepped from the curb, opened the door and slid in, as if he was right on time for our pre-arranged pickup.

He didn't speak, just continued making some detailed notations in a small clipboard. Then, finishing, he placed the clipboard on the front passenger seat, adjusted his mirror slightly and said, "Where to, sir?" We had still not moved from the curb.

My mind was a blank. I forced myself to keep from looking at the two youths on the sidewalk outside. I felt the situation was balancing by a thread, and that might be the provocation that would topple the whole thing.

Finally, I came up with the only street name I knew: "Beale Street?"

He nodded, shifted unhurriedly into Drive, and pulled away from the curb. I allowed myself a backward glance at the two youths, who were still on

the sidewalk, lighting cigarettes, their caps pulled low enough to hide their eyes.

"Nothin' open on Beale this time of night. Too late now," said my rescuer after a moment.

I had regained my wits a bit, though. "Actually, I'm going to the youth hostel on..." I squinted at a piece of paper. "...Poplar Street?"

He nodded. I felt a rush of gratitude toward this guy. A real after-hours angel, patrolling the mean streets and doing good deeds. But he waved away my attempts at thanks with a brusque growl.

"Forget it, man," he said, and didn't speak again. I had the unmistakable feeling he was irritated, though I wasn't sure if it was at the two boys or at me. But I felt guilty all the same, for not trusting him right off. I wondered what he assumed, what darker motives he had assigned to my initial refusal of a ride.

I had no idea if other people were as terrified of being misunderstood as I was.

I leaned back and watched my new city go by outside the window. Beale Street flashed by, Handy's statue standing watch over the empty park, the newspapers blowing across the deserted green. The cabbie took me silently through the streets with Sly and the Family Stone pulsing quietly on the stereo, interrupted periodically by the incoherent bleating of the dispatcher on the CB.

And later, when I knew the city better, I realized that he had screwed me, had in fact driven me in a kind of figure-eight that circled in on the youth hostel gradually, adding at least ten minutes and fifteen or twenty dollars to the meter.

When he dropped me off, he thanked me politely and wished me a pleasant stay. And when I turned to look back from the steps of the hostel, he was there, framed in the yellow light of a street lamp, scribbling something in his clipboard, and I remember thinking that he had an impressive dignity about him, although I still wasn't sure exactly how I felt about him, or the two youths, or what had happened. I felt that I had been absent in some fundamental way from the entire event. And somehow that absence freed me from the need to have an opinion, bestowing upon me a kind of innocence that was too appealing to resist. Like the way your eyes go out of focus sometimes when you're tired and you let them stay that way, because the clarity of the details is too exhausting.

I checked into the hostel and fell asleep almost immediately, and dreamed about trains roaring through the empty night with no passengers, just running automatically, following a schedule no one had bothered to change. Making stops where no one got on or off.

Diego is a worrier. Thin face, pinched before me in the bar gloom.

"I don't know, man..."

One of several of the local regulars. A handsome, neat-looking guy, he squints out at the late afternoon foot traffic on Gayoso Street as if he would like to nuke every able body scurrying to and fro out there in the light. Through the open door and way off across the park I can see the band: five small figures generating some kind of noise. At this distance I can only faintly hear the thudding of Tommy's drums and some indistinct hollering. I'm joining the time-killers in Johnny Raspberry's bar, draining beers and shooting molasses-slow games of pool. Christ Johnny, when you gonna get some AC?

Johnny's bar is a gathering place for good old boys in the downtown area. They hitch around on their stools and spit and talk in dull monotone voices, the occasional "nigger this" and "nigger that" falling from their lips with no particular malice. Reggie, the black cook, never bats an eye. And, bad talk aside, when it comes down to it, Johnny seems to treat Reggie well, and they seem to like – even *trust* – each other. When Raspberry was in county hospital for kidney stones, Reggie ran the joint by himself for almost three weeks. I'll never figure the South out.

"I don't know, man..." Sigh. Sip.

Diego: long hair, thinning slightly on top. Aerosmith half-tee, snakeskin boots and leather blazer. Plays a mean guitar. A longtime bedroom noodler. Learned Stairway To Heaven before the Pledge of Allegiance. Never been in a band.

"I just gotta get it together enough to go sit in with someone one of these nights. I gotta just get the nerve up."

This said with earnest determination and steely resolve. Listening, you'd imagine he was on his way to doing it. But he's been saying the same thing every night since I met him, and long before that, no doubt.

"So, listen. Why don't we jump in the car, cruise down to Junior's joint in Mississippi tonight. Or hell, just go across the street. I know T'll let you sit in on a tune or two."

This from me, playing along.

"I don't know, man. I need to play with white people. No shit, I ain't racist or nothin' but I can't hang with that 'bumpa bumpa' blues stuff."

"What about the Peanut – out by the college? Open mic night."

His eyes are hungry for a moment, then go slack. "I'm not ready."

"Maybe never be ready at this rate."

He readily concedes this, grasping gladly at impossibility. "I know. I'm thirty-three, man. I gotta get going with this music thing. I just don't want to get up there in front of people until I've, like, really got my shit together. I don't want to do it half-assed."

"Maybe better half-assed than not at all."

"No!" Emphatically. Fingers moving on Stollicran in the shape of a C7 chord. He's wound up now, ready for his favorite subject: Why I Fail. "See, man, this is my whole problem. Like, it's gotta be perfect with me. Like with chicks. You know I haven't been laid in like, four years?"

"Get out."

"Oh, yeah!" Something like pride. "The same reason. Like, I'm talking to this chick and I think, okay, okay, and then I always notice something about her. Like her nose is too long, or maybe I don't like something she says. Something. And I abort the whole

thing, because it's gotta be perfect, man, or I can't roll with it, y'know?"

This is what the world of arena rock does to its lesser-endowed citizenry. Perpetuates the feeling that you're constantly coming up short. That just outside are perfect lives being lived by imperfect people, and why the hell not me?

One thing about the Cadillac band: they're absolutely within reach.

"Maybe there's no such thing as perfect."

"Oh yeah, I know, man. You're totally right. I'm chasing some thing that don't exist. It's sick. You think I should see a shrink or something?"

"Just tell you what you already know."

"You're right. I just gotta do it. I just gotta get up there and do it."

"You're not getting any younger." Feeding him my lines, which I already know by heart.

"Totally."

"Time passing you by. Be too late for all of it soon. Nothing left but regrets."

"Totally!" Eyes wild, feverish. "I just gotta get it together. You heard me play, Oscar. I'm good enough, right?"

Sure, I've heard him. And I've been to his house, plastered with guitar god posters scotch-taped to the walls like the college dorm rooms I couldn't wait to escape. Diego always has booze and his house is a

popular after-hours spot for those who aren't ready to let the night drain away just yet. But after the whiskey and the weed, he'll pull out his notebook and read lyrics out loud in a droning monotone, frightening and boring everyone in sight. But he can play, sure.

"I don't know, man..."

Something about a good dark bar in the late afternoon. Sun slanting through, lighting the grime in the air and rendering it celestial, like pixie dust. Nobody here to hook up or raise hell. To be drunk in a bar at 4 p.m. indicates that at some point today you said, whether to yourself or to someone else, "Fuck it, I'm gonna go get wasted." To hell with the day. That's the refrain here, and I am drawn to it, thinking myself a kind of tourist, an impartial observer. After all, *I'm* going somewhere. Just not right *now*.

I sit with Diego, who is worrying the details of his demise like a kitten with a never-ending string, and I listen to the bleep-bleep of the video poker machines at either end of the bar, and I savor the sweet whimsical wind of the early stages of drunkenness. Later it will be more manic, and perhaps more depressive, but for now, I amble over to the jukebox – gliding, not yet stumbling – and a benevolent smile crawls across my face as I look out the open door at the writhing yellow world outside (go ahead, friends), and feel a gentle sadness, but also a rightness, as if it

couldn't really have been any other way and how astute of me to grasp this.

I drop in the coins and punch up Louis Armstrong, and his voice fills the place with a majestic dignity, and I think: why do I pay money to play these songs that we have back at the warehouse that is home? Because music sounds different in a bar. Better. It becomes part of the environment, integrates itself with memory and motion in a way that it never does in the confines of one's own tiny space. Even convicts prefer the yard to the cell.

I settle onto my stool, and Diego falls silent for once. The whole bar falls silent. There is only the clinking of ice, the bleep-bleep, and the gentle, musical clack of a cue ball finding its mark. It only lasts as long as the song, but it is shared (though not acknowledged) by everyone in the place. A tiny bit of grace, of light in the dark before the bad jokes start again.

It's A Wonderful World.

Lazy day. August heat has rolled in and taken hold, entering the blood through the pores like a tranquilizer. The fan spins stupidly overhead and we swim in our own sweat and wait on the evening shade. Way up there, the weather doesn't care. Down here Boyd is talking trash – another inevitability.

"I couldn't believe it, man. Four hours after we all got paid two hundred each for that riverboat gig, and there's T, spare changin' in front of the Peabody Hotel like a damn bum."

"He spent it that fast?"

"I'm tellin' you, man. Don't ever let me catch you messin' with that rock. You see what it does to T. That's why you can't leave nothin' around him that ain't bolted down. It'll be in the pawn shop by the time you get back from takin' a piss."

"Yeah."

Boyd's doubled over at the table by the window, doing some kind of micro-surgery to one of his harps with a tiny screwdriver. I'm slumped in what's left of a chair, reading a two-year-old copy of "Living Blues."

"We oughtta dump his ass is what we oughtta do," he says.

"Who, T?"

"Yeah, who're we talkin' about?"

"I don't know. If T goes, Fred'll probably go with him."

"Let 'em go. We could get someone else to sing. And Artie could play guitar."

"Yeah, but it won't be the same without Fred and T."

"So what?"

"Well, I'm just saying maybe there's things you gotta put up with if you want to – "

"What the hell you talkin' about?"

"I mean, T and Fred, they've had it hard, you know..."

"Oh shit. I'VE had it hard, man. And I ain't no double-crossing money-stealing nigger. Oh, that's right. You don't say that word out in 'Californ-ee-uh'".

"It's an ugly word."

"Hey, I say it about white people too. You know, there's plenty of white niggers out there too."

"Yeah..."

"I think the only difference between me and you is I say what I'm thinkin' and you just think it."

"Yeah, I hear that all the time from rednecks."

"That's 'cause it's true!"

"But I wasn't thinking that."

"What?"

"Anyway, what I mean is, you don't want to be just another one of those half-assed bands down there that we laugh at, you know?"

"What the fuck does that mean?"

"You know – "

"What, so I'm supposed to put up with T showin' up late, stealin' my money, stealin' my shit, so we can have a *real* bluesman in the band, right? And what makes T a *real* bluesman, huh? Shee-it..."

"No – "

"Shit, man. I know about blues. I grew up in a fuckin' *shack*, man. We didn't even have 'lectricity until I was sixteen. After I got out of the Army, I lived on the fuckin' street in Little Rock for five years, man, till I started playing music. You're glad you didn't know me then. I wasn't a sweetheart like I am now. I was a mean sonofabitch..."

"No, I know, I just – "

"And you know where T lives?"

"No, where does he live anyway?"

"You know where Mr. Big Bad Bluesman lives?"

"Where?"

"With his fuckin' mom."

"No way..."

"Uh-huh. With his mother. Always has."

"No kidding?"

"She's got a nice little house too, out in Fraser. Better than this place."

"Mmmm."

"Yeah, that's right."

It's my turn this time. Boyd says they'll meet me there with the van and the gear. But get the hell over there and get T out and over to the park.

"That motherfucker better not fuck up my money today."

I don't ask how I'm going to find him or what exactly I'm supposed to do if I do – aside from politely remind him of his business commitments and the lateness of the hour and won't you come out of the crackhouse, old boy, and let's go play some blues, whaddya say? But Boyd's putting out vibes mad and bad and I figure it's better to just roll with it. We're standing in front of Ray's and panhandlers are crossing the street to get away from Boyd. He's stomping around looking like trouble circling for a landing spot.

So it's my turn.

I cross the vacant lot over to Vance Street and move along quick, keeping my head down and my eyes up. A lone black whore is strolling lazily at the corner in cut-off jeans and a t-shirt tied way up under her breasts. Her cold eyes flick over me without interest as she sees I'm not a trick. Not today anyway.

I've never been on foot on Vance Street before. I feel uncomfortably exposed and vulnerable. The long blocks are mostly deserted, though. Just the bombed-out lots and the streets full of garbage.

I know the building, am surprised to find that I know it well, in fact, having marked it in my mind somewhere, sometime, and there is no searching the block for the right one, no walking up and down Vance Street trying doors. I walk right up and put my hand on the knob, knowing this is the place.

The lock hangs there, unfastened. I push slightly, then harder, and finally scrape the door open. It is heavy. Lots of resistance somewhere, and it is not necessary to remember to close it, because the weight slams it shut on the daylight before my eyes have even had a chance to adjust.

The smell is otherworldly. A hot, acrid tang, like burning hair. Baking soda and smoke and underneath, a layer of corpse-like body odor so foul it is hard to believe, to even process.

My heart is slamming in my chest, and I move forward in the blackness, trying my best to navigate

around the shapes in the gloom, seeing my way by the intermittent bursts of butane that spark like fireflies in random patterns all around me. In the flashes of light I see the faces, the wide whites of the eyes fixed so intently on the flame where it's touching the tip of the glass pipe that it looks almost as if the eyes are *willing* the flame into being.

There is a low, indistinct murmur. Men, black and white, muttering to themselves. Quick fast cursing. Someone weeping back in the dark somewhere. A few female voices, hard and brittle, like dry twigs snapping. And the constant crackling that gives the drug its name, mixed with muffled inhales and grateful, prayer-like exhales.

