

Me and The Devil Blues

By
Stuart Neville

The soupy Mississippi heat had given way to the slightest of chills as Robert Johnson took the Hohner Marine Band harp from his pocket. Dim stars blinked at him as he brought the metal and wood to his mouth and drew air across the reeds. The little harmonica moaned and sighed to the darkness, a churning railroad rhythm pumping as he inhaled and exhaled, forming shapes with his lips, blocking with his tongue, making implosive consonants at the back of his throat to twist the notes as he pleased.

He was handy with a harp, but he wasn't good - not real good. That didn't bother him so much. He was about as good at blowing harp as he wanted to be. The coffin at his feet bothered him more. He held the last note until his lungs were full, then took the harp away from his mouth. He dropped it back into his pocket as he let the air out of his chest. A dog howled way over at Dockery Farms, answering the harp's call.

The moon cast enough light on the crossroads where Dockery Road met Hwy 8 so he could see pretty well. Or as well as his poor eyesight would let him. He looked down to the coffin, three feet long, with a narrow waist, wide bottom and long neck. He hunkered down and popped the clasps. The moonlight caught the gloss of the Kalamazoo's finish and Robert ran his long fingers over its face. He drew his forefinger across the strings, letting each one ring out, sonorous in the night air. It was a little out of tune, but he needn't remedy that. Not tonight. That would be someone else's job.

He placed his hand flat on the strings to still them. This was all he wanted. To be the master of these six wires, this wooden box. To make it sing, to make it pull the sounds from his head and throw them into the air. He'd been practicing for years, playing every place they'd let him, but it was so slow. He'd be an old man before he'd tame this thing. He wanted it now. He wanted to go right up to Son House, take this guitar, and use it to wipe that shit-eating grin off his face.

He shivered as a breeze picked up, carrying the sound of hooves on dirt and a low smell. He stood upright, peering down Hwy 8. He stared at the blackness. His half-sister had bought him eyeglasses years ago, but he never wore them. Shit, he'd walk into walls before he'd go around with those things hanging off his face.

If he squinted he could just see two green-glowing eyes approaching from the south. At least he thought so. It was dark, and with vision as poor as his, he couldn't be certain. A shape formed around the distant eyes. What was it? The moonlight seemed to miss that spot on the highway, as if averting its gaze in shame.

A goat. Yes, a goat, great horns twisting around its long face. Wanderlust must have taken it, and it had jumped a fence somewhere down the highway. It was exploring the roads around Clarksdale, and being a wanderer also, Robert knew its plight. As if aware it had been recognized by a fellow traveller, it stopped. It shivered, its horned head throwing off dust.

In one smooth movement, it raised itself onto its hind legs and stood upright.

"God a'mighty," whispered Robert, his breath misting before him. He brought his fingertips to his eyes and rubbed them. He'd had some whisky to warm him as he waited and it was dark, at least on that part of the flat landscape. He was mistaken, surely.

He took his hands away and cried out.

"Good evening," said the broad-shouldered man.

"Shit!" Robert took a step back.

The man smiled. He was handsome, with large teeth and inky skin. His finely cut suit caressed his thick body. "I'm sorry, brother," he said. "I didn't mean to startle you. I'm just out enjoying the moonlight. And what are you doing here at this late hour?"

Robert smoothed his jacket and studied the stranger. "I'm s'posed to meet somebody here. Where'd you come from?"

The stranger looked over his shoulder, then back to Robert.

Robert blinked at him. "I thought I saw a..."

"A what, brother?"

"Nothing. Must've been you, I guess. My eyes ain't so good."

The stranger smiled, then looked to the ground. "Mmm-mmm. That's a fine looking guitar you got there. Can you play it?"

"Yes, sir," said Robert.

"Let's hear you." The stranger grinned, his white teeth glowing in the moonlight.

"Is it you?" asked Robert.

"Is what me?" His smile never faltered.

"Is it you I'm s'posed to meet?"

The stranger turned in a slow circle. "Ain't nobody else out here, now, is there?"

"No," said Robert. He kneeled down and took the guitar from its case. Still squatting, he placed its waist across his right thigh. "What'll I play?"

"Whatever you please."

Robert thought for a moment, then decided. He began a tune Ike Zinnerman had been teaching him. He knew all the chords and all the movements of his right hand. His thumb knew when to strike down, his fingers knew when to pluck. He'd practiced for hours. He'd practiced until he bled. Still, the notes were blunt and graceless. None were wrong; they all arrived at the correct pitch at the correct time, but all were disjointed and clumsy. He stopped before the end of the second verse, embarrassed at over-reaching himself.

The stranger's smile was kind and warm. "Not bad. You're trying real hard."

"Yes sir," said Robert. "I try as hard as I can but it don't get no better."

"Maybe if I tuned that fine guitar for you it might help you along."

