



THE
DEVIL
BLUES

A SHORT TALE

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I recall a night long ago, here in the Crescent city, when the blues was still a stranger to me. My neck caressed by a soft talking angel, her skin smelling of ginger root and wet grass. The sounds of a summer night under a white moon resonate in my head as I pretend to pluck my double bass, humming the notes. The bass in my humming seems to hang heavy in the small room and the notes swell and linger in the air. Just moments ago, we were standing outside Chuckies Bar on Bourbon Street; feet restless and tired.

“Wha’ ya mean the band ain’t got no name?” Snapped the show promoter.

The band ain’t got no damn name.

A fat blob of black flesh wrapped up tight in a sunflower yellow zoot suit shakes his head fervently, his eyes watching us with distrust.

“You better play good, ya hear? Or this money going straight back in my pocket and ain’t a damn thing you gone do about it.”

The show promoter looks at me and grunts.

“Ain’t got no name for your band. Ya mama gave you a name?” He spits.

“Yeah, she sure did,” I reply.

“Whatcha mama call ya?”

I shrugged and smiled, which probably looked more like a snarl.

“Not professional,” he says, shaking his fat head. “But I ain’t got a choice. The last band dived out on me. Bunch of swamp sucking faggots. Fuck ‘em. You... what’s your name?”

“Me? Sammy Wilkinson suh.”

“You the singer?”

“Yassuh.”

“Sammy and the Bluesmen,” he turns back to me. “See how fucking easy that was? Now you have a fucking name. I should be your fucking manager but I wouldn’t waste my time. You sure you can carry that thing?”

He points a stubby finger at my double bass case that sits on the sidewalk beside me.

“It’s bigger than you. How long you been playing bass?”

“Been playing bass for as long as I been playing bass,” I reply.

He laughs and jabs a stubby finger at me. I feel like biting it off and spitting it out on the sidewalk. He doesn’t know much, this young, fat fool, but he knows my name. He says my name, but his eyes wish he were saying something else.

“Ya see? I know everybody. And I know you guys can play OK. I was just fooling with ya dumb asses. Just wish I had them swamp sucking faggots here instead. Why can’t you all look like dazzling Sammy Wilkinson here? He looks like a fucking showman.”

I try to maintain my nonchalant masquerade, but my forehead is wrinkled with stress and my shoes are tight.

I just want to get out of my shoes and get out of this fool’s way.

“The show has finally started. Already had to delay for forty minutes, the comedian was also a no show because he got arrested for fucking one of those Chinese hookers. Can you believe that shit? We got that old Buddy ‘Do ‘em Gently’ Woods playing at the moment. Sound like he should be playing down at the morgue but you guys will liven up shit, right? You niggers will go on before the big act; the magnificent Patricia ‘Velvet Lady’ Walker. Such a beautiful piece of ass. Sings like a fucking angel too. You sing like a fucking angel Sammy?”

He laughs again. We all shuffle our feet. I refrain from telling the show promoter to close his mouth.

Keep quiet, play nice and get the gig. Eat something decent tonight. Maybe get a woman and a bottle of something good.
“You niggers go on at around half nine. About nine o'clock. May not be nine, but you niggers be ready for nine.”

We all nod in agreement.

Now here we sit, in this tiny room tucked away at the back of the building.

There are five of us.

Gillespie Pearson, the drummer man leans against the wall - his drum sticks protruding from a chest pocket - picking at the dry skin on his hands.

“Mice shit everywhere,” he said, when we first stepped into the room. He has been looking at his hands ever since.

Then there is Tall Man Augustus Brown.

He sits on the floor occasionally looking up at the others in the room and then returning his gaze to his spindly fingers. I watch him bend and crack his finger bones. I have - for over twenty years now - watched those mortal instruments caress the keys like a battle of bone and flesh against ivory.

Sweet Sammy Wilkinson is talking, because that is what Sweet Sammy does. His mouth may have even been alive before he was. His eyes close a lot when he goes on like this as he stirs himself into a ranting fever.

