

**Come On In My Kitchen**

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **Come On In My Kitchen**

**Steven Aisenpresser**

The most legendary of the Mississippi bluesmen was Robert Johnson. He was born in 1911 in the southern town of Hazlehurst, but was raised by his single mother in the northern Delta town of Robinsonville. By the age of 19, he was already a widower and no longer wished to lead the life of a sharecropper. So Robert Johnson left home to learn how to play the guitar. When he returned to Robinsonville just two years later, it was with a guitar style so astounding and skillful as to raise questions as to whether he had sold his soul to the devil. However, his mastery of the guitar was short lived. Robert Johnson recorded only twenty-nine songs before he was murdered in August 1938 at the age of twenty-seven. His death, like most of his life, remains a mystery.

This short novel attempts to go beyond the music to get a sense of the man that was Robert Johnson. Working within the gaps of the historical record, this work uses a linear narrative that straddles the boundary between past and present, and call attentions to the dislocation between what we know and what we don't know. Using mostly historical personages, the piece focuses on the theme of passion as the fuel of life, whether music, love, or murder; its simple goal was to find a language that could mirror or express, the experience of the blues.

*To my family for their love and support.*

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*A man and a woman are supposed to love each other, but when one of them falls out of love the other one has got the blues. It is a heavy feeling in the heart that knows no reasonable solution. Sometimes people have the blues so bad it leads them to murder. Nowhere is murder committed with less hesitation than in the Delta, the home of the blues.*

Son House, Blues Musician

Robert Johnson was the most legendary of the Mississippi bluesmen. He was born in 1911 in Hazlehurst in the southern part of the state, but was brought to the northern Delta town of Robinsonville by his mother around 1920. An outsider who perhaps felt personally rejected, Robert took an early interest in music. Dressed in a pin-stripe suit, and with a guitar in his hand, Robert Johnson would go on to travel over most of the cotton-covered plains of the Mississippi Delta – one hundred and fifty miles from north to south and fifty miles from east to west. Robert Johnson recorded twice, in Dallas and in San Antonio. The sessions were fruitful, and led to both critical and commercial successes. He only recorded twenty-nine songs, but many of them became blues standards and he sold well over five thousand albums.

Robert Johnson was killed in August of 1938; he drank a glass of whiskey that had been tainted with strychnine. Rumors circulated that an angry girlfriend or jealous husband had poisoned him, but the case was never investigated and no one was ever charged with murder. Robert was laid to rest in a makeshift grave by the bar where he was killed and no ceremony was held. He was only twenty-seven years old.

While Johnson was perhaps the most talented and influential Delta blues musician of his time, he remained relatively unknown until the early 1990s when Columbia Records released his complete recordings and the album went platinum. Over the next few years, there was a rush by music scholars to piece together the life of the most important blues artist of all time. What they found made a picture, but with many pieces missing. His life, like his death, remains a mystery.



## Chapter 1

1.

Charles Dodds and Julia Major were married in Hazlehurst, Mississippi in 1889. Mr. Dodds was a successful wicker furniture maker and landowner, and the father of eleven children by Julia; but in 1909, he was forced to leave his life in Hazlehurst behind. A dispute with the Marchetti brothers, the local landowning elite, left the family home in flames. Charles narrowly escaped the blaze and the angry mob that set it by dressing in woman's clothing; he landed in Memphis where he adopted a new name, a new furniture business, and a new mistress. Unaware, Julia stayed behind in Hazlehurst and sent their children to Charles one by one. After two years, only one daughter remained, but word came that Charles had a new mistress. Julia wagged her finger disapprovingly and wandered; she took to a plantation worker named Noah Johnson and bore him a son. Robert Johnson was born in May 1911 in Hazlehurst. Noah left Julia soon thereafter, but the damage was already done. The birth of a son by another man prevented any possible reunification of the Dodds family. Julia was condemned to roam from labor to levee camp, plantation to plantation, to make ends meet. At any one time, one or more of her children joined Julia, but her son Robert always accompanied her. This was her burden to bear.

2.

In 1921, Julia and two of her sons, Robert and his older half-brother Charles Leroy, and her daughter Bessie live in a two-storey shotgun house in Robinsonville. All of the houses in this part of Robinsonville are two-storey shotgun houses. They are called shotgun houses because, theoretically, one could stand in the front of the house,

fire a shotgun, and the shell would travel out the back door without hitting a single wall. While the houses are not spacious, by and large they serve their purpose.

Robert begins each morning waiting for his mother to leave for the fields. When she does, he joins his brother Charles Leroy, who plays guitar on the porch every morning. By the afternoon the house is too hot to inhabit, but first thing in the morning the floor is always cool on his feet. Charles Leroy is a handsome man who has an easy nature with everyone but his mother. In town, Charles Leroy is known as “Big City” and gambles at the juke joint with the men from the fields. Recently, he took his winnings and bought a guitar, a Stella from Sears Roebuck. It cost about twelve dollars, but was worth every penny. Charles Leroy is an outlaw. He would travel several miles to see a piano player from Kansas City, a cornet player from New Orleans, or a guitar player from Texas. Each morning, when he returns from a night of good-timing, Charles Leroy sits on the porch and plays. There is something faraway about Charles Leroy; he is always spotless, though dressed in yesterday’s clothes, and he smells like whiskey, which Robert thinks is mouthwash. There is something rebellious inside his exact body. He is reckless, but dependable in his recklessness. This both confuses and excites a young Robert.

“This is a ‘C’ chord. You can use it with ‘D’ and ‘E’ to play *CC Rider*. See.”

This is the first time Robert hears the blues: from his big brother Charles Leroy. Charles Leroy passes the guitar to Robert, who tries to strum. Charles Leroy begins to sing. “*Now C, CC Rider, see now the moon is shining bright. Well Now C, CC Rider see now the moon is shining bright. Just find me that good girl and everything will be right.*” Charles Leroy has a strong voice, but Robert likes this song because the girl who

lives next door is named Celia. Robert and Celia are so close in age that everyone calls them the twins. Robert now calls Celia “CC” and sings her name like his brother has taught him, but only he and his brother know this.

On a morning when last night’s party has yet to wear off, Charles Leroy sends Robert on a daring mission to Celia’s roof. Robert stretches his arms, and presses his knees and toes against the steep roof; with all of his strength he raises his head out of the pull of earth’s gravity.

“What do you see?” Charles Leroy quietly calls up to him.

“Everything.”

Beyond the window three girls in various states of undress are singing *Ma Rainey Blues* as they dress. To Robert it is the marvelous sound of angels, except he cannot find Celia. To get a better view, Robert strains to lift his right leg, but the shingle beneath his left leg gives way. Robert screams as he begins to slide down the roof. When he comes to a stop he finds himself hanging dangerously, his upper half grasping shingles, his legs mimicking a turtle turned on its back.

Celia rushes to the window as her sisters flee downstairs. Soon there is a crowd around the stranded boy: Celia’s three sisters, Robert’s sister Bessie and Charles Leroy wait anxiously. Charles Leroy never moves, never flinches, never changes the tone of his voice.

“Just let go, Robert.” Charles Leroy instructs calmly.

Robert lifts his upper body with his arms, but his legs feel as if they are stapled to the roof. “I can’t,” he shouts down. Robert is afraid to look down, so he looks up and finds Celia looking down at him from the window. “Let go, Robert,” she screams

hysterically. Robert looks at Celia. He is so nervous he begins to sing, "*CC Rider, see what you have done. You made me love you, now your man done gone.*" Celia cannot help but laugh and Robert laughs too, until he remembers his predicament. Calm now, Celia tells Robert to let go again, and this time he does, falling one storey into Charles Leroy's arms.

Robert paces the house waiting for his mother's punishment, a snap of the belt that will clear his name. He looks at a picture of his mother on the wall. In Sunday dress and hat she stands attentively. One hand finds support on a side table, draped with a flower vase and a bible that has no other purpose than decoration. The other hand rests anxiously in a closed fist at her side. Her feet are firmly planted on the ground. She is every bit the iron-willed matriarch, the ruler of Robert's private life, the mistreated mother who suffers and hollers.

Robert has moved through this picture many times before, but he is just now finding its hidden story. One of Julia's eyes is half-closed. An instant of hesitation? He moves closer to study the discoloration; the bruise is barely visible, but murmurs at Robert. These are not forgiving eyes, he thinks.

"Boy, what did you do?" Julia shouts as she barrels through the front door.

Robert turns, but his eyes water from looking too long. He dances, but is bitten at the bicep. There is no one to save him from his mother's violence. Julia pulls Robert over to the cane back chair and sits herself down. Only his mother's frilly socks and worn out shoes are visible to Robert now.

"Boy, I'm going to teach you about your kind, so you know what you are about to inherit." She raises her right arm above her head and the leather belt snaps his backside.

“You’re a lying breed. You lie to get women, and you lie to hold on to them. When you get them, you push them around, beat on them, and when it suits you, you walk out on them.”

“But Momma,” Robert protests in vain.

“Don’t ‘But Momma,’ me,” Julia shouts as the belt snaps again. “You’re going to listen to me because you got me into this mess and I don’t see you getting me out of it. It’s best I tell you now, so you can change your ways.” Robert fears the end of each sentence as it brings another licking from the belt.

“You’re going to drink, probably love that bottle more than you love your woman. It will spoil you for everything save some labor camp.”

But before Julia can snap the belt Robert wriggles free. “Momma, I won’t be like that.”

“Boy, I’m not asking you, I’m telling you. You’re going to grow, going to be a sweet-looking man with whistling words, but *no* you won’t play around. Before you’re twelve, the sin is on your father and me. After you’re twelve, it’s up to you. You die with sin, you’re going to hell.”

‘Momma?’” Robert whimpers, devoid of all strength. Julia drops the belt and straightens Robert up. She clears the tears from his eyes and continues. “Let me tell you something: even good men are no good, but it ain’t all their fault. We women are no angels. Love ain’t nothing but hardship, but we all got it like this. So, it’s best you know now. Stop acting like a damn fool around them girls.” These last words punctuate the last of the belt.

“Yes, Ma’am.” Robert replies sheepishly as he clears his tears.

Julia lets Robert off her lap, slaps him on the behind with her open hand and walks towards the window. “Now, go tell your brother I want to see him and bring me that bottle that’s on my night table, I am feeling kind of snaky today.” The cold words trail off as she looks out the window. Robert wonders what she is looking at in the window, but before he can figure it out she turns and looks straight at him. “Well, what are you waiting for?”

The next morning, after his mother leaves for the fields, Robert heads to the porch. Neither Charles Leroy, nor his guitar can be found there, but the faint sounds of strumming and a girl’s voice can be heard from the backyard. Bessie is in the backyard strumming on Charles Leroy’s guitar.

“Give me that.” Robert shouts and grabs the guitar. “It’s not yours, it’s Charles Leroy’s guitar.”

“Not anymore.” Bessie teases, but Robert’s sad eyes prevent her from taking the taunting any further. “Momma don’t want him around no more, so he’s gone now.”

“He left his guitar?” Robert wonders aloud as he inspects the long necked Stella.

“He left it for you.” Bessie shakes her head at her little brother’s good fortune.

“He said it would be in good hands, but when you are done with it you got to give it back. You can’t pawn it or nothing.”

Robert smiles as he looks over his new guitar. He plays on it night and day until his mother takes a new man into her house. His name is Dusty Willis and he doesn’t like music much.

3.

Willie Willis worked mostly in the cotton fields. He used to walk so fast he would swirl the dust all around him, earning him the nickname "Dusty". He was a short, stocky man, with worn out gloves for hands, a real workhorse from the boss' perspective. Dusty and Julia married in 1922, and now that Dusty had a son, even if Robert wasn't his own, Dusty marched him to the fields. Dusty was a servant of the single order that made the Mississippi whites the most powerful group in the South. He was a sharecropper. The landowner gave sharecroppers, like Dusty, money to see them through the winter. That money was put toward food and clothing, a cabin, water and firewood. In the fall, the sharecropper had to pay it all back; if you grew twenty bales, ten bales went to the landowner to pay off your debt. If it was a good year, you could clear as much as two hundred forty, two hundred fifty dollars: a bad year, you would owe the same.

The best crop year was in 1924. Robert was about thirteen and Dusty was a renter; he had a mule, a couple of cows, and enough money to take care of his family. Renters had an advantage over sharecroppers because they didn't have to borrow money from the agent; whatever they made was clear. Dusty had a stretch of good land, a lot of rich, black soil. He cleared about three hundred dollars and bought himself a Sunday suit and Julia a Sunday dress and hat. He was never so proud in all his life as he was in '24. But there were more bad years than good and the '27 flood nearly did him in. By 1929, word had it that Dusty Willis was in deep debt. One day, Robert overheard Jim Edwards say, "Be careful Dusty, or Robert will be paying your debts." That day Robert realized that hard labour, low yields, and mounting debt were his inheritance, an inheritance he had no intention of collecting.

Dusty Willis spent his entire life scratching cotton out of a rocky field. This land, a violent and difficult place, was his handiwork; it was he who brought order to the wilderness, drained the swamps and sandbagged the levee. His hands were marked with the land, but his heart was carried away with the low yields. It was no surprise then when Dusty took another lover. Dusty worked too long and too hard to walk with holes in his shoes in every aspect of his life. He planted another seed and in nine months he would have another harvest and another mouth to feed. It was too late for tears or tantrums—Julia was too old and too tired to fight.