And I feel a quickening in me, a giddy responding to the pure vanishing act that the world outside has suddenly done. In here there is no time, no light, no other people even – none who matter much, anyway. It is simply a hole into which each man and woman has crawled in order to worship in relative safety. To rock and jabber and get frantically higher and higher and higher, dancing on the wire until the wire runs out.

I understand even before I see T, perched like a Buddha in a corner, fingers wrapped around the pipe, playing it like a flute, head back, eyes terrifyingly exposed, like the crudely drawn eyes of a demon in some cheap horror comic. I understand that this is his

darker world, his turn-and-run place, and I suddenly don't know what to say. Don't know how to approach him. I feel small and wispy and inconsequential next to the sheer might of the submission in his face and body, the *giving over* of his will to this higher power.

And the words whisper through my skull like ghosts: *how dare you* – and I get out of there.

In the interest of research, we go to see Massello.

This requires some costuming, and Boyd and I spend a good thirty minutes rooting around in piles of his clothing, Frankensteining a suitable outfit together for each of us. The clubs will not kick you out if you are dressed like a bum – not as long as you have money – but the service will have a wrinkle of the nose about it, and the minutes spent waiting for the waitress are likely to exceed the comfort zone. Eventually we come up rumpled but acceptable. I giggle at the sight of Boyd in a moth-eaten sport coat. The idea that we're going to blend in with the dining and dancing crowd is suddenly laughable. But it's all in the name of research.

"After all, man," Boyd says, frowning as he scrutinizes himself in our cracked mirror. "If I'm gonna

make it in this music business, I oughtta get a peep at them folks that already *made* it. You see, Oscar, you gotta approach this thing like it's a *trade*. You gotta learn what's what, just like when I learned carpentry from my old man, the fucking bum. There's *rules* to this shit. I ain't gonna learn nothin' from those fools in the park."

I wonder at this sudden swell of ambition on Boyd's part. I think of the way Fred can lay into a slow blues, the way it pricks the hairs up on my neck no matter how many times I've seen it. I open my mouth and shut it right away, figuring: why start something now? Just go down to the club, have a few drinks, get out of the warehouse for a night. Just go with the flow. I am aware that as my money has drained away and the Cadillac band has become my primary source of income, my position as Boyd's "advisor" has also proved mutable. I seem, occasionally, to be drifting into something resembling the category of Yes Man. Anyway, his mind is made up already. And there's no doubt that, as gifted an axe-man as he is, Fred is a piss-poor business model.

So we set off to see Massello, and we leave early to get a good seat, because he packs them in. And has done for years. I first saw him back in California when I started venturing out to the clubs, looking for the full-color, in-the-flesh version of what I'd been

ingesting nightly via crackling LPs of skipping, hissing old recordings.

And Massello was there, in his glistening silk suits and alligator boots. And always with the wraparound sunglasses, usually baby blue or pink. No one has ever seen Massello's eyes. It was rumored he had once attempted to deliberately blind himself with lye in order to make contact with the sightless world of music shared by so many of the famous old blues legends.

As Boyd and I approach Beale Street, I am remembering the sad, sinking feeling of those first outings. And I wonder if maybe it is different here at the Memphis clubs. We *are* officially in the South, the birthplace of all this crazy music. And the joint is named after B.B. King, after all. I peer up at the sign. It is a gaudy, neon approximation of B.B.'s famous guitar. His giant initials blink red and green above our heads as Boyd digs into his sport coat and piles money into the hand of the bored young girl at the door. A poster on the wall indicates that B.B. himself warmly welcomes us to "his own, personal juke joint." And we move past the piles of T-shirts and mugs and pencil holders for sale, and make our way forward into the neon gloom.

We must have had the time wrong, because Massello has already started. He's up there with his head thrown back, wailing away on a solo with his

harmonica. Boyd and I thread our way through the crowd towards a table near the front of the stage, at the edge of the dance floor. It always amuses me to see the berth that people give Boyd. They sense, even before they see him, a combustible presence in their midst, and they instinctively draw back as he rumbles through, his head down like a bull, his eyes slitted and mean-looking. He pulls a chair back, and sits down, glaring up at Massello like he's considering whether or not to eat him.

Massello's show is tightly coordinated. Every time I've seen him it's been exactly the same, with only minor variations in the setlist. He has a series of rocking, swing-based numbers, a few late-night ballad-type things, a couple growling rockers, and an old-time "down home" number that always brings out the worst in the dancers. In between, he dances around like a boxer, shoulders loose in that big shiny suit and says things like "If that wadn't a boogie, y'all ain't gonna *heah* one here tonight, I ain't lyin'...".

But when you've seen the show twice, you notice that all of it – every lick and spank and drop of sweat – is identical the second time around. That part in the middle of the ballad where he drops to his knees, seemingly overcome by it all? It turns out that he drops at the same point – the same *note* – every time. Over and over, like a wind-up toy. And when he comes off the bandstand at the end of the night you hear him

barking at the manager, haggling over a few bucks, and the jiving Southern accent that he affects onstage is gone, and there is just the low cold voice of a businessman.

Boyd and I sit there in the swirl of Saturday night on Beale Street in the last decade of the 20th century. After the sixth whiskey, it is a blur of frantic white faces. The dancers on the floor are struggling to find the two and the four, the women wiggling their thin hips, and the men grinning sweatily and shaking their heads to the music, letting you know they're *feeling it*, this being their blues-themed night on the town and everybody getting fuuuun-kay.

Dotted at tables around the room are the *aficionados*. The older, bearded, professorial guys who have left rooms full of immaculately catalogued LPs to sip club soda in silent assessment here amongst the rabble. With eyes beady and myopic, they talk earnestly between songs about obscure Mississippi guitar players from the depths of the Great Depression, competitive with the trivia, constantly drawing and re-drawing the boundaries of what is acceptable. What is *authentic*.

But hold on, now... that's not really fair, is it? Check yourself, Oscar. Because I look down into my glass and it tells me what I already know: that I'm doing the same as those guys. I should try to be less judgmental. I have a tendency to alternately

romanticize and to undervalue – sometimes about the same thing. Makes it difficult to truly engage, but I'm trying, and the whiskey seems to help, seems to sweep away my knotted anxieties and expectations and allows me to plunge in and swim with life – seems so, anyway. Like most apparent cynics, I'm really a true-believer, and when I look up there at Massello shucking his way through another set, and the shiny, upturned faces of the audience, moist and ecstatic, I assume my default sneer, but I really want to cry. Because when you love something like I do, no one else can ever love it enough to suit you. And it's hard to accept that this is what they've done to it.

I look at Boyd and his face tells me that he sees it too. His brow wrinkles as he tries to puzzle out the strange lifelessness, the wind of decay that gusts through the room of happy dancing people and their entertainment.

Hey, this was always good-time music. From the backwoods juke joints, to the boogieing homeless of Handy Park. And sure, maybe it's gotten a little... *clean* in here. But what's the alternative? Sweating it out under the trees outside for whatever gets tossed in the bucket? Massello occupies the highest echelon a modern blues musician can reasonably hope to attain. He plays Vegas, Princess cruises, the Sausalito Blues Festival.

As she clears the bottles away from our table, I motion to our waitress and she bends down, offering me a tiny, pearl-shaped ear.

"Listen, does B.B. ever really come in here?"

She gives me an exasperated look. "You never know."

Dee shuffles in from the kitchen with a tray of tea and cakes. I watch him coming through the ornate Victorian doorway, his one mad eye shining in his skull. I have to admit he belongs here, in this crazy old mansion. I can't imagine him fitting anywhere else. And some part of me envies him that: his ship to go down with.

"As I was saying... Memphis took a wrong turn somewhere, Oscar. Who can say when or where? Now, when Dr. King took that bullet at the Lorraine Motel on April 4th, 1968, I will admit, there did seem to be a certain... slackening of momentum. But the damage had been done long before that."

I accept a cup from the tray. Lean back in the dusty old chair.

"You remember that, Dee?"

"Indeed I do, son."

His soft, Southern voice purrs musically, like a quiet motor.

"Dark times they were. The anger was so thick it darn near turned the air black."

He brushes his eye patch lightly, with the back of one hand, like a Southern belle fanning her powdered bosom on a long hot day. And he talks.

"Anger, you ought to know now, son, is both a thief and a liar. It steals energy from people, from places. It exhausts resources, floods the atmosphere with impotence and futility. All the while promising satisfaction."

He sighs heavily, and takes a bite of one of the cakes.

"Yes, indeed."

The insane quiet of this place. The distant ticking of a clock. Wind chimes tickled by the wind on some far-off veranda. The sounds of peace. Of order.

"Say, did I ever tell you my theory about the pinnacle of civilization?"

"Um, no, Dee."

And according to Dee it was in 1954. He's warming to a kind of giddiness now. No way I'm the first one to hear the "pinnacle" theory, but I'm probably the first in too long a while.

That first night in town, straight from the train station, I knocked on the door of the old Longston

house, circa 1855, carved up into units to double as a Bed and Breakfast and youth hostel, and Dee opened up and peered out at me through that one eye, and told me to come in out of "all that out there." And when he said it, he waved his hand vaguely and dismissively at something I couldn't see – maybe he couldn't see it either, but he shut the door quickly anyhow, so it couldn't get in.

"Caretaker" is the term he prefers. Certainly not "groundskeeper," and "manager" lacks the necessary *noblesse*. He is a large, hulking man with rounded shoulders and sandy gray hair. At first glance he looks almost threatening, given the combination of his size and the eye patch. But he moves with a peculiar delicacy that is shaded with hesitance, like a man who has bumped his shins on the same coffee table all his life. And closer up, he is one of those people you can, with no trouble at all, picture as a very young child.

Unsurprisingly, Dee is also a rabid music fan. We struck up the first installment of an ongoing debate that first night, and though I only stayed at the hostel two nights, I pop in from time to time to take tea. I like the house, the ticking stillness. The feeling of entering another world. Dee creeping across the carpet with a tray like some insane one-eyed butler from a late-night movie.

Our debate has a few different branches, but the main stem is Dee's contention that American music

was forever sullied when the races began to bleed into one another.

"Progress is the death of purity. And without purity, art is just craft."

He throws these lines out there with a studied Southern airiness, and I am enthralled. Because I missed out on the standard university coffeehouse brand of earnest late-night pontifications, cracking the world's riddles. This taps my suspicion of gaps in my experience – things visible to me only by their absence. Wisdom I'm maybe missing out on. I lean forward and listen further to Dee describing a world before television and teenagers and corporate sponsorship. Before, always before.

And he tells me that in 1954, Hank Williams had just died. Charlie Parker was in his final year and Billie Holiday was making her last great records. Muddy Waters and Chicago blues were at their brief zenith, and Ray Charles was about to bring church into rhythm and blues. Elvis Presley, still covered with pimples, had just made his first record. He tells me that this is the last snapshot we have of the various cross-streams of American music, existing in their separate little incubatory ghettos, swollen with genius, waiting to be engulfed by the tidal wave of rock and roll, swept up and scattered in flaccid, diluted incarnations to the shores. The floodgates were opening. None of it could

stay safe. The money was getting too big. The threat was too real. And it was all about to merge...

He points a finger my way. "That was also the year they desegregated the schools. Think about it, son. It was a beautiful dream, but in the end we all brought out the worst in each other. Each race ignorantly aping the most vulgar aspects of the other..."

He sighs grandly, talking upward now, beseeching the heavens.

"God help us, from Louis Armstrong to... *rap music* in sixty years. Those poor boys... embracing the garish materialism of the mainstream they were finally doomed to be a part of. Do you follow this, son? I'm talking about a mass culture of *in-between*, of mediocrity. No greatness. No purity. No going back. Yes, indeed..."

And I make my feeble rejoinders – tempted sure, but sensing a wrongness in there that I can't articulate effectively. I can't even decide if Dee is a racist or not. His words puff calmly from his lips like bubbles and they sometimes sound right, but they *feel* wrong. One thing's for sure: he seems to have only a limited interest in any historical ramifications that don't in some way involve music. He has managed to zero in on the one dimension that sustains him, and the rest has been elaborately filtered out. A neat trick.

Later, we adjourn to the piano, where Dee sings gospel songs in a throaty tenor that bears a slight

resemblance to Charlie Rich. His head thrown back, tears streaming down his cheeks, he hollers about Jesus coming back, but I know he can't really believe it. After all, we would assume that Dee's Jesus, of all people, would know what's good for him. Snug in the afterlife, why would he return to this, of all worlds? Can anything still remain for him, after all this history? What could possibly entice him to brave "all that out there?"

I'm sitting with my back to one of the gnarled oaks that have watched down on Handy Park for eighty years, witnessing all forms of fumble and foolishness, and I'm squinting into the sun, watching T up there butchering the living daylights out of Jimmy Reed's "Baby What You Want Me To Do."

Possibly the easiest blues song in history to sing, but T is tearing it new holes left and right. Staggering back and forth across the stage, his voice a rasping shadow of its usual self, he seems to be ignoring the music altogether, cramming syllables together in random configurations, spitting out the lyrics in a kind of tuneless distaste. It's not pretty.

By the way he's glowering over his cupped hands, I can see the performance quality has not escaped Boyd's attention. He blows short angry bursts

on the harmonica, looking like he'd prefer to blow T right off the stage and into the bushes.

Artie looks nervously over at T from time to time. Fred just looks at the ground and strums softly as if he's alone in a room playing for himself. Tommy drums on, undaunted, a cigarette hanging tranquilly from his mouth.

At last the tune sputters to a halt and Boyd hurls his harp mic into a box in disgust. T is pacing the stage in front of the mic and looking disoriented, like someone who's trying to remember if he left the stove on at home.

"Yeah... that's our show, folks. Now come on up here and give us some money..."