He is talking about the unnecessary deaths caused by doctors fresh out of college and how they're set loose on black folks, using us as guinea pigs for their sinister medical experiments. When he is not ranting and sings, it's as if an angel has possessed his body for a while.

The sudden bright wail of a trumpet shoots through Sammy's rambling and causes all our heads to turn.

The trumpet glows like an evening sun and behind it stands Ruckus Billy. His cheeks inflate and I laugh inside because he looks like a stoned blowfish. He deflates and the gush of air from his body creates a melodic scream. The sound shoots into my head, overturning things I would rather not think about.

And then there is me, my double bass is already waiting for me on stage and so I sit with my fingers strumming the air, practicing the set in my head, tapping my feet to a steady beat. An hour passes and from somewhere along the hallway flows the sound of applause. It's almost ten o'clock.

The show promoter, slime-like sweat painting his face, swings the door open. Sweet Sammy opens his eyes and stops talking. The show promoter's eyes seem disappointed and hungry as if he expected to see a feast fit for a king but came upon a chicken bone.

He beckons and we follow along a hallway that seems to go on forever. I felt nervous, more nervous than usual.

The walls turn from a dusty brown to a clean white. We march up a short flight of steps and are now backstage.

We hear the new name of our nameless band and we walk out into the light. Everyone goes first (don't matter which order) and then Sammy comes on last; smiling, showing his bone white teeth. The show promoter in his ridiculous outfit stands at the side of the stage.

Fat head in a yellow sack.

I can hear the feeble threats in his head. I glance at him and flash a smile. We are like the old uncles that get too drunk at the party and the young ones want to keep us in the back room, drunk on moonshine and playing cards so we don't come out the front and embarrass them in front of their cool socialite friends and pretty airheads. But they resented us because they knew we could play that authentic jazz blues and modernise it too.

Funking it up. Spicing it up.

Shaken not stirred.

And so, because some 'swamp sucking faggots' had cancelled their tour of the Crescent city, they had allowed the old timers to fill a slot.

It is the autumn of 68 and while blues has aged gracefully; we attempt to transform it into a new-born baby. We drop and settle into awkward chords that spin into dark pits and then pull it up into a happy place.

When Sweet Sammy's mouth opens, people by the bar on the other end of the hall stop talking and turn.

Halfway through the set we take a short breather while Sweet Sammy takes centre stage, cracking jokes and seducing the ladies in the front row, creating dark frowns on the faces of their husbands.

The boys pretend to laugh at his jokes for we have heard them a thousand times already, but everyone in the band is fake-laughing except for me. I rest my head against my bass, clutching it in terror.

I see a dead girl sitting among the people in the audience.

Three or four rows back. Sitting at a table.

I know who she is because I killed her, but you need to hear me out before you go judging

I did not mean to kill her.

I rub my eyes; they come away wet and I realise I am crying. Sammy's voice trails off as if I am losing him down a long tunnel and everything seems to slow down...

When I was a boy, Mama collected porcelain figurines.

All over the house, lining the hallways and the living room, there would be these tiny tables draped in bronze and green tablecloths used only for showcasing her collection.

I would play with the figurines when she wasn't home and pretend they were alive. One day when she

not around I decided that the cute, white and brown porcelain Jack Russell dog could fly and it had slipped from my hand as I raced down the stairs and the porcelain dog went flying, for real, over the banister to the floor. It had been the first time I had experienced the sensation of time slowing down, and yet not slow enough so you can stop whatever was happening from happening. You just had to watch with dread as if you were witnessing some dark magic. I let my head rest back on the bass as that familiar sensation swept over me as the crowd laughed at one of Sammy's jokes.

The dead girl isn't laughing.

A dark hand grips my heart as she straightens her head and turns to look directly at me. She looks confused as if she has just seen someone from her past but cannot recognise them.

"It's crazy ain't it? You betcha ass it's crazy," shouts Sammy into the mic.

It is crazy.

My mind closes in on itself and takes me back to the summer of 1929.

