

In the Blue Corner

Jamie Hill sat on the tailgate of his pickup, trying to get as close to what he thought of as perfection without ripping it off too badly. *Hellhound on my Trail* was one of his favorite blues songs, but that had always come with the same problem as any other song he loved of any vintage. Good job Robert Johnson for writing it, but like so many pioneers, he had been redone and re-recorded by a legion of those who'd come after. They'd had the benefit of time and exposure to other seminal works of genius, and the inevitable evolution of the same. Each successor had stood on the shoulders of giants, generation after generation, amen.

He could only ever hear Chris's version in his head when he sang it. It was the standard by which he judged everything he played. It was his bible, really. Nobody sang it like Chris. Not Robert Johnson, and not him in particular. He knew that. Not for lack of trying, though. It reminded him of an earlier version of himself, where it'd been all about the guitar, and the idea of singing had terrified him. Then, it had been trying to duplicate SRV's version of *Little Wing*, as if that was *ever* a possibility. Kind of like this.

I'm gonna keep on movin', I will keep on movin', blues falling down like hail.

He wasn't busking, *exactly*. That's what he told himself, anyway. He was *practicing*, and if any passers-by felt like applauding his efforts, then who was he to deny them that. He'd arrived before the stores opened, and had gotten his favorite parking spot. It was a single, curbed in between two mature oaks that provided shade for not just this spot, but probably six adjacent spots in the otherwise open sea of parking lot that circled the prosaically-named "Crossroads Retail Campus". As if there were a value-added education going on while upscale shoppers threw their offerings at the feet of their capitalist gods, and carried their talismans away in the hopes that they would fill the hole.

It really was the perfect spot. It was directly across from the entrance to Coach on the right, and Polo Ralph Lauren to the left. There was a lot of traffic along the wide sidewalk, punctuated with French Quarter lamp-posts and planters dripping with bougainvillea and lobelia. He could typically count on five to seven people watching him play at any one time. They would drift in and out, and sometimes there'd be up to twenty. Not everyone crossed the gulf of the access lane to drop money in his guitar case, but most did.

There'd been the initial skirmish with security, of course, when he'd first tried this place on. He had only been a few songs in before a huge African-American dude in a tiny white SUV rolled up and dropped his window. The disparity between the man's size, and the little Ford Escape he drove had been almost jarring, despite the light-bar up top, and the "Security" legend emblazoned on the door in blue vinyl letters. Below that had been the CRC logo sticker. He'd wondered in the moment how much some graphic artist had been paid to craft the brand identity that also adorned each fifty-foot sign looming over the three separate entrances to this bastion of the buy. Too much, by the look of it.

"No soliciting on the premises, sir."

He'd been roused by the best, so he just shrugged.

"Not soliciting, man. Just playing my guitar in the shade."

"That looks like a little cash in your guitar case."

"C'mon. I didn't ask anybody to put it there. Join me in some nuance."

The man stared at him for a long second, and Jamie predicted the inevitable get-out-of-the-car-and-into-his-face result. He was pleasantly surprised when the man put a hand to his forehead and laughed out loud. When he was done, he locked eyes with Jamie.

“Nuance. I like it. Carry on, citizen.”

Then he’d thumbed his window up again and driven off. It was almost as if he’d passed an audition. He’d since gotten to know the two security guards by name. Brad was the black guy, and there was also Steph, a tiny, pale Goth with pitch-black hair that stood maybe five feet. In one of life’s constant mysteries, he’d watched both of them do their jobs from his perch on his truck-bed, and they each were utterly effective at it. Brad did it with bulk and humor, and Steph appeared to do it with an odd blend of sarcasm and empathy. Beyond that, they both liked him and let him be.

He was picking through the bridge section when he first noticed the man standing under the awning of the Coach store. He was well-dressed and appeared cool, even in the mounting heat. There were a few others at the edge of the sidewalk, an older couple and a trio of young teen girls as well. One of the latter had darted across the asphalt and dropped a piece of paper into his guitar case a few minutes earlier. He knew it was a phone number that he would never call, just as he knew it was a rite of passage for her. It was a way for her to show her friends that she wasn’t as shy as they thought she was. He enjoyed divining his audience’s back-story almost as much as performing, so it didn’t matter that there was no money in that particular transaction.

But, the man. There was something he couldn’t quite get. He considered himself a student of human behavior, and first impressions were almost always the truth. This guy was at once what he looked like, and something else. He could sense it. He almost flubbed the transition to the next verse as he caught the man’s gaze directly.

