

Mississippi Blues

by Matt Shaw

The house lights came up and the audience clapped in the lecture hall at Mississippi State College. The guest lecturers — there were four of us — all raised our hands in appreciation at the dutifully affectionate eyes of our audience. It had been a good conference, all told. We all began shuffling offstage.

“It's amazing, isn't it?” one of the other lecturers, a Ph. D. from New York, said.

“How's that?” I said.

“You give speeches up north, and they go wild for it. It's like you're a celebrity. Down here...” He looked around, lowered his voice. “Down here I can't help but think these people know better than we do.”

“Oh, I don't know,” I said. “This is the heart of the south. I'll bet these kids just think it's old hat, you know? What can you tell them about the blues that they haven't heard before?”

“I give jazz talks in New York, and those kids just eat it up. There I am in the birthplace of jazz, you'd think they'd never heard of it.”

“That's just my point,” I said. “Kids go to NYU from all over the place. A kid from Ohio at NYU will be impressed by that stuff. Most of these kids are red-blooded southerners, born and raised. They grew up on the blues.”

The doctor shrugged. “Maybe you're right,” he said. “But I can't shake the feeling when I'm down here that there's so much to learn and no one wants to teach it.”

We had reached the staircase going down into the back corridor.

This was where actors would change garb between scenes during the various plays and musicals put on every other week, I was told. The doctor tilted his head to one side. "I'm going this way," he said.

"I'm over here," I said, jerking a thumb over my shoulder.

"Good to meet you, Mr. Prescott," he said. He shook my hand.

"And you, doctor."

At the end of the hallway, I ran into the head of the school's music department, apparently in a rush somewhere. Our eyes met, and she smiled.

"Wonderful talk, Jim," she said. "We really appreciate your flying all the way down here to our little school."

"It was my pleasure, as always," I said.

"So humble, for a northerner." She shot me a wink.

"We Bostonians aren't all bad."

"Hey, I've gotta go meet with some people. When do you fly out?" She was checking her watch, already stepping around me.

"Tomorrow afternoon," I said.

"Oh good. Can I call your cell later? The music club is having a night on the town, and I know some of them would love to meet you."

"Sure," I said. A night spent schmoozing with college co-eds couldn't be all bad. "Sounds great."

"Good," she said. "Then I'll give you a call later?"

“Yeah,” I said. “See you around.” She smiled and hurried on down the hallway.

My hotel was three towns away, which meant two busses, a shuttle, and 35 minutes from now I could curl up with a book in the leather club chairs in the Hilton lounge. It had been raining for the past four or five hours, big hot raindrops that splattered everywhere. I had bought an MSC umbrella in the bookstore located below the lecture hall, and hoped like hell it was big enough to keep my books and papers relatively dry as I made my way to the downtown bus stop just off campus.

My pants were wet up to my knees by the time I reached the steel bench with the slanted rain guard overhead. But my bag was dry. I shook off the water from my umbrella and laid it on the ground at my feet. I took a deep breath. It occurred to me that a college friend of mine ended up taking a job at Ole Miss. I wondered how far away it was from here. Maybe I could give him a call.

The sound of shuffling footsteps reached my ears, and out of the corner of my eye I noticed a well-dressed black man, older and hunched, walking toward my bench with a large golf umbrella in one hand and a dark wood cane in the other. He took the empty seat beside me.

“I can't stop movin'. I jus' can't,” the black man said through smiling, crooked teeth. “I ain't able to. Got to keep movin'.”

“Hellhounds on your trail?” I asked with a grin. I didn't get one in return. I tried to decide if the man was crazy or not.

“Sheeyit,” he grumbled. “You ain't know the half of it. Not the half.”

I didn't know why God had picked this particular man to sit down

next to me, or why he had to be in a talkative mood. I was tired, and I just wanted to get back to the hotel. I cracked open some book on the history of blues in an effort to distance myself from any further social interaction.

"That rain sho' does holla some, don't it?" he said.

"It sure does." I didn't look up from my book.

"Yessuh. Devil take me if it ain't hard to move come weather like this here."

"Mmm." There was a silence. I thought for a minute that he'd gotten the hint.

"Mind me a time down in Jackson, yessuh." I closed my book. So much for social isolation. "Done rained three days right through. Right straight through. Stuck in some club down there, yessuh. Playin' down with Jim Hawk an' Travis Lee an' 'em. Rain wash out all them roads, so's can't nobody get by."

"You played with Jim Hawk?" I asked. I had heard the name mentioned several times in my reading. Hawk was a delta guitarist, supposedly trained from birth. A true blues virtuoso, a pioneer of slide guitar with a strange aversion to recording.

"Yessuh, me an' the Hawk, we go way back." His voice dropped a bit, and his eyes glazed over for an instant. "Could say we started off together, me an' him, out there on them farms jus' workin' them hands to the bone. Jus' right straight down to the bone."

"So what do you play?"

"Me? Hell, boy, I ain't nuthin' no mo'. Back then, though, I useta blow harp. Weren't too bad, neither. No suh. People useta say I's

pretty good." He chuckled deep behind those crooked yellow teeth, staring out into the rain. "Yessuh, that rain sho' 'nuff holla some."

I followed his gaze out across the road. The deep greenery of the neighborhood dominated for as far as they eye could see. There wasn't much life out there. There wasn't much of anything out there. Farms, trees, roads... Even downtown was as rural as some of the suburbs in central Massachusetts. A bright green wasteland. It's no wonder the blues came from this place.

The old man reached over and tapped the book on my lap. "Good book?" he asked.

"This? Oh." I held it up casually and tucked it in my backpack. "Yeah, it's pretty good. Lots of good stories in there." I zipped my bag shut. "Your boy Hawk's in there, too."

"Sheeyit," the man said, spitting into the street. "He weren't my boy any more than he your'n. And ain't no book gon' tell the truth, neither. Ain't no truth in those books, no suh."

I chuckled. "So all the stories are wrong?"