I had first seen the girl as she walked with her father, a man who seemed to bathe in anger to clean any trace of joy from his life.

I stood there, transfixed by the scene before me.

The angry man, his back slightly hunched as he moaned about something. The girl nodded, struggling to carry the bag of groceries. Her skin was brown and shiny like soft bark after a light rainfall. The hair pulled tightly to her head was midnight black.

When she walked, she did so as if every step was important, her chin raised. She wore a sky-blue summer dress with a creamy brown cardigan. I stepped further away from the game of marbles, not caring that I might miss my turn.

I don't know why she caught my attention. Maybe it was her careful walk.

I wanted to know this girl.

I needed to know her.

She didn't look at me once that day and kept on walking by as if she were trying her best to follow in her father's footsteps.

It took another week for me to see her again and I had thought of her every morning and night since then. I saw her at the Congo Square Saturday market while I was collecting groceries for Mama. The weather was humid and the darkening clouds seemed lower than usual, pushing down on New Orleans, covering the people in sweat and making the scent of rotten fruit and vegetables and roasted almond pralines more potent.

The girl was not concentrating so much on her steps this time. She watches a man as he chops ripened

coconuts with a machete.

She seemed to be one of those people who tried to hide between their shoulders. As I grew older, I became shy, almost scared of matters that concerned the heart and the opposite sex but as a fourteen-year-old boy exploring the strange shores of my desire, any little pretence that I had had drowned in an undying need.

I walked up to her and introduced myself.

She glanced at me then back at the man chopping coconuts.

“Are you here by yourself?”

What I really meant to ask was ‘Is your Daddy here?’

“I sure might be.”

“What’s your name?”

“Clarentine.”

“That’s an unusual name.”

I loved it.

“How old are you?”

“Thirteen. You?”

“Fourteen.”

She tilted her head, the hollering of the market traders drowned out what I said next.

She smiles.

“I’ve not seen you around before.”

“My family are from Biloxi. We moved here in the winter.”

“You like it here?”

She frowns and looks around. I want to kiss her.

“No, when I first got here, not that much,” she smiled. “But now I do.”

The summer heat rages for the following week and it is as if my heart has cradled New Orleans into its embrace. I sleep with thoughts of Clarentine, going over every word she said, hearing the song of her words as I drift into dreams. The trees rustle against my window in the night whispering tales of teenaged passion and the birds sing in the morning as if they are celebrating my future. I walk with light feet thinking of the girl from Biloxi.

We see each other every day, even on Sundays when she sneaks out of church to see me, if only for a glorious minute.

On our days together we sometimes walk for miles until our feet hurt, through Congo Square along Claiborne Avenue, through Taylor Park, Napoleon Avenue, St Charles Avenue and we would hang out

in Audubon Park, far away from familiar faces. On one of these long walks she had told me she would like to keep flowers in her bedroom.

The following Sunday, with teenaged love pumping through my body, I took one of Mama's vases that lay at the back of her collection, not thinking of the consequences if she would notice it gone but only thinking of Clarentine's face when I placed the vase into her hands.

I turn up on the steps of the church where I had met her the last four Sundays. I wrapped the vase in an old edition of *The Mascot* and sit on the sun-baked stairs, waiting.

Eventually, she comes skipping down the steps and I hand her the vase with a big stupid grin on my face.

She unwraps the vase letting the paper drop to the surrounding floor around her tiny feet housed in shiny black shoes.

She gasps.

"It's for you. You said you wanted flowers in your bedroom. You can put them in this," I said.

"It's beautiful. Where did you get it?" She asked. Before I can answer, I see her father; like a dark cloud threatening a clear sky. He saw us before I saw him and he stomps down the stairs, his eyes blazing with anger.

"Have you gone and lost your goddamned mind?" He looks at me and a wave of puzzlement crosses his face.

"What's this?" he asks, referring to the vase.

Clarentine looks as if her whole body has turned to stone.

I swallow a boulder.