He resumes pacing, laughing and mumbling to himself.

"All you fuckin' winos move aside and let the money come through... yeah..." He sneers at someone in front. "I know *you* ain't got no money for me... shit..."

With a brief snarl of feedback he jumps down suddenly and wanders away from the stage in a lurching, random way, like a ship with a bad rudder.

After a moment, Fred leans over to the mic. "Uh, alright... the one and only Big T, ladies and gentlemen. We thank you for your kindness and we'll be seein' you back here tomorrow. Levi's comin' up, so hang around."

The mood is grim as I make my way through the thinning crowd to the stage.

"Whoo. That was painful."

Boyd snaps his harp case shut and spits into the dirt. "Yeah, try bein' up here on the fuckin' stage." He glares out at T, a zigzagging dark shape at the other end of the park. "I've about had enough of this shit."

Artie's shaking his head sadly. "I hope that guy from the Parks Commission wasn't watchin' today."

Boyd's pacing like a bull preparing to charge. "Motherfucker's gettin' worse. Next time he does that I'm gonna kick his ass off the fuckin' stage. You think I won't? This is bullshit, man. I'm dead serious..."

Levi approaches just then, with the traces of an "I told you so" look on his face. He says nothing, just gives a low whistle.

Fred chuckles, "Well, I guess we done warmed the stage up enough for you."

Levi wags his head solemnly.

But Boyd's getting worked up now. "Seriously, man. How long are we gonna put up with him?"

"If we can just keep him away from the crackhouse before the gig..."

Boyd throws up his hands in disgust. "Yeah, maybe if we just watch him every fuckin' minute. You know, we could take turns, sleep in shifts... Jesus, Artie, how much shit will you take?"

"Well fuck, I'm just trying to be constructive here."

"*I'm* being constructive. You're being a fuckin' pussy."

"Fuck you."

I watch them and realize that these mounting difficulties will forge no bond between them, that no strength will be born of the struggle, that no one will *rise* to any of this.

"Where the fuck'd T run off to, anyway?"

"You know where."

"Dumb motherfucker..."

Levi peers out at the crowd. "I'm sho' 'nuff glad I ain't gonna be there to see what become of y'all out in Missouri."

"What?" Artie and Boyd echo simultaneously.

Levi turns back to the now confused group.

"What, he didn't tell y'all?"

"Look here, what the hell you talkin' about, Levi?"

"Yeah, I know I heard him say somethin' just 'bout an hour ago. That casino gig y'all were trying to get..."

Boyd is incredulous. "He got it?"

"That's what the man said."

Artie's fidgeting nervously. "I don't believe it. What do you think, Boyd?"

"Probably a fuckin' fantasy." But he's looking thoughtful now.

Tommy's squatted in front of his drums rolling a joint. "Hey, a casino? Righteous. When do we leave?"

"Those gigs pay good, huh, Boyd?"

"Yeah, they do pay good..."

I walk over to Tommy and take the joint from him, filling my lungs. "Look out, Missouri..."

Interview: Levi

"A man got to take care of business. Got to be a man and not no boy. Dress right. See how I dress? See how I look? Like a professional. Muddy, Wolf, B.B. King... they professionals. Show up on time, leave 'em wantin' more. That's the way to get it done..."

"If you gonna be a musician, *be* a musician. They call it *playin'* music, but ain't no play about it. Don't play at it. *Work* it. Like anything: a job, a woman you sweet on, anything. Lots of mens out there just playin', but if you *workin'* you gonna make it..."

"I haven't taken a drop of liquor in ten years. No sir... 'Cause it mess up my mind, and when you mess up your mind, you mess up your music, and everything else follow. 'Cause all your music is, all

blues is, is what's inside you. If you a mess inside, your music gonna be a mess. And ain't nobody I know gonna pay money to see a mess. 'Cause most of them, they a mess too. And they don't wanna see that up there on the stand. They wanna see someone respects hisself, who gonna be professional and not be clownin' around all drunk and everything like that..."

"Well, maybe *some* just want to see a clown, but if you aimin' at *that* type of audience, well you gonna be playin' on the street all your life. You ain't goin' nowhere. And me, I'm goin' somewhere. You can bet money on that, man..."

The card is my one secret. So many times I've held the scissors up, measuring the line: straight across the middle divide, right between the words "American" and "Express." One quick cut and then I'm truly on my own. But I always put it back in my wallet, hiding it behind a Memphis Blues Society card I found in the park one day.

It's a small thing, this plastic lifeline back to where I came from, and I keep it to myself. Nobody in this red brick downtown world even carries a wallet. What few bills they have are carried in a swiftly diminishing roll. The guys in the clubs carry money *clips* but everyone I know just uses a rubber band and puts the biggest bill (a ten, maybe) on the outside.

But sometimes I get tired and hungry, especially hungry, and I sneak off and hike five blocks

over and get on the Poplar bus headed East. And as we roll through the blocks, the vacant lots and scarred buildings give way, first to strip malls and coffee shops, and finally to manicured lawns and immaculately landscaped parks.

And I walk the streets, lit by cute little antique lamps, listening to the soft Southern accents – nobody yells here – and I slink through bookstores running my hands over the names I remember from school. Small, trinkety shops with bells that ring as you enter. Restaurants with cool slim women chewing \$80 steaks right there in the window where I can watch.

And I go into one of these places, and am seated at a white tablecloth, brought water and wine. Nobody questions me. I can still pull it off. All the kids look mangy these days. And I've got my secret little card like a key to the city. Paper bills generated from these electronic card-reader devices, floating stamped and binding across the continent like postcards to my parents, back in golden California.

The food appears. Asparagus and Caesar salad. Mashed potatoes whipped to a dreamy foaming white. Huge, succulent burgers and imported beer. Crème Brule and espresso. I cram it all in greedily, knowing I'm only stretching my tiny shrunken stomach, that tomorrow I will be even hungrier than usual because of this expensive little orgy. But I don't give a shit because, for now, I feel blood pouring back into my

veins, feel the strength rising in me. Knowing that if I could only eat like this every day I would have the energy to do wondrous things.

Occasionally, on those increasingly rare days when everyone is getting along, the Cadillac band and I will troop off together to the Mexican place for the all-you-can-eat buffet that is offered at a discounted price before 4 p.m. The small, polite waiters grow nervous at the sight of T and Boyd walking through the door. Easily five hundred pounds between the two of them, they represent a significant dent in profits. We all pile into a large booth and order several pitchers of beer before beginning the assault on the buffet table.

Something about the unlimited flow of food brings out the garrulous side in them, T especially. The conversation frequently turns to surreal, semi-political discussions or social philosophizing. Hammering on the table with his fist, T will insist that "All there is to do with them dudes who mess with little kids is kill 'em. Straight up."

Tommy might counter with: "I dunno man, I knew a guy who hadda wear one of them LoJacks for foolin' with a little girl and he wasn't a bad guy. He just loved them little girls, man. It weren't his *choice* or nothin.' Heck, he felt *bad* about it, far as I could tell."

"I don't give a goddamn how he *feels* about it. The point is, man, you can't cure them guys from that

shit any more than you can get my black ass off dope.
How you is... is how you is."

Artie will chime in now, looking tense. "That's bullshit, T. My meetings are fulla guys who are all changing. Working their programs, so they can get better, instead of just stayin' fuckups."

"Yeah, but how many of them fuckups *stay* cleaned up? Way I hear it is, there's a revolving door at them meetings. Come in, go out, come back. And half them old fuckers are high *during* them meetings anyhow."

Then T will conclude by shaking his head with great certainty. "Ain't nobody ever changes for long."

Riding the bus back west I lean my head against the glass and watch the streets change back into the glass-splattered gashes that carve up the downtown. I know my viewpoint is informed by my origins, the same as T and the others. But I am continually surprised by how little they appear to have invested in their time here. They seem to live without either doubt or hope, and somehow the absence of one cancels out the missing other, leaving something that looks like freedom to me, who cannot stop second-guessing every moment of every day. I figure I should be less attached than I am, that it's a weakness of some kind. And I know that I should be disgusted with myself for my continual reliance on the Card, and

these little nights out with myself on the nice side of town.

But I can't summon any real remorse. I feel too good, like a fat, happy bug. I tell myself that none of the others would think twice about using a credit card if they had access to one. Second guesses on top of second guesses. One bus ride and I'm already screaming to be free of my nagging mind.

I swing down from the bus and walk home, feeling a little like a spy. But a spy who is somewhat confused about his loyalties. Which is headquarters, and which is the field? I didn't feel exactly at home out there in East Memphis. But then, I was hardly ill at ease either.

Truthfully, as I stick my key into the lock and push the steel door open, I feel more than a little undercover. But I realize that I've always felt that wherever I've been. And for the moment, this strikes me as funny, somehow.

Boyd hollers, "Where *you* been?" from where he's sprawled in his bedroom watching TV.

And I yell out, "Dining with the fucking Queen, where d'ya think?"

"Smart ass. I'm gonna cook up some beans. You eat yet?"

"Yep."

When she brought the bill, she bowed and said, have a very pleasant evening sir, and I hope we'll see

you again, and maybe they do that to everyone, but it still gives you a little something. It's not so hard, to just make life a little nicer...

Wondrous things.

Tommy points the van up Highway 65 and I'm riding shotgun, enjoying the breeze in my hair and watching Memphis fall away outside the window. WEVL's afternoon blues show is on the radio, the crazed DJ's bottle sloshing audibly in the background as he finishes off a solid hour of nothing but harmonica instrumentals.

Everyone's in high spirits, wedged in the spaces between the amps and the instruments, pouring sweat and sucking dust in the stifling van, but glad to be getting out of town for a couple days and looking forward to tasting the worldly pleasures of Branston, Missouri.

Artie's hollering from the back seat. "First thing I'm gonna do when I get paid is play me a little

blackjack. All the fine women hang out at the blackjack table."

Boyd, just finishing licking a joint, manages to scoff, light up and inhale simultaneously. "Artie, you're gonna fuck up and lose all your money."

"Hell no. I got a fool-proof system."

"You count cards?"

"What? No."

"Artie, if you don't count cards there's no way to win at blackjack. You might want to incorprit' that into your system..."

T snorts from where he's sprawled near the wheel well, the ever-present Wild Irish Rose in his fist. "Shoot... this boy thinks we goin' to Vegas. Branston ain't nothin' but a bunch of fuckin' hicks. Y'all gonna fit right in."

But the mood is easy in the van. I don't know where any of this is leading, but it feels surprisingly good to have palpable motion and at least a short-term destination. I relax into the fleeting sense of purpose and watch the yellow line licking up under the front bumper.

I glance at Tommy who appears peaceful, in his own world, as always. A small, odd-looking splash of faded blue ink peeks out from under his sleeve on his passenger-side arm. There's a number, several digits long, in the center of what looks like a whirling storm of water or fire, it's hard to tell which.

"What's that, Tommy?"

Tommy looks at the tattoo curiously, as if seeing it for the first time. "I got that in the Army."

"You were in the Army?" I can't picture Tommy in a military environment somehow. But all I really know of such environments is the same handful of movies that everyone else my age has seen.

He nods. The joint has made its way to the front seat and he squints his eyes closed for a moment while he inhales. I'm thinking he's not going to say any more when he blows the smoke out slowly, like a whale lazily clearing its blow hole, and says, "They let me go."

"What for?"

He shrugs, as if the memory is too distant and too inconsequential to muster. "I had some problems, they said. My head wasn't right."

He taps his head absently and looks as if he is going to continue, but doesn't.

"Oh yeah?" I'm fumbling for an appropriate response when T cuts in, bellowing from the back seat.

"Hey, Gomer! You didn't miss the turn-off did ya? Keep an eye on him, kid. We bound to end up in Nebraska."

I hear Fred chuckling. "Oh they gonna *love* us when we come rollin' in."

"Hey, How do you count cards?"

"No, Artie. Don't mess with the fool-proof system."

I close my eyes and remember hazy car rides with my family when I was younger. The safe feeling of knowing you can close your eyes and still be all right. Someone's at the wheel.

Thinking how busting I was to flee the safeness and sameness of my little smalltown whitebread life. And a secluded trickle of thought: wondering if all I'm doing is re-creating a less functional version of that first small world. How can anyone not want to be *safe*?

T leans abruptly forward. "Hey, turn that shit up!"

I flick the knob and Otis Redding fills the van with that tortured, quavering voice. Protesting that he's no boy, that his time is *expensive*.

"Mmm..." says Fred. "That's the good old shit."

We're all listening. The van's speakers are rattling and the station's listener-supported signal is straining with all its watts to reach us, but the meat – the message, the *magic* – is coming through clear as the first time I heard this song, eyes closed in my bedroom, fingers laced behind my head, my body still as a bird, every part of me tensed in receptivity to the noise that was reaching me at last over the wires, across the decades, clear as a fucking bell – and that's the simple, beautiful craziness of what music is, however it finds you. Or at least that's how it is for me.

We listen:

Carla Thomas comes in with the horns and she knows what he needs, and promises it – *you know I wiiiiill...* – and it should be a festive thing, this sexual meeting of the minds, but it sounds doomed.

And they come together with the first chorus. *Tell it like it is...* urging each other on, Otis saying to let your conscience be your guide, pleading for the honesty he probably wouldn't trust even if he got it, almost mocking his own request by twisting the word "guide" into so many syllables it sounds like he's trying to breathe the faith back into himself by sheer gymnastic will, to wring that last little bit of *more* from the clichéd words.

You may be here today and gone tomorrow...

Carla purrs this line like a woman breaking the rough news and knowing it's better to face it now rather than later.

And when Otis answers her, it's clear that he knows it already. There's no more sex talk. All they can do is affirm the hard truth to each other without flinching, for the small victory that's in the naming of it.