4.

Julia stares down at her wooden bowl. Her hands are dirty, covered in innards. How long she has struggled and for what? Sowbelly and molasses bought on store credit. Julia reaches for her silver ladle, an artifact that speaks of the meals she prepared for her first husband, Charles Dodds. Gone are the days when she dropped two tablespoons of creamy butter in a deep skillet; when, as the butter began to bubble, she poured two cups of diced onions into the steaming pot. She has made this catfish chowder a hundred times before, when the fish man owed money to her husband Charles and paid him back in swollen catfish. When the beef and celery broth rises to a boil, Julia guts the catfish one by one. Just then Dusty opens the door and the aromatic clouds of chowder waft into nothingness.

“Dusty, how did we make out?” Julia asks desperately, but Dusty only mumbles something as he attempts to make it uninterrupted to the backyard. Julia can only make out the words “low yield,” so she confronts him before the backdoor. “Dusty, we just can’t keep living on low yields.” Dusty is uninterested in conversation; he pushes Julia



away knocking the sowbelly bowl from its perch and Julia to the floor. "I don't want you around here no more, Dusty. Go to where your woman's at." Dusty slams the screen door instead of answering. "You're not worth nothing to me here," Julia mumbles as she looks at the bowl of sowbelly. She walks with a slight bend in her hip and a wet rag in her hand over to the mess on the floor. The sowbelly can be salvaged quickly, but not her faith in Dusty.

It is just before sunset when Robert returns from the fields. Dusty is long gone and there is no explanation. Julia does not have anything to say, but she cannot hide her discomfort, her pain. It is a silent scene, where knowledge is gained without talking, where promises are made in swift glances. With a little light still left, Robert opens up the trunk at the front of his parent's bed. Julia pleads with him not to, but Robert leaves with Dusty's Winchester rifle and a couple of shells.

"Don't do anything. Please." Julia pleads, but she is helpless to stop him.

Two hours later, Julia is still sitting at the kitchen table. The oil lamp is burning low and the sowbelly has not been touched. Robert knocks three times before Julia finally answers; she is unprepared for the sight that lay behind the door. There stands Robert, hunting rifle slung over his shoulder, and a bleeding pig by his feet.

The sharecropping agent has a lot of pigs. He lets them run out in the late summer so that they can eat in the pastures. A month in the pasture and a young, ninety-pound pig would come back about a hundred or a hundred twenty pounds. The pig Robert brought back is easily that and maybe a little more. Robert's first shot caught the pig in the hind leg; he then shot the pig in the head to keep it from hollering. He is a bloody mess.

“Put on some hot water and cook up some onions. We are going to eat a proper supper, tonight.” Robert reaches down to pick up the pig and move him inside, but Julia is blocking the door.

“Don’t bring that in here, Robert. Dusty won’t eat stolen meat.”

“Well, that is just fine, because I ain’t offering.” Robert readjusts his hold on the pig.

“But, Robert, you could go to jail for this.” Julia looks swiftly down the street.

Robert looks up at Julia. “You know how many pigs they have running around out there? They won’t miss one. Besides, we have to eat.”

“Alright, well don’t just stand there. Bring him in, quick.” Robert shakes his head and moves the pig inside.

When Dusty returns later that night, his arms are filled with goods from the country store: dried figs and apples, grapes and oranges from California, and a richly colored Sunday dress for Julia. But before he can set the goods down he catches sight of the pig carcass.

“What the hell is going on here? Where did you get this meat?” Dusty asks as he inspects the leftover pig.

“I found it.” Robert answers smartly.

“You *found* it.” Dusty repeats sarcastically. “You stole this meat, didn’t you?” Dusty eyes are steely.

“No, well, yes, but where did you get all that?” Robert answers brazenly.

“The country store, but funny I don’t remember seeing you there.” Dusty moves closer to Robert.

Julia wants to interject, but does not know where to start. Robert clears his throat, “But where did you get money for all of that stuff?”

“Robert, shut your mouth,” Julia shouts, “We’ll work it out, right Dusty?”

Without taking his eyes off of Robert, Dusty answers Julia. “I already worked it out with the agent, Julia. Settlement is coming up, we’ll pay it back then.”

“What about what we borrowed over the winter, shouldn’t we pay that first?”

Robert already knows the answer. Dusty has taken out more credit with the agent, leaving them further into debt.

Dusty raises his arm as if he is to wipe the sweat from his brow and stings Robert with the back of his hand. “Boy, you just don’t understand. If you want anything in this life you got to work for it. You don’t know nothing about working hard.”

“Dusty calm down, please. Robert, listen to your father.” Julia is pleading.

But Robert cannot back down now. “At least I know how to provide.”

“Don’t get smart with me, boy!” Dusty lands another blow. “You call stealing a pig providing? You want to end up in jail, fine, but I ain’t going with you.” Dusty lands another blow that sends Robert to the floor, and leaves Dusty’s hand stinging.

“Leave him alone!” Julia screams as she moves in between Dusty and Robert.

“I’m so sorry Robert, I’m so sorry.” Julia cradles his head and rocks back and forth.

“Your father didn’t mean it.”

Robert regains his composure. “He’s not my father.” He struggles to stand, and pushes the table and chairs in his way as he staggers towards the front door.

Nightfall covers the fields in darkness and shadows, but Robert is too upset to be nervous. He knows that this year’s yield will not cover both their winter expenses, as

well as these new purchases; Dusty is living beyond his means. Sure her Sunday dress is well beyond repair, and it had been so long since she had bit into a fresh red apple, but the luxury goods are an expensive apology that he and his mother will end up paying for in the end.

## Chapter 2

1.

Virginia Travis is his first beautiful enemy. Watch as Robert's pin-stripe suit and spider fingers retreat. He is thin and nimble and undernourished, Virginia is long-limbed and her skin dark and shiny.

Robert follows Virginia to the southwestern edge of the field, to the apple orchard. This is not the first time Robert has followed Virginia, but the first time he will let her know. Virginia is his favourite, but it was not always this way. Not until this most recent spring exposed her slender features, her skin as hard and dark as deep soil, her fine frame.

Robert enters the orchard as if he entering a great hall. Folded in foliage, she rearranges her legs leaving her in an indecent position. In time, she will teach him desire, frustration and loss, but first she will teach him not to lurk around.

"Who is it? Who's there?" Virginia startles and quickly folds her legs like a lady.

The sun catches Virginia's skin and turns it a blinding black. "It's Robert," he answers blinded.

"Boy, why are you following me? Can't you see I'm trying to get some peace and quiet? Why are you creeping around? You scare me half to death."

"I just want to see what you're up to," Robert offers innocently, but Virginia is not fooled. Robert has a wild reputation. The boss rider had made an example of him after having spotted him smoking cigarettes in the field. She wonders if he will be trouble.

“Don’t play like that. You see what I am up to, so why do you have to sneak up on me like that.”

He checks his pockets compulsively, as if he doesn’t trust even himself. He pulls out his tobacco pouch and begins to roll a shag cigarette. His hands quickly finish their magic trick, but he pauses before lighting his cigarette and looks straight at Virginia, catching her off guard. “Can I stay?”

“Alright.” Robert passes Virginia his cigarette. She holds it awkwardly between her thumb and index finger and cannot help but cough after the first mouthful.

“Slow down, slow down, girl. It’s like this.” Robert takes a deep drag, purses his lips, and slowly billows smoke. Virginia delights in the movement of his muscular mouth. “Like that,” Robert smiles and passes the cigarette back to Virginia, but all she can do is cough. Robert pulls Virginia in closer and rubs her back slowly. The sudden feeling causes Virginia to drop the cigarette and it accidentally slips between Robert’s legs. In the scramble to retrieve the cigarette, Virginia knocks the top of her head into Robert’s chin.

“Ooh, I’m sorry,” Virginia looks up at him and tries to explain, but Robert just tilts her chin further upward and kisses her.

“There that’s better,” Robert says before Virginia has a chance to open her eyes.

They spend the rest of the afternoon kissing under the apple tree until Virginia begins pushing Robert away. “I have to go now,” she says with a shy smile. Robert wipes the wetness from his lips and asks: “Can I see you tomorrow?”

Virginia waits before answering him. The branches of the apple tree tremble under the weight of his appeal.

“I don’t know, *can* you?” Virginia asks coyly.

“I’ll see you tomorrow.” Robert confirms as he reaches into his pocket for the pouch of tobacco. “I’ll see you tomorrow.” Virginia walks away from him, swinging her hips from side to side until she is no longer visible.

Virginia is waiting for him the next day in the orchard. Virginia wants to know everything about him. Where did he get beaten up? Had he ever been to a real juke joint? Had he ever had corn whiskey? Did he know his real father? At this Robert falls silent. Robert’s background makes him more mysterious. It gives him an unqualified right to speak on the nature of life and love. “You know, the world’s a slanted place,” he looks away. At that moment, he doesn’t exactly believe these words, but he uses the opportunity to squeeze Virginia in tight and kiss her.

After the kiss Robert quickly announces that he will preserve their love in song. Words will make them one, he promises, but all Virginia receives are a mouthful of dirty words, and sloppy chords. When the song finishes Virginia rushes home, careful not to be late for supper. Her thoughts roam wild and roughshod over the children she is to raise, the house she is to keep, and the man she is to share it with. Robert remains behind playing his guitar and wondering when he can take Virginia to the barn.

2.

The barn is much older than the distant row of shotgun houses it serves. It is thirty yards long and ten yards wide and inside it is dark and smells like motor oil and dried tobacco. The bales of hay, stacked at the back of the barn, are the site of many temporary improprieties. It is the type of place where visiting preachers take eager but married congregants; where tramps sneak their hooch and have a card game. Robert

spends many an afternoon staring into that barn: it is a Saturday matinee and New Orleans brothel all rolled into one.

By October, Robert no longer wants to wait for Sunday afternoons when Virginia can sneak away from her family after church. He is growing tired of games in the orchard, light clothing, and curfews, but according to Virginia undressing is still a sin. He longs for more knowledge; more daring games of flesh.

Two small hands cover Robert's eyes. Careful not to break their grip, Robert takes a step to his left, and one to his right before starting a shuffle dance that pulls Virginia in tight. Virginia accepts the challenge. Making sure Robert's eyes are still closed, she places his arms lower on her hips and repeats the dance shuffle, only she is moving one step quicker. Robert peeks through one eye as Virginia twirls; her legs are well formed, made beautiful by heavy work. Now, it is Robert's turn. With eyes still closed, he exaggerates the feminine style of her shuffle, but breaks free of her grasp with a hearty stomping of his feet. Robert opens his eyes and the barn begins to pulse. Virginia quickens Robert's stomp and adds a chorus of claps and whistles. Robert plants his left leg and shimmies to his left, but before Robert gets halfway around his imaginary circle, he plants his right leg, raises his arms and shimmies to the right. Virginia whoops as she makes her way into the circle, baiting Robert on. He still cannot see her, can only feel her urgency. He pumps his feet and puts his hands where her waist should be. Virginia relents; her cotton blouse is moist and she smells like wet earth and red apples.

They don't know where to begin, so they aggressively tug at each other. Robert rubs Virginia's neck with his chin, and bites her ear. Searching restlessly for an anchor, Virginia arches her body. Robert lifts Virginia up and lays her down on a haystack. He



begins to move her body in the only way he knows how. Robert massages her swollen breasts, her hollow stomach, her thighs: his hands slowly imitating the breaking up of hardened soil. Robert loosens his pants, but Virginia pushes down her dress. Robert lifts Virginia on top of him opening up new doors of pleasure. He lays her on her back again and lifts up her dress. This time Virginia gives in.

At first, they walk slowly in each other, occasionally bumping into each other. Their movement is simple and natural, they hold hands, tightly, and forge a path through wilderness. But soon they move as one, slow dancing in each other, absorbing soft brown necklines, waves of black shoulders –sex under the wooden rafters of the barn. By the time they finish the stars and the orange moon are visible through the window. Breathlessly, Virginia leans over to Robert, and whispers, “I love you.” She is humbled by her new wisdom of Robert, but she is surprised when she receives no response.

3.

Although Penton, Mississippi is only 15 miles from Robinsonville it is another world, a simple truth not lost on the young Virginia. The home of Granville Hines and Bessie Dodds can be found on Shelia Street in Penton. It is a rickety one-storey shotgun house on a street of rickety one-storey shotgun houses. The house is almost falling down; the steps are broken, and the paint is peeling, but the porch is sturdy and the lamplight still strong. A pot-bellied stove keeps the house warm in the winter, and an oak tree keeps it cool in the summer.

Granville Hines opens the door dressed in his shorts. The sight of the couple, especially the young pregnant girl, arouses a deep sense of sympathy.

“Why don’t you both come in? Bessie, put on the pot, and make us some coffee.”

A voice from the back of the house wonders aloud. "Why Granville, who's there?"

Granville points the couple to a pair of chairs. "We have ourselves a couple of visitors," he calls out to the kitchen.

"Thank-you," Robert responds on behalf of himself and Virginia.

"Where are you coming from?" Granville asks plainly.

"Robinsonville," Robert answers, knowing it will elicit a strong response.

"My wife Bessie is from Robinsonville. Maybe you know her."