Robert felt a cold film of sweat on his brow as he stood up, letting the guitar hang by his side. "Maybe."

"The question is," said the stranger, his grin dimming slightly, "are you willing to pay me my price?"

Robert swallowed. "My soul?"

The stranger clutched his belly as he laughed. "Boy, I don't need your soul. Besides, you can't sell what don't belong to you. Who made you? Aside from your mama."

"God?"

"That's right. And He made your soul. Your soul belongs to Him. You go on the way you are, He's going to send your sorry ass my way anyhow." The stranger's face became black stone. "That ain't the price."

Robert tightened his grip on the guitar neck, feeling the fret-ends bite his palm. "Then what is?"

"Your moment," said the stranger.

Robert shook his head. "I don't understand."

The man took a step closer. "Everyone has a moment in their lifetime, just one, when they have everything they ever wanted, whether they know it or not. The moment when they reach the point He intended for them."

The stranger placed his thumbs over Robert's eyes, wiped them, then took his hands away. "My price is that moment," he said as he flicked a milky fluid onto the dirt road.

Robert blinked, his vision seeming to dance in his head. A bright burning was replaced by a smooth coolness. He looked up at the sky, startled by thousands upon thousands of brilliant pinpricks in the great, black blanket. He looked back to the stranger, his every pore hard and clear in the moonlight.

"What did you do to my eyes?" asked Robert.

"My price is that moment," repeated the stranger. "Are you willing to pay it?"

Robert could only stare.

"Are you willing to pay it?"

"Yes," said Robert.

The stranger smiled. "Now, that is a fine guitar. Your wife bought it for you, didn't she? Before she left you. A Kalamazoo. It ain't a Gibson, but it ain't far off. May I see it?"

He'd barely had enough time to get the Kalamazoo into its case and throw it out the window before the door came splintering in. He turned to see her husband, all jowls and wide eyes, advancing across the room as she squealed on the bed. Robert was running through the morning dew, the case in one hand, his suit bundled up in the other, before he heard the smacking of hard hand against soft cheek from the window he'd just leapt through. He was well practiced.

But now, at the other end of the day, he was without a slide. He preferred the sound of a brass tube, thick walled, like a tractor bearing, but they were shouting for him and there was no time to get what he wanted. He sucked down the last of the whisky, grimacing at the burn, before gripping the bottle by its neck and swinging it against the step. He was left holding a glass cylinder that fit snugly over his little finger.

He walked back inside the juke joint, lifted the Kalamazoo from its place at the wall, and sat down on the chair. He turned the pegs so the guitar was in windmill tuning. He could do it in seconds, going only by the resonance of the guitar's body against his.

He swept the bottleneck up the fingerboard, striking the strings just as it passed the seventh fret. He halted at the twelfth, letting his left hand waver, a glassy vibrato swelling to fill the room.

They became quiet, the people gathered here, pierced by the spidery tones. He held the chord until the guitar was almost out of breath, then let the silver notes fall. He caught them at the lower octave, turning them to face the subdominant chord, then the

dominant.

He was unaware of those labels, just as he was unaware he was carving lines guitar players would trace for a century to come. When he found the rhythm, pinning it to the floor with his muddied boots, he had no inkling he was drawing a map millions would follow decades after his passing. He was just playing guitar, happy and drunk.

Still, this was not the moment. This was not the price.

It was not the moment, or the price, when Robert went home to Robinsonville and watched Son House's jaw drop at the impossibility of his playing. When House and Willie Brown each stood aghast, unable to follow or even comprehend what the boy they'd laughed off was doing with his guitar, Robert's heart was fit to burst with pride. As the whoops and hollers rose over the slamming together of hands, Robert scanned the crowd for that handsome, broad-shouldered, inky-skinned stranger's face. He did not see a flash of white teeth through a knowing smile. He just saw the jealousy in the men, the desire in the women, and he drank his fill.

Even when Ernie Oertle brought him to San Antonio and sat him in the corner of a hotel room, a can ready to catch lightning and hold it in a great whirring machine, it was not the moment. When he stepped out into the Texas evening, his voice raw, seventy-five dollars in his pocket, he looked up and down the street searching for a man whose suit fitted like skin. He saw nothing but a scrawny dog sniffing at a lamppost.

Or, when he first heard his own voice, high and pure, like a ghost mourning its own death. Soaring over the crackles of the seventy-eight, straddling the guitar's wiry lattice, his words rang clear and loud. As the phonograph played, he looked to the doorway, then the window, to see if the stranger had come to collect.

But this was not the moment. This was not the price.