"Jus' because a story told right don't make it true," he said. "Sometimes the story is there ain't no story. Sometimes you look way down inside, and ain't nuthin' there. Can't write no book 'bout nuthin'. Won't sell none. But them blues, man..." He turned his eyes back onto the road, trying to read the raindrops. "Them blues come from nuthin'. Come from when you ain't got a cent, ain't got no woman, ain't got no home, an' all you got is that git-tar an' them lonesome, howlin' blues." He tapped his cane on the ground for effect. "All you got is a bus stop, listenin' to that rain."

I nodded. What else could I do? I felt his eyes look through me, saw him shake his head out of the corner of my eye.

"I wish I could feel it," I said softly, almost to myself.

"What? Feel the blues?" The old man threw his head back and laughed. Thunder clapped overhead and the rain seemed louder than ever. "God damn, white boy! Ain't nobody in his right mind wanna know what those blues feel like! What's wrong wit you?"

"What? I mean, the music, it's so... powerful."

"Yeah, it can be," said the man next to me.

"It's music about enduring hard times. It's God's music."

"Aw, hell no." The ragged man threw up his hands in a gesture that I interpreted as disgust. "Hell no. It ain't no God's music. Ain't no God in blues."

"There are lots of blues scholars who would..."

"Blues what?" He snapped his head back around at me. "Boy, do you hear yo'self? Ain't no scholars of blues. No suh. Ain't nobody know the blues so well he can call hisself a professional. Sheeyit. How you gon' read a book by a blues scholar and 'spect to learn yo'self a damn thing?"

"There are lots of professional bluesmen," I said.

The man looked at me as if I was crazy. "Boy, I been playin' blues a long time, a long damn time, and I'll tell ya straight up I ain't never seen a man down so low he ain't never got back up, not even just a minute. Ain't seen no man ain't never had them blues, neither. Less'n they got 'em always, or they always git away from 'em, ain't no man no blues scholar." He spit into the road again. "Sheeyit," he said.

“The books talk about the history of the blues. Anyone can learn that.”

“History.” The man laughed the word. “You want history? Here it is, the whole history of the blues. Man git wronged, man git sad, man sing them blues. Jus' so happens lotsa other men git wronged, too, so lotsa men start singin' them blues. Then the rich white men start recording it, makin' lotsa money on them niggers. Then they starts copyin' it, singin' it like they wrote it, like they know. White men get rich, us niggers keep them blues.”

“And now you've got a new blues to sing.”

“What, 'cuz white man makin' money on black music? Sheeyit, I heard niggers out east sing that white hillbilly music, ain't got no songs themselves. Niggers make themselves good money doin' it, singin' that Hank Williams shit. No suh, I ain't got no blues concernin' no white man. No God, neither.”

I took a deep breath. I felt like a novice pianist trying to show Beethoven a thing or two.

“Why you came down here, anyway?” the man said. He turned in his seat to face me.

“I don't know,” I said, believing it. “Maybe I thought I'd learn something about the music.”

“Sheeyit, that's yo' problem,” he said. “That's your problem right there, white boy. The blues ain't about the music no more'n this rain's angel tears. You b'lieve that, or you best catch the next bus the hell up outta here.”

“You make it seem like I should apologize,” I said.

“No need, white boy,” the man said. “You ain't the first, sho's hell ain't gonna be the last. No suh.” The man laughed. “Sho's hell ain't gonna be the last, long's they makin' them books.”

I heard a bus around the corner. I prayed for the number 65, fingering the dollar in my pocket, ready as all hell to end this embarrassment. Through the rain, I saw the number 15 on the display panel.

“This here's my chariot,” the man said, standing up. I noticed for the first time how sharply cut his suit was, sharp as a razor. “Comin' fo' t'carry me home,” he said. He was still laughing as he boarded the bus.

I slumped back in the bench and sulked. The rain pounded the ground around me. As a car passed with its headlights on, I noticed a faint metallic gleam on the seat beside me. A rather large pen sat there, gilded in gold. The name “JJ. Regal” was engraved on the side of it. I tucked it inside my pocket. Then a thought struck me. I dug a book out of my bag.

A minute later, accompanied by a small picture of the man I had encountered not five minutes before, I found an article about a brilliant harmonica player named Jerry James Regal, a brilliant musician whose talents garnered him national respect. According to the book, Regal was scheduled to record an album with his friend Jim Hawk, and the two disappeared the day before the session. This was fifteen years ago.

The number 65 bus pulled to the stop. I didn't move. The driver shouted at me. “Hey, you gettin' on?” he said.

“No,” I said, closing my book. I was shaking. On unsteady legs I walked out into the rain, the book carefully tucked into my bag.

Damn the parasol; I was soaked anyway. A yellow and black checked car made its way through the rain. I waved the cab down.

"Where to?" the driver asked. He had a soft, nasal accent, almost Creole but not as musical. Haitian, I figured.

"The Hilton," I said. "In Riverdale."

"I know the place," the driver said. "Maybe twenty minutes." He flipped a switch and the meter read \$1.75. He looked in the mirror at me.

"Hey, boss, you look like you see a ghost," he said.

"Long day," I said.

"You a teacher at the college?"

"Just visiting," I said.

"Oh? From where?"

"Boston," I said.

The driver laughed. "I have cousins in Boston," he said. "I visit them last March, maybe April. Very beautiful."

"Boston is beautiful in the spring," I said.

"Very beautiful. But the people don't talk to you," he said.

"Some people do," I said. "I like to talk to people." I cringed at the lie.

"I like it here," the driver said. "People always very friendly. Always

talk.”

“They do like to tell stories,” I said.

“Oh, yes. Everybody have a story. Everybody in my cab like to tell me stories.”

“Funny,” I said. “A guy just told me a story about playing harmonica a long time ago.”

“Mr. Regal?” the man said. His face was split in half with a smile. It took up the whole rear-view mirror.

“Yeah, I think so,” I said. “Older guy, very well dressed, deep voice...”

“That's him!” the driver said. “That man been here since before the University is built. Always telling stories about the old days.”

“You know him?” I said.

“Man, everybody know J. J. Regal,” he said. “And if you don't know him, he come up and tell you about him.” The driver laughed.

