

Slide Steel

by Paul Hargreaves

It's a common riff: C-C-C-C-B-A-G-A that goes *What made you leave me sweet Mollie?* Riding under a soiled raffia cowboy hat in the trashy cab of his garbage truck, Billy carries the tune like an armload of cinder blocks.

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Keyfob Haggis describes himself as a man of literary inclinations, meaning he roosts behind the library where the climate control blows out hot and humid on cloudless winter nights. He's there now, suckling a bottle of blended. Fat Patty sniffs the delicate waft of peat and sidles over, proffering a grope in exchange for a few wet-lipped swigs. Hell yes.

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The grind of the big diesel is drowned out by TommyJoe Harper's Wailin' Slide Steel Sextet as the empty trash bin lands hard in front of the truck. Billy retracts the forks then knuckles the gearshift into reverse, singing:

*When you knowed I'd be missin' you so
Now all that's left is these cold lonesome nights
And my heart ain't got nowhere to go...*

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Mick rounds the corner by the book return and sees his girl Patty, bottle in hand, and Keyfob copping a mashy feel. "I'm gonna bust yer ass, Haggis!" he roars. Even staggering, Mick's a fearsome sight, so Keyfob pries the bottle from the suck of Fat Patty's lips, stumbles to his feet and hoofs it north. He turns into the forked alley behind Central Bank, the better to drop Mick's tail. But just as Keyfob is weighing left or right, he sees a garbage bin and, being a man of cunning and economy, figures why run at all? The lid shuts over him just as Mick comes huffing into the alley.

The large sheet of bubble wrap, paperboard boxes and shredded memoranda embrace Keyfob with warming insularity. Through a crack in the lid, he watches Mick prowling, barking

invective and finally stopping to relieve his bladder against the bin. Under the covering stink of hot piss on frozen metal, Keyfob grins and twists the cap off the bottle. Breathy minutes pass. Before long, Mick and the golden broth are both gone and, weightless in the bubblewrap, Keyfob drifts off.

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Billy clangs the forks into the rusted side channels. The hydraulic arm swings the steel box through an overhead arc, tumbling its contents into the refuse container. This is the part Billy likes best: when the chorus and the slide guitars ring into his head like a concert hall through the tiny earbuds. On beat with the music, he smacks the grease-smearred button on the dashboard, the one marked COMPACTOR, and wails to the night:

*Molly, by golly, you're love gives me folly
My jolly's gone clean outta sight,
You done such bad wrong, I'm cry-in' my sad song,
But ain't no one listenin' tonight...*