He awoke from the same nightmare, sweat licking at his back, and sat upright. That dream again. That dog, that hellhound, slobbering, blackened tongue lolling. Robert wiped sleep away from his eyes and breathed deep. He could see dawn creeping up the walls and knew he should be gone. Betty-Mae was still asleep beside him; her scent filled the room. Earl would be home from the Three Forks as soon as he shoved the last of the drunks out into the early rising heat. If he caught his wife in bed with his star attraction there'd be hell to pay.

Robert looked down to Betty-Mae and found a strange ache inside of him. What caused this new feeling? He considered it for a while. He felt the skin on his forearms and the back of his neck tingle when it came to him. It was the thought of leaving her that caused this odd pang in his heart.

It was August 13th, 1938. A Saturday. The last day of Robert Johnson's short life.

The Three Forks was empty except for Robert Johnson, Sonny Boy Williamson II, Betty Mae and her husband, Earl. Robert marked out a slow, steady rhythm while Sonny Boy made wavering, breathy lines with his harp. Earl stacked glasses behind a long, low table that served as the bar. Betty-Mae moved between the barrels that were set on end to make tables, sweeping the floor, spreading sawdust around and under the benches. The Three Forks was a grocery store by day, but at weekends its storeroom became the hottest juke joint in Greenwood. Men and women would come from miles around to

drink and dance and fight until dusk became dawn. The bleary eyes and hoarse voices that shamed the county's churches on Sunday morning were earned here on Saturday night.

Robert watched Betty-Mae as she swayed to the music, letting her hips mark the beat. The twitch this sight caused in his loins was familiar, but not the fluttering in his chest. He had been married twice, both times for the comfort of being kept, and both women were dead - one from childbirth, the other from a broken heart. He never looked at either of those women and felt this strange stirring inside. That troubled him.

When Betty-Mae showed up this evening with another grazed cheek and puffy lip he had to fight the urge to break a bottle over Earl's flat head.

"Man, where you at?"

Robert looked up to Sonny Boy. He hadn't noticed the harp had left the tall man's mouth twelve bars ago.

"You keep your eyes to yourself," said Sonny Boy. "That Earl ain't as stupid as he looks."

"What you talking about?" Robert stood up and leaned the Kalamazoo against the wall. "I'll look where I want and you don't have a thing to say about it."

Sonny Boy held his hands up and walked away.

Robert stood for a moment, feeling anger burn his heart, before turning to head out the back door and into the night air. He lit a cigarette and blew a long, blue plume into the warm darkness. He scolded himself for mouthing off to his old friend. Sonny Boy was right. He was playing with fire. Earl was a big man with a foul temper, and Robert was small, slim and not built for fighting. His right mind told him to get the hell away from Betty-Mae before he bought himself a bed in the infirmary.

But she was something. What was it? He couldn't fix it in his head. Was it her wide, smoky eyes? Her light brown skin? Her round hips? Or maybe it was her bubbling laugh, or the way she said what she meant, and what she meant was always right.

He thought of that swelling on her lip and kicked a stone across the dirt track that ran behind the Three Forks. Betty-Mae's father had been a drunk who gave his only daughter to Earl in hopes of a lifetime supply of free whisky. That lifetime only lasted the few months it took to drink himself to death and Betty-Mae was left with a husband who used her as a punch bag and cheap labor.

"Goddamn it," said Robert as he ground the cigarette butt into the dirt with his heel. He turned and went back inside the Three Forks to apologize to Sonny Boy.

He didn't see the green eyes watching from the darkness.

"That's whisky talking," said Betty-Mae, her head to one side, her eyes serious.

"No, I mean it," said Robert. He held the door to the open closet so it shielded them from the rest of the packed room. "We can go to Chicago, Detroit, wherever you want. I even know some folks up in Canada."

"Canada?" She threw her head back and laughed. "I ain't going to no Canada! I ain't freezing my ass off for no man."

She smiled, then, and it almost broke his heart.

"I love you, Betty-Mae," he said. "I never said that to a woman and meant it before now. I want to marry you."

Her smile fell away, her puffy lip trembled and her eyes made small, quick movements. She was leaning in to kiss him when the door was pulled from his grip.

"Betty-Mae?" Earl looked down at them both, his face slack and confused. "What you doing back here?"

"Nothing," she said. "Just putting the broom away."

Earl gripped her upper arm and guided her towards the makeshift bar, a scowl darkening his face as he glanced back over his shoulder.

Robert turned to go back to his guitar, but his way was blocked by a tall, broad man. A handsome man. A man with large white teeth and inky skin.

"Now is the moment," said the stranger. "This is the price."

Robert took two steps back, suddenly cold amidst the heat of a hundred warm bodies.

"Don't look at me like that, boy." The stranger grinned. "You knew I'd be back to collect one day. You owe me and it's time to settle up. But I think I'll listen to you play a little while. You and Sonny Boy together, now that's a sound I'd like to hear."

Robert looked around him, searching for a way out.