When Bessie enters the room, she takes one look at Robert and rushes over to hug him. She is shorter than Robert and much bigger than he is, but she has the same bright eyes. She is wearing a cotton dress with a pink checker print, an apron, and a handkerchief that keeps her hair out of the way. "Of course, I know this man. Granville, this is my brother, Little Robert."

"Little Robert, let me get a good look at you. Ooh, you turned out to be a fine looking man. And what about your pretty little wife?"

"We're not married, yet." Robert pauses on this last word, but Bessie is already pulling Virginia from her chair. "What is your name?"

"Virginia." Bessie squeezes Virginia tightly. "You make yourself at home, here. I am going to fix up some coffee. Granville, why don't you give me a hand?"

Robert and Virginia sit solemnly in the small, dark living room as Granville and Bessie discuss this sudden change in events. The thin walls of the shotgun house afford the young couple an intimate view of the domestic life of their hosts.

“How long are they going to stay?” Granville asks as he takes down the coffee tin. The question confirms Robert’s fears, but he refuses to look at Virginia. If it does not work out with Bessie and Granville they will have to return to Robinsonville, where both of their families have proved unwelcoming to the young, expectant couple.

“Hush up, Granville.” Bessie argues as the teakettle bangs down on the burner. “A girl like that with a baby on the way is not fit to be roaming around.” Virginia lowers her head and examines her hands.

Granville pulls down four mugs from the shelf, but holds them away from Bessie. “But we’re barely getting by ourselves,” he adds.

Bessie sticks out her hands, waiting for the mugs. “We always find a way.”

“But this house ain’t even big enough for the two of us,” Granville raises his voice and jokes, “especially since Sterling’s Café started offering chicken plates.” Bessie throws Granville a dirty look, but Granville continues: “I’m going to have to widen that door so you can fit in the house.” Granville peaks through the kitchen door and smiles. “You could help me with that, Robert, couldn’t you?” Granville’s candid drollery makes Robert laugh.

“I heard that, Little Robert, you quiet down, I am trying to get you in the house, but you keep that up and you’ll be out the house with your brother-in-law Granville. Plenty of room in the house for ‘Ginny and me.’” Virginia smiles and mouths her new name “Ginny.”

“They can stay as long as you want, Bessie. After all, you are the boss.” Granville rubs up to Bessie.

“That’s right, you hear that Little Robert, I’m the boss around here. Now, Granville get the milk, I got us some fresh coffee.”

“And I got us a little whiskey I can pour in,” Granville peaks his head through the door and winks at Robert again.

“Granville! It’s the middle of the afternoon.” Bessie bellows.

“Yeah, but we have a reason to celebrate.”

4.

Robert Johnson and Virginia Travis are married on February 24, 1930. Virginia is two months shy of her sixteenth birthday; Robert is already nineteen. The preacher costs two dollars – the balance of their savings. Granville and Bessie make the party: baked chickens with dressing, fruitcake, and a couple of gallons of whiskey. It is a small affair, some friends of Granville and Bessie, and a few friends Robert has met at the juke joint in town. There are a few presents, not much, but what people can afford: a soup pot and ladle, a washbasin, and a bottle of port wine. They dance and drink whiskey, but nobody makes the trip from Robinsonville, especially not Virginia’s family.

Towards the end of the night, Bessie finds Virginia sitting alone on the back porch. “Ginny girl, what’s the matter?”

Virginia leans in close to Bessie and starts whimpering, “It’s not supposed to be like this.” The sight of the young, pregnant bride crying her eyes out on her wedding night nearly causes Bessie to cry herself, but Bessie puts her arm around rocks her gently.

“I know, I know.”

“I am not supposed to stay with Robert tonight. I’m supposed to stay at home, talk to my mother. It’s my wedding night, my mother is supposed to tell me how to treat my man, tell me about her time; she is supposed to tell me what to do.” It is hard for Bessie to make out these last few words over the crying. “Come on now,” Bessie shakes Virginia. “Looks like you already know what to do,” Bessie winks and looks down towards her stomach. Virginia cannot help but laugh; she wipes her runny nose with her arm and continues. “I know. It’s just that it isn’t how I thought it would be.”

5.

By the middle of March, Robert and Virginia are nearly out of money. Due to the generosity of Bessie and Granville, the couple is just getting by. Bessie is a marvelous cook and often brings home leftovers from her job cooking in town, but her patience is growing thin. While Bessie works all day, Robert stays home and plays his mouth harp. Granville’s patience with Robert is also wearing thin. Granville, who is working in the fields, occasionally brings Robert along with him, to mend fences or dig trenches. Robert hates the spiritless work and complains endlessly. The agent has asked Granville not to bring by his little brother because he cannot stand his poor attitude and the other workers are complaining as well.

Robert is hung up on the wonderful, but unreal promise of becoming a musician. He uses the tone and the words he has picked up from the local musicians, but in a real mixed-up way. When he sounds off on his musician routine, Bessie has to leave the room, and Granville has no idea what he is saying. They worry greatly for the future of Virginia and their child, but never let that be known.

One morning towards the end of March, while Bessie is at work in town and Granville is out in the fields, Virginia wakes up nervously. She paces around and tidies up the house, fixes a little breakfast. Robert wakes up excitedly to the smell of eggs and grits, but Virginia quickly tempers his excitement. "Robert, we are running out of money." Robert, still half asleep, answers dismissively: "What do you want me to do." Virginia is growing impatient; she is eating less, not because she is any less hungry, but because she feels there is not enough food to go around. "You have got to get a job. If you don't get a job, I am going to go back to Robinsonville." Robert is confused. "Why? We're doing fine here." Virginia can only shake her head. "But what about later. We don't have any money. We need a roof and food for our baby, we have to get ourselves together." Robert's head is pounding. "Fine, I'll go get a piece, a little stretch to raise some cotton. Is that what you want?" Virginia wants to encourage Robert, but she wonders whether he will be able raise a crop: stick it through from March until early October. But before Virginia can answer, Robert begins again. "Yeah, that's it – I'll get a stretch. We didn't borrow any money in the winter, so whatever we make this summer will be ours clear, well, after we split with the agent. We can't lose." Virginia smiles weakly. "See, I knew you would like it," Robert continues. "By the time the summer's through, we're going to have a new cabin for our new boy. You'll see." Virginia nods and places a plate of eggs and grits on the table. "Where's yours?" Robert questions. "Mine?" Virginia replies, "I'm not that hungry."

By the day's end, Robert has a stretch of land near the northeast corner of the field, a stretch of land closest to the woods surrounding the plantation. Robert stays well after sunset and inspects the field. It isn't the darkest or richest soil in the field, and the

roots are thick and deep, but it is Robert's stretch, and he has a plan. He stops at the bootlegger's house on the way home and picks up a small bottle of white whiskey. Finally, there is a reason to celebrate.

6.

Robert wants to begin planting in the middle of April. The land is already broken up, the stalks burned off, and the ground turned over. During this period Granville proves invaluable both in his experience working the land and his muscle behind the mule and the plow. Although Robert has spent a lot of time in the field, he has never had his own stretch. A new sharecropper is not so much burdened by his added responsibilities as much as he is blinded by his own ego. Mesmerized by the thought of millions of creamy white blossoms the new sharecropper must fight the temptation to plant too early. Feeling pressure from the late start on his crop and the thought that Virginia will no longer be able to help him if he waits a few more weeks, Robert decides that he will start planting immediately. Granville does not like the idea. "Cotton comes out in a sprout," he explains. "Even if the seeds take, a cold draft will catch the sprout in the crook, and if the cold catches it, it won't come out at all." But Robert is stubborn and he and Virginia forge ahead and plant the whole stretch.

7.

A week after finishing planting Robert and Virginia find themselves on their way to the cotton field. They cut through the oak trees as the bright sun shines off patches of silver frost. Neither Robert nor Virginia carries anything in their hands; field implements

are neither necessary nor effective against the frost. Virginia kneels under the oak tree branches; she can hear the sprouts drying out. Last night's cold spell froze the cotton sprouts, just as Granville had predicted. None of the sprouts would ever see daylight; they would have to plant the whole stretch over again.

Raising herself up again Virginia is met by a sudden surge in her belly. Ignoring the discomfort, she doubles her effort, but the gravity of her pain holds her in place. This is trouble, she thinks, and gently lays herself down. Virginia's breath is short and the pain is getting greater. "Robert," Virginia's lips manage, "Get Bessie. It's time." Robert's eyes ignite and he is off to find his sister Bessie. The ground is hard and cold, but Virginia can only wait.

When Robert returns with Bessie, a feeling of helplessness washes over his body. An enormous crimson stain is spreading rapidly down Virginia's dress and her breathing is faint. Crisp leaves crush under the force of Bessie's body as she rushes to Virginia's side. Bessie strokes Virginia's face before inspecting the birth canal. Robert can only stand above her in strange isolation. He doesn't know how bodies reproduce, how pressure forces a baby from the womb.

Bessie's hands work tirelessly to pull the baby from within, but she cannot get the baby past the placenta – a mess of blood and veins that is now blocking Virginia's birth canal. Bessie can feel her hands slipping, but she is afraid to let go. Bessie tries again and again to rearrange her hands, but she cannot pull the baby out

8.

Virginia Travis died in childbirth on April 10<sup>th</sup> 1930. No doctor could have mended her. The placenta blocked the birth canal and she died of internal hemorrhaging;



she just couldn't stop bleeding. Granville found a preacher and arranged for an undertaker from Banks. The next morning, the undertaker put curtains up all around the house; cut her and drew her blood. In the afternoon, he bathed her in a tub and dressed her in the new dress Bessie had bought from the country store. The undertaker then laid her out on a cooling table in the early evening. Virginia Travis was buried the next morning at Whitestone Church near Penton; the only one of her five sisters not buried in Robinsonville. She was sixteen years old.

After the ceremony, Robert detours around the patch of oak trees that line his stretch of land and consumes himself in his cotton crop. A cotton crop is a great achievement; waves of white and pink blossoms that have no parallel. In June, when the cotton blossoms vanish, so does Robert. Usually, if a cropper senses a low yield, he may desert his crop without warning. This was not the case. Despite the predictions of a bumper crop, a miracle in itself considering the root-laden stretch, Robert turns the stretch over to Granville, and heads back to Robinsonville.

### Chapter 3

1.

When Robert returns to Robinsonville in early August, the cotton has begun to burst through the tight walls of the green bolls unfolding white pillows all over the fields. Soon, it will be harvest time and hundreds of people will descend from the Mississippi hills armed with canvas sacks. From sunrise to sunset they will trawl the fields and gather in the waves of cotton. The whole community is involved in one way or another, but not Robert, not if he can help it.

Julia swings the door of Robert's room open. "You're wasting your whole life away in that bed of yours," Julia shouts from his doorway.

"Leave me alone. I just want to sleep." Robert mumbles, still half-asleep.

"Who is going to take care of you when I am gone? Better yet, who is going to take care of me when I get old?" Julia sucks her teeth in protest. "You never work in the fields no more, and you ain't got no other work."

Robert turns over to look at his mother. "I am working, I am playing my mouth harp; I can make one or two dollars a day at the country store."

"And spend three or four on white whiskey. You're not fit for anything but the killing floor." Julia's lips tighten around these last words.

"Momma, give it a rest." Robert turns back over and pulls his pillow over his head.

"Not while you live in my house and eat my food." Robert tightens the pillow around his head in defiance. "You're going into the fields with your father."

"Momma!" Robert throws his pillow beyond his bed. But he cannot argue. As long as he is living in his mother's house he must obey her rules.

“Full up!” Robert shouts. He is high atop a wagon catching cotton sacks. The wagon lurches without warning, and Robert has hitched a ride. The sight from the wagon is familiar. Cotton pickers, fifteen and twenty wide, march up the rows in time. They stuff their long canvas sacks with cotton, looking like rattle snakes in the grass preying on field mice. The wagon is on its way to the gin where the cotton is split into bale and seed. But there is a long line of trucks and wagons, so Robert seizes the opportunity for a little leisure. He sleeps on a soft stack under the bright mid-morning sun, but his sleep is cut short by a couple of strong arms ready to unload the high stacks. The men are all smiles, after all, it is a Saturday harvest, a glad time of year, there is seed money floating and soon to be music in the ear.

2.

Willie Brown is a burly fellow from the hills of Mississippi. He came down to the Delta in the early fall and gets paid by the day to pick cotton. This is how Robert meets Willie Brown: picking cotton on the Abbay and Leatherman Plantation. Willie Brown is a guitar player. Popular songs, knife pieces, church songs; he plays all of these, but the most beautiful chords he makes are on old time dance numbers in the key of A. On Saturday nights, he plays country dances on neighboring plantations with Son House. He comes back Monday mornings and tells a jealous Robert all about it. Willie Brown has made enough money to get him through the entire winter. He is going back to the hills soon because all the cotton is picked and the good-timing is near over. Robert desperately wants to go to the juke with Willie Brown and see Son House play.

Dusty raises himself from his chair. “You’re not going out to the juke,” he screams, but Robert only stares blankly in silence.

“Your father’s speaking to you, boy, you look him in the face.” Robert’s mother no longer takes the side of her lazy son.