"Hello, sir. Your daughter told me she wanted to keep flowers in her bedroom, so I got her a fine porcelain vase."

Her father grabs Clarentine's arm and goes to strike me. I duck out of the way from his huge hand.

The vase seems to hang in the air and then shatters on the stairs, revealing its cream insides.

"You wanna embarrass your father like this at church? Hanging around with some street hoodlum? Why you wanna do that child? Uh? You crazy? What she do? I tell you what she did. She messing outside here with some street boy!"

I watched in dismay as he dragged her off her feet, back into the church.

The next day I did not see her at our normal meeting place; Eclipse alley. The day was long and meaningless and the night felt like the whole of New Orleans had died and left me stranded on an island of twilight surrounded by still waters.

The next morning, I rose and the sun squeezing through clouds raised a little hope in me. My usual light stride now felt cumbersome, my thoughts floated around like feathers.

I walked through Congo Square and sat on some steps in Eclipse Alley watching the number runners and street kids go about their daily routine. I told myself that she would walk around the corner, any minute now...

I forgot to eat.

Thoughts became harder to understand and while the sun of August scorched the sidewalks, an icy wind storm built up inside of me, an endless rainfall - that sometimes seeped from my eyes and trickled down my cheeks - was travelling the skies of my troubled mind. Thunder explosions and white flash of lightning tormented my gut. In my heaving chest, a hurricane slaughtered the solace of nightfall.

I praised the Lord when I saw her on the third Thursday of August. I was standing on my usual waiting spot in Eclipse alley when she turned the corner. I flew so fast off them steps; it would not have surprised me if the birds had glanced at me and thought for a moment, I was one of their brethren.

"I missed you."

"I missed you so much."

"I love you."

"I love you too."

She showed me her scrapes and bruises under a willow tree in the corner of Audubon Park where the stench of fish packed on the fisher boats and the sweet scent of roasted chestnuts entwined and floated on an idle breeze. Her arm looked like someone had been dancing a hammer on it.

"We did nothing wrong," I said.

"My Daddy says any girl that likes to hang with boys will grow up to be a whore."

"That doesn't sound like it's true."

"I know."

I touched the bruises on her arm.

"He's a monster. Everybody get a beating now and then, but this look like he wanted to really...,"

"Hey, that's my Daddy you're talking about so quiet your mouth."

I do as I'm told.

We rest back against the trunk of the willow tree. My hand leaves the map of bruises on her arm and holds her hand.

"My Daddy says that a young girl should not be spending time with boys unless she's planning on getting married. He said if mother were still alive, she would be heartbroken to know her daughter was hanging around with street-boys. I know he means well. I've seen how some of these young girls are having babies before they can even read. I guess he's just worried because I'm his only daughter."

"I'm not a street-boy and I ain't never been in no gang."

She turns to look at me. Her eyes; innocent and caring.

“My Daddy says the Lord will punish me for it and make me like it and after a while I will enjoy being a whore like those ladies ‘round the District and that’s when the devil will eat my soul. The devil will eat my heart so slowly I won’t even notice.”

“Damn. Your father really don’t want you speaking with boys.”

She sighs.

“He says he would rather punish me than have the devil do it. Better I be hurt by a little beating than cursed for a lifetime of sin. The preacher says I’ll be fine for a ticket to heaven just as long as I don’t make my Daddy angry. Whenever I make Daddy angry, I make the devil happy.”

I caress her hand, feeling the shape of her knuckles.

“I guess it’s a father’s responsibility to protect his daughter. But he doesn’t have to worry about me. He can talk to my Mama if...,”

“Uh, uh. That ain’t gonna happen.”

“Mama would whoop my ass if she thought I was in a gang. I know plenty of boys in gangs. My cousin is in the Black Dollar gang. You heard of ‘em? They sliced his face just the other day; some kid from a rival gang. Mama says his wife gonna have to be ugly ‘cause no woman wants a man with a hoodlum’s scar and he only has himself and the devil to blame. My cousin would ask me time and time again if I wanted to hang out behind the billiard hall but I always gave him an excuse because I knew they would be up to no good. The hoodlum life ain’t for me. I want to learn the piano and become a piano professor in the sporting houses. Do you know how much money they make?”