“Funny man,” he said. “But he like everybody.”

“He didn't seem to like me,” I said. “He asked me why I was here, and he didn't seem to like the answer I gave him.”

“Oh, he do that to everybody,” the driver said. “He ask me once, he say, ‘Island boy, why you is here?’ and I say, ‘I come here to work, to drive the cab,’ and he say, ‘You work hard, now.’” He smiled. “And I do. Now I work hard and I drive the best,” he said.

“That's good,” I said. “It's good to make a living.”

"You a teacher," the driver said. He made a turn onto a rural highway. "That good, too. Teachers, they very important. They know much, teach kids to learn."

"Some of us know more than others," I said. I thought of the doctor from New York who spoke after me. "Sometimes I wonder."

There was a pause. The rain slapped the roof of the car, made a soft shushing sound outside.

"But Boston very beautiful," the driver said.

"Yes, it is." We made small talk the rest of the way to the hotel.

I paid the cabbie when we got to the Hilton, maybe a little too much. Either he wasn't used to people tipping like they do up north, or else he appreciated being tipped a considerable amount more than Boston cabbies do. An attendant opened my door and held an oversized umbrella over my head. We walked to the front door, and I pushed my way into the warm lobby.

In certain respects every hotel lobby is the same. There is a desk, there are chairs, usually a nice carpet, a mess of bellhops running in straight lines to and from the concierge desk. I had spent a lot of time in hotels, and this one wasn't much different, but the lobby seemed inviting. It made me forget I had a room upstairs. Why should I want a room? Everything I could possibly need was right here. Fat leather club chairs, ornate wooden coffee tables, a soft brass jazz band pumped through invisible speakers. It was perfect.

I walked slowly to the middle of the room and picked an armchair that looked particularly comfortable. It wasn't, but at that point I didn't care. My pants were still damp from the bus station, and my mind was reeling. I tried to shake the cobwebs out. What was it that had gotten me like this? It had to be the old black man, that Regal

guy. But why? There was nothing about him that was extraordinary. Just a crotchety old black man, a blues purist with an extraordinarily narrow mind when it came to music study. I had run across men like this before, though admittedly these encounters had been in an academic setting. My home turf, I suppose. Now I was on theirs. Was that it?

A small hand tapped my shoulder. "Sir?" a woman's voice said.

I looked up. She was a slender thing, unremarkable except in the black-and-red uniform she wore. Pretty, but I wasn't really thinking about prettiness. I had a feeling she could make me think about it if she tried, but I doubt she would have wanted to. A middle-aged man soaked to the knees, looking like he had just stepped off a fishing boat? Not exactly the kind of guy that pretty young waitresses go for.

"Can I get you a drink?" she said in a polite falsetto.

"You serve drinks in the lobby?"

"We do until four o'clock." She'd given this talk once or twice before.

"Oh, great," I said. "What time is it?"

"About two. You've got plenty of time." I wondered if this girl doubled as a by-the-hour hooker, the moderately expensive kind.

"Yeah," I said. "Bourbon and water." I don't know why I ordered a bourbon. I don't really drink bourbon. In fact, I don't really like it. I think this girl made me order it.

"Sure," she said. "I'll go get that for you." She disappeared, shaking her healthy caboose as she strode across the lobby to the little jazz lounge on the far side. I started to watch her go, and then thought

the better of it. No point in being seedy, after all. We don't want to give people the wrong impression, do we?

What the hell was I talking about? Nobody in this place knew me. I could be seedy all I wanted and no one would care, much less remember. I lived a thousand miles away from here, and considering the mood this place put me in, I doubted very much that I would be in any big hurry to come back. I've got one more night in this town, why the hell not live it up?

I opened up my bag and took out a notebook. I slid a pen from my jacket pocket and started writing. They were furious scribbles, mostly, concerning various benchmarks in blues history and music theory. Most of it was nonsensical. I didn't care. The words just flew off of my hand and onto the page. I injected the whole thing with bits of my conversation with J. J. Regal. I flipped a page and did it all over again. It was blues poetry, maybe: a complete disregard for form, bent on expressing emotion in chunks and fragments, the way we experience them in real life. Did Kerouac write in this kind of frenzy? Who cared about Kerouac? (I wrote that down verbatim.) This was me, it wasn't him. This was man at his most desperate, at his most intelligent and yet most remote. This was...

"Your bourbon," the waitress said. I wheeled on her. She must have seen something like wild desperation in my eyes, because she looked scared, like she had just been grabbed by someone from behind and was trying to figure out if it was a friend or a stranger.

"Oh, sorry," I said. I took the glass from her hand. "Thanks. I get caught up in my writing sometimes."

The girl seemed satisfied by this response. "That's okay," she said. "What are you writing?"

"Uh, nothing. Poetry, I think." She looked like she was going to ask if

she could read it. "Hey, you don't have an accent," I said. She smiled and forgot the poetry.

"No, I'm not from around here."

"Me neither," I said. "Where are you from?"

"Maine," she said. "Portland."

"I'm from Boston," I said.

"Small world."

"Are you going to school down here?"

She leaned against the chair across from me. The lobby was slow, and I guessed that the jazz lounge was even slower at this time of day. "I was," she said. "I'm taking some time off to write a book."

"Really," I said. "What's it about?" I knew that writers always hated to be asked that question, because when you're writing a book you never really know what it's about until you're done with it. Apparently she had missed this memo.

"It's a romance novel about a girl running away from an abusive husband who falls in love with the detective working her case."

I tried not to make a "working her case" joke.

"It's a lot harder than I thought it would be," she said. "I thought I had the whole book planned out, but then I changed a couple of things and now I have to rethink all of it."

"How far along are you?"

“Only about fifty pages. And I've been working on it for a long time. Three months now, I think.” She trailed off here. Her pen was held aloft over a pad of paper. “Can I have your room number?” she said.

My heart stopped.

“For the bill,” she said.

“Oh.” I thought I was going to die, right there. “It's room number 1408.” I dug my room key out of my pocket so she could read the code on the back. She jotted the number down.

“Okay, great,” she said.

“Well good luck.”

