

Simmer Time

by Richard Cooper

That's when I saw him, staggering down the middle of Stone Coal Road about five miles from the Pit River, when I drove up from behind, and he hitched a ride. Usually the predawn light means bedtime for wicked guitar players, but not that bloody Sunday. I was returning from a solo gig in the boonies, my perfectly non-descript Ford Escort's trunk full of fresh cut weed, and was headed toward the old timber-framed, one-lane bridge—the only way in or out of this remote, sparsely populated county.

Modoc County: where the California farmers are extra mellow.

"Dude, you've got a serious case of road rash," I said. His leather pants were torn and there were bloodstains on his gray shirt and black motorcycle jacket. He didn't reply. Was he drunk? Damn. He smelled more like beer than beer itself. "Listen," I said, "where's your bike? Where did you wipeout? I have a cell phone, let's find a hospital, okay?"

"No." His voice was raspy. "I'm just looking for my g—I love that guitar—my girlfriend gave me that guitar." He paused, and then coughed, violently. "I've been walking up and down this freaking road looking for her. We just had to get away from the Los Angeles scene for a few days... Do you have any water?"

"Here." I reached between the bucket seats and grabbed a Corona from my travel cooler, and he gingerly pressed the ice-cold bottle against his forehead. His face was scraped up on the left side and his red hair was caked with road grime, gravel, and grease. And more blood. My own private poster child for helmet laws. In the front seat.

"Slow down," he said. "Please. How does this work?" He found the switch, rolled down the tinted glass and squinted at the deep verdant forest as we passed. The chilly morning air rushed in like hungry harpies. When he turned to look at me, he said, "You must think you've picked up a ghost."

"No," I said. "You're much too visceral to be a ghost." The sun wasn't up yet and I wanted this day to be over, kaput. He was quiet again. The harpies raged and swirled inside my Escort, and the stand of oak trees encroaching the curve of the road seemed dark and inviting. I slowed down a little more, and then persisted. "Listen, mi amigo, you're definitely going to need a tetanus shot and box of Band-Aids." He looked like he was weeping. I continued: "I'm Bob, Bob Burns. Where did you lose it?"

"Where did I lose it?" He chuckled, but didn't smile. "The old Rooster would have loved you, Robert Burns," he said. "Help me find my baby and I'll get you into the Viper Room for eternity." He was definitely weeping. I thought about turning on the radio but remembered something about accident victims suffering from shock, and became afraid of too much silence from my wounded passenger.

"Tell me about your guitar—is it electric or acoustic?"

"Her looks were like a flower in May, her smile was like a simmer morn."

"Simmer Morn? Is that like a Fender Telecaster? I've always wanted one of those." I nervously turned on the radio anyway, got only static, and switched it off again.

"That was Bobby Burns, Bobby. 'Blithe, blithe and merry was she...' I forget the rest." I suddenly recognized his mad poet's voice: Rooster, of the infamous neo-punk band, BDD. I had them on my iPod. Everyone in his band had a famous name like "Toni Collette" or "Ethan Hawke." His own, actual no-shit name was Russell Crowe. And now he's probably got fucking brain damage.

But the Viper Room... The problem, as I saw it, was getting back to the Hollywood hills in relative anonymity—this is why I never watched CNN—human fragility was such an inevitable buzzkill. I had some rolled fatties hidden in the glove compartment and craved to burn one down.

As we approached the bridge and the steep riverbank, he said, "Stop here. She's here, Bobby. Fuck me. Fuck me. She's here." He started to open the passenger door before we were stopped. There were several sheriff's vehicles parked near the bridge, flashing red

and blue lights, and an ambulance. I hesitated to pull over, but did it anyway, despite my trunk full of Modoc Mellow.

I said: "Man, I play guitar, too. I mean, mostly blues and R&B and some of your shit, too—not that your stuff is shit, I mean." I started to say something else, about getting the hell out of Dodge, when Rooster hopped out of the car and hobbled down the embankment of the Pit and out of sight. The morning sky was gray and foggy, blocking the sunrise.

A deputy sheriff in a transparent raincoat walked over to my window and I rolled it down. He asked me if I knew "a Miss Elizabeth Davis." I said I didn't know her. Bette Davis. Was there another vehicle involved? It started to rain and the cold drops stung my face. "That man was wandering down the road," I told him, "and I'm pretty sure he hurt his head when he crashed. His band is called 'BDD' for 'Bitch Die Die.'"

The deputy stared at me for several long seconds, like a village idiot, and I tried to not look worried about my stash. Then he shook his head, and walked away to talk to the paramedics. I shouted after him, into the rain: "But at least he's found his... his guitar down there, right? Right?"

I rolled up the windows, wiped away the rain, and drove away as inconspicuously as possible. Across the narrow, crooked bridge, I encountered a small black van marked with large white lettering: Modoc County Coroner. I stepped on the accelerator, and reached for the glove compartment. He must have spotted his guitar down there. His Simmer Morn.

Must have.