“I don’t care if it’s a Saturday night ball, that place is too rough.” Robert refuses to acknowledge his stepfather. Dusty calculates the effort needed for a strong slap, but decides against it. “You’re not going.”

But Robert decides to sneak out anyway.

3.

Willie Brown guns his pick-up over the broken country roads. At forty miles an hour Robert can’t make out much of what Willie Brown’s saying. His ancient automobile cost him \$75, but it didn’t even have a clutch. When he bought it he had no money left over to pay for a license or gasoline. Every now and then Willie hits a bump and drives on like it doesn’t matter. Despite repeated pleadings, Willie will not slow it down; he just keeps putting the valves out. But a big bump drops the bottom out, and the truck starts running from the gas can. They just can’t wait to get to the juke joint is all. It is a clear night, with a jack-o-lantern moon, so they ditch the pick-up and start out on foot. They are not far, maybe two or three miles of cotton fields, but they can already feel the beat.

The barrelhouse is the only thing for miles. Cars line the front yard, a group of players playing dice block the stoop, and a man in a Sunday coat is hustling a woman. He has his hand underneath her dress; he doesn’t even look up, but he knows exactly when to move out of the way so Robert and Willie can pass. Slick. The whole house is moving, beating like a drum. Inside couples are slow dragging: belly-to-belly and soles to the floor, hands all over each other. It is sex standing up, pressed on by the music.

There is a kid, maybe nine or ten, dragging a broom over the floorboards. He uses the stick end to beat the floor, and the straw end for rhythm. He attracts a small crowd, mostly women that call him Baby Blue and blow him kisses. He isn't even ten years old, but he can dance. When the song ends, so does his little show, and Robert makes his way through the crowd. Robert turns to Willie and shakes his head, "good time women and little hustle men." But Willie is nowhere to be found.

The next song is different. It starts with some strumming, real low and lonesome, as if it's coming from a faraway place. The rough slide rhythm quiets the room and Robert makes his way to the guitar player as a sharp cry rips through the smoky air.

Son House is a Baptist. His hands are scarred from the horse and cattle ranch he worked on in Algiers, but the scars are now smooth from shining shoes across the river in New Orleans. He claimed King Louis, the trumpet player, among his regulars; before Louis, it was Bolden. The claim, like the cost of a shoeshine, was always the same; it was always jazz, it was always black, and it was always two nickels or a dime.

At the age of fifteen, Son House was known as Eddie James and known to preach sermons. When he was seven his mother took him and his brothers to Tallulah and away from their father. Eddie James would frequently visit his father, who played a little guitar and tuba on Saturday nights in an eight-piece family brass band. Old-time stuff, slow blues, infuriated the young Baptist. The first sermon Eddie James gave was on "the Devil's Music."

In 1928, Eddie James met Willie Wilson in Mattson, just a few miles below Clarksdale, not far from where W.C. Handy, the father of jazz, first heard the blues. Willie Wilson was known as the "Medicine Man"; he was neither healer nor procurer of

curative substances, but played slide with a small medicine bottle on his left hand. The slippery sound of glass sliding on metal strings, the deep groan of spiritual dilemma, these sounds intrigued the young Baptist. Meeting Willie Wilson did not catalyze a crisis in faith, it resolved one. Eddie James changed his name to Son House and he picked up an old piece of guitar for a dollar-fifty. He did not even know that the guitar was broken – the neck had a hairline split and frequently went out of tune. He stole a couple of songs off of James McCoy and within two weeks he was playing a country ball. He played McCoy's *My Black Mama* and *Preachin' the Blues* all night long while people drank corn whiskey and danced. People thought he wasn't anything but an old whiskey drinking blues player. This thought both excited and scared him.

A short time after, Son House redeemed himself, he promised God that he would quit playing the blues. He started preaching in a church and played nothing but church songs. But Son House had a disconsolate mind and a habit of breaking promises. He praised god in song for a little while, until he became disillusioned, and returned to the blues. Once he tired of that, he'd start singing gospels again. Son didn't see much difference between church songs and blues; he had to tell his people about the things that were to come. He was telling stories: the birth of man, the virtues of a kind woman, the sweetness of Jesus and he sat for hours on end in cabins, at the juke, or in the country stores, talking about these themes – a whiskey-stained preacher. He wandered everywhere and lived nowhere, playing on the streets for nickels and dimes, and the country dances for three dollars a night and all the whiskey he could drink. By July 1930 he found himself in Robinsonville. It was a chance to reunite with his good friend and musical partner Willie Brown.

When Robert Johnson watches Son House for the first time it is a revelation. Son House sits on a wooden chair and holds his National guitar like a shotgun. He wears a black suit and tie, but his clothes fade behind his tight face, thin lips and giant guitar. He has a troubled look, as if he is asking for something great, and afraid that he actually might get it. When Son plays, his eyes roll back in his head and he goes somewhere else. He begins by feeling around with his shoes until the beat hovers like an enormous thundercloud. He cocks his head back and the sky explodes over the sharecroppers and highway workers. He hollers, screams, and cries passion, betrayal, shame, and judgment, burning blues in the clear moonlight – the story of a fallen woman and her child. Hail and fire, mixed with blood, were dropped on the earth; a third of the earth was burned, and a third of all trees, and every blade of grass. The crowd listens because it is their story. Robert wonders what makes them listen and not tear the room to pieces? The song ends and Son House breathes again. His voice reclaims his body, but his soul is beyond reach.

The room is full of people, but Robert feels alone. He runs, past the players, and the cars into the cotton patches that surround the house. He runs through the prickly fields, until he is out of breath. He pulls apart a boll and performs a test of its softness against his face. He pulls up another boll and then another until he surrounds himself with mutilated bolls. He can only kick and curse the white poison and discard its bits and pieces.

Robert spots a patch of oak trees and slowly makes his way to them. He lies under the long, spidery branches of the oak trees for a long time. The stars are almost all out and the immensity of the sky startles him. He wonders how he will endure a lifetime of cotton harvests. He hates settlement time, when the cotton is drawn apart and the

year's work spent in days; men and women parading around in new clothes, and newly purchased old automobiles. He hates their shotgun houses, their controlled lives, rising every morning to go to the fields. He needs to break the cycle. He needs to get out.

When Robert gets back to the juke Willie Brown and Son House are playing together. Together the journeymen troubadours put on a big show; Son House with his rough bottleneck slide guitar offsets Willie Brown's enchanting chord rhythms. The people move their bodies closer, their chests and thighs finding nourishment in the burning beat. Robert sits right in front of the two men and watches. Son House's blistering blues: lecherous men, and no-good women under the stars and moon – the people cannot get enough. This is how Robert is going to get out of Robinsonville.

When Willie and Son stroll outside into the cool night air and down the shadowy road for a break, Robert sees his opportunity. He picks up Son's guitar and begins to play a rickety version of *CC Rider* that disappoints the regular Saturday night revelers. The backlash is instant. Before Robert can get back to the chorus, his strongest part, a lone shout from the back of the room disrupts him, "Get that guitar away from him!" During Robert's new signature piece *How Long-How Long Blues*, Son House quickly appears from outside and makes his way through the laughter and the catcalls. "Don't do that Robert, you're driving the people nuts. Give me that." Son House takes back his guitar and steers Robert outside to the sound of great applause.

Outside Son confronts Robert: "Why are you doing that, you know you can't play nothing. Why don't you blow your harmonica, I hear you ain't half bad on that." But Robert doesn't want to play his harmonica. "Son, I want to play guitar." Robert mistakes Son's silence for irritation, but Robert cannot be stopped. "Son, you got to learn me how



to play guitar.” Robert’s sincerity and persistence beguiles the elder guitar player.

“Alright, you come by my place, next week, later on in the day, before sunset. I’ll show you a few things. Till then, you better stay away from my guitar, you got me.” Robert has no choice, but to accept. “I’ll see you Monday. But can I stay and watch.” Son just shakes his head. “Yeah, you can stay, but stay away from my guitar, and Willie’s too.”

4.

For the next three weeks Robert heads out every night before sunset to where Son House is staying. Every night Son has people by. The faces sometimes change, but everyone knows to bring a couple nickels and dimes to hear Son play. That is how Son makes it, playing songs for highwaymen and sharecroppers. They work all day for seventy-five, eighty cents, turn around and exchange that for a little whiskey and a little song.

Robert pockets a couple of nickels and dimes, and some whiskey and makes his way to where Son is living. He arrives well before the workers and Son teaches him the basics. First it is chords, harmonies, and blues progressions, then it is hollering and slide work. Robert picks it up quickly, but he still makes a terrible racket. Nevertheless, in his third week, Son has Robert sit in with him while he plays for the workers. There are many smiles and pats on the back, even a couple nickels are thrown his way, but mostly out of encouragement. Robert shows little promise of becoming a blues guitar player.

5.

By the end of October, empty brown cotton stalks cover the once green field. The autumn winds rattle the loose, dry leaves over miles of empty stretches. The brown

horizon is broken only by tree stumps no longer invisible under the sea of cotton. The Delta has harvested its beauty and the seed money is nearly all spent. Son House and Willie Brown are leaving Robinsonville more frequently. They ride to Memphis, playing for tips in Church's Park, and Robert tags along when he can find them.

On a trip to Banks, a small town just east of Robinsonville, Son pulls Robert aside. "I like you, Robert, but you ain't getting any better hanging around Willie and me. You're a young man. A little rambling now will do you some good." Robert nods, he is growing tired of the taunting and teasing he receives from the two men. Sometimes, Willie and Son dodge him if he tries to tag along. Other times they let him tag along, but then ride him constantly about his guitar playing.

With Son's words fresh in his head Robert realizes that if he is going to make it with his guitar he is going to have to do it himself. Robert wants more out of life than to be a cotton sharecropper, and only he can make this happen. With this in mind, Robert decides it is time to leave Son and Willie, to leave Julia and Dusty, and head out on the road on his own. Robert chooses his birthplace – Hazelhurst, Mississippi, a small lush town 210 miles to the south, as his destination. Without a word of warning Robert slips off making, his way to Highway 49. With his guitar over his shoulder, he manages his first ride heading south.

The trip into the southern Mississippi will last two years and will prove a pivotal point in Robert Johnson's life. During his stay in Copiah County he will develop the personal traits and musical talent that will define him for the rest of his life.

## Chapter 4

1.

Two days travel quickly distances Robert from Robinsonville. When Robert wakes there is no hassling from his mother, no work in the fields with Dusty, no buildings bearing memories of Virginia. However, traveling south the past rushes forward. He is nearing Hazlehurst, the town of his birth and this thought frightens him. Does his father still live there? If Robert's father does live there, would Robert want to meet him? Would his father recognize his own son?

After catching a short lift in a lumber truck Robert finds himself in Jackson, Mississippi. Spreading along a high bluff, the Pearl River forming its eastern boundary, Jackson is Mississippi's capital city; it is also its largest. Civic buildings and public gardens dominate the south of the city. In the centre of the city is the governor's mansion, with wide lawns and shade trees; the business district can be found on Capitol Street. To the north and the west are the city's residential areas. And along the railroad tracks northwest of the business district are the heavy industries: lumber, oil, and cotton.

Robert spends the afternoon in Rooster's, a bus station café on Lamar St: after a catfish sandwich and Coca-Cola, he follows the waitress who had smiled at him as he took his seat. She pours boiling black coffee into the mugs that line the lunch counter. Robert wants to be close to her, to run his fingers through her jet-black hair, to massage the soft skin of her hardworking wrists. The waitress gracefully bends down to empty the coffee filter. She catches the edge of Robert's eyes as she resurfaces; she smiles, but he just stares blankly, his hands dead on his thighs. The waitress walks over to his table and Robert begins to think, if only he knew her, wait, he could play her a song on his guitar or tell her a joke. Robert is thick with anticipation when the waitress arrives. "Anything

else?” Robert clears his throat, “Um...no, thank-you.” “Well, you’ll have to settle up, I need this table again.” Robert quickly pays his bill and leaves a nice tip. He takes one more glance at the woman in the waitress uniform, but she pays him no attention, so he leaves Rooster’s.

The first thing Robert notices when he leaves Rooster’s café is the sun is going down. For five cents, Robert rides a city bus to East Pearl St. and walks the rest of the way to the train yards on foot. Robert passes men walking home from work and they look oddly familiar. They look just like the men walking home after work in the fields, except they do not carry any tools over their shoulder. As the orange sun sets peeks between the rust-coloured trains Robert is struck by the sheer beauty of his situation: there is money in his pocket, and no direction in sight. When the train cars swallow the sun whole, these same thoughts disturb him. Hobos roasting pig’s feet over open fires give him suspicious looks —the train yards are a lonely place at night. With his money tightly folded in the sole of his shoe, Robert heads to the edge of the train yard to try to sleep, but all he can hear is the talk of the hobos – muffled voices speaking endlessly of where to hustle and the weather in Yazoo City.

The next morning Robert decides he is going to hop the first train. After a train’s whistle blows twice Robert begins trying to slide open doors. After a few locked doors Robert finds one that he can just slide open and he spins his guitar behind the door. After Robert shuts the door he is afraid to move for a minute or two. Moving away from the door, he dusts off a stretch to sit on. The boxcar is nearly empty save for the smell of urine and a couple of sacks in the far end.