You might as well get what you want...

But he's not going to whine. He's not going gently.

So go on and LIVE.

When she joins him on the last word, Fred and T drop in with them, T taking Otis's part and Fred with Carla's plaintive upper register moan, and the four of them plunging into the final defiant chorus together.

...I'm just TELLING IT LIKE IT IS...

And I notice that, for once, there's no jive in T's voice. His eyes are closed, the wine bottle forgotten between his knees, and his face is upturned as he leans toward Fred and their voices blend into one, rising and falling like a man walking one slow perfect line on the high wire, deaf to everything beyond his own little circle of light.

There's quiet for a moment as the radio fades into a commercial for Poplar Tunes record store. A deep thuggish voice is trumpeting a sale on all hip-hop and R&B. I snap the knob off.

"You remember that one, man?" says T.

"Oh yeah..." says Fred. "Back with Sonny Taylor's group."

"Raymond was on the drums. That cat could play. Over there at Blues Alley."

"That's right. 'Fore they shut down."

"*That* was a fuckin' band."

"Sho' 'nuff it was, man."

There's a palpable discomfort in the air. Almost a shame. Boyd is sitting silently. I wonder if he's feeling it.

Artie is fumbling with his guitar. "What were those changes, Fred?"

Fred is smiling, eyes closed, humming softly to himself. "Whatever become of ole' Sonny anyhow?"

"Dead," says T, looking out the window.

The Sweetwater Casino of Branston, Missouri is a surreal monstrosity. It juts out on a bluff overlooking the Mississippi river, like a painted whore with her dirty feet in the water. As we rumble through the town on the way up the hill to the main parking lot, kids pause their play in the streets and stare at us. The kids are raggedy-looking, the houses are small and shabby, and the streets are pocked with big holes.

The gate leading to the main lot gleams with reds and golds, looking ghastly and misplaced in this tired little river town. But some whirring of political machination and backroom wrangling has delivered this neon baby to their doorstep, the answer to all their economic prayers. Just ask the Indians.

"They just opened last week," says T. "They green all right. Man just said 'no problem' when I said a hundred each. Shoulda said two hundred."

We're all chuckling. Bandits from the big city. It does not occur to anyone that the Cadillac Band might actually be *worth* half a grand.

Our wheels glide onto new blacktop and we follow freshly-painted arrows to the service entrance by Lot C.

"This is it," says T. "Get in there and check us in, kid."

I have just finished sharing a joint of some particularly strong pot with Tommy, and I am struck somewhat dumb by the glitter and the grandeur. But I stumble my way through the whoosh of the automatic doors and into the artificial air.

The Sweetwater is clearly aspiring to some type of Trump-league luxury, but there's a definite air of small-town cheapness wafting off the place. Country-looking senior citizens in baggy, floral print shuffle along the red carpet lugging buckets of nickels and dimes. Or sit slumped in front of the slots, pushing coins in with stubby fingers. The craps and poker tables are empty. One kid in a John Deere hat occupies a seat at the five-dollar-limit blackjack table. The waitresses, bovine-like townies in too-revealing tops, lean against the machines and yawn without covering their mouths.

The place is clean and unused-feeling, but there's a discernable malice about the various signs beckoning me forth – PLAY! – or so it seems to me in my stoned state. I'm sweating coldly, white lights are flashing like razors all around me, and it takes me a moment to collect myself and locate the main desk.

The guy behind the counter seems to be aping the gay maitre'd in every movie that takes place in a French restaurant. He's fidgeting with a bad John Waters mustache and twitching with officiousness, trying hard to pretend he's at the MGM Grand.

As I approach, he straightens with what seems to be a rehearsed haughtiness.

"Yes, can I help you, sir?"

"Yes, good afternoon. I'm with the Beale Street Cadillac Blues Band. I wonder if you might be able to tell us where we should set up?"

"The Beale Street...?"

"Yes, your musical entertainment for this afternoon."

"Oh, I see, sir. Are you a band member?"

"No, I'm the equipment manager."

There is a pause, as he looks at my clothes. I am suddenly aware of my own shabbiness. I stand straight, and think of the Card buried in my wallet. Somehow, the Card gives me the right to be here.

"Ah... well, the lounge is just over there, beyond the buffet. There should be someone there who can direct you."

"Thank you very much."

"Not at all, sir. And enjoy your visit to the Sweetwater."

I know I should move on, but instead I sigh, and light a cigarette. Lean against the counter, unhurried, and blow smoke wistfully up at the art deco ceiling.

"Yes, it looks like a fine establishment."

His eyes narrow darkly. But I can't seem to stop.

"The band always enjoys these type of engagements. It allows them to let their hair down a bit. Relax."

"Of course, sir."

With garish timing, Boyd's voice can suddenly be heard behind me. "Artie, I ain't loaning you no money! Wait'll we get PAID for Chrissake!"

"Did you SEE her?"

"She was like, sixty, Artie..."

I beam desperately at my friend behind the counter. "That must be them now. They're in excellent spirits."

"It certainly appears so, sir."

Now T's voice fills the room, causing several of the blue-haired crowd to scowl in our direction. "Hey kid! Them amps ain't gonna move themselves!"

I wince, and give a martyr's shrug to the clerk.
Oh, those guys...

His wry smile tells me he's not buying any of it. I am suddenly mortified, feeling I've made a tremendous mistake. Even drugged in the land of make-believe, it seems I can't dream my way out of my colorless self. I shuffle away from the counter and merge with the other suckers.

The band is crushed onto a postage stamp-sized platform in the corner of the lounge, jostling for elbow room and each trying not to get a bit of foliage in the eye. The plants are everywhere, huge green billowing ferns and lush jungle tentacles, all their plastic leaves and stems buffed to a mirror shine and covering nearly every inch of free space in this dusky hideaway.

The Jungle Room at the Sweetwater Casino is modestly populated tonight with a crowd resembling that of your average Saturday night Bingo game. Several of the men are even wearing overalls. There are a few younger couples, the men hard and surly-looking, gripping Bud Lights beside their spandex-clad ladies, and looking like they've already lost more than they can afford at the roulette table. A few older black couples are scattered here and there, talking quietly.

I climb up on a stool shaped like a leaf and order a Mai Tai, not even sure what's in it. Just hoping to blend in. I suddenly feel a delicious anonymity. I'm glad not to be up there on that stage, exposed. I don't know why some seem to thrive under pressure. That push push always brought out the fear in me. Remembering my father's eyes: twin drills of demand. I don't know what I want to be when I grow up. And I can always run away. Thirteen-year-old Oscar, dreaming of a world somewhere where no one will bother me about it. Where the currency Ambition don't spend. Land ahoy.

Behind his drums, Tommy stares straight ahead like he's waiting in line at the DMV. Boyd and Artie are arguing about something, gesturing as animatedly as the space will permit. T whispers something to them, then moves forward and seizes the mic. A Heineken in one hand and a cigarette hanging from his mouth, he leans in and eyeballs the room at large.

"Alright folks, welcome one and all to the brand-new Sweetwater Casino and Gaming Center, right here on the Mississippi in your own Branston, MO. We're the Beale Street Cadillac Blues Band, come all the way from Memphis, Tennessee to play for y'all this evening. If you wanna get up and dance, go on and do it, and if you wanna sit there and drink, go on and do that, 'cause the more you drink the better we sound... If you wanna come up here and drop some

money in our bucket 'stead of droppin' it in those slot machines, well that's all right too, 'cause the more you pay the better we play and that's a fact..."

At the end of the bar I can see the manager, dressed like some seventies tropical nightmare. His eyebrows appear to have risen slightly.

"Now, I can tell by lookin' this crowd over that this here's a good down home crowd ready for some good down home music, so just relax and enjoy yourselves, 'cause we're gonna play all night long. And who knows, maybe you'll get lucky tonight, you never know... and maybe I'll get lucky too..."

T is grinning down at a very young white girl in a tube top who is sitting in one of the booths nearer the stage. The jar-headed youth beside her is fumbling with some bills in his wallet and seems not to have noticed. But my stomach twists anyway. Christ, don't let it be one of *those* nights.

"...Yessir... here's one for ya which features the great Fred Saunders on vocals..."

Fred leans back and roars the intro to "Don't Make Your Move Too Soon" and they're off. The manager is staring, mouth open. A squinty-eyed twinge revealing itself in stages across his face. But they're moving drinks. The Cadillac band *is* party music. Maybe not the sleek uptown brand of get-down that the Sweetwater suits would prefer to hawk, but there's something infectious about it. Once again, I marvel

that sometimes all the parts of the Cadillac machine swing in unison, clanking in the right place, the steam whistle blowing smack on the dot, and all of it edging towards some kind of misshapen rendering of what can – still and all – only be called... Pro.

And I'm in the shadows, watching like mad.

I remember the discovery.

Fourteen years old and tall for my age, cutting school to ride the bus into the city. Prowling the sidewalks, looking for a place that will serve me. Somewhere dark enough to obscure my actual face and let me *in*.

But that day having no luck. The bartenders snickering and shaking their heads with great amusement.

"Sorry, kid."

Some of them adding, "Nice try," with a vaguely sympathetic look.

Knowing I could always shoplift a bottle from one of the Korean-owned stores on Market Street, but wanting the *access*, the perch at the corner of the bar where I can watch and listen. Still finding the average

barroom drunk unbearably exotic and fascinating. And them finding a too-receptive-to-be-true audience for their childish notions of wisdom. Getting to play sage for me, who lapped it up.

So, that day, roaming the second-hand record stores, knowing I barely have enough in my pockets to get back home on the bus. Mainly just ruffling through the heavy metal stacks, looking for a good half-naked girl cover photo.

Straying into the blues section after noticing that, for a stretch there in the seventies, album covers by Bobby Bland, Little Milton and O.V. Wright were frequently on the verge of pornographic. Satiny dark women with shiny bottles of Courvosier, showing a hell of a lot of leg. And the bluesman cocking an eye to the camera as if to say, "how about *that*?"

Then, flipping through the "Various Artists" section and stopping on one. A large black and white photograph of Beale Street, circa 1940s. The words "Union Avenue Breakdown" stenciled across the front. The street is crowded with mid-century shoppers, all of them black. Awnings announcing pawn shops and pool halls are visible on either side of the street. It is clearly a poor part of town, yet there is an unmistakable liveliness about the scene, a bustling vitality that seems utterly independent of white approval or censor. This is telegraphed by the jaunty body language of the passersby, the outrageous plumage of some of the

women. Everyone in the photo appears to be *strutting*. It's where mama told you not to come.

On the back, a young black man with a hat and suspenders, cradling a battered guitar. Another photo of another black man, smiling, leaning against the rail in a bar somewhere. Some more street shots. Songs with names like "Boogie Disease" and "Snatch It Up And Go." In contrast, the desperate obsequiousness of heavy metal's brand of faux-occult rebellion seems absurdly childish and *safe*.

It was just impulse of some kind that made me pick it up that first day, and carry it to the counter, where I paid for it in nickels and dimes, horded from my lunch money a little at a time.

On the long bus ride back, I sat and stared at that front cover, having no idea what was contained within. But sensing something. Some hidden world in there. Something I hadn't been told about.

Then home, waiting until later when my parents were asleep and it was past midnight. *My* time. Slipping the heavy black disk onto the turntable and sitting back, not sure what to expect.

Feeling that seismic shock of recognition, of the horizon widening an inch. Listening always with my eyes closed, to blot out any input that might water down the clarity. From then on: following the clues, hunting down the next record, which led to the next, an endless web of trails converging and diverging,

branching off into other genres – into Rock and Soul and Jazz – and circling back. Devouring the details that began widening the crack between me and everyone around me.

I remember walking in a haze of appropriated memories, waiting to make my own. Knowing I'd have to leave to do it.

I remember gradually coming to despise my friends, seeing myself in their sameness.

I remember the girls, slender and blonde and unattainable.

I remember wanting to run.

My father saying that this is music of oppression and the existential pain that results from that experience.

Saying this is not *your* experience, Oscar.

Saying the number one audience for hip-hop is white suburban teenagers, because... why?

Words.

Saying I'm too young to throw my future away.

Saying I have opportunities, obligations.

Thinking he knows me. Thinking there's something *to* know in this pale muddle.

I can't fight the words. Can't express it using them.

I remember always wanting to run.

"Hit me, motherfucker."

We're attracting a certain amount of attention, but I'm past worrying about it. In fact, it seems right. *We're* the circus tonight. What fun to blow the hair back on the furrowed skulls of these sheltered souls. Show 'em a little Memphis, by god. The hubris welling up in me – in my eyes we're living large at the moment. Our table is full of *life*, right? Even though the patrons appear to be, right this moment, squinting at us rather resentfully, not seeming all that awed or envious, but rather... *disgusted*, and the dealer... well, the dealer, he actually looks somewhat... *embarrassed*. Well, that's funny, all right.

"Hit me again, motherfucker."

T is glaring at the impassive little mustached man in the lime green vest who has drawn the unlucky

assignment of our table this evening. The new card is barely on the felt before T barks it again:

"Hit me."

Another card comes down. How many is that? I feel the giggles coming on again.

Across the table, Boyd has his arm around Fred, leaning in with great confidentiality – apart from the volume of his voice, which is on the generous side.

"Aw, shit, man... Fred, man..."

"What issit, man?"

"Man, you can really play, man. I mean, really, you should be makin' records, you know... you and me, Fred, less' make us a record, huh?"

Tongues whiskey-thick, they are moving and talking in slow motion. Eyes lidded, words jumbled together, weaving dangerously and looking very sloppy. But just when it seems they are ready to go down for the count, they straighten. Pulling back from the abyss and, improbably, calling for more drinks.