She smiled. “Thanks. And good luck to you on your poetry.” She sauntered off, and I watched her go again. I couldn't help but think, as I watched the soft fold where her buttocks met her leg, that I'd work her case anytime. I'd give it a good old-fashioned working.

My phone started ringing.

“Hello?” I said.

“Jim?” It was Catherine McPhee, the head of the music department at MSC.

“Hi, Catherine. What's up? I thought you had a meeting.”

“Me too. Apparently they cancelled it.” I could tell she wasn't really upset. One less thing for the important head of the music department to do.

“That's too bad,” I said.

“Not really. Hey, so I just got off the phone with Samantha — she's the president of the jazz club — and she said she and the others are going to meet at Black Eyed Sally's down on Macomb Ave. Do you know where that is?”

“I'm at the hotel now,” I said. “I'll ask the concierge.”

“Okay, great. Six-thirty okay with you?”

“I've got nothing but time,” I said.

“Great.” There was a pause. She wanted to say something else. Whatever it was, she didn't say it. “Okay, great. Well, we'll see you at six-thirty, then.”

“Sounds good,” I said. “Thanks a lot.” I hung up the phone.

I took a swill on the bourbon. It tasted like someone had soaked a gym sock in grain alcohol and wrung it into my glass. I couldn't drink it. I packed the pad of paper into my bag and reached for the pen. It was J.J. Regal's pen. Why had I taken it? I grabbed it, tucked it back into my jacket, threw two singles on the table, and set the bourbon on top of them. Then I took the elevator to the 14th floor.

The first thing I did when I got into my room was toss my bag in the far corner. I was done with the book, and I didn't want to take a second look at the mishmash of words I had written in the lounge. I wanted a strong drink, but I didn't dare go back down to the lobby for fear of seeing that girl from Maine again. I licked my lips and fought the urge to think about her any more than was absolutely necessary.

The room was small, a one-bed job with an adequate bathroom and a view of exactly nothing. There was a closet where I hung my suits

and jackets. I kicked off my shoes and pulled my damp pants from my legs and unrolled the socks from my feet. I decided to go all-out and took off my shirt, too, which clung to my ribs and my back with rain and sweat. The storm was causing quite the calamity outside, but the windows were thick enough to dampen the sound to a dull, persistent whisper.

I flopped on the stiff bed and stared at the ceiling. I had been thinking too much recently. It felt good to look up and see nothing but a white canvas. It cleared my mind, sucked the poison out. I rolled over and looked at the clock. Two-thirty, give or take. I had plenty of time. I fumbled with the alarm clock for a minute and set it for four o'clock. An hour and a half of cleansing sleep. That sounded about right. I shut my eyes and set my mind to dream hard about the waitress from Maine and her case that badly needed working.

I didn't dream about her. I didn't dream about anything, in fact, as is often the case when you try really hard to dream about something. The alarm next to me was buzzing its frenetic tune. I slapped the damn thing. That didn't work, so I groped around for the off button.

I sat up in bed and stretched. The mini-fridge caught my eye. I wondered idly if they stocked it with gin and tonic water, and if the gin was any good, and if the tonic was flat. I got down on my knees in front of the fridge and swung the door open. The ugly yellow light was the only illumination in the room. There was a small bottle of Tanqueray and a smaller bottle of Beefeater. I took the Tanqueray and a bottle of generic tonic with a yellow label.

I had never been very good at mixing drinks myself. As it happens, in college I wasn't much of a social creature. I rarely attended parties where alcohol was mixed ad hoc. I went to the occasional bar, and there my martinis and gimballs and gins and tonic were prepared for me to exacting proportions. But I could never get the mixture right. This time wasn't much different. Too much gin. I

suffered a large gulp and tossed in a few extra ice cubes.

Time for pants, I figured. First I checked myself out in the mirror on the back of the door. I instantly wished I hadn't. Almost forty years of life had begun to drain me of my vitality, and this showed in the expansion of my gut and drooping of my shoulders. I flexed, just to make sure I wasn't withering too rapidly, and was moderately impressed the way desperate older men are. I wasn't entirely grotesque. Still had a few miles left before my warranty ran up.

I took a long drag from the glass and pulled on a tee-shirt and jeans. Then, almost as an afterthought, I got a gray pinstriped jacket from the matchbox closet and threw it over the shirt. I pulled on a pair of round, not-too-shiny black shoes. I faced the mirror again. Young, hip, and alternative. If I was going to be hanging around co-eds all night, I needed all the help I could get. I wondered if the souvenir shop downstairs sold fedoras, and then shook the idea from my head. The jacket-tee-shirt combination was radical enough. No need to overdo it.

Just for good measure I went into the bathroom and ran wet fingers through my hair. I hadn't noticed it before, but the bed head would have turned into a talking point among the students. I considered shaving again, but the five o'clock shadow went well with the image, so I left it. I grabbed my wallet and phone and strode out into the corridor.

I rode the elevator down to the lobby. I was disappointed at how empty it was. The usual bustle was taking place, but no one stopped to look twice at me. I looked for the waitress with the great backside and couldn't find her. I checked my watch. Four thirty. My mind flashed to the Tanqueray on the dresser in my room, and my mouth watered. The bourbon and the two dollars were gone, and the doors to the jazz lounge were open. The host at the doors stood behind a podium and was marking something in a book. I walked up to her.

"Just one," I said. "For drinks."

She smiled and led me to a booth near the back corner of the room. I opened the drink menu and pretended to have a clue as to what it was that I liked and what I didn't. The wine list looked impressive, but it could have all been dressed up, grossly overpriced grape juice for all I knew. It occurred to me that that's exactly what wine is, and the thought almost made me smile. I flipped to the beer list. A voice next to me broke me out of my spell.

"Are you following me?" she asked. I looked up. It was the waitress from Maine. Of course it was. How many cocktail waitresses could a little hotel like this have? Wasn't that why I came in here in the first place?

"Oh, hi," I said. "You work in here, too?"

"Yeah, sometimes," she said. "After we stop serving in the lobby, anyway."