Comfortable, Robert begins picking on his guitar:

*John Henry was a little baby, sitting on his papa's knee. He picked up a hammer and a little piece of steel. Said, hammer's going be the death of me, Lord, hammer's going be the death of me.*

Nearing the chorus he cuts his strumming short. There is a rustling coming from the other end of the car. The sacks begin to move. There is a body lying underneath that pile. Robert's song triggers something, because the dark figure sits up. With a splay in his walk the dark figure moves closer. He is dressed in old clothes blackened by the soot from the railroads, and the dirt from sleeping on the boxcar floors. He takes a step with his left and swings his right leg around so it catches up to its partner. All Robert can think is, here is some crazy fool, with a cripple leg, back from the dead to come get him. As the man moves in closer all Robert can do is repeat the chords, but the dark figure is getting closer.

Instead of reaching for his knife Robert starts up the second verse. "*John Henry said to his shaker...*" but the hobo gets real close, so close Robert can make out his face. It is all dried up like an old apple core. Robert doesn't want to keep playing, but the old apple core opens his mouth like he is going to scream and in perfect time he does: "*I'm throwing twelve pounds from my hips on down, just listen to that cold steel ring, Lord, listen to that cold steel ring.*" Robert cannot believe it; the dark figure is singing *John Henry*. They sing the rest of the song together, Robert singing verse and the dark figure singing chorus. They finish up and laugh real loud.

"Robert Johnson." Robert puts his hand out.

"Ragtime Texas. I'm a guitar picker, too." He looks down at Robert's guitar.

"Well give her a go," and Robert passes Ragtime the guitar.

When Ragtime plays he sounds like a freight train running. His right arm moves as if churning the train wheels and his cripple leg clicks and clomps; he whoops and whistles like smokestack and a train whistle. It is one of the most beautiful and strange spectacles Robert has ever seen. After Ragtime finishes, he reaches into his coat and pulls out a whiskey bottle. He takes a long drink and gives some to Robert. It is dark whiskey, like soot, and it smells like burning stalks at clearing time. When Robert regains his senses Ragtime tells Robert his story.

2.

Ragtime was born in Texas in 1874. By age nine, he was farming, and by fifteen he could pick more cotton than any man in Upshur County. He could make 35 cents a day picking cotton, three and four times that in the evening playing get-backs. As soon as he could he upped and left for the big name streets of Dallas, Shreveport and Kansas City; he played the World's Fair in St. Louis and recorded albums in Chicago.

But the Ragtime who stands before Robert is different from the Ragtime in the stories. He is nothing but an old hobo, no longer recording. He is not even clean enough to get carried on the trains. A bindle, a pair of torn up pants, and the sorriest Sunday coat you've ever seen is all he has with him. He doesn't even carry a guitar he is so low down. As Ragtime finishes his story, the train begins to slow down.

"Hold on" Ragtime says as he reaches back into his bindle and pulls out a railroad spike. "Take this."

"The hell am I going to do with this?" Robert cries as he inspects the spike.

"The Railroad Dick is coming," Ragtime attempts to explain as he sizes up the situation.

“I am not killing anybody.” Robert tries to hand the spike back to Ragtime.

“No you fool, you are going to jam the door with it.” Ragtime grabs back the spike and fixes the spike in the door so that it can no longer slide. Just as he finishes there is a pounding at the door.

“Open up!”

“Shh,” Ragtime whispers. “It’s the Dick.” Robert rolls his eyes.

The railroad agent pounds again. “Come on out of there!”

“Why don’t you come on in?” Ragtime shouts back.

The railroad agent tries the door. “Come on and open up. If you open up, I won’t haul you in.” Robert thinks this is a pretty good deal and reaches for the door, but before he can reach for the spike Ragtime grabs his arm. “Don’t worry, he can’t get in here.” Ragtime and Robert wait patiently as the railroad agent continues banging on the door. The train whistle blows twice and the train begins to lurch forward. They can hear the railroad agent cursing and walking away.

“Watch this.” Ragtime sticks his ass out the crack of the train door, killing himself laughing. Ragtime replaces the spike, leaving a little space so they can look outside, and sets himself down.

When the train is up around thirty miles an hour Robert looks out of the crack in the door. Stretches of land flash by his eyes, broken only by large, ageless trees. Robert marvels at the labour it took to clear the fields and to build the tracks that carry these trains. Felling trees, digging ditches, draining swamps, these are the heavy labours he is running away from. Ragtime joins him at the door. “These flatlands remind me of Texas. I spent so many years getting away from them. Now, I am just trying to find a

way of getting back. I could use another shot in the arm. You want one?" Robert takes a long look at the whiskey bottle, but takes a longer swallow. He has a hundred questions for Ragtime and Ragtime has an answer for every one of them.

"How long have you been working the trains?" Robert asks Ragtime as he wipes his lips clean.

"Almost thirty years now," he says as he takes another sip of whiskey. "It's real simple. I hang around the parlor until the train pulls in. I play the platform for the spare change and when it's fixing to go – I make a play for the smoke car. If I get a good conductor like Hardy, I ride for free. Maybe even play in the car for a little more spare. If I can't find Hardy, I try the blind end of the boxcar. But I know I got it real bad, boy, when I'm riding the sway."

"The sway?" Robert wonders.

"That's the rods below the train!" Ragtime cracks himself up again and takes a long sip from the bottle. From the look of Ragtime he has been spending most of his time riding below the trains.

"Have many records have you recorded?" Robert asks as Ragtime caps the whiskey and returns it to his bindle.

"I have recorded over twenty records."

"Really," and Robert reaches for the bindle and the whiskey. Ragtime grabs his arm. He has a really strong grip.

"It's simple." And in two words Robert gets the message – never reach for another man's bindle. Ragtime releases his arm and picks up Robert's guitar. "I would record the same song twice, just change the title and the words to fool the record



companies. *Don't Ease Me In* starts, 'Don't ease, don't you ease/ Ah, don't you ease me in./ It's been all night long, Cunningham, don't ease me in.' But *Don't You Leave Me Here* starts, 'Don't you leave, don't you leave,/ Oh don't you leave me here./ It's all night long, sweet papa, don't leave me here.'

Ragtime and Robert ride together for about two months, hopping trains and sleeping in rail yards in the Southeast. Ragtime knows when the trains are heading east and west and what boxcars to use. During that time, Robert picks up *Red River Blues* and a slick version of *Texas Easy Street* off of him.

Near Baton Rouge, Louisiana, there is a great big hobo jungle. Baton Rouge is a critical juncture; one track heads off to Texas and another to Tennessee. There is a big tent there with pots and skillets hanging from the walls. Hoboes come here to cook, wash up, and bed down and there is a big simple sign that says, "Clean Up." Ragtime has Robert collect some logs and build a fire while Ragtime heads to town to hustle up some meat to throw on the fire. That night they sleep fitfully.

In the morning, Ragtime teaches Robert how to keep himself clean on the road.

Ragtime puts out his hand. "Give me your clothes."

"Come again?" Robert wonders as he inspects Ragtime's calloused hands.

"Don't worry about it, just give me your clothes," Ragtime insists, but Robert remains unconvinced. "What are you going to do with them?" Robert asks, but Ragtime is losing his patience. "What do you think?" Robert looks over his clothes: "You're not going to sell them, are you?"

"They're a little small, but I could probably get a good price for them. No you fool, I am going to wash them." Ragtime laughs so hard he nearly falls over.

Ragtime leads Robert to the mud hole where they work in silence. Ragtime washes his clothes with a bar of soap and then hands the bar of soap to Robert. Robert scrubs down his clothes and passes the bar of soap back to Ragtime. When they finish Ragtime shows Robert how to hang his clothes on a tree to dry in the sunshine.

Ragtime usually talks a lot, but he is silent at the mud hole. Finally, Robert breaks the silence. "You're leaving aren't you?"

Ragtime doesn't immediately answer, he just gets up and starts toward the clothing tree. "Yeah, I am thinking about heading back to Texas. I know a pretty woman near San Antone that I could stay with a little while." Robert isn't quite sure if this is the truth or not, but plays along anyway. He looks away from Ragtime before he continues. "You've taught me so much. I can't tell you how much I appreciate it."

"Don't mention it. Come on, get your clothes down."

"But they ain't dry yet." Ragtime does not listen to Robert he just walks over to the clothing tree and begins to pull down clothes. He walks back to a clearing where the sun is laid out in patches between the trees. Ragtime continues: "You're going to lie on them now, that'll press them. You got to press your clothes." Robert is amazed. "If you don't press your clothes, people won't talk to you." Ragtime cracks himself up again.

They spend the afternoon lying on top of their clothes. A little while later Ragtime gets Robert's attention. Ragtime has a vacant voice as if he doesn't expect to be listened to, but he has something important to share. "Robert, don't get like me, boy. Just drink good whiskey and let the cocaine be." Robert feels sorry for the old man. He knows now that the rails are different now than when Ragtime started off. Young drunks and dope pushers are preying on old timers like Ragtime. It isn't safe for him anymore.

“If you ever get afraid to ride the trains it’s time for you to leave.” Ragtime makes Robert promise he will do just that.

A lonesome whistle wakes Robert the next morning. Ragtime is gone, and it is time to get moving again. On a freight train heading toward Kansas City, Robert decides it is time to head for Hazlehurst, and at a train yard north of Knoxville, Robert finds a train heading back towards Jackson. Locking down the freight door with a railroad spike Robert’s thoughts turn toward Ragtime. Has it only been two months?

The next time Robert is near Baton Rouge he asks around for Ragtime, but he is nowhere to be found. Word is Ragtime was slashed in the face and left for dead in Shreveport. He never did make it home.

## Chapter 5

1.

Nine miles south of Crystal Springs, 33 miles south of Jackson, and 210 miles south of Robinsonville, lies Hazlehurst – a lush town tucked neatly into the hills of Copeiah County. The town gains its name from George H. Hazlehurst, the chief engineer of the Illinois Central Railroad. Hazlehurst is only one of many beautiful small towns that dot the 550-mile ICR route between New Orleans and Cairo, Illinois. In 1931, most of the southern hill towns of the Mississippi were devastated by the depression. But when Robert arrived in Hazlehurst at the age of twenty the town was fortunate enough to have the WPA building a highway. The town had not seen a public work this large since the Illinois Central was laying track back in 1873. There was much work to be had building the concrete roads that would replace the railroads, and much money to spend on good times come Saturday night.

2.

Walking down Banks Street Robert stops in front of the St. James Baptist Church. A sign in big blue letters reads “Church Sisterhood Supper.” Inside there is a mess of congregants milling about with plates in hand of ham, potatoes, and corn. Their conversation is boisterous, oscillating between Baptist gospel and town gossip. The first notes of a long and lively song seem scarcely to disturb the hearty crowd, merely, merging with them. They are unaware of anything new, but Robert strains to hear where the sound is coming from.

In the corner of the room, sitting on a chair, is a small man with powerful arms that move around like rattle snakes. In fact, his entire frame radiates a musical feeling;

the small bones of his face chase the sound coming from his guitar, his bright eyes jumping with delight. As he begins the next song the excitement of his upper body reaches his lower body. One foot hammers the floor, while the other wanders delicately. Plates return to tables and hands reach for hips. The music has begun, but Robert is hungry. He takes the opportunity to find a plate and get a little something to eat.

After five or six songs, popular numbers and church tunes, it is time for the blues. A mournful tune with wistful chords reduces the crowd to lowered voices and slow, soft, swaying motions. By this time everyone on Banks St. knows that Ike Zimmerman is playing and the church is full up. Men and women cock their heads to hear what he is singing. Ike stoops forward and presses down on his guitar, "*Lord Jesus help me, I can't find my way,*" his eyes are liquid with pain and suffering. "*God, save us sinners come Judgment Day.*" The last few notes tremble in heavy air while Ike rests his head. A few scattered words are exchanged and arms pull in loved ones, but everyone waits. When Ike finally raises his head, he is met by thunderous applause.

When the crowd settles and Ike places his guitar in the corner, Robert approaches the guitar player, who looks smaller than when he was playing.

"That was tight," Robert offers.

"Thank you," Ike says, looking around the room for the dinner table. His eyes return to Robert who is still standing before him.

"What's your name, junior?"

"R.L."

"R.L. What's that stand for?"

“Robert Lonnie,” it’s an answer that is only half-right. His given name is Robert Leroy, like his brother Charles Leroy.

“Like Lonnie Johnson?” Ike smiles.

“Yeah.” Robert answers as he looks down at his guitar. At different times and in different communities, Robert goes by different names. Dodds, James, Spencer, and Johnson, but never Willis.

“Can you play?” Ike asks in earnest.

“A little bit,” Robert looks away shyly.

“Well, You want to play some later?”

“Sure,” Robert answers excitedly.

“I am going to break for a little while, but meet me back here in about half-an-hour and we’ll see what you got. You know “*Falling Rain*”?”

“Yeah.”

“How about *Kansas City Blues*?”

“Sure.” Robert recognizes the songs of his famous namesake.

“I’ll bring you up near the end and we’ll play a little blues. Alright, Mr. Lonnie Johnson?”

“Sure thing.” Robert looks at all the people inside this little church. They are strangers to him, but somehow familiar. Young men approach timid women, and parents are running after their children; an elderly man is slowly making his way to the door. Robert smiles at the scene that reminds him of home, but his smile is cut short when he realizes that he will have to play in front of these people. He puts his plate down on a nearby table. He has lost his appetite.