That little freckle-faced woman over by the slots. Stop staring at me if you please, ma'am. I'd prefer a little more discretion on your part. Can't you see we're just having a little fun? Raising a little innocent hell? Why the devil is everyone shooting us these *looks*?

"Oh, FUCK me! What you givin' me?"

T has busted for the fourth time in a row. And seems unwilling to accept his own role in the defeat.

I look down at my cards for what feels like the first time. They are a blur of red and white. Fuck it.

"Hit me."

"Dealer holds, gentleman hits on sixteen, gentleman draws a five, five plus sixteen is twenty one, blackjack, the gentleman has blackjack."

The guy in the vest is sliding me over a small pile of chips. I must have bet right.

"Was this what you were looking for, T?"

"Motherfucker! You keep dealin' this punk the good cards!"

I loop an elbow over T's shoulder, feeling a surge of goodwill and affection slugging through me. That ole' sonofabitch, Big T. My man.

"T, I've been telling you, I got the knack for this game. I own this fuckin' game..."

"Yeah, you gonna own a broken arm, white boy, 'less you get off me."

I blink. "Shit, T. I was just fucking around."

"Well, why don't you go move some fuckin' equipment or somethin'. You bringin' me bad luck."

Pushing back from the table, reeling away from the dark blur that is T, hunched there with a handful of new cards, I stand up too quickly and stumble backwards, nearly colliding with Artie, who is blowing by at great speed.

"Oscar, you got some money? Gimme some money, willya?"

"What? I don't ..."

But my head is clearing now. I lean closer, smelling the dank urgency of him. "Artie, have you been *drinking*?"

"Yeah, I been fuckin' drinking! Are you my fuckin' mom?"

"Uh, no. I don't – "

"Where's Tommy?"

"I don't know."

"You don't have any money?"

"No, just like, a couple bucks."

"I need forty. The fuck is Tommy?"

And he's off, pushing through the crowd, gone.

Across the casino I see a row of bottles. Blues and greens and yellows standing at attention in front of a long mirrored shelf. A mass of palm leaves and a cloud of cigarette smoke rising like some kind of distress signal. I make my way over, sliding up onto the stool.

"Rum and coke."

He doesn't give me any shit about being underage, just nods and gets to work. I stare up at all those cheap flavored liqueurs that no one ever orders. Creme de banana. Taking up space for what?

The bartender returns with my drink, accepts a bill, then moves away again. I take a big hit, stare into space, tired, thinking of nothing.

The silence is fractured by a thunderclap of sound behind me. A combination of individual noises that, compressed into a few seconds, form a single detonation, what can only be described as the sound of violence.

I spin on the stool and, even before my eyes have located the source of the disruption, T's voice is reverberating across the casino floor:

"GET AWAY FROM ME YOU REDNECK MOTHERFUCKER!!!"

The blackjack table is overturned, cards and chips scattered, and the dealer is standing with his palms up in a pleading, "no trouble" gesture.

"Don't think I don't know how you do around here! Jive-ass PUNK!"

Fred is grasping at him urgently. "Come on, man. This ain't no good. Let's just go outside."

I move toward the cluster of them. They seem to be at the center of a harsh white light. As I approach, I catch sight of Boyd a few feet away, at an otherwise unoccupied neighboring table. His head is down on his folded arms and he appears to be snoring peacefully.

The dealer is pleading with T. "Yes, please go outside..."

"I'll go outside when I'm damn well ready! Who you think you are? You think you a big man?"

"No, sir. I'm not a big man..."

T is pacing back and forth, his big arms flailing up and down. "*Big man?* Small town white trash pole-smoker!"

Fred is attempting to keep his body between T and the dealer, and is having some trouble due to T's constant movement. "Okay, okay... we're gonna go outside now, okay?"

I am less than five yards away when there is a blur of motion in my peripheral vision and three security guards tackle T from behind, driving him off his feet. T lets out a surprised yelp and goes down face-first. One of the guards, a handsome beefy guy with a neat blonde mustache, gets his knee in T's back and pins his arm, holding him in place like a bug.

"It's about fucking time. Get this trash out of here, will you?"

The dealer's meek, conciliatory manner is gone. He is glaring, not at T but at the guards.

"Twenty minutes he was at my table. *Twenty minutes*. You jerks need a goddamn red flag to go up or something?"

He shakes his head and turns away, not even glancing at the formerly abusive patron wriggling on the floor a few feet away. I watch him tear off his clip-on tie and walk tiredly across the room, disappearing into a door marked "employees only."

The blonde guard is fumbling with some handcuffs. He barks at his partner:

"Dammit, hold him still."

Now Fred is there, speaking in soothing tones to the third guard, an older man with a creased and unreadable face. "Hey, we was just leavin'..."

"Damn right you are." Without changing his expression, the guy shoots a hand out and grabs Fred by the collar, twisting it in his fist and yanking him along like a child. They're moving now, hustling toward the exit. The whole incident has taken less than thirty seconds and many of the patrons are just now becoming aware of some malignancy in their sphere. They stare, open-mouthed, from the thicket of slot machines, hands frozen between withdrawal and deposit.

I stand there, feeling invisible. Like those dreams where you yell and yell and no one hears you.

"Hey!"

They are almost at the exit. I run forward and yell again, louder:

"HEY!"

Then, the blonde turns to me, his face like a toothpaste ad, startling in its *goodness*. And suddenly my invisibility is all the way gone.

"You with these niggers, boy?"

I see Fred's eyes. It seems that there is a flicker of impatience there. T has his back to me, and I'm glad of that. This clichéd morality tale of the wicked South, I've seen this on a hundred TV shows. The guy who

yells "Hey" is always the hero, right? But I feel very small, and once again like I'm trespassing in some way. All five of them are standing there, in the middle of performing this time-worn ritual. Everyone knows his part, is braced for the inevitability of it, and here I am, just a kid, a *Yankee*, for chrissake. Butting in.

"Yeah," I say, loathing the sound of my own voice, wishing I could rub my eyes, get my mind clear. "They're the *band*. They're... my friends."

Fred's eyes are expressionless. The blonde guard nods to his partner, transferring the grip on T, and then walks swiftly toward me. I see him coming, see his clear blue eyes, with the flicker of hot excitement dancing in the back somewhere. I know that look because I've seen it in Boyd's eyes when one of his whores got too greedy and too sloppy. I've seen it in the eyes of men in the park, offering kindly advice to the nervous teen runaways who crouch, shivering with doomed trust that having at last got away from their stepdads, it will all work out. That doing the right thing will yield its own reward somehow.

He stops in front of me, looking me over. He seems to be making up his mind about something. I force myself to meet his gaze, knowing I have no power here. That I have, in fact, just handed over what little I had. Surely there is – or *was* – some right move to be made. But I know as sure as breathing that I won't think of it in time.

"These are your *friends*, huh, boy?"

"Yeah."

He shrugs. It's my choice. "Okay, you can come too, then."

He grabs me by the hair and pulls me off my feet, dragging me along the floor. I am thrashing madly like an animal, struggling to get a grip on his arm, trying to lessen the pull on my scalp. My hand covers his momentarily and I feel the smooth metal of his wedding band. Tears shoot out of my eyes, and I can't see at all now, can only feel the pain in my head and the burning of the Sweetwater's cheap red carpet against my knees.

I am yanked upright just before we bang through the doors to the outside, and by the time my eyes clear we're on some kind of loading dock, lit by one pale yellow bulb. The fear is hitting me now, twisting my bowels in a sudden spasm, thinking: they can do whatever they want with us here. Who knows what kind of mad shit goes down in the back alley behind a hick casino? Fred and T don't look scared. They are both cuffed now, leaned up against a dumpster, managing to look vaguely insolent despite a nightstick each across the neck. The guards hold them there, looking to my blonde guard for further instructions.

I am shoved, absently, against a brick wall.
"Stay put, kid."

Turning his back on me, Blondie ambles over to the other four. He hitches his hands up on his belt and drawls in a sing-song way, like a schoolteacher explaining today's lesson plan, "Now, listen up. Y'all are no longer welcome at the Sweetwater. You understand?"

"Yeah, man," says Fred. "We understand. Just be cool, okay?"

There's a beat. I can't hear any noises from inside. Just the crunching of gravel underfoot, and everyone breathing, and the endless drone of the cicadas. I notice something small and black has appeared in Blondie's hand.

"Oh, we'll be *cool*..."

He holds his hand up, a few feet away from Fred's face and I see a quick burst of mist. Fred goes down immediately, coughing and sputtering, sounding like he can't get breath. It's an awful sound. Like his windpipe is suddenly too small.

T brings his knee up then, catching his guard in the chest and lifting him up off the ground a few inches. "You dirty honky mother – "

When the second spray hits T's snarling face, cutting him off in mid-epithet, I am certain that I will be next, and I am afraid. I remember reading about protesters at antiwar rallies being fatally suffocated by close-range pepper spray blasts. But the three guards seem to have forgotten about me. I could run now. Or I

could... do what? Get help? Jump them from behind? I feel frozen, pressed against the wall, watching them give T and Fred a few swift boots to the gut. Watching them hitch up their pants and spit, looking disgusted and elated and bored and aroused all at once.

Fred and T are both curled up, elbows protecting their skulls, taking the blows now without curses or yelling. My invisible feeling is returning. I wait, my whole body tensed for what will come next, feeling the sharp brick against my back.

And then they are done, heading back toward the casino doors, leaving the darker half of the Cadillac Blues Band piled in the shadows by the dumpster. The older guard and the third guy, a nondescript young redneck with a crew cut, pass by me with barely a glance. They are both breathing heavily, with sweat stains spreading across their pits. The third guy pulls his glasses out of a protective plastic container and rubs them carefully on his sleeve.

The blonde stops in front of me, slightly winded but no more. He drops to one knee, tying his boot lace with quick, deft movements, then pops to his feet and regards me lazily.

"Maybe you oughtta start choosin' your friends better, boy."

I realize that it's over. That I am not going to share in the punishment. And, to my shame, all I can

think is that I am glad. Glad beyond words that they don't see me as one of *them*.

The guards vanish back inside, slamming the doors shut. Now the dock feels strangely empty. As if all the active energy from this one spot has been... *drained*, somehow. I am still emerging from the moment, from the realization of my reprieve. For this, and also simply for the passing of what was done to the others, I feel a relief that is almost post-coital in its intensity.

I hurry over to Fred and T. They don't seem to be hurt too badly. Fred has a small cut over his eye that is oozing a little blood and when T stands, I notice him limping slightly. Both of them are bruised and battered, but they'll walk away from it.

And they do, moving wordlessly away into the darkness, leaving me alone on the dock, clenching and unclenching my fists and watching them disappear.

The woman who plays the piano in the lobby of the Peabody Hotel is slim and graceful, usually dressed in long, flowing things that swirl and spill off her arms and shoulders in gusts of fabric like a gentle breeze that surrounds her. She is young and very pretty, with dark eyes and long, wise fingers. When she plays, she bends her head slightly toward the keys and her eyelids sometimes flutter shut during particularly difficult passages.

She plays mostly standards and show tunes – Gershwin, Porter, Arlen, Cahn, etc. – with a smattering of classical pieces and an occasional elegant blues. I go in there and sit under the grand ceiling with the glimmering chandeliers and I watch her in her little corner, by the fountain.

All around me are the travelers and the tourists, gawking at the ornaments and feeding the ducks in the big fountain. Most of them pay little notice to the woman at the piano. But there are a few men standing around her piano like schoolboys, holding drinks and struck suddenly silent.

She commands a kind of reverence, even among the drunk salesmen, the hawk-eyed businessmen, the traveling sports agents, the vacationing cops and their nervous wives. Some of the bolder will sometimes approach, leaning in to whisper something to her, thrusting their chests out comically and gripping their beer bottles. She always laughs easily, never missing a note, and says something that manages to send them back to the bar without feeling that they've been turned down.

Watching her, I see that she is alone. And I see that, after her shift at the piano, she walks home along Main Street to where she lives in a small apartment that is very simply and tastefully furnished and makes you want to stay and talk some more with her, if you happen to be dropping her off there.

Because there are men in her life, of course. And friends. But much of the time she is alone, with her music. She sometimes misses her family, who is far away.

She is an excellent person to go to with a problem, because she will not try to solve it. She will

just listen quietly and sympathetically, and you will feel better when you leave.

She will age well.

The notes of "Rhapsody In Blue" trickle upward and out like raindrops, and I think: this is music, too, and making a living at it. I have always been drawn to the "tortured artist" myth, thinking it explained something for me, or soothed something. I don't know if it is real, this serenity I see in her. I like the *idea* of her, though: gentle and soft and wordless over there, rocking her slim body on the bench and dispensing grace to Happy Hour like an angel.

I've tried hard to erase my past, to re-invent the future from scratch here in this city. But something about this music is insistent, as well. I remember hearing this song at a concert with my parents when I was much younger. It was outdoors, in Golden Gate Park, and I was bored that day, looking at all the calm white people around me who had nothing of interest to teach me.

The notes from her keys circle the ceiling and remind me that my own history is still there, trailing along behind me, and I can never really get rid of it. And I know that if I were to get into too bad a scrape, I could call on that history to bail me out. Even though I have not spoken with my parents in six months, they would help me if I needed it. Nothing I do will change that.

Someday, I will probably leave Memphis and go on to the rest of my life. I will look back from unseen years and see Fred and T and all the people of my life here, even the girl who plays the piano in the lobby of the Peabody. Even though I was only in there once, and I never even spoke to her. I just sat on the bench and imagined what her life must be like. I dreamed up a story for her, and when I left, I took the story with me, because it was all I had of her.

And I'll move on to other towns, moving through my days, with all these people waving out at me like phantoms from where I keep them, like nice ideas, in my mind.