"Cool," I said. I kicked myself for using the word. I wondered if biting off my tongue would save me any future embarrassment or social awkwardness, then decided against it.

"What can I get you?" she said. "And don't say bourbon. You hardly touched the last one." I wasn't totally in love with her motherly tone, but I smiled anyway.

"Do you have a Sam Adams Light?" I said.

"We've got it in a bottle."

"That's fine," I said.

“Okay, be right back.” Her informal manner struck me as a little odd, but I didn't mind. It was good to be recognized, even if it was only because I left a double tip on a drink that I hardly touched. I played with a cardboard coaster to occupy my hands. The waitress came back with my beer and a glass.

“Thanks a lot,” I said. She smiled.

“So what are your poems about?” she asked.

“My poems?” I said. “Oh, well, to be honest, I only just started writing poetry. Kind of abstract stuff. Blues poetry, I guess.”

“Like that guy... Jack Kerouac?” she said.

“Yeah, kind of,” I said. Who cares about Kerouac?

“He was from Massachusetts, too, wasn't he?”

“Yeah. Amherst, I think. Or Lowell.” I had no freaking clue where Kerouac was from.

“That's cool,” she said. “Are you published yet?”

“Me? Oh, no. Not poetry anyway. I'm a teacher up at UMass.” Her eyes lit up. I hoped to God it was because she had a teacher-student fantasy that needed realizing. But it was probably nothing more than an acknowledgement of another intellectual in a place seemingly devoid of intellect.

“What do you teach?” she said.

“Music, mostly,” I said. “Jazz and blues theory, music history, that kind of thing.”

"Do you mind if I sit down?" I looked around the lounge. A couple of business-types sat at the bar, but otherwise I was the only one there.

"No, go right ahead," I said.

"Thanks." She slid into the fake leather seat across from me. "I've been on my feet since nine."

"Serving cocktails that early?" I said. "I guess like this town likes its liquor, huh?"

"I worked the breakfast buffet this morning," she said.

"A multi-talented girl," I said. "I like that." That came out sounding flirtier than it did in my head. For the second time today I wondered what my tongue would taste like if bit the sucker off. The waitress smiled anyway. Probably just a polite gesture, something to occupy her lips.

"Nothing special," she said. "Refill the eggs, refill the coffee, refill the bacon... A good portion of my life has been wasted refilling things."

"It's better than being empty," I said. I was grasping for an intellectual thought. Of the two of us, I was supposed to be the intellectual superior, right? I wouldn't taste my tongue, I realized. You need your tongue to taste things, and if I bit it off I wouldn't have anything to taste it with. I shook this very confusing thought from my head.

"What brings you down to the deep south?" she asked.

"I gave a talk over at MSC," I said. "There was a conference on blues history, and I was on a panel of speakers."

"Fancy," she said. She had a funny little quirk in her lips. "How much dough does a speaking engagement like that bring in?"

"Enough," I said. "And the expense account will buy me all the beer I need to keep me afloat." I took a sip from the bottle for effect. If I couldn't wow her with my mind, I might be able to do it with my wallet.

"A poet with an expense account." She propped her elbows on the table and rested her chin on the heel of her hand. "Now that's something you don't see every day."

"Just lucky, I guess," I said. I took another long sip. She stared at me for a second, smiling faintly. I could see the gears winding up in her head. She stood up very slowly.

"Thanks for the break," she said. "Are you going to stick around for a while?"

"I've got to go to a dinner with the school's jazz club tonight," I said. "I should get going soon."

"Okay, then," she said. "Do you want me to cash you out now?"

"Yeah, that's fine." I dug around in my pocket for my room key and handed it to her. She jotted down the code on the back, then tucked the card into her bra.

"Thanks," she said with a wink. She disappeared into the kitchen.

My phone started ringing.

"Yeah," I said. It was the only sound I could manage. I wondered what that electronic key felt like pressed up close to her skin.

"Mr. Prescott?" a voice on the other end said.

"Speaking," I said. I supposed I would find out exactly what that card felt like later tonight. Or was that wishful thinking? Maybe she was joking.

"This is Samantha O'Donnell, president of the jazz club at MSC."

"Oh, hello, Samantha," I said. "You know, both you and your advisor have impeccable timing."

"I'm sorry?" she said.

"Nothing, forget it. How are you?"

"I'm good, sir. I just wanted to let you know that the club's officers are meeting at O'Leary's at about five-thirty to have a couple of drinks before dinner. We were wondering if you'd like to meet up with the three of us. It's right next to Black Eyed Sally's," she said all in one breath.

"Well, sure," I said. "I'd love to. I don't know how long it'll take me to get over there, but I'll try to be there on time."

"Great!" she said. "Well then we'll see you there!"

"Sure will, Samantha," I said. "See you then." I hung up the phone and pounded the rest of my beer.

I dropped a ten dollar bill on the table, and then picked it back up again. No point in trying too hard. I dug out two singles and dropped them instead. The girl still hadn't come out of the kitchen when I hit the door and said good-bye to the hostess. I stepped into the lobby.

Traffic was picking up again. The concierge desk was packed with

people wondering about reservations at restaurants and concert tickets. I decided to skip the line and flag down a cab. A good cabbie is just as knowledgeable as the best concierge. I walked outside and asked the attendant to flag one for me. He jumped out into the street and blew his shrill little whistle. In no time a yellow-and-white Crown Victoria pulled up to me. I handed the bellhop a dollar and climbed in.

"Where to?" The cabbie asked. He was an older man, balding and unkempt. Probably a drunk, though he seemed sober enough at the time.

"O'Leary's," I said. "It's a bar on Macomb Ave in Greensborough."

"That down by the college?" the cabbie said.

"Yeah, I think so."

"Yeah, I think that's the place. Down by Sally's. Maybe twenty minutes."

I thanked him for his trouble and took a minute to stare at the greenery around me. The rain had stopped, or had slowed to nothing more sinister than a leaky faucet. I was thankful for that. I checked my watch. Almost five. Plenty of time to get there and maybe have a swig or two before I had to punch up the cojones to be sociable. I ruffled up my hair and smoothed it back down again to get that I-only-care-about-my-appearance-in-an-offhand-way look that seemed to make my female students go ga-ga for the trendy young men who took their education the same way. I was feeling pretty damn good about myself.