Later on Robert sits in with Ike Zimmerman. They begin with *Falling Rain* a slow blues number. Ike instructs Robert to strum in a low key while Ike picks on the high key, and sings in sweet melancholy reminiscent of Lonnie Johnson. *Kansas City Blues* gets the room rolling again and earns strong applause prompting Ike to point to Robert and the crowd shows their appreciation. Ike turns to Robert, “you want to play your own tune?” Robert is unsure, but Ike does not give up. “Go on, they like you.”

Robert begins the slick chords of *Texas Easy Street*. His fingers are limber but slow to transform the song into music. He stumbles. He plays the wrong chord to start the chorus and he can’t remember the exact words. He stops playing and looks over to Ike. He wants to say that’s it, I have made a mistake and I’d like to go hide in the shadows. The room fills with muffled voices and stifled laughs and Robert feels like a crawfish trying to make its way through a muddy ditch. Ike stands up to put his hand on Robert’s shoulder, to relieve this young man of his duty. But before Ike can reach his shoulder, the first few notes of *Red River Blues* creep from Robert’s guitar. What proceeds is a long, lonesome blues that blends in well with the smoky oil lamps and mosquito whine. The song touches the hearts of the men and the women, not just for its words, but for the young man who labours underneath them, struggling to find his way through the song. When Robert finishes there is a long silence. The church erupts with whoops and whistles. Robert turns to Ike and smiles. “You want to play one more?”

The two men play another song, and then another, and another, before the deacon shuts down the supper. While the sisterhood coordinates the clean-up, Robert pulls Ike aside. “Are you playing anywhere later?”

Ike stretches out. “I don’t know. It is getting kind of late.”

“You don’t want to play a couple of songs by the courthouse?” Robert asks again, but Ike is uninterested.

“My wife doesn’t like me staying out all hours. She gets to thinking I have another woman, and that bothers the hell out of her.” Robert is out of luck, but he understands.

“Okay. Well, I guess I will see you around?” Robert walks around looking for somebody to converse with, but there are mostly just older women cleaning up. He looks lost.

“Hey Kid!” Ike shouts. “You got a place to stay?”

Robert looks around the now near empty room. “I’m sure I’ll find something.” But Ike is not satisfied. “Come on, you can stay at my house.”

3.

Ike Zimmerman was born in Grady, Alabama, in the early years of the century. He told his wife that he had learned to play guitar in a graveyard at midnight while sitting atop tombstones. He met and married her in 1921 and shortly thereafter they moved to Copiah County. Ike was a popular performer at the church suppers and fish fries in Hazlehurst and nearby Martinsville, Beauregard, and Galatin. Occasionally he’d hitchhike out east to Georgetown, or up to Jackson to play with Johnny Temple and his friends, but he usually stayed around Hazlehurst. In later years, Ike Zimmerman was content to be at home wherever he was, but at that time, home was where his wife was. In any event he could really play the blues and Robert knew it.

For the next two years Robert attached himself to Ike, staying with the older guitar player and his wife on weekends and learning what he could about the guitar and



the blues Ike played on it. During the week, they would play the blues and talk late into the night. In the morning Ike would go to work and Robert would practice what Ike was teaching him. Ike taught him how to work on the road; how to stand on the street making nickels and dimes, and how to hustle in juke joints for two or three dollars a night. On Saturdays, they played the grocery stores; there they set up in the back of store, sat on sacks of rice, and just played their guitars. Sometimes a bootlegger would get them to play a Saturday night at the juke. That is how Robert made it: nickels and the dimes from the country stores, two or three dollars from the dances. He gave most of it to Ike in return for shelter and guidance.

Every now and then Robert and Ike traveled outside of town to where the highway was being built. Out there, there wasn't much in the way of the music, so when the highwaymen saw Robert and Ike come down the road, word spread pretty quick and a makeshift barrelhouse was made at the lumber camp. They just went out with their guitars, and after a long swallow of strong whiskey, they started in on the blues. While Robert always had a good time around there he really didn't have many friends who he sat around and laughed with. He is not conceited, just consumed with the education of the guitar. Still nobody bothered him, and that was fine because he didn't bother anybody else. That is until he met Miss Callie Craft.

4.

Robert is learning how to set tired feet to stomp, to rid troubled minds of their worries. He is learning to ease the blues, like a slick man that eases up to a beautiful woman who doesn't care where her jealous husband is. On cool winter nights or sunny

Saturday afternoons at the country store, Robert is making a stand, his faithful six-string guitar in his hand.

Robert sits up under the floodlights of the large mess tent and hollers like it is the Day of Reckoning. Robert takes short breaths between verses when it looks like he is making the guitar speak through his mouth. Sweat beads chase each other in an elaborate dance down his face before disappearing beyond his collar. "*When you've got a good friend that will stand right by your side.*" His feet tap time in the dust, his torso moves in fast circles. "*When you've got a good friend that will stand right by your side.*" His neck convulses, and his pupils dilate, "*Give her all of your spare time, love and treat her right.*"

Robert cannot help but notice a well-shaped woman wearing a long white dress and a flapper hat. He starts his next number as if he is playing just for her. She has nice hair and a big mouth, so Robert smiles at her. "*I got a kindhearted woman do anything in this world for me.*" She sways slowly to one side and then the other. "*But these evil hearted women man, they will not let me be.*" She shoots a glare at Robert, but Robert doesn't flinch. "*I love my baby, ooh, but my baby don't love me.*" Robert smiles in jest, but the woman refuses to smile back. "*I love my baby, ooh, but my baby don't love me. But I really love that woman, can't stand to let her be.*" Finally, she smiles back. When the song ends, Robert hastily motions to Ike. "Can you take over? I need to take a quick break."

Gaining her attention with his eyes, he walks outside the tent toward the edge of the first cut block. Outside she seems older, more vulnerable to the elements. Steam rises off of their bodies, it is cool outside; Robert takes off his jacket and wraps her within.

Her lips are moist and salty, but there is something foreign about her body. It is more tender than Virginia's body and this tenderness surprises him. For a moment, he feels ridiculous. But even a modest man can be persuaded to indecency.

When they return to the tent, Ike is playing a smooth version of *St. Louis Blues*. Robert grabs her hand and they get right into the middle of the dance floor. Robert is a good dancer. He taps his feet back and forth in time, a tidy rhythm accompanying the swing tune. He moves quickly and with an agility that could have been mistaken for grace. When the song ends she pulls Robert in tight. "Stay with me tonight."

"Let's start with your name?" Robert asks with a sly grin. There is no doubt he will be going home with her, but he wants to have some fun first.

"It's Calletta, but everyone calls me 'Callie.'"

"O.K. Callie, I'll stay with you tonight."

Back at her house, Robert runs his hands all over her body. He is both happy and frightened by its possibilities. His hands reach her underwear and he is not sure what to do. Virginia's little body is a long lost memory to him. He feels around, delighting Callie in a succession of minor chords, A-minor proving the most stirring. Lying on her back, covered only by her white dress Callie's chest heaves every few moments. He undoes his pants with his other hand, and slides into her. His heart pounds, and thumps and jumps a beat, until suddenly he is filled with relief. Lying back, he contents in his triumph. He looks around the room and realizes he could spend a lot of time in this house.

5.

On May 4, 1931 Robert married Calletta "Callie" Craft at the Covich County Courthouse. She was ten years his senior and had been married twice previously. They were married in Martinsville, a lumber camp a few miles south of Hazlehurst, where she was a cook. Callie idolized Robert, cooked for him, worked to support him, and she trusted him when he spent weekends learning the blues from Ike. Robert wished he loved her, but he didn't. He kept their marriage a secret from everyone except for Ike.

When Robert was not at home with Callie, or with Ike, he sat alone going over what Ike had been teaching him. He began to keep a little book with his songs in it, and he either stayed home playing phonographs or started going off into the nearby woods to sing and pick the blues to himself. He played the same tune over and over obsessively until he got it just like he thought it should be. On Saturdays, he practiced his lessons by performing for the public: during the day on the steps of the courthouse and any number of local juke joints in the evening. He played constantly from Saturday late morning until late Sunday night. At first he and Ike played together, but later he became more restless.

6.

By 8:30 am Callie is up and dressed and ready for work at the lumber camp in Martinsville. At 8:35 she kisses Robert's forehead and shuts the door quietly; in minutes she is riding in the back of a covered truck, next to other highwaymen. She knows them by name, by clothing, by smell; though she doesn't talk very much they know her as Callie, as that woman with the rag-covered hair with that cheap perfume she now wears. Together, they ride the bumpy road and scrap it out for a dollar each day.

Robert sleeps while Callie works. In the South, there is a vagrancy law known as the hog law. The vagrancy law means that you either have a job, or you make yourself scarce while everybody is working. If the police find someone on the street during the day, they'll put him in a car and carry him off to jail. They'll give him four or five days sentence and those days he will spend working on the highway. Robert doesn't want to work all day, breaking his back, for a dollar. He can make four or five times that in an evening, so, Robert stays in the house all day long, hiding like a groundhog.

Robert wakes up around lunchtime. He puts a pot on the stove for some coffee and picks up his guitar. He is fiddling, just messing around until he gets warmed up. When he is warm, he puts a record on the phonograph. Lonnie Johnson, Skip James, Scrapper Blackwell, Kokomo Arnold – listening to these records Robert is learning new songs and figuring out new ways to pick the guitar.

After this game of copycat, Robert begins working on a new song. The guitar part is already familiar to him, but he is working on the lyrics: "*From four until late, I was wringing my hands and crying.*" He takes a long look outside; it is a cold and dreary day. "*I believe to your soul that your daddy's Gulfport bound.*" Robert is thinking of Dusty, how he is probably rushing about in the fields, digging a trench, and going on about the bible. It is the thought of Dusty, breaking his back for seventy cents or a dollar, that makes Robert realize that he is in the exact place he wants to be, doing the one thing he wants to be doing. It may be a cold day outside, but is a beautiful place in here.

When Callie returns at 6 p.m., Robert is still working on the song. Callie sits down on a chair and listens to the new words he is adding to his song. "*A woman is like a dresser, some man always rambling through its drawers.*" Callie raises an eyebrow not

sure she heard is hearing Robert properly. *“A woman is like a dresser, some man always rambling through its drawers.”* She has heard him right, and so she lets out a great big laugh that drowns out the next verse. When she regains herself, Robert is still singing: *“From four until late, she get with a no-good bunch and clown.”* In a warm, soft, slow voice: *“From four until late, she with a no-good bunch and clown.”* Desire for the man who is sitting next to her, warms her afternoon light and makes her close her eyes. *“Now, she won’t do nothing, but tear a good man’s reputation down.”*

“Put down that guitar, and come over and play me.”

But Robert will not stop playing. *“When I leave this town, I’m going bid you fair farewell.”* Undaunted Callie gets up from her chair and walks slowly over to Robert. *“When I leave this town, I’m going bid you fair farewell.”* She sways as she undoes the buttons of her blouse; she pulls her top off, but Robert continues to play. *“And when I return again, you’ll have a great long story to tell.”*

Robert and Callie sleep together until seven. When they wake up they love each other again, but after dinner, Robert leaves for the courthouse where he will play a little before the bootlegger from the juke joint arrives. He is happy, a thought that surprises and unsettles him.

7.

Robert and Callie went on like this for months. At first, they rejoiced in the development of love’s intimacies. Callie loved to dance and she frequently went with Robert on his playing jobs. Sometimes she’d sit on his knee while he played his numbers, almost becoming a part of the act itself, but this did not last long. Robert and Callie soon

found themselves in love's awkward descent. Robert was growing tired of Callie's heavy legs draped over him as he played. He'd flail his legs up and down and back and forth as a silent signal to Callie not to come on stage. Robert's legs were too busy keeping time, he said it was the only way he could get a good rhythm, but all Callie could hear was: "Get your big leg off me."

## Chapter 6

1.

Tommy Johnson: sinister conjurer, addict, guitar player. Tommy was only about four foot ten, but had big, bright eyes just like a bullfrog. They seemed to contain a unnatural ability to see through the absurdities and social pretensions that plagued those who surrounded him. The duplicitous nature of preachers, the social aspirations of wealthy undertakers, the coarse conspiracies of weighty matriarchs: it didn't matter who was standing in front of him, he could strip them naked in a single sentence.

Tommy Johnson was born on George Miller's Plantation near Terry, Mississippi in 1896. At the age of fourteen, his family moved to Crystal Springs. At about that time, Tommy's brother, LeDell, started teaching him how to play the guitar. By 1914, Tommy and LeDell were playing all over the Crystal Springs area, supplementing their sharecropping incomes by playing picnics, country dances and rent parties.

Between 1916 and 1920 little was heard of Tommy Johnson in the Crystal Springs area. He married Maggie Bidwell and moved to the Yazoo. There they settled on Webb Jennings's Plantation near Drew, not far from Dockery's Plantation where Charley Patton was breaking down country houses with his raw, ferocious blues. He lived there for a year and dedicated himself to learning the nuances of Patton's showboating style. Beginning with whiskey, he first learned how to drink like Patton. After just four months he could drink two gallons of whiskey without vomiting, and began stealing the virtues of other men's wives. His lust was not lost on his instrument; he would play for hours without a break, riding his guitar like a mule, throwing it up in the air, and playing it behind his head.