I'm leaning on the hood of Tommy's Chevy Nova, sucking on a joint and staring at the graffiti on the side of Ray's wall. It's gang graffiti, deliberately illegible, except – I assume – to those with whom it's intended to communicate. To me, it's just a violent dark scrawl. Somebody's name maybe.

I'm experiencing some difficulty in getting adequately high. I've already been high, come down, and climbed back up again several times since breakfast, and I'm now sort of idling in a blank, fuzzy place. I'm wondering if Boyd has any of his pills. I'm feeling hot and sleepy and bored.

It's well over a hundred degrees today, and life in Memphis seems to have ground to a near halt. The city feels exhausted on days like this. There is a heaviness in the air, a *resigned* quality that is particular

to the South, or so it seems to me. I'm still trying to gauge it, this peculiar weight of history and defeat that drags around like a ball and chain behind the postures and gestures. But maybe I'm just telling myself stories. I rub my eyes until they are blurry, bored with myself, with my impressions.

Tommy emerges from the stairwell, moving slowly. After what seems like a very long time, he is beside me on the hood. I hand the joint over, lean back, stare into the sun.

"They coming?"

He grunts around a lungful of smoke. "They said they was."

I kick at some glass near the front tire. "I dunno," I say finally. "It's gonna sound strange with no bass. And just one guitar."

Tommy blows out the smoke. Stretches lazily and yawns, not seeming too interested. "Aw, it don't matter none," he says. "Just tourists and teenagers down there anyhow."

"I guess."

We wait. An older black man shuffles slowly up the sidewalk toward Ray's.

"I still think firing them was kind of dumb."

"They was stealing from the bucket."

"I told you that before. You didn't care then."

He sighs. Lights a Marlboro off the joint. "I don't care much. Whenever you play with niggers, they always got their hand in. But Boyd don't go for that."

We wait. Tommy removes a pair of drumsticks from his bag and starts drumming idly on the front fender. I watch him, feeling a mix of amused futility and something else I can't name. Something almost like fear.

He looks up suddenly, remembering something. "Aerosmith's playin' at the New Daisy next Saturday. I'm gonna sneak in."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, man! For true. I know this way in the back, by the dumpsters. I'm totally gonna sneak in!"

Suddenly, I wish my head was clearer, and yet I know that's not possible. But I'll settle for *some* kind of change in my chemistry, even if it means a regression. I just need some feeling of control, even if it's simply control over the amount of haze I'm going to stumble around in this endless afternoon. Even if it means *more* haze. I grab the joint back from Tommy, inhaling as hard as I can. If Boyd doesn't have any pills, maybe I can score some at the park. Bad day...

"I'm gonna get my T-shirt signed and shit."

"Yeah?"

Tommy's face is as animated as I've ever seen it, but his eyes look like empty dark sockets. A gruesome trick of the shadows and the setting sun.

"Wouldn't that be cool if they showed up at the park, and maybe Steven and Joe sat in with us?" He grins at me. "Wouldn't that be fuckin' wild?"

A brick is being lowered onto my frontal lobe, blotting more out with every new second. I struggle for speech. "Yeah, I somehow doubt it, you know?"

He doesn't seem to hear me. He's sitting on the curb now, singing softly, with the beatific smile of a kid on Christmas Eve. His drumsticks rattle out a primitive rhythm on the curbside, using an empty bottle of Thunderbird for the crash cymbal. I close my eyes and lean back against the burning hood.

"Talk about things and nobody cares..."

Rat-a-tat-tat. *Crash.*

"Wearin' them things that nobody wears..."

I lift the bottle of beer and take a conservative swig, eyeing the contents sadly. I think I've stretched that twelve ounces almost as far as possible. It's nice in here. The air-conditioning and the pretzels have dried my mouth out and given me a powerful thirst, but I bide my time, returning the Bud to the bar and settling back in my chair. I only have a dollar and change in my pants. Not enough for another drink at indoor prices.

But it's nice in here. The waitresses dip and swoop with their trays, shooting smiles and cleavage at the well-lubricated patrons – mostly tourists around these parts. Locals rarely set foot on Beale Street during the day except to work. The jolly Texans at the bar are whooping it up good here at the "Blue Saloon." A carefully aged-looking little bar with an adjoining

gift shop, the walls are lined with photos of the classic bluesmen, old Coca-Cola bottles, and posters for the King Biscuit Flower Hour and Magic Sam's Too-Good-To-Be-True Wonder Tonic ("cure what ails ya"). That pre-manufactured "historical" vibe – chain store history for the Bermuda shorts crowd. I catch myself feeling superior and it feels almost as refreshing as the beer.

Anyway, to hell with it, it's nice in here. A welcome respite from the fire and fury of the Handy's Park brand of hucksterism just around the corner, where Boyd and the remains of the Cadillac Band are set up for their afternoon show. I stretch my legs out and watch the meager foot traffic on Beale. A few old white people stumbling along, eyes whipping from side to side, scanning in vain for "sites of interest" and trying to avoid the roving panhandlers. The inevitable Japanese hipsters with greasy ducktails and cigarettes, snapping photos of themselves with the Elvis statue.

In the corner of the bar, an acoustic duo churns along unobtrusively. An older black guy and a young white guy, both on guitars, both serious and professional-looking. They are hunched over, playing mainly to each other – not much attempt to work the crowd. The atmosphere should not talk back, after all. The desperation is less visible, the game slicker and paid for with plastic. No drop in the bucket, not in here.

At last, I rise, kill the last swallow of my excuse for being in here, and push out regretfully into the merciless heat. I hurry across the street to the shady side, join a flow of sight-seers past the T-shirt stands and the junk vendors. The street salesmen holler at me, entreating, and I eye them coldly, wishing they would recognize my apartness from the rest of the puffy parade. Don't you know I *live* here? Not no tourist, not me.

On impulse, I swing into Schwab's drug store. Schwab's is the last dangling shard of the old darktown-strutting Beale Street, before it was torn down and redone in neon and American Express. It has squatted there since 1876, dispensing dry goods, ointments, candy and assorted sundries to downtown dwellers. I love this place. I breathe deeply and fill my nostrils with the heavy scent of years. The wood floor creaks as I move across it, and the kindly Jew behind the counter smiles at me, and this is 1994 but it could very easily be 1964 or 1924. I have these ideas, these visions of a sepia past that swirls around me in ghosts and memory, almost lost but lingering on like imagination. And I can't articulate the protest that swells in my throat: that all this lovely smell is from a world that's hopelessly past and gone, and I'm stranded here in the too-bright present where the party seems to be most definitely winding down.

But is it, really? Doesn't everyone think so when they're young? Got to bounce that one off Dee, next time I swing by the hostel. A chill sweeps through me at the thought – a recurring one – that, somewhere, the nucleus of some marvelous new era is congealing at this very moment and I am missing it, mired here in the stagnant South with these old junkies, nursing a dying art form into a cheap grave for a few bucks and free drinks. And I don't even PLAY, for fuck's sake.

I definitely need to get laid tonight.

Out on the sidewalk again, I can hear Boyd's harp cutting through the afternoon now like a squalling cat. I pause at the edge of the park by Malcolm's T-shirt stand. Malcolm's a black kid about my age, a young entrepreneur. He's out there night and day it seems, barking, cajoling and charming the dazed Middle Americans out of their traveler's checks. Applying subtle guilt and discreet leverage, until they are three-quarters convinced that the uplift of the black community is somehow tied inexorably to their purchase of a "Home of The Blues" T-shirt. Or decals, or pens, or snow globes or bootleg CD compilations – whatever he's managed to put together that day. Malcolm is working his way through community college, bound for Memphis State and points distant.

"Looks like change is in the air once again," he says, nodding in the direction of the bandstand.

I shrug.

He sighs knowingly. "Them *other* two were down here earlier. They hooked up with Alabama, but I know Alabama – he's about money. They won't last long together." He purses his lips disapprovingly. "Those boys can play all right, but *damn...*"

"You're a businessman," I say. "You don't understand the quirks of the artistic personality."

"You damn right about that," he says, flashing a grin. "That rock they're smoking don't understand it neither." He rubs his neck and deftly straightens the display of immaculately folded shirts. "It's a damn shame."

We both watch as Boyd finishes his solo and grasps the vocal mic, tearing into the last verse of "Baker Shop Boogie," spitting the lines out in short bursts, his head weaving back and forth like a cobra.

I watch, knowing with dread that I will be asked to critique the performance later. He will press me for elements that can be polished up, improved upon, worked over. He will listen intently, filled with an earnest determination to better himself, flattering me that I can help. He will readily acknowledge that he is no natural, but he will add that he's willing to work twice as hard.

"Hell, man," he'll say. "Five years ago, when I was squatting in that abandoned building, this life we're livin' here woulda seemed like *paradise* to me."

The tune dribbles to an unrehearsed close and some scattered applause ripples through the air. What can I tell him? There's no gray area when it comes to that ineffable *It* that, cruelly or not, either you have or...

But Boyd's face is shining. He's having the time of his life up there. I realize I'm just going to lie. And I tell myself once more that tomorrow's the day I'll get up early and get out to see about a job.

"Thank you kindly, everybody. Now don't forget, we're workin' for tips up here so come on up and support the blues, right here on Beale Street. All right... thank *you*, sir! Now, up next, Artie here's gonna sing you one by Freddy King..."

Artie can be seen leaning over to Boyd with a panic-stricken look on his face. There is a hushed conference up there for a moment, then Boyd is at the mic again. "...Yeah, one by Freddy King, like I said..."

Crouched behind his amp, Artie is upturning a fifth of Jack Daniels, glugging at it like it's a water bottle. Even at this distance I can see the pistoning fury of his Adam's apple. Behind his drums, Tommy stares open-mouth, visibly impressed.

Boyd laughs into the mic, a quick plosive snort. "Yeah! Give him a hand, Memphis!"

Then Artie's up front, blinking and swaying with a sickly grin. "Uh, thank you, Boyd."

There is a squeal of feedback. His New York accent sounds harsh and garbled, like rocks are in his throat. "Okay, uh... one, two – one, two, three..."

And then he's into it. Yelping the first verse of "Tore Down" in a thin, wavering, terrified voice. I catch Malcolm looking at me. I don't want to talk to him anymore. Suddenly, I'm tired of being a curiosity. The black women in the bars are always saying, "what you doin' here, honey?" I usually give them a row of enigmatical Cheshire teeth – or what I hope are. Inexplicable Oscar. Man of mystery. Whistling in the fucking dark.

I don't want to watch Artie up there singing that he's "almost level with the ground." But I can't figure where else to go. I see two girls leaning against a tree, looking bored, and I make for them. But my pockets are empty, and I know it will show in my eyes. Men of mystery, I suspect, don't tend toward such transparency, as a rule.

They see me coming: two little blondes. My only hope is that they want as little as I do. Or, rather, that they want more, but don't know where to even begin to look.

And so will settle.

Interview: Alabama

"Oh yeah, I'll play with anybody who comes down here. I got these kids, they come down from the college, man, to play with Alabama. They wanna play the *real* blues. I let 'em all sit in. 'Cause the folks love to see them kids tryin' to play the blues, man... It's all in good fun, you know. You remember what Sonny Boy said? 'Those white boys wanna play the blues so bad... and they play the blues so *bad...!*'"

"Naw, naw, naw... but I love my white boys, man, 'cause they dig the music you know. Black folks, they don't dig the blues so much no more, 'specially the young-uns. But all these white kids, they dig it. Don't ask me why, but they do. They get somethin' out of it.

And they get somethin' out of playin' with me. Sho' 'nuff I'll give 'em an education..."

"And the folks, 'specially the ladies, they love these white boys. I declare 'fore God they do! Get all to screamin' and carryin' on! Now you don't never hear people say this, but a whole lotta colored womens dug on old Elvis. Sho' you right, they did. Shakin' his little skinny white ass, that's what you call universal appeal, that right there..."

"So I let 'em sit in. Sure. I'll even throw 'em a couple bucks if they do okay. They happy to get it, and they real polite. Won't never be stealin' or pullin' a pistol on me like some a' these niggas down here do. Naw, they just happy to play with me, and I'm happy to have 'em..."

"You know something funny? I ain't never even *been* to Alabama. I'm from *California*, man. Oakland. But don't tell nobody..."

"y'all come on back, now..."

The big front room of the warehouse is packed with bodies. The air is blue with smoke, and the stereo is up loud, throbbing out some ZZ Hill. I scan the room for obvious culprits, hoping we aren't going to lose any more CDs tonight. But that's all it is: hoping. There is no policing this crowd, even if we were inclined to try. They stand, elbows out, cigarettes jutting from beneath dark glasses, swilling from bottles and cups and bags, hammering home points with index fingers swaddled in cheap jewelry. The women flit from group to group, bumming cigarettes and money, laughing too loud, never staying with one man too long. Fights will break out at some point later, when more bottles have been emptied.

Everyone's here tonight. There's Tommy, slumped on a couch and he's got a girl's hand on his

knee. There's Artie, uncapping another bottle of beer, grinning madly at no one in particular. Diego is here, in earnest conversation with another long-haired musician type and Alabama, both of whom are looking coolly bemused at whatever it is they're hearing. On the couch by the window I see Palo, smiling away and jabbering at Uncle Ben, who is cocking one skeptical eye at him and fumbling protectively with a bottle of something between his knees, as if he's afraid someone is going to take it away from him. Fred and T seem to be completely forgotten, but even Levi is here in the corner, no drink in his hand, but talking quietly and seriously to a beautiful girl in an African smock – probably one of the only girls here who isn't a whore. Dee was invited as well, but I can't really imagine him here with this crowd, which is probably a close approximation of his version of hell. But these are the characters of this small world I've sought out, or that has sought me out. Or however it happened.