She shakes her head.

“Hundreds of dollars a week.”

“The Lord may punish you for working in a house of sin.”

“God loves good people. Sometimes good people do bad things so they can do good things. Sporting girls ain’t evil. They have babies to look after. They may live the life of sin but they ain’t all bad people. And piano professors ain’t evil either; they play music. God loves music. Why do you think we sing in his church every Sunday?”

We are silent for a while.

“I just hope I’ll be able to play the piano,” I said, looking at my hands, not knowing that years later I would be a bass player instead.

“You can do anything with practice,” Clarentine smiles and then frowns, “but how you gonna buy a piano?”

“I could be a number runner for my uncle. He’s always complaining that he doesn’t have enough time to collect and check the markers. I can make some money so we can leave the Crescent City, move up south

and find a place of our own.”

She says nothing.

“We can marry before we come back so your father won’t be able to say we are living in sin.”

“And come back with a baby.”

I was speechless.

“Tell me,” she says, resting on her knees facing towards me. “Would your mother not miss you?”

“Yeah, I guess she would. But it wouldn’t be forever. Anyway, when she finds out I took her vase she won’t be missing me that much.”

My hand covers my mouth as soon as the words come out.

“You stole it from your mother?”

I felt my face blushing.

“I didn’t steal it. The vase been there ever since I was born so I reckon it belong to the family and that include me.”

“You stole it.” She said, shaking her head in disapproval.

I shrug.

“Well, if he punishes me and but still gives me you, I can deal with that.”

“But where would we live until we found a place? On the streets? Under a willow tree?”

“We wouldn’t leave until I had enough money.”

“And what type of house would we live in?” asked Clarentine, her eyes wide with wonder.

“A big white mansion. Like those big houses on Basin Street.”

“Could it be a mansion by a lake?”

“Uh, huh, and I could go fishing in the lake for dinner.”

“And there has to be a forest nearby so you can hunt for wild boar or we eat fish for the rest of our days.”

“Most certainly, madam.”

She falls into a thinking silence again. The stillness of our being embraces the both of us and although we can’t see the sky because of the long, green draping willow leaves, we feel the sun being swallowed up by the evening. The warm rays of violet and amber cause the leaves that shelter us to glow, painting our faces in moving shadows and the radiance of a summer evening. We turn to say something to each other but talking is done with us and we fall into a kiss. A peculiar warmth embraces my mind and I taste her. I hold her and she pulls me down on top of her. I don’t know what I’m doing but I know how I’m doing it. We feel each other like we have just discovered a song that we had both forgotten. I caress and kiss her bruises while the world beyond the shelter of the willow tree is no more and we enter a new world where the wind breathes heavily and the sound of our soft moans echo against our trembling bodies.

When we leave the shelter of the willow tree, the night rules and the day is a long-time gone.

We venture through the alleyways of the Crescent city, our minds too lazy with bliss to worry about what awaits us at home.

“Mama is used to me running with the night. I was born at night so she calls me a night time baby and says she has no right from stopping me because the night will look after me.”

Clarentine laughs. Music to my ears.

“I was born in the morning so you have to protect me from the night.”

“I will always protect you,” I said, “hey, you wanna meet up in the park tomorrow morning?”

She nods.

“Yes, and we can decide what name to call our baby.”

I blush.

She laughs.

“You ain’t got to look so worried.”

I wasn’t worried. I was smiling on the inside and thinking of baby names.

The following morning, I wake to the sound of banging on my bedroom door.

Shit! I was supposed to meet Clarentine in the park.

Mama stands there. She looks me over, probably checking that I didn’t leave an arm or a leg outside during my midnight adventures.

“Good morning, Mama,” I mumbled, rubbing my eyes.

“Don’t you good morning me. Your friends are at the door making a whole lot of commotion about some girl.”