After Tommy had learned all he could from Patton he set out on the road, leaving his wife behind in Drew. Hoboing around Mississippi, Arkansas, and Louisiana he became addicted, trapped in his own world of womanizing and alcohol abuse. Each morning he would ask his bedmate the location of the closest bootlegger before asking her name, but whiskey was not always available. In time, he learned how to stomach Sterno and extolled the virtues of brown shoe polish drained through bread. Adding further to his unconventional behavior he carried around a large rabbit foot and black cat bone. When he was drinking his mind was mind razor-sharp; it was when he was sober that he became frightened of his surroundings.

When Tommy returned to the Crystal Springs area very little changed. He was still a hellraiser bent on the blues, canned heat, and womanizing. He teamed up with his brother LeDell and the two of them put together a down and dirty, full-throttled show. Together they played parties on the weekends; during the week they played the streets. Tommy's prowess on the guitar and success with women led to the circulation of rumors that Tommy had signed a deal with the devil. LeDell ran with this and concocted a story that the reason Tommy knew so much on the guitar is because he'd sold his soul to the devil. According to the LeDell, Tommy learned how to play by taking his guitar to the crossroads around midnight. There, while playing a song sitting by himself, a black man walked up and took his guitar and tuned it. The black man then played a piece and handed his guitar back to Tommy.

Watching Tommy Johnson, Robert was enthralled with the fierceness of his playing, his blistering chords and hollering blues. In time, Robert would learn a great deal from the man who could play anything with tumultuous flair.

2.

When Robert arrives in Crystal Springs it is late autumn. Tommy Johnson has just returned from Drew, where he spent the fall picking cotton. It was a good crop year in Drew, so good, in fact, that Tommy and his brother LeDell were able to buy an old Model T. Although Tommy and LeDell picked cotton by the hundred, the Model T is the fruit of their musical labours and gambling.

In Crystal Springs, Tommy and his wife Alice have a large house. There are two small bedrooms, and a large drawing room where they entertain guests. The front of the house has a large porch that serves as a second parlor when the weather permits, and there is a large magnolia tree and water well in the back. Tommy and Alice consider themselves quite fortunate with this house and their guests do too.

The first thing Robert notices is the number of guests in the house. Tommy and his third wife, Alice, are entertaining six people. There is Robert, Ida Mae and her sister Paulita – friends of Alice, and Clarence, Eddie, and Charles. LeDell is also there, but he doesn't count, seeing as he seems to live there permanently. Any number of these people, and a good number of others are guests at one time or another. Indeed, the house is a little world in itself. It is a familiar resting place for many people, and many musicians, passing through the Crystal Springs area. There is always somebody playing guitar and a card game on the go. At nighttime, people sit around drinking whiskey, eating hot tamales, and listening to Tommy play the blues.

3.

When Robert wakes up his head is heavy, but there is a warm smell coming from the kitchen. Alice is cooking soup in a large pot. Robert has come to realize that Alice

does most of the work while Tommy plays guitar, cards, and shoots dice. “Smells really good. What are you...” but Alice does not even let Robert finish. “Don’t even ask because you can’t have any. This is for dinner.” Robert finds himself looking around the kitchen, afraid to make eye contact with the stern matriarch. “Let me tell you how it works around here. You’re on your own until dinner.” “When is dinner?” Robert asks shyly. “I’ll let you know.” Gaining comfort from her smile, Robert wonders aloud, “Have you seen Tommy?” “No. He is still sleeping, he’ll be like that until just before dinner.” Her tone betrays a certain discomfort in their arrangement. As Robert will later learn, Alice accepts Tommy’s womanizing, but she is fearful he is hiding money from her. Money he makes playing music and gambling, and spends on other women. “Is there anything else?” Alice asks. “Well, run along then,” and Alice shoos Robert out of the kitchen.

By the late afternoon the house is full up with people. LeDell brings over some whiskey and there is a card game going in the corner. After LeDell balls the jack, he pulls Robert aside. “You’re a guitar player, aren’t you?” Robert nods unsure of where LeDell is headed. “Now, my brother won’t tell you, but...”

“He won’t tell you what?” Tommy shouts from the doorway. Tommy takes one step forward and two steps back before resting his arm on the doorway for balance. He rubs his eyes and rakes his moustache before lurching to the open seat next to LeDell on the couch. “My brother,” LeDell offers gently. He lifts his arm to give his brother a hug, but Tommy reaches for LeDell’s whiskey. He takes a long shot and winks, “Who is next?” Everyone in the room laughs. Tommy sits next to LeDell and gives him a look that says keep your mouth shut.

The next hour is spent passing the bottle and listening to Tommy telling stories. Tommy loves to talk and his conversation is peppered with colorful images and language. He entertains them with the sort of stories they love to hear. Everyone is silent when he speaks.

“There’s a pretty little lady in Vicksburg always does her wash near a certain well. She’s a pretty little lady always does her washing well. One day I get on up and go over to get some water. I go down to the spring to get me a drink of water I notice her washing. Of course she is washing because I planned it this way. She is just washing and not paying me attention, so I just look away and slip up behind her. I did what I wanted and thought I would slip off, you know. But she hollered after to me and said ‘Mister, Mister, I washes here every Friday.’”

Everyone in the room watches Tommy until he laughs out loud, the signal that it is safe to join in. It is not a new joke, in fact they know the punch line because he has told it before, but they are afraid to not laugh. They fear Tommy Johnson because he understands them. He knows what motivates their laughter. He also knows what motivates their fear and their anger. And with this knowledge he is able to manipulate them.

Keyed up on whiskey, Tommy effortlessly carries on three or four conversations at once while leaving no one behind. He seems to know a little about everything, and has a lightning quick response for every question, every situation. Tommy inspires confidence and confession in his company. Long ago he decided to be his own man; traditional values no longer apply, only he decides what is right, and those who surround him follow. It is a compassionate, but dangerous gift to the addicts, the deviants, and the

murderers who surround him. To a social outsider like Robert, Tommy is everything he is not, and everything he wants to be.

“I got to keep moving Tommy, I’ll see you later,” Clarence announces as he makes his way toward Tommy, but Tommy refuses to shake his hand.

“Where are you going Clarence?”

“I got to get to work.” Clarence answers meekly.

Tommy looks through him. “What for? How much are you getting paid?”

Clarence puts his hands in his pockets. “Tonight, I will probably make two bits.”

“You ’re going to give up this good time and break your back for fifty cents?”

Clarence tries to explain, “Well, money is money,” but his answer falls on deaf ears. Tommy looks around the room at his audience. “Shoot, only fools work for the sake of money.” Clarence can only shake his head. This last statement vexes Alice, but she knows better than to say something.

Clarence has learned to pay little attention to Tommy in these situations. “I’ll see you later,” Clarence offers and then turns to Robert. “Robert, it was a pleasure to meet you.” Clarence turns and as he opens the door he adds, “You can learn a lot from this man.” Tommy smiles as the door slams behind Clarence, the room is his again, but then again he always has everyone’s attention.

Tommy stands up and begins to pronounce like a preacher. “The Lord put us on this earth to enjoy ourselves. And I am not one to go against the word of the Lord. Come now let’s rejoice in the pleasures of this life and the hereafter. To Clarence, may he break his back and bring back some jack!”

Later that evening, Robert finds himself looking at Tommy's wife. Alice is a good-looking wife. She has brown eyes, and a thin waist. Robert watches her while she falls asleep in her chair. Languid and peaceful, her sleep state is a great contrast to her awakened state, but he loves both. As the oil lamp burns across her he notices that even though she hugs her knees, her long nightgown stretches all the way down to the floor. He strokes her hair as she rests her head in her lap. But it is just a drifting dream. Robert enjoys those nights when Alice falls asleep early.

4.

The relationship between Tommy and Robert is straightforward. Robert is hustling Tommy to learn how to play the blues and Robert knows that Tommy knows that he is hustling him, but it doesn't matter. In Robert, Tommy sees a little bit of himself, like finding an old picture where you appear younger and thinner. Tommy is ready to pass along his knowledge of barrelhouses and bottleneck blues, canned heat and the short con, as Charley Patton had passed it along on to him. He is ready to share all of this in return for Robert's company in all-night whiskey induced conversation. At some point in these evenings Tommy would proposition Robert.

"In this life, Robert, many things will happen to you. There will be times when you will write many beautiful songs, and then there will be times when you write nothing. There will be many beautiful brown women to lie in, and many nights alone. There will be many beautiful fields to play in, and many dark places to run from. Robert, when you play that guitar, you can play it with cruelty, or you can play it with

compassion; because that guitar is a gift and it's a burden. This awaits you, but you got to ask yourself is this the life for me.”

Robert does not know if Tommy is asking him or telling him. It is striking question that Robert doesn't know how to answer, so he just answers yes quickly. They will talk for hours on end, hundreds of conversations of which Robert remembers a few. In time, the old hustler will take the young hustler to the edge and beyond.

5.

In Ruleville, Louisiana, Tommy and Robert walk down the street with guitars in hand: highway troubadours tracing roads that once were the paths for frontiersman heading west. On a bright, sunny morning, or lazy afternoon, the people of Ruleville can be found picking berries or fishing in the nearby river. Come Saturday and Sunday nights they play at the festivals and the all night sing-alongs at the church. Ruleville moves at a slower pace than the Delta, it is a place where folks still wave at you. But as Robert and Tommy make their way the doors up and down the length of the street begin to bang. Doors pop and screech as they are shut violently, porch swings sway lonely for a moment and then come to a stop. The street is deserted except for old men on their rocking chairs.

“I don't know where the people are at, but I do know this: when Tommy Johnson comes to town to tear a strip off his guitar the men shut their doors and tell their women to stay back until I have gone.” Tommy has a wide smile.

Tommy had played a while at a juke joint in Ruleville. He took a liking to the wife of the man who ran the juke joint, and Ruleville was never the same to him again.

“Every man in three counties probably wants to kill me cause I keep coming around, hollering the blues and stealing their women. But they can’t kill me.” There is more than a hint of triumph in his voice.

Some of Tommy’s self-assured attitude is rubbing off on Robert. Robert quickly denies Tommy’s claim. “I don’t know much about monkeying around with another man’s wife, but if you do get killed messing around here, it won’t be anything new and no skin off my teeth.” Robert smiles, “Come on, let’s find something lively.”

Tommy and Robert approach a large house at the end of Fourth Avenue, a narrow street known to the locals as Greasy Street. The orange light, pouring through the windows, gives way to a crowd of young people dancing and drinking whiskey and beer. The church sing-along is now over and the good-timing is really beginning. Tommy and Robert place their guitars in the corner and rush over to a couple of girls. They grab them by the waist and begin to dance to the phonograph. The place is filling up and the night is getting more and more feverish.

Tommy is outside, necking in the backyard with a girl. Robert has his eyes on the phonograph, waiting for the side to end so he can pull out his guitar. When the music is over, Robert pulls out a chair and a bread knife. He starts in on a fierce, up tempo number he has been working on at Tommy Johnson’s house. “Mmmmmmm mmmmm,” Robert moans and the crowd shouts in approval. “*I woke up this morning, blues walking like a man.*” With one hand he is generously spreading the bread knife along the neck, while his other hand is rolling smoothly over the strings. “*Woke up this morning, with the blues walking like a man.*” His feet are keeping a hearty beat. “*Worried blues,*” his voice lowers as he looks over the crows. A sinister sound erupts “*give me your right hand.*”



There is no mistaking Robert's falsetto cry it is the direct inheritance of Robert's newest patron Tommy Johnson. A broken down bridge introduces the second stanza, Robert lets go of the strings and looks at the crowd "*And the blues fell mama's child, tore me all upside down.*" The crowd waits as Robert kicks back in the alluring rhythm. "*And the blues fell mama's child, tore me all upside down.*" Robert closes his eyes, rocks back his body, and screams in his newfound falsetto: "*The bluuuuues, is a low down shaking chill. Mmmmm, is a low down shaking chill.*" When Robert bears down on his guitar, his fingers move up and down with the grace and precision of a spider spinning a cobweb. The crowd is really jumping.

Hearing what sounds like his own voice, Tommy Johnson lets go of the girl he is necking with and makes his way into the house, avoiding the couples that litter the grass and back porch. As Robert opens his eyes he makes contact with Tommy who is now watching him. Distracted, Robert pulls at his strings in desperation and screams, "*Well, the bluuuuues, is a low down aching heart disease.*" Robert is speeding through the chords, now and looking at Tommy. Almost smiling Robert speaks, "*You going to do it? Tell me all about it.*" But before Tommy can respond, Robert screams again. "*Well, the bluuuuues, is a low down aching heart disease.*" The crowd shrieks in ecstasy and Tommy nods his head in agreement. "*I been studying the rain, and I'm going drive, I'm going to drive.*" Robert's hands are blurs of flesh and sound, he nearly drops his guitar, but he regains himself. "*I been studying the rain and I'm going drive my blues away.*" Out of breath now, he takes his hands off his guitar, "*going to the distillery,*" he makes one last ditch pull of the E-string, "*stay out there all day.*"

Tommy tries to make his way to the front, but he cannot make it through the mob of people crowding Robert: men pat Robert on the shoulder and women try to cozy up to him. Robert is stuck to his chair looking up at all of these faces, trying to find Tommy. Finally, Robert catches his eye, and Tommy tilts his head: a signal to meet him outside. Now. Robert quickly excuses himself and jumps down the steps of the back porch. Tommy stoically waits for his progeny. “Well, what did you think?” Robert naively asks, but Tommy just shakes his head. “Let me explain” Robert offers, but before Robert can continue a strange man appears. “Excuse me, but this is my party and we sure would like it if you would play some more numbers. I can’t pay you much, but you can drink what you want.” Robert looks at Tommy and Tommy lets out a long, troubling laugh and smiles at Robert. “Go on.”