Yes, I know most of these faces: park hangers-on, petty thieves, assorted street life. A few stray hippies, grooving to their own private deadhead vibrations. Joint after joint circles the room, everyone gobbling whatever is available, stuffing it all in, whatever might jack the level up another notch.

A group of dirty bikers enter at some point with some crystal meth and the tempo picks up, conversations grow fevered and imperative and

nonsensical. The laughter of the girls sounds hysterical, almost like grief. Every few minutes there is some kind of minor accident – a spilled drink or a broken glass. Someone backs into someone else by mistake, and a "motherfucker!" is lobbed into the air testingly. They sniff around each other like dogs, comparing size and shape. Preening and snarling for the whores. Muttering and gulping and blowing smoke.

Now I'm sitting at the piano, banging at the keys, feeling the jagged, discordant sounds running down my arm and rattling the bench underneath me. Hitting the keys harder, knowing that there's music in there if you hit it the right way, but not knowing the right way. Wondering how you learn that.

This girl is making me nervous. She has very bright, serious eyes. Wearing this little scarf and a dark blue blouse of some sort, looks vaguely European. She is perched on the chair next to the piano, her skirt twisted under her, and she is staring at me. Seems incredulous, somehow. I can feel judgment blowing outward from her like a stinging breeze.

"You actually live here?" she says.

"Yeah."

"With those guys?"

"Yeah, why?"

She brushes a strand of hair away from her face and scans the room. Then looks back. Her calm eyes

feel itchy on me. "I don't know. They don't look too bright."

I laugh – too loudly. "Aw, they're all right."

You can't fault my loyalty. They're all right. We're *all* all right. Really, we're just doing the best we can, right? Why get so bunched up about things? It's really only a simple matter of finding the correct chemical balance: a little weed, a little wine... and there it is. Keep an eye on the levels. Top off when necessary. *Stay* there, in that place. Live there forever. Once when I was nine or ten I was made to take piano lessons. Kicking my legs on that hard wooden bench as the old lady rambled on about key signatures. She had all this loose skin at her throat. It looked soft and fine, like rice paper, and I wanted to touch it. But you can't just grab at people. Not where I grew up. I remember the clenching in my stomach before the recitals we were made to give. Nervous little boys trotted out like ponies so the folks could verify that their money was indeed contributing to well-roundedness. And that one afternoon, walking to the recital, coming to where I usually turned right at the general store on 5th Street. Feeling my gut leaping and twisting, consumed with dread and the feeling of some kind of danger. But suddenly, blinking inside my head: a new idea. That I can just *not go*. And the reproaches I suffered later did not eclipse the very real peace that had flowed into my veins like narcotics, melting away the fear at that sweet

moment of decisiveness where I turned left instead of right, and gave up. Where was I, when they called my name to perform? I was downtown somewhere, probably. Lost in the movie house, dreaming my way into some dreary, manipulative Hollywood fantasy. Or with my nose in some book. A real bookworm back then. I was just a kid, though. Hadn't discovered the music. Despite the hooky-playing, I was still, in most essential ways, just going along with the flow. If I'd had whiskey back then, I probably could have made it through the damn recital. I don't remember anything from those piano lessons. Nothing sank in.

An indignant female cry is heard from across the room. A young black working-girl type is standing, hands out and dripping, a wet dark spot running down the front of her stretch pants.

Boyd is scrambling to his feet, retrieving the now-empty beer bottle. "Oh, damn. I'm sorry honey. Here, lemme help you clean that off."

"Get your goddamn hands off me!"

"Aw, come on now, it's just a little accident..."

"Yeah, you an accident waiting to happen. I seen that right off."

I'm laughing. Embracing all this comic catastrophe. But I feel the girl studying me. She won't let me have this little moment where it's all funny and harmless and okay. At last she says, "I'm gonna go."

"Yeah? How come?"

"I don't like this. These people are ugly. They remind me of my brothers. Drunk all the time. Dirty."

"Dirty? Well you can't really hold that against them. We've been having some communication problems with the water department."

But she isn't charmed. She can tell I'm not really talking *to* her, but only sort of in her direction, and half to some invisible audience in my mind. I can't help it. Girls like this are too much work, and I barely remember the necessary moves. Time to open a new bottle. This special one I've been saving in my coat for times of want or impasse. No use offering her a shot, I suspect.

"I'm gonna go home."

"Do you want me to call you a cab?"

"No, I'm just gonna walk."

No clean cups around. I guess this one here will do...

She's saying good-bye. I wave distractedly, peering into the cup. Give it a whiff. It smells like dead things in there. To hell with it, alcohol kills germs anyway.

"You know, you could've offered to walk me home."

I look up into those dark eyes and shiver a little. Didn't I used to *want* girls like this? She's obviously no street kid. Who did she come with? Maybe I should be making a *little* effort here. She

wouldn't have stuck around for this long if she wasn't halfway interested. What the hell is wrong with me? Life with Boyd and the boys doesn't wash one up like this every day.

"Um... listen, you want me to – ?" Oscar, single-handedly keeping chivalry afloat.

She shakes her head. "Never mind." Evidently mobilized by my half-assed offer, as if she needed to say no to me before leaving, she is now up and headed away across the room toward the staircase. Okay, then. Bye-bye.

At some point they start drifting off to the bedrooms. The girls lead one stumbling man after another down the hall to one of the spare rooms that Boyd keeps to rent out from time to time. Bare mattresses and walls with a peeling institutional blue. No one stays long and no one pays on time.

But tonight those sad mattresses are bending and groaning under the weight of commerce. I remember the time China Doll was over, and T went down the hall with her, and ten minutes later she came darting back into the front room shaking her head, no.

"Hell, no," she said. "Not that one. Uh-uh."

China Doll was not, in fact, Chinese. Was very dark black, in fact, but favored a cute little straight-hair wig that someone must have thought looked Chinese somewhere back down the line. Or maybe she thought

it up. A real come-when-you-call girl who looked down on the streetwalkers over on Vance Street.

"Tramps," she'd snort. "Bad girls over there. They all got AIDS. Kill you dead, honey."

Afterwards, I'd drive her home. She lived in the projects. Could never save money, she said without any real regret.

"I don't know where it goes," she'd yawn. She must have weighed ninety pounds. Sometimes when I'd drop her off, an older man would be on the stoop, rocking peacefully with a cigar in his teeth.

"Who's that?" I asked once.

"My dad," she said.

That time when she said no to T, he appeared a moment later, all grins and harmlessness. "C'mon baby, don't be scared of me, now."

And I wondered what unearthly thing had gone down back there. What primitive, dark, terrifying endowment had been revealed, or proclivity unmasked. T was swaggering like a quarterback. Was it like they said?

"C'mon, honey," she said to me. And I was hesitant, not wanting to go now, but not sure how to say it. And it was over soon, and she seemed not to care one way or the other, and I relaxed because after all, it was foolish to worry about what a whore thinks of you.

But it was nice with her. She never seemed to be in a hurry, and she always said "thank-you" when I paid her, and I always said "thank-you" too. It was very cordial, and sometimes we'd talk about baseball when I drove her home. The one subject about which she seemed capable of something like outrage was the question of why Memphis still had no major-league team.

"They always trying to cut us out of the deal, honey," she'd say, snapping her gum and adjusting her wig with impatient little tugs.

But China Doll's not at this party. Dialing her number now yields an automated notice of disconnection. I thought about driving by to see if she was all right, but I knew I wouldn't. Boyd didn't seem overly concerned.

"She probably got busted," he said. And dialed another number.

Sometime after midnight I'm stretched on the floor watching Tommy and a girl dancing very slow over in the corner. The lights are down now and I can just make them out in the shadows, spinning slowly and peacefully like something on a string, twisting with the breeze. Barry White is rumbling his baritone seductions out of the stereo and the night is winding down.

Artie is in a chair, peeling the label off a bottle of Budweiser with a dark, inward look on his face. Boyd is leaning back on the couch with a tall black girl. The girl is wearing some kind of gold lamé miniskirt, long red go-go boots, and a platinum wig, and she is whispering something in Boyd's ear. His eyes are closed and he is nodding over and over as if in

unconditional agreement with whatever it is she's saying.

I swivel my blurred eyeballs from one of them to another, and they seem unreal, like television images. Visually representative, but physically irrelevant. They're breathing some other air, sharing some other time zone that I can visit only as a spectator. I raise my cup up and look into it. It is a whole universe in there. Little specks of dust and bits from my own mouth that must have backwashed in. I feel a rush of nausea and drink it down quickly to stop the sick feeling.

Now the girl is fumbling in her purse and withdrawing a small, cellophane wrapper, unrolling it delicately with a fixed and reverential deliberation.

Boyd's eyes snap open. "Mmm... lookit - what do we got here?"

You can feel the energy in the room focus and compress. A kind of holy silence opens up that is epicentered on the couch and ripples outward through the room, touching everyone.

We watch with elaborate casualness as she digs back into her purse and comes up with a short glass pipe and a tiny bronze hunk of Brillo pad. Her long fingers working with a musical grace, she stuffs a piece of the bronze wire into one end of the glass, then dips into the cellophane and loads a medium-sized chunk of rock into the pipe.

She flicks the lighter at the tip and then there's the crackling sound, puncturing the stillness, and the sharp rasp of her indrawn breath. She holds it, then spits out a mouthful of gray smoke.

Boyd's big hand is on her knee. "Well, how bout sharin' a little of that?"

Hopping and twisting like a wind-up toy, she passes the pipe over to him. Boyd takes a hit, then another. Tommy and the girl are still dancing in the corner. The music has stopped, but they continue their revolving sway, heads bowed to each other.

The girl's head is jiggling back and forth, her eyes fixed on something I can't see. Then Boyd leans forward and whispers in her ear. Still jiggling, she nods resignedly. Then stands up and takes Boyd's hand, leading him out of the room. I hear their footsteps echoing in the hallway, then a door slamming, and then there is silence down there.

"Look at that big dumb motherfucker."

This is from Artie, who is glaring at the hallway door, shifting in the chair like he's preparing to get up. But he remains sitting. He lifts a pint of whiskey and takes a big shot, followed by a hit off the quart of Bud in his other hand.

"Thinks he's so bad. He can't sing. At least I know *that* much, goddamit."

He's slumping lower in the chair now. His rhythm is erratic. He appears to be talking to himself,

but there is an occasional broad gesticulation to the room at large.

"He can't even *play* that good either. *I* can play as good as he can. How come he's the boss of everybody now?"

His voice shoots up an octave for a moment, mimicking a simpering, nasal hillbilly:

"*Hurry up, Artie... move your ass, Artie...* Fuck him right in the neck."

Yawning, I roll onto my belly and lean across Artie's legs to retrieve a pack of cigarettes from the floor.

"Shit Artie, you're one mean drunk, you know that?"

He emits a noise that is closer to a laugh than a cough, but stranded somewhere between the two.

"Hell... you don't know shit, Oscar. You don't know nothing. You're just a fucking kid! Christ..."

Me, offhandedly: "Yeah, whatever, Artie. Fuck you too."

"Fuck *me*?"

And then Artie's got me by the collar, twisting it in his fist, yanking me up onto my knees and pulling me toward him.

"You better watch your fucking mouth when you talk to me."

I'm struggling, balanced precariously on one knee, still too surprised to do anything but yelp, "Damn, Artie! What the hell?"

"You hear me, you little shit?"

I stare into his face, which is almost unrecognizable, crumpled in a grimace of rage and loathing, and suddenly Artie looks quite dangerous. Waves of aggression are coming off him so thick I can almost smell it. His scarred knuckles, balled beneath my jaw, look large and menacing, and there's something horrible and sad about this situation. Because Artie is my father's age, and the stubble on his chin is graying, and his eyes are dark with pain. I realize that he is lost. And I imagine a lifetime of days spent playing in the park for nickels and dimes, and nights drunk in rat-filled warehouses with punks like me.

"Okay, okay. Hey, cool it huh, Artie? Just relax, okay?"

He shoves me away and staggers to his feet unsteadily. The bottle is in his hand and he is holding it by the wide end, with the neck jutting outward like a sword.

"*Fuck* all this! I play *good!* I play better than half those old black fuckers down at the park, and all I do is eat *shit!* From all these fucking niggers with their attitude, from Boyd, from *you*. Boyd ain't no better

than T and all those other trash... they all think they're so fucking bad..."

He pauses, his eyes having zeroed in on something across the room. He stalks over and lunges clumsily at the Robert Johnson poster Boyd has affixed to one wall with scotch tape. It is the famous studio portrait: a smallish, immaculately-dressed black man posed with a guitar, looking confident and urbane. One leg is slung over the other, and his long slender fingers are stretched around the neck of the guitar in playing position. There is no hint there of the man who sang "Hellhound On My Trail" as if the devil himself was at the studio door. There is only a black man with a guitar, smiling politely for the white man with the camera.

A piece of the poster comes off in Artie's hand with one long tear. He flings it aside in disgust. "Shit, you follow around after all these ignorant niggers like they're fucking kings... well they *ain't*. They're just bums, like bums everywhere, like Robert Johnson was probably a damn bum. Fuck all this... FUCK blues and niggers and the fucking South."

He reels away and then I am alone in the big room, except for the couple dancing like ghosts in the shadows behind me.

* * *

The girl in the platinum wig wiggles in from the hallway, her feet slapping on the bare wood of the warehouse floor. She sits down on the couch, crossing her legs, the boots off now, gone. She lets out a thank-God-it's-Friday sigh, and I see she is holding the glass pipe in one hand.

"Well, at least he was quick. I suppose you want your turn too?"

I feel slack, flaccid. I'm lacking a certain kind of necessary imagination, a willingness to suspend the normal gravitational rules that enforce the speed and trajectory of intimacy.

"No, it's okay."