I walk to the door still half asleep.

At least three of the boys I know from Eclipse alley are standing at Mama’s door. I had told them never to knock on Mama’s door and so I cuss them out.

“Where was she?” yelled Tiny Eddie, “that’s what they be yelling, dontcha know, you?”

“He said the devil got her good.” Muttered Cat Ray.

“Whatchu saying? You boys making a noise at my Mama's house? You lost your damn minds?”

Tiny Eddie taps me in the shin with his foot.

“Listen. That sweet thing you been courting for a wife. The devil got to her!”

I clap Tiny Eddie so hard in his head he doubles back and falls onto his ass.

The world seems to darken slightly. I notice small irrelevant things like the cracked skin at the bottom of Tiny Eddie's dry feet. The intense, bloodshot stare from Cat Ray. The growing crowd of kids in the street pointing, whispering. I hear Mama’s footsteps disturbing the floorboards behind me and smell the

scent of ham, eggs, and onions sizzling on the stove.

Things seem to slow down as if something awful is happening but I can't figure out what.

I turn to the oldest of the boys, Augustus and I watch his lips move, and it's just like the flying porcelain Jack Russell. It's just like the vase smashing into fragments on the steps of the church. Something terrible is happening that is out of my control but this time it's far worse than a broken piece of porcelain.

"They say she dead. They say someone killed her early this morning up by Audubon Park."

I don't remember how I got there, but I find myself amongst a crowd of strangers in Audubon Park.

Police officers walk in and out of the shelter of a willow tree.

Our willow tree.

The clothes she had been wearing are strewn across the grass, like blood in a baby's cradle; so devastating; the image before me.

I see her father ten feet away from me: his head buried in a man's shoulder. He lets out a strange sound, an animalistic howl that causes the hairs on my neck to stand up.

"... ran away..." I heard a lady say, "She told one of her friends she was gonna run away with some street-boy. Bless the poor child."

A police officer standing beside me is talking with another man.

"Father says she raced out the house like a wild horse. Said he had put down a few well-deserved beatings for messing with boys. These kids, man, I tell you..."

My knees buckle and I fall to the ground.

I crawl through the leaves of the willow tree. I hear Clarentine's father.

"That's the animal! That's the hoodlum! Arrest him!"

I see the blood, but it does not look like blood. It's black like night.

I fall down into a deep river of something terrible as hands grab me at all angles. I hear Clarentine's father screaming and I say I didn't kill her and I can tell by his eyes that he knows I loved her. And I can tell by his eyes, he loved her too and then I black out.

Sweet Sammy laughs and the crowd laughs along with him.

I take in a sharp breath and watch as the ghost of Clarentine gingerly stands up from her seat. She looks at me, smiling.

I'm the reason you're dead.

She shakes her head.

I killed you, didn't I? I should have been there, but I overslept.

Gillespie Pearson rolls into a beat.

Thump Bappa Thump Pap!

Thump Bappa Thumpity Pap!

Clarentine nods her head to the beat and the piano tinkles along with the joyful wail of Ruckus Billy's trumpet. The music plays on without bass as I watch Clarentine turn and walk off into the crowd. She walks with a purpose like she did the first day I saw her.

Every step is important; even in death.

The darkness draws her outline against the crowd until all I see is the trace of an arm, a shoulder as she disappears into the crowd, as she walks into nothingness.

I killed you, didn't I?

The boys look over at me.

I know what they are thinking.

They know about the ghost.

I haven't seen her for over a year but now and then I would catch glimpses of her in the audience and it always leaves me pondering whether the real ghost is regret; hanging around like a rain cloud.

I feel sweat dripping down my face and start to violently pluck my bass filling the space and then Sweet Sammy is off again with his angelic voice.

Well, good morning blues, blues, how do you do?

Well, good morning blues, blues, how do you do?

I'm doing all right and I heard the devil is too.

Sammy's words ring through my head and I smile and cry at the same time.

I love you, Clarentine.