The cab pulled up to O'Leary's fifteen minutes later. I was just a shade early, enough for a round of liquid confidence and a brief glance at SportsCenter. I walked down the gaudy yellow staircase

and into the pub.

The bar was exactly like every other Irish bar on the planet. Wood floors, wood chairs, wood paneling on the walls, and a bartender as wide as a pool table. This particular one wore a nametag that said "Mack." I flagged him down.

"Black and tan," I said. I had never ordered one before in my life, but hey, when in Rome. He took his time making it, a quality I assumed was good in a bartender. I grabbed a stool from a couple who had just paid their tab and left. Mack put the drink on a coaster in front of me. I slid him a ten.

"Is that your real name?" I asked him when he brought back my change.

"Could be," he said. "Who's asking?"

"Nobody," I said.

He repeated the word. "Nobody." Then he walked away.

I sipped my beer — beers, really; there are two of them in a black and tan — and felt decidedly un-Irish. I didn't know what I was. A middle-aged college professor trying to blend in at a college bar. A soulless northerner in a town rife with soul. A man trying to force his Bostonian intellectualism on a people whose knew that God was God, but lawd, James Brown could sing. They didn't have special drinks for guys like me.

A fat brown hand grabbed me just above the elbow. I turned and beheld the smiling face of a very fat and very short young black woman.

"Mr. Prescott?" she said. I recognized her voice.

"Yes ma'am," I said. "You must be Samantha."

"Very nice to meet you," she said. We shook hands. She turned her head toward the far corner and waved at two other people. "It's him," she said.

"It's me," I said after her. They laughed.

"We're all sitting over at that table," she said. "Come on over."

"I'll do that," I said. I picked up my glass and grabbed the change that Mack had left on the bar. I left fifty cents for Mack and followed Samantha over to her shadowy corner. She introduced me around the table to the Treasurer and Vice President of the MSC Blue Notes Jazz Club. I told them I thought the name was catchy. They smiled and pointed to the Treasurer, who apparently had helped create the club his freshman year and had coined the term.

"We really enjoyed your speech today," he said.

"Well thank you," I said. "It was my pleasure."

"I loved your commentary on the progression of blues to rap," Samantha said. "Do you think there's a conscious connection between the two?"

"Well," I said, trying hard to come up with a satisfactory answer, "I think in some cases there is, maybe less with rap as with certain other types of pop music. But if you look at the lyrics of your average rap song — and I mean the songs that aren't on the top forty, the ones that actually have a message — you see a few similarities. Poverty is certainly in there. Drugs are in there—"

"But wasn't drug use more typical to the jazz era?" This came from

the Treasurer.

"In the modern sense of the word, sure," I said. "But in the poverty-stricken world of early blues, the big drug before cocaine and heroin was alcohol." I took a sip from my black and tan. "Different drugs, but the same image. A man hooked on booze back then was the equivalent of a crackhead now, I suppose. Certainly just as lowly. Just as despicable."

"I'll drink to that," the V.P. said. We all laughed and clinked our glasses.

"You mentioned a blues connection to pop music," Samantha said. "Are you talking about blues revivalists like Stevie Ray or Clapton?"

"Well, sure," I said. "And by the way, if you called either of those men 'blues revivalists,' they'd be quick to point out that blues never died. I've met Eric Clapton, and he told me that he plays the blues as a matter of the soul, not a matter of musical trends." I let the name-drop set in, and then continued. "But even in the top forty today there are shreds of it. And I'm not talking about Christina Aguilera, or even Alicia Keys. I'm talking about guys like Amos Lee and Ray Lamontagne, guys whose lives are modern images of the old bluesmen."

"But is it conscious?" Samantha said. "I mean, do artists sit down and think to themselves, 'okay, I want to write blues music?'"

"I don't think so," I said. "But you'd have to ask them. I think the Lees and the Lamontagnes are too powerful to be manufactured."

"I don't know," the Treasurer said. "Amos Lee's first album sounded a little forced to me."

"Maybe," I said. "Maybe he just knows how to fake it reasonably

well, or well enough to fool my old phony sensors." They all grinned politely at this. "But it could just be the first-album jitters. You never know."

The conversation followed this path for a considerable length of time. The three officers of the Blue Notes were all different shades of brown, Samantha being the darkest of them. The Treasurer, a skinny, timid type, was a khaki brown with acne scars dotting his cheekbones. The V.P. was somewhere in between the two, a light chocolate brown, and very plain. None of the three impressed me very much. I checked my watch. Quarter past six. The conversation had turned from blues to jazz, and I was rapidly losing interest. It didn't much help that the three were discussing local jazz acts that I'd never heard of, trying to pique my interest. They made me promise to come back to see a band called "The Gray Keys" who were apparently out of this world. I told them I would try my best, and gave Samantha my email address so she could tell me when they were playing. I had absolutely no intention of going.

"Hey, we should get over to Sally's," the V.P. said. "It's almost six thirty, and you know how McPhee is about punctuality."

"One last question, Mr. Prescott," Samantha said.

"Please, call me Jim."

"Okay, Jim. One last question." She leveled her eyes with mine. "What's the most important thing you think we should keep in mind when listening to the blues?"

"Easy," I said. "Think about the balance." They all three looked confused. "I mean, think about it. Your basic 12-bar blues is a I-IV-V progression, right?" They nodded. "That's a major progression. But the lyrics are most often about how hard life is, about the pain of living. That's what blues is: it's a representation of life. It's mixing

the good and the bad together and coming up with something that's not necessarily positive, but at very least it's true." They smiled at each other and at me.

"Very well put," Samantha said.

"That's what they pay me for."

We paid the tab — to be fair, the Treasurer paid the tab and told me the club would cover it — and we left the pub. We were just about to head into Black Eyed Sally's when my phone started buzzing. The three students stopped to wait up; I could tell it was far too noisy inside to hear anything on a cell phone. I waved them all in. "I'll catch up with you in a second," I said.