The stranger stepped in close. "Now, don't be thinking of running, boy. I'll catch you. And if you make me come after you, I might not be satisfied with just you, you understand?"

Robert turned to see what the stranger's eyes had focussed on: Betty-Mae washing glasses in a bucket of soapy water. He turned back to the stranger and felt the hot, sulphurous breath on his face.

"Now get that guitar and play. I want to hear what you bought with your one moment."

On shaking legs, Robert walked back to where his Kalamazoo leaned against the wall. Sonny Boy leaned alongside it, finishing a cigarette.

"Who was that?" he asked.

"No-one," said Robert as he tried to hide the tremor in his voice. "Just someone I used to know."

"He looked serious."

"Yep, he's serious all right. Let's play."

Sonny Boy plucked a harp from the belt at his waist. "Me and the Devil Blues?"

Robert took his seat. "All right."

He played the best he ever played because he knew he would never hold a guitar again. And because he was the greatest bluesman who ever lived, those hundred or so people heard the best blues ever played on this Earth, before or since, that hot August night. None of them knew it, except one man who wasn't really a man at all.

Robert looked up now and then, just for a second, and saw the stranger whispering in Earl's ear. He saw Earl's face go grey, saw the muscles in his jaw clench. He saw the stranger pass Earl a small bottle.

As the last notes died, the crowd roared and stamped their feet. Robert waved away the calls for more and Sonny Boy holstered his harp. Robert laid his cheek on the guitar's shoulder and ran his thumb across the strings, feeling the them resonate in his skull. When they died away, he kissed the Kalamazoo's neck and leaned it against the wall.

"Man, are you all right?" asked Sonny Boy.

"Yeah, I'm good," said Robert. "I just need a drink."

"Well, don't be tying one on tonight, boy. I smell trouble. Earl and that friend of yours been cooking something up."

"Don't worry." Robert patted his friend's shoulder. "Ain't nothing I can't handle."

Cassie, one of Earl's bar girls approached. She carried a half pint bottle of whisky. "On the house," she said, and put it in Robert's outstretched hand.

"Watch that," said Sonny Boy. "The seal's broke."

"I know." Robert unscrewed the already loosened cap.

"Don't put that near your mouth, man. You crazy?"

"Mind your business, Sonny Boy. You ain't my nursemaid." Robert raised the bottle to his lips.

Sonny Boy slapped it from his hand and the shattering of glass silenced the room for just a second. "Man, don't never take a drink from an open bottle. You don't know what could be in it."

Robert looked to the bar where the stranger kept a steady eye on him. Betty-Mae slipped past the stranger, and he reached out. He pulled her close to him and whispered in her ear. Her eyes grew wide and she pulled away. He grinned as he looked back to Robert.

Robert turned back to Sonny Boy. "Man, don't never knock a bottle of whisky outta my hand. Cassie, bring me another one."

"All right," said Sonny Boy as he walked away. "You said it. I ain't your nursemaid."

Cassie headed for the bar and Robert breathed deep, trying to ease the hammering in his chest. His eyes were hot and wet.

"Baby, what's wrong?"

Robert jumped, frightened by the soft hand on his shoulder.

"Nothing, Betty-Mae," he lied. "I'm just tired, that's all."

She looked into his eyes. "Robert, I been thinking. About what you said. I want to go. I don't want to be around here no more. Let's go someplace."

He felt the hot, salty tears run down his cheeks.

"Oh baby," she said, reaching out to touch him. "Don't cry."

He pulled her close and kissed her. She resisted for a moment, then gave in. He wrapped his arms around her warm, full body.

"Are you two crazy?" Cassie pulled them apart. "Earl's right over there. He'll whup both your asses. Here."

She handed Robert another half pint bottle. Again, the seal was broken. He wiped his eyes with the back of his hand then unscrewed the cap.

"I love you, Betty-Mae," he said, raising the bottle in a toast. "You remember that."

"I love you, too," she said, her eyes glistening. She touched his cheek.

He smiled and brought his hand up to hers, pressing its warmth against his skin.

"Now is the moment," he said. "This is the price."

He lifted the bottle to his lips and swallowed.

A note from the author:

This is a fictionalised account of the life and death of Robert Johnson. The crossroads myth was one he actively encouraged during his lifetime, and I've always found it a fascinating story. The circumstances of Johnson's death are shrouded in mystery and hearsay, but it's generally accepted that he was poisoned by the man who ran the Three Forks juke joint on August 13th, 1938, for being overly familiar with his wife. That Sonny Boy Williamson II was in attendance and slapped the first poisoned bottle out of Johnson's hand is well documented - the words used here are the ones they are reported to have spoken. The name Betty-Mae is taken from the song Honeymoon Blues. Although this story states that August 13th was the last day of Johnson's life, it actually took him a further three days to die. The cause given on his death certificate was 'No Doctor'.