You sprinkled hot-foot powder all around my door, ‘round your Daddy’s door.

It was his eyes, for the most part. There’s that cliché that eyes are the window to the soul. If true, this guy didn’t have one. Jamie knew that it went beyond a simplistic assignation to some corporate ghoulish who’d made a bazillion dollars on the backs of little folk like him. This was...deeper. And more empty.

But it also wasn’t. Because the man smiled then, and it was like all the thoughts Jamie had thought in the few seconds between registering the man’s existence and the final up-turn of his lips were harvested and trucked off for sale. When the man detached himself from the shade of the awning above the palatial Coach store entrance and started towards him, Jamie had only the sense that he’d lost something he needed. It was a credit to time spent and muscle-memory that kept him in the groove and playing.

I can tell the wind is risin’, leaves tremblin’ on the tree.

He finished the song just as the man came to a halt in front of him. Up close, there was little clarification. The man was just a continuation of the generic version he’d been in shadow. Black hair shot through with gray, and glasses with lenses so thin they seemed like an affectation rather than an aid. Pallid skin that should have shouted submerged corpse, but didn’t. Everything screamed something wrong, but purred just enough to cancel the opposing wave-length, like those headphones Jamie couldn’t afford.

When the man spoke, his voice was beautiful. Jamie remembered a sixth-grade vocab word in that instant. Mellifluous.

"That's as close to Whitley as I've heard. Gorgeous."

Jamie stared into the black orbs behind the fake glasses, and felt pride and shame in equal measure. Shame won out.

"No, it isn't." He said.

The man wasn't put off. He just shrugged, and the movement was mesmerizing.

"Am I not allowed my own opinion, young bard?"

Jamie defaulted to his normal reaction when someone confronted him, because it was stock-in-trade. People had opinions, and if you put yourself out there, you'd get them. Praise or criticism was the currency, because the indifferent never bothered.

"How can I help you, sir?"

The man's response seemed to be nearly instant, but Jamie was able to catalogue multiple impressions before the words reached his ears. It was as if time was stuttering, but he was not.

Every time Jamie blinked, the man changed just a tiny bit. It was like the AI video renders he'd seen on YouTube, viewed on his nearly obsolete Iphone. There was a shadow under his chin that wasn't there before and vanished as soon as Jamie grasped it. There was a hair across his brow that was there but then not. Jamie felt like he should be very afraid, but the called-for emotion did not arrive. The only thing he could feel was its absence.

The words finally arrived.

"You can't. But I can help *you*, if you want."

"And how would you do that, Mr....?"

"Johnson. Bob Johnson."

Jamie barked out a short laugh. The man didn't react, beyond a single nod. He gave the impression that this sort of reaction was nothing new. His next statement was like a wave against a slightly aggressive bug.

"Yes, yes. A little on the nose. I get it. But perhaps we can get past this, and focus on you, Mr. Hill."

"How do you know my name, Bob?"

The expression did a little flip, and if Jamie hadn't been watching carefully, he wouldn't have seen the slight moue touch the pale-pink lips. The shrug that followed would have been perfectly disarming if he hadn't seen what he'd seen. Mr. Johnson continued.

"I've been watching you for a while, now. I know the blues. For example, I can tell you that Whitley should've sung the whole thing. Lang is a hell of a guitarist, *and* a vocalist, but he can't compete. Not there. You know I'm right. And you are *so* close to it. Not many people who know could tell the difference. "

It was a statement, but it rang as a question. Jamie felt compelled to respond, but he steeled himself, and only gave out as little as he could stand. The rich prick *was* right, but he was wrong, too.

"The ones that matter would."

The dark man dipped his head, and his little laugh was both sunshine and corruption. When he re-engaged Jamie's gaze, it was all there. Jamie knew who he was, and what he was offering. The tide of fear and desire felt apocalyptic. This was a world desired at his feet, waiting for the slightest nod.

The moment stretched, and he stretched with it.

But everything has an end, and it was clear to him what he'd be giving away.

He looked away, and set his guitar into its case by feel.

"No thank you, sir."

He watched the pavement for a bit, and saw the man's shadow finally depart. He didn't raise his eyes for a number of minutes after. As soon as he did, he saw Steph driving by in the security-mobile. She was looking at him, and her eyes were empty, too. She blew him a kiss before turning her attention forward.

She'd never done that before.

A line from the song floated back into his mind, and he wondered if he'd gotten the lyrics wrong all this time.

Blues fallin' down like hell.

He started to shake, then.