"Hello, Jim Prescott." The waitress's voice was even sweeter on the phone.

"Hi," I said. "I, um... How did you get my number?"

"Called in a favor with the guy at the reservation desk." She sounded like she was on the verge of a giggle.

"I see," I said. "Well what's up?"

"Aren't you going to ask where I'm calling from?"

"I assume you're at the hotel," I said.

"Uh huh." She was toying with me. It felt great to be toyed with again. "Where in the hotel?"

I gathered up a little courage. "Well I'm hoping you're in room 1408, because that's where I'm headed right now." This time she did giggle, a little warbly tone that I swear would have crippled me if I

had heard it in person.

"Is that so?" she said.

"Yes, it is."

"Well then I guess it's a good thing I am where I am, isn't it?" I could picture her in my head with a lollypop poised precariously on her lips. It was a maddening thought.

"That depends. Are you where I hope you are?"

She giggled again. "Uh huh," she said.

"Give me twenty minutes," I said. "I've just gotta catch a cab."

"In that case," she said, "there's gonna be an extra charge on your hotel bill."

"Extra charge?" I said. "Why?"

"A girl's gotta keep herself in the mood, doesn't she?" she said in an oh-so-naughty voice. "I'm sure I can find something on the channels you have to pay for. Oh, here's one that sounds like fun. 'Jessica's Diary.' What do you think?"

My mind was racing. I could feel my heart trying to tear a hole in my chest. I waved my free hand at every passing car, cab or not.

"I think in twenty minutes you're in a lot of trouble," I said. She giggled again.

"And I think I like the sound of that, Jim Prescott."

"Why are you—?"

"Oh, the movie's on. Gotta go." She hung up the phone in my ear. I cursed loudly with a huge smile on my face.

The door to the restaurant opened, and a small, well-coiffed head poked out of it. I recognized it immediately as Catherine McPhee.

"Jim?" she said. "Is everything okay?"

"Oh, yeah, Catherine," I said. "But... ah... I just got a phone call from my sister, and she just went into labor."

"Your sister?" She took a step toward me. She knew I was leaving. She could have seen me trying to hail a cab from inside.

"Yeah, my kid sister." I said. My sister really was pregnant, but only about three month's worth. "Poor thing, her boyfriend left her, and I'm all she's got. She wasn't due for another week, but she thinks the baby's coming now. I need to get back up to Boston right away. I'm really sorry."

"Oh," Catherine said. "No, I understand. Go on ahead." She smiled, but it didn't look like she meant it. "Good luck!"

"Thanks," I said. I felt bad leaving her. She looked like the kind of girl who had been stood up a few times too many. But at that moment she ranked right up there with the Queen of England on the list of women I was definitely not thinking about.

A cab pulled up and I hopped in. "The Riverdale Hilton," I said. "And floor it." The cabbie smiled in the rear view, a big gap-toothed smile. He didn't speak a word of English, and I was thankful for that. I was not in a talking kind of mood.

Thirteen minutes later, I was at the Hilton. I dropped quite a lot of

money in the driver's palm. There weren't any money slots in the cabs out here. Just hand the money to the driver through the security glass, if there was any, and off you go. Apparently business was good and security was not a problem in a Mississippi college town.

Thirty seconds after closing the door to the cab, I was in the souvenir shop slash drug store in the hotel lobby, looking at a boy in his late teens with zits on his forehead that badly needed popping.

"I need condoms," I said in a low voice. The boy didn't flinch.

"We've got plain, ribbed, magnum and strawberry-flavored," he said in a nasal whine.

"Just the plain ones," I said. "No, better make it the ribbed ones."

He pulled a small blue box from the shelf. "That'll be eight seventy-five." I threw him a ten, grabbed the box and shoved it in my back pocket.

"Keep it," I said. I was out of the store before he had even opened the register.

The elevator took forever to climb the fourteen floors. It made a stop every other floor to let someone else off. I tapped my feet and cracked my knuckles. I must have looked like a cokehead in need of his nightly fix.

Finally the number 14 lit up on the overhead panel and the doors opened. I almost tore them off completely as I barged my way through. Down the hall, first corridor on the left. Two doors down. There it was, 1408. I dug in my wallet for my spare key. How did she know I had a spare key? She works in a hotel, stupid; she knows they always give you a spare key in case you lose one. The sounds of

soft moaning were coming from inside, accompanied by that sugary filth that passes for jazz music, the common soundtrack to your average blue film. I fumbled with my key in the lock, and finally managed to get it open. I took a deep breath and stepped inside.

She was the most beautiful sight I'd ever seen, splayed out on the bed, basking in the glow of the television, naked as a newborn and twice as vulnerable. She beckoned me with a wicked finger.

The alarm clock buzzed the next morning, and I rolled over to slap it. It worked this time. Eight o'clock. My flight left in six hours. Time to get up. Time to make the donuts.

I rolled over to wake up the waitress. She wasn't there. I had expected as much, I suppose. I checked my nightstand. My wallet and watch were both still there, and my cell phone, too. There was something else, as well: a small square of paper underneath a ten dollar bill. I picked them up and read the bubbly print on the paper.

Dear Jim, Thanks for last night. Here's ten bucks for the movie. Good luck with everything. See you around. —Janet.

Janet. That was her name. In all the commotion I had forgotten to ask. I swung my legs out of the bed and walked into the bathroom, still naked from last night's romp. I couldn't believe that had just happened. I looked in the mirror just to make sure I hadn't changed into some buff, studly model type, the kind of guy that Janet might put on the cover of her novel. I hadn't. It was the same old flabby, graying, middle-aged me. Nothing special or peculiar about me. But apparently that was just good enough to drive a pretty little twenty-something into a foaming frenzy. Three times, no less.

I hadn't felt this good since college. I whistled in the shower, some old rock tune that seemed appropriate given my spirits. I toweled off, doing more dancing than drying. The stubble on my face was

darker now than it had been at any time since my last ski trip. I let it grow. What the hell, right?