"Uh-huh." She flicks the lighter and takes a deep, greedy hit. I watch her eyes grow wide and glassy and frantic.

After a moment she says, "You smoke this shit?"

"No, thanks."

This amuses her for some reason.

"*No, thanks?*" She chuckles to herself. "Well, you don't know what you're missin'."

She takes another hit and leans back, brushing her fingers lightly against her neck underneath her chin. I'm still sprawled in front of the chair. I have no idea what to do next. I think of the way Fred coaxes

notes out of his guitar like he's urging some new life into being. Where does a person go to find his instrument? How do you know where to start? Then I think of Artie and wonder if that's even the right goal after all. What if what you love just ends up trapping you?

She's eyeing me. "So, what's your deal, Mr. Big Stuff? Why you slummin' around here? You tryin' to piss off your mamma, or what?"

I could take the Card right now and go to the bus station. And go... where? Back to school? I'm *not* slumming. I'm different from that type. I love the *music*, right? The music set me free and all that. *Didn't it?* I'm just trying to *fit* somewhere, you see. I just wanted the future to feel less prescribed, more uncertain. Am I this poorly equipped to handle uncertainty?

A panic is starting to build, dawning on me in a relentless way. It hits me, with genuinely seismic surprise, that I am *miserable*.

I don't want to know this, don't want to see it all at once. Plus, we're out of booze and it seems important for some reason to not just slink off to bed. Isn't this supposed to be the flash of wisdom? The late hour epiphany that gathers me up and propels me forward towards some kind of better destiny? I feel an urgent need for something to be *accomplished*. Is this more middle-class bullshit?

The girl is smiling down at me. She is utterly at ease, long legs and lips and wig and ass. No doubt at all in her animal eyes. And I am filled with contempt for my pathetic, whining, worrying white self. God, to slide out of this skin and learn to *dance* through this life instead of all the tiresome cringe and balk.

"What the fuck do you know?" I snap at her. "Gimme that," I add, gesturing at the pipe.

Her mouth moves into a round red circle of mock surprise. "Oooh, look here, I'm corrupting a white boy. What would momma say?"

"Fuck you," I say, rolling over onto my knees and grabbing the pipe and lighter from her hand. The glass is smooth and warm, as if it is plugged into some invisible outlet.

The girl is convulsed in a kind of dry-heave laughter now. No sound is coming out, but her dilated eyes are like radar dishes, flashing and ecstatic and her breath is coming in short little percussive bursts.

"Oh yes! Look out, momma!"

I put it in my mouth and raise the lighter to the tip, which is scarred black from the flame. The last of a small, yellowish rock is wedged in there and I touch the flame and inhale gently at first, then harder, filling my lungs as far as they will go. I can hear the whore's crazed laughter as if from a great distance.

The smoke is sweetish and then I exhale, and run dead-on into a brick wall of pleasure so intense it is

almost like nausea. My whole face breaks out in tiny droplets of sweat that feel like bugs on my skin, and I am aware that my eyes are bulging, as I struggle in the grip of this almost unbearable orgasmic warmth that is penetrating every atom of me.

"YEY-ass! Welcome to the club, child! You all grown up now!"

"Shit..." I gasp.

She takes the pipe back and hands me her lit Newport as she breaks another chunk off the rock. I am grimacing madly as I wolf down the cigarette, nearly swallowing it.

"What are you doin', Oscar?"

I look up and Tommy is standing over me, holding hands with his girl. Their faces are stoned and sleepy and concerned.

"Nothing, man. Don't worry about it."

I look away, watching the pipe, waiting as she takes another hit. When I look up again later, they are gone.

I think about putting on a record. Music might be nice. But I don't move.

The pipe comes my way again, and I take two large hits this time. And the wave hits me again, sending me into more spasms of the hellish euphoria. I am sucking on my lower lip frantically, lighting more cigarettes and leaving them burning in the ashtray. What are you doing, Oscar?

Jiggling and twitching, squeezing my right eye shut over and over, winking grotesquely at the torn picture of Robert Johnson. His eyes look past me and I am glad. Another hit off the pipe. Standing up, and sitting down immediately. Unable to decide on either position. Nothing feels right. Another hit. Too high, too high. Too high to watch TV, too high to put on a record, too high to speak or move. Too high to do anything but get higher. I hand the pipe to her and time stops while I wait for it to come back to me.

What are you doing, Oscar?

As my tongue rubs the burn on the inside of my cheek, as the dawn breaks, as the traffic moves outside, as the birds herald the arrival of another workday, as I stick chunk after chunk of the rock into the pipe, as my skin burns and the air shimmers and the light bulbs scream viciously and my head strains at my neck, tugging violently like a zeppelin at the last frayed rope still holding it to earth, I answer, having arrived at last:

I. Do. Not. Know.

When my eyes finally open I am on the floor. I roll over, upturning an ashtray with my foot, and squint at the window, which is pouring a stinging yellow light into the room. I stagger to my feet and sweep shut the blanket we use as a shade.

I close my eyes and lean against the window, twisting the old blanket in my hand. Outside, I can hear the traffic rumbling Eastward, toward the suburbs. It must be late. I am alone in the room, which is pregnant with the staleness of the morning after. Bags and bottles and me.

The hallway door is half open, and I push through, nearly stepping on Artie who is curled up in the entryway at the top of the stairs, his arms around a bottle like someone impersonating a wino. His face is an awful ashen gray and he is breathing rapidly and

shallowly. I step over him and feel my way down the hall, my hands passing over the cracked plaster. It is always dark down here. No one can ever remember to replace the bulb and there is no window.

I jump as a Palmetto bug races over my hand and darts toward a crack where the wall meets the floor. My heart seems unusually active this morning, thudding angrily against my ribcage. I pause and wait for it to slow before knocking at the door.

There is no answer inside, and I push the door open. Boyd is on the bed, snoring steadily. An empty bottle of Jack Daniels is on the floor, inches from his dangling, outstretched arm, and the room smells like a used condom. There is no sign of the girl. I close the door and make my way back down the hall.

When I get to the bottom of the stairwell, I notice that the door is slightly ajar. Bending down, I find a folded piece of cardboard wedged in there. I check to make sure my keys are still in my pocket, and then I kick the cardboard into the gutter. The heavy steel clicks shut behind me and I sit down on the step, shielding my eyes against the late afternoon sun.

A bus rolls by, belching a toxic black cloud like an old bluesman exhaling cigar smoke. I automatically read the advertisement that stretches along the side. It's an ad for a local radio station: a giant-sized smiling girl, eyes closed, lips parted, dancing to what you can only imagine must be the music of her dreams,

undoubtedly not blues. At the bottom of the ad is one of those new postscripts I've been seeing everywhere lately: *http://www.krok.com*. A web address they call it. Something to do with computers.

The breeze has a slight chill in it. The heat of the summer is weakening. Soon the tourists will be fewer. Beale Street will quiet down and the bands in the park will play mainly for the bums on the benches. I think about the day before, watching the new Boyd-led incarnation of the Cadillac Blues Band. Fred told me once that the Cadillac band name had been around since the mid-seventies. There were no ongoing members – no one could even remember who had started the band to begin with. Only the name remained constant, hosting a different assortment of street players, season after season, who stole and fought and flailed drunkenly at cheap guitars plugged into battered amps, a bucket of coins and bills at their feet, shouting over the crowd, trying to make it through one more day.

Contrary to my doomsaying, the departure of Fred and T hasn't really made much of a difference, at least not financially. The tourists keep coming, plunking dollars into the bucket to show what good sports they are. And there's always the occasional showoff, waving a twenty and shouting out some request to show his lady how "down" he is. And the band will obligingly play "that Clapton song" and only

fools like me will know or care which obscure, poverty-stricken black man from the 1950s the song was stolen from. Everyone else just wants to *dance*. In the end they won't hear any real difference between Artie's playing and Fred's, and they'll forgive Boyd's off-key vocals and Tommy's clumsy drumming. The audience will never *demand* anything of the music. After all, it's just some old guys in the park, playing some old songs for free.

And it's probably not even much of a tragedy, as things go. After all, nothing remains pure. It all gets thrown out there in the street to mingle with everything else, to get run over repeatedly until it either endures, or adapts, or perishes.

Suddenly, I become aware of how hungry I am. I clutch my stomach and it feels horribly shriveled, like a deflated balloon. Despite my nausea, I feel an urgent need for food of some kind, any kind. I feel like a clock winding down. Almost unconsciously, my hand drifts down toward my back pocket. It takes a moment to register. I check again, running my hand over the smooth place where the bulge of my wallet should be.

The word *bitch* hisses out from between my teeth as I see again the wedge of cardboard holding the door open. She probably considered it payback for all the dope I smoked, if she considered it at all. I feel, briefly, the righteous and not wholly unpleasant sense of outrage and violation that accompanies personal

theft. But it dribbles away quickly, and never feels totally appropriate. After all, she was what she was and I left myself wide open. A ghostly memory returns to me – like recalling a movie I once saw – of me withdrawing the wallet and waving the Card over my head, offering to go get us some more crack. Insisting that I can use the Card to get a cash advance at an ATM, ranting that drug dealers should accept plastic, out of my mind... But it's all gone now. I'm on my own.

I don't notice them until they're nearly on top of me. A young couple, probably in their early twenties, and definitely not from around here. There is a softness about them. Their posture is relaxed, and they are not braced to rebuff solicitation of any kind. Their faces are friendly and open and smiling inquisitively at me.

The girl speaks first. "Excuse. Excuse please. You are living in Memphis?"

The accent is perhaps Eastern European. Mysterious and guttural, like a sexy lady spy from the movies.

I look up into her alarmingly blue eyes. "Yeah."

She nods enthusiastically. "Please..." She is rummaging around in her bag. "Please wait..."

I nod, and the young guy and I smile mutely at each other for a moment. I notice that he is wearing a

new-looking "Home Of The Blues" shirt that looks suspiciously like one of Malcolm's wares.

The girl is unrolling a small map, the kind you get on tours or that come with guidebooks.

"Please," she says. "We would like please to go to Graceland. You know Graceland, yes? House of the King!"

"Elvis!" adds her boyfriend, very affirmatively.

"Um, Yeah," I say, pointing vaguely Southeast. "I think it's out that way, but I don't know exactly how to get there."

This appears to confuse them. They exchange quizzical looks with each other and began to talk rapidly in their own language.

"I'm sorry," I say. "I've never been there. I'm not sure where it is."

The girl lifts her hand up to silence her partner and smiles politely. "You are living in Memphis and you have never been to Graceland?"

"Elvis!" repeats the guy, as if I obviously couldn't have heard him correctly the first time.

"No," I say. "I've never been."

The girl looks wonderingly and pityingly at me. Then, carefully folds up the map and puts it back in her bag. "Okay, please. Thank you very much."

"You might try at Sun Studios, right up the street," I say. "They'll probably be able to help you."

"Yes," she says, nodding sadly, clearly not believing a word I say. "Yes, thank you very much."

They move off down the sidewalk, and I see them waving down a bewildered-looking wino who is exiting Ray's with a small, brown-bagged package tucked under his arm. I can see the animated faces of the two young people, all bright eyes and flashing teeth.

Across the street at the bus stop, a middle-aged white woman is waiting for the Eastbound bus. She is wearing a slightly rumpled beige pantsuit with heels, and she looks tired, as if she can't wait to get home and relax in front of the TV. She keeps checking her watch and craning her neck out of the bus shelter to watch for her bus. I realize that I have no idea what day it is. I stare at her, wanting her to look over at me, for some reason. But my invisibility is back. Cars whip by, only a few feet in front of me. More tired faces headed for home. But none of them turn their heads to see me, sitting here on the step. Their eyes, too, are forward: on their homes, families. On their lives.

"Excuse me, my brother."

I am startled again, and I turn to face a very dirty black man of indeterminate age. He could be thirty years old or sixty, or anywhere in between. He is wearing what looks to be several overcoats, one on top of the other, and he is pushing a shopping cart, overflowing with a blinding array of absolutely

useless-looking junk: old bent cans, a few ancient issues of *Jet*, a hubcap, a filthy newsboy cap, what looks like a dog's leash, a poster advertising a long-ago show at the Hippodrome, a blackened banana, several unopened packages of dice, a toy flute...

"Can you spare a quarter so I can get something to eat?"

"Oh... sure, let me see..."

I rummage in my pockets and he smiles munificently, his eyes shimmering reflections of some decades-old inner dialogue. I want to help him, and I want to get rid of him, and I want him not to exist in the first place.

"Thank you, my brother. Actually, I could *really* use a dollar, you know."

I stretch my hand out to him and he opens his palm like a priest.

"Here, this is all I got," I say.

He looks down and blinks. "I see fifteen cents here, my brother."

"Yeah, well that's all I have."

He gives me a stern look. He obviously doesn't believe me, either.

"Really," I say, almost desperately. "I'm broke too."

At this, he straightens and takes one imperious step backwards, his eyebrows twitching with vexation.

"*You're* broke too? Man, I ain't broke. Who said I was broke? *Sheeit...*"

Shaking his head and muttering, he pushes off down the sidewalk in the direction the kids went. I glance across the street. The woman is gone, and the bus shelter is empty. I think about going inside and waking up Boyd and Artie. Plainly, we've missed our gig today. No money to be made, and my pockets are empty again.

Cocking my ear, I can almost hear the sounds coming from Handy Park, less than a mile away. A faint slap of snare drum and the occasional squeal of an amplified harmonica, riding the wind out over the city. From this distance it sounds forlorn and lonesome, like a girl's laughter from blocks away, echoing through the empty streets when you are walking home alone at night. And you know that if you were beside her, you'd probably be laughing too. But from a distance all it does is exclude you. So you hurry along, your mind on where you're going. And wondering how it will be when you get there.