I dressed in the same jeans as last night, but threw on a different tee shirt and sneakers, then hurried down the hall to the elevator. I hoped to catch Janet in the breakfast buffet line before I had to start packing my stuff and hauling it downstairs. I rode down to the lobby with a few early-morning business types and a happy couple. They looked about my age. I eyed the husband up and down. I had banged a hotter chick than he did last night. I nearly let a laugh escape.

Breakfast was served in a dining room in the hotel's west wing. I walked in and grabbed a plate. Janet was serving eggs at the other end of the line. I waited patiently, grabbing small hunks of fruit and slices of bread, eyed the pancakes and the breakfast sausage, then settled for bacon and ham before reaching the egg station, making sure to leave room for a spoonful of scrambled goodness. I smiled at Janet. She didn't seem to recognize me.

"Scrambled eggs, sir?" she said.

"I'd love some." She scooped a spoonful of the runny stuff onto my plate, then turned to the elderly lady next to me and asked her the same thing.

"What," I said. "That's it?"

"Would you like more eggs?" she said.

"No," I said. "I mean, that's all you're going to say?"

"I don't really have anything to say, John."

"It's Jim," I said.

“John, Jim, whatever.” She smiled and scooped eggs onto another plate. “They all blend together after a while.” Something wasn't right here. The sex was way too good to be dealt with in such an offhand kind of way.

“What happened last night was incredible,” I said. “It was for me, anyway. It's not every day that—”

“You say incredible,” she said, “and I say research.” She still wasn't looking at me.

“Research?”

“I'm writing a romance novel,” she said. “Remember? How am I going to know how to write about sex with strangers if I don't know anything about it?”

I didn't say anything for a minute. What could I say? I was used. I knew I was going to be used, and I didn't care. But I wasn't being used the way I thought I was. I thought I was an attractive guy, if a little out of shape. I thought there was attraction there. I thought she wanted to get her jollies with an attractive older man. Apparently I was way off base, destined to become flavoring for a sex scene in a drugstore paperback. Great. That was just great.

“Look,” I said. “You should have told me, that's all.”

She shot a laugh at me. “Aw, did I break your heart?” she said. “What did you expect? A white house and 2.6 kids? Please. You and I... did what we did, and now it's over.”

“It's just that...”

“Look,” she said. “Write a poem about it if you're so goddamn upset. But I've got a job to do, and to be perfectly honest, our little

escapade last night isn't even worth discussing." I took a step away. I could have slugged her. "And oh, by the way," she said. "I was faking it."

The line for breakfast had bottlenecked at Janet's station, and there was a crowd of people who now knew exactly how I spent my night, and how this waitress had spent hers, and who had gotten the better end of the deal. A hundred pairs of eyes stared at me from every corner of the room. A few snickered, and a handful of old ladies gasped and muttered things like, "Well I never!" I set down my plate at the end of the buffet line.

"Fine," I said. "Okay, fine." I turned my back and walked out of the dining room. Conversation started popping up behind me. I didn't care. They could talk about the nameless guy and his bedroom inadequacies. Who was I to them? Nobody. Another face, one of thousands just like me in hotels across the country, across the world. And who was she to me? Just a trick. Some devil woman who had gotten my juices flowing and didn't give a damn one way or another about it. I jammed the button on the elevator with my thumb and tried to swallow the lump in my throat.

I packed my bags and checked out through the TV set. I remembered a simpler time when you had to go down to the front desk to check out. Apparently that task was unnecessary. I wondered what it was about checking in that had to be personal when checking out was easily managed by a series of clicks on the remote. I took the ten bucks off the nightstand and left the note there for the cleaning ladies.

I took a shuttle to a local bus stop, and from there took the number 65 bus downtown. I ended up on the same bench as yesterday, only today the rain had given way to bright sunshine. I thought for a minute that God was spiting me with this weather, and then decided God had nothing to do with it.

"I b'leev you have sumthin' b'longs to me," an old voice said beside me. I looked over and saw J. J. Regal seated in the same place he had been not 24 hours before. For some reason this didn't surprise me. I rooted around in the breast pocket of my jacket and produced a gold gilded pen with the old bluesman's initials engraved on it. He took it from my hand. He smiled at me, sized me up a little.

"You look diff'rent, white boy," he said. "Look like you down some."

I shook my head. "That rain sure does holler some," I said.

"Ha! Yessuh, it sho' 'nuff do!" he said. His laugh was a deep belly laugh, filled with dirt and sweat. "Come on, now. Tell ol' J.J. all about it."

I looked at him out of the corner of my eye. He was smiling a crooked yellow smile that smelled of cologne and aftershave. I studied my shoes again. "There was this girl, and—"

"Say no more," he said. "I know the whole story." He laughed again. "Yessuh, there's always a woman in the middle of a man's troubles." He leaned closer. "Lemme guess: that trick done stole yo' money, stole yo' heart, and stole yo' pride."

"Two outta three," I said. "She didn't take my money."

"Sheeyit!" Regal said. "Now I know I gots to find me a white girl, if'n she gon' steal everythin' but yo' money!" He laughed again. I joined him this time, though weakly.

"Lemme ask you sumthin', white boy," he said. "You got love?"

"I was married once, a few years ago."

“What ‘bout right now? Right this very second?”

I shook my head. “I thought I did. Maybe not love, but something. Something better than what I had before.”

“Mm-hmm,” Regal said. “You had sumthin' good, an' then you lost it.”

“That's right,” I said.

“An' now you all torn up inside. You thinkin' it's gon' take a while to get that heart of yours back up an' runnin'.”

“If I can even get it running again,” I said.

“Oh, you will, white boy,” Regal said. “You will.”

I heard a bus round a corner and saw the number 15 about a quarter of a mile away. Regal seemed not to notice.

“See,” he said, “that's the thing about them blues.” He tucked the pen into his jacket pocket. “They let that heart of yours heal back up, jus' so's they can tear it all to shreds all over ‘gain.” The bus pulled over to the curb in front of us.

“As for you, white boy,” Regal said with one foot in the bus. “I'd say's you got ‘em pretty bad.” He smiled at me. “Yessuh, you got them blues pretty bad.”