Robert heads back in and plays five or six more heart-stopping numbers. When he finishes, he looks around the room, but he can’t find Tommy Johnson anywhere. The backyard is empty save for a few couples. Back inside, the party is winding down, but the owner of the house is trying to get Robert’s attention. “We passed around a hat and got you this. It’s just over two dollars.” Robert accepts the generous gift. “There is a small shed around the back that you are welcome to take for the night. And there is a little lady over there,” he looks in the direction of the sofa where a young lady is waiting idly by, “who’s had her eye on you all night.” The owner squeezes Robert’s fist full of coins and give him a pat on the back.

## Chapter 7

1.

I hate this house, Robert thinks as he opens the door. It is not his house – he merely lives here. Callie is at work, and so he is free to move about the house. It is exactly the same as when he left it. He looks over the familiar inhabitants: the well-weathered cane chair, the oil lamp, the kitchen table. There are many happy memories here, why can't he live in just one of them? How has he played this game for so long? He is living off her: her food, her job, her love. In exchange he has given over his body; in this house it is not his own. How much longer can he keep returning to this house, to this bed, to this woman?

Callie blows in like a brisk winter breeze; she approaches her man loud, and selfish. Robert is reluctant, but ready to give another performance. He imagines another audience, but he is fearful he will never be able to forget the face looking square at him. He wishes his eyes were swathed by cloth, he already feels as if his hands are bound by rope.

“I go crazy when you are not here.” It is a lonely sentence from a lonely woman.

“Me too.”

Robert lies for hours unable to move, fearful of Callie's touch. He hates himself for hating her fat arms, her caresses, her warmth. He lies silently, waiting for her to fall asleep.

Robert slides away from Callie and picks up his guitar. In the living room he pulls a chair to the window and soundlessly fingers the guitar strings. Facing the cold, empty street, he transforms his thoughts into words. *“I got stones in my passway, and my road*

*seems dark as night.*” He repeats these words, but slower and darker than usual he adds:

*“I have pains in my hearts they have taken my appetite.”*

Robert turns back to the bedroom, straining to hear one of Callie’s greedy breaths. *“I have a bird to whistle, and I have a bird to sing.”* Robert taps his foot a little harder, *“Said, I have a bird to whistle, and I have a bird to sing.”* He fingers a slick transition. *“I got a woman that I’m loving…”* Suddenly, Robert feels a hand on his shoulder and it startles him. He nearly knocks over his chair and in the blunt light of the oil lamp Robert appears threatening to Callie for the first time. Robert steadies his chair and looks back outside, refusing to play anymore. Callie’s speaks, but her words float silently through the room. Callie turns away from Robert and heads back to the bedroom. When she closes the door Robert picks his guitar back up. He fingers a few more chords. *“There’s a woman that I’m loving, she don’t mean a thing.”*

2.

In the morning Callie is lying on the sofa, alight in the shadow of the sun. She braces her legs with her arms, her knees a resting place for her weary head. She is gazing listlessly at the floor. Callie has slid from his heart; marriage is too familiar, too confining, and too painful.

As Robert talks, Callie watches him with precise attention and deference, giving his words a sudden and unexpected heaviness. He is speaking at a distance, like a stranger who offers directions to a place he has never been.

“You’re a fool.” Callie wails and lurches from the sofa. She thumps Robert on the chest, but her fists are clumsy, weighed down by grief. As if struck by the hand of death itself, she drops to her knees. She wails how ugly life is until her voice runs out and

she falls over. There is nothing now. “Lord have mercy,” Robert shouts as he fixes himself a glass of whiskey. The long gulps warm the tension in his neck and shoulders.

Robert confesses. He mumbles that it is not her love, but love by and large. Replacing expediency with intimacy, Robert talks at length, unsure of what he is saying, but promising everything. “I want to move you up into the Delta.” He hates himself for raising her hopes, while Callie pretends that the move will change their relationship. Robert is grateful for her act, but she cannot mask the memories of men who have left her before, and those who will leave her again. He holds her tightly, and leads her to her back to bed.

“You are so beautiful,” he says as he strokes her hair, but Callie feels anything but beautiful. Her body is warm, her clothes are moist from tears, and sweat. Before long, she is asleep in Robert’s arms, her head resting on his chest. He lies awake in bed until dawn, watching the sunrise from the bedroom window. Slowly raising her arm, he slides her away from his heart. He dresses like an adulterer, careful not to leave any trace of him behind. He wants her to forget him. Robert pauses as he reaches for the doorknob.

“Please. Don’t leave,” Callie begins to cry.

Why does she have to speak? “Don’t cry. I’ll be back.”

“When?”

“Soon.” Robert lies as he closes the door.

When Callie awakens her face feels tight and dry from last night’s tears. She uncoils her legs, stretches her body over the space Robert has left and bounces back into a ball at the sudden realization he is gone. He’ll come back, Callie thinks, but she refuses to look out the window, afraid to face this new day.

3.

Robert moved Callie to Clarksdale in clandestine fashion. Neither Callie's family nor her friends were told that the couple was moving. He said it was part of the excitement of it all, eloping in the middle of the night, but it was really because he didn't want them to know. After all, they had no idea the two were married. Callie hoped that the move would bring legitimacy to their relationship, stability at the very least, but neither of these desires was fulfilled. Robert visited her less frequently. It is as if somehow he had forgotten the way to their new home. Shortly after the move, he stopped visiting her completely.

Callie Craft's health quickly deteriorated after that. The humid climate of Clarksdale was a stark contrast to the cooler climate of Martinsville. The loss of Robert, coupled with her meek health, caused Callie's downfall. She called home to Hazelhurst for her family to retrieve her. They had no idea where she was. Callie never recovered from her move to Clarksdale; she died heartbroken two years to the day after leaving Hazelhurst.

## Chapter 8

1.

In May, Robert returns to Crystal Springs. He has a sock full of money he has been saving since he first made Martinsville, but he is careful not to spend it. He has an eye on a pin-stripe suit and he is saving up for a new guitar he will purchase in the new year. He celebrates his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday drinking whiskey and playing guitar, a warm, wet wind outside, Tommy Johnson, Alice, and Robert inside. The door rattles, open and closed, open and closed, until dusk settles the weary wind. Robert blows out the candles on a beautiful birthday cake Alice has made him. This year, Alice is his one and only wish.

2.

In the morning, Alice succumbs to rage that makes her tear her hair in protest. At first Robert does not know the source of her rage. Did LeDell empty the fridge of the food destined for a white table? But as she throws herself at Tommy he knows. It is a scene that is not new for Robert. There isn't a cent in the house and fingers are being pointed. Rain assaults the tin roof as Tommy and Alice pull at each other in chaos. The battle is over quickly, but the war rages on. Alice runs to the back porch, but Tommy does not run after her. Tommy looks at Robert to try to explain, "She always does this. I'll be back tomorrow with a pocketful of money, and everything will be back to normal." But Tommy is not as confident as his words. When Tommy leaves, Robert looks for Alice on the back porch. Alice is crying, mixing rain with teardrops. "I get so tired of that son of a bitch sometimes. The alcohol, the other women." It is the first time that Robert has seen Alice cry. She is beautiful. "I don't want to get in the middle of this,"

but before Robert can say anything else, Alice's tongue is swimming in his mouth. He leans over her wet body and puts his mouth to her ear, wanting nothing more than all of her.

3.

Robert has never seen a woman more naked. In desperation he covers her body with trembling hands. On the bed, he staggers and lurches alternately, his heart pounding greedily for the prize that is suddenly within reach. Alice's hips begin to move. He throws her skirt over her stomach, and puts his arms behind her head.

On this rainy afternoon Alice does not feel love, she feels loss. When he finishes, it is as if she has disappeared down a corridor he cannot reach. She lies cool and still beside him, carefully measuring the events of the afternoon. She turns, and her hips become a mountain further distancing him. This pains Robert, for it means that he is not her lover. Offering a shoulder or a breast would have made them lovers; instead she is fortifying her territory. She is engaging herself in warfare with Tommy, and Robert has been her secret weapon.

Alice inspects herself in the mirror as she dresses. She catches Robert's eyes in the mirror; she senses a deep melancholy, but she cannot worry about him now, she has to get dressed. But Robert cannot believe the swiftness of her activity. She is a stranger now to him and he realizes she will always be that, one of many female forms swaying, dizzy as a drunk, in front of a mirror. There is a sound from outside, like a cat hissing from the window ledge, but neither of them pays attention to it.

Alice hands him his clothes, and he begins to dress. That he is fighting for love is difficult for her to understand. When Robert puts his pants on the dried semen on his



thighs pulls at his tiny leg hairs. Once he watched her body while she slept. Now he wanted to watch her body go limp.

4.

Instead of the next day, Tommy returns that night, not nearly enough time for Robert and Alice to put the events of the day behind them. A few people came by that evening to play some dice, but no one stays for very long. A little before twelve o'clock, Alice gets up to get ready for bed. At this time, Tommy moves to the kitchen to fix a couple of cups of coffee for himself and Robert. After a little while, Alice returns in a soft yellow nightgown. She gives Tommy a kiss, and whispers love or betrayal, Robert isn't sure, before retiring for the evening. On her way to bed, Alice looks at Robert and Robert knows she is watching him, but what has she said? After a couple more sips of coffee, Tommy and Robert return to the whiskey, welcoming its warm burn as it makes its way down the throat. They are both loaded, Tommy on the sofa and Robert in his chair. Robert and Tommy are alone. A long silence deafens the room, scares Robert.

"How you do it?" Robert finally breaks the silence.

"Do what?" Tommy feigns ignorance.

"How do you win at dice like that? You always come out on top."

"You really want to know?" Tommy looks him over.

"Yeah." He does not really want to know, but it is better than silence.

"Alright, I am going to learn you."

They are alone, but Tommy sits up straight and pulls Robert's chair in. He begins to tell a story of a man he met at a juke joint, a real ugly son of a bitch with nowhere to

go and no woman to see. He feels for the man, and arranges for him to stay at the same rooming house he is at.

“In the morning, that ugly son of a bitch learnt me how to gamble, and I am going to learn you.” The gambling talk makes Robert feel more comfortable. Tommy is excited; he keeps moving on the sofa and there are no uncomfortable pauses. Maybe Alice didn’t say anything after all. Besides she would only be getting herself into trouble.

“Now you’re not a bad gambler, Robert, but you’re a square gambler and that makes you a fool.” Tommy walks into the kitchen and pulls out a cigar box of dice. He shows him how to weight them so he knows which way they are going to fall every time. He always knows which way they are going to come up. Tommy picks up the dice, “five-deuce.” The dice land, up turn the five and two. “Six-ace” the six and snake eye show. “Four-trees” – the four and the three. “But you have to play with straight dice, drugstore dice, until you have a good bet up. Then you can switch the dice and get satisfied.”

Robert makes a couple of rolls, none of them winners. He looks on in amazement, but the lesson is not over. “Knowing how to throw the dice is only the first part. When you get a couple of hot dollars, put your guitar back in the corner and jump down into a game. When you make your money get out. Pretend you got to take a piss. Leave a bet on the table and sneak out of there. Get some whiskey and get tight, find a girl, and get satisfied.”

“That’s hot,” Robert says as he takes the dice from Tommy’s hands and tries a few more throws. “But how do you know if someone else is isn’t cheating, too.”

“Sometimes there will be a guy sitting across from you doing the exact same thing. You’ll look over at him and he’ll look over at you.” Robert looks up from the

dice; the old hustler with the sharp eyes pierces the young hustler. “You both know what the other is doing but all around you are fools. So you don’t bet against each other. Every which way you bet the other guy is going to bet the same way. When the game’s over you’re going to say: ‘Man, you’re good,’ to keep the fools from knowing anything.” “You can’t hustle a hustler.” Robert is beginning to feel uncomfortable; Tommy is staring him down and speaking in harsher tones. “When you cheat one of them, they know something’s wrong. And people will kill you about that. He don’t know what it is but he know it ain’t right.”

And in that one moment Robert is sure Alice has told Tommy everything. Robert reaches for his guitar, but Tommy reaches it first, and pushes Robert away. He begins tuning the strings, each one individually until they break. Robert is helpless. All he can think is that he is fucked. He has fallen off a train into a part of hell and now he is fucked. He is fucked and all he can think about is getting out, but Tommy has his guitar and begins singing a sneering version of *Preaching Blues*, mocking Robert on the guitar without strings. After the first few words Robert cannot hear what Tommy is singing; all he can hear is distant laughter.

When Tommy finishes the song he throws Robert’s guitar at him. Robert caresses his guitar like a child with a broken toy, its springs spiraling in every direction. He doesn’t even notice Tommy is pointing a gun at him until Tommy cocks the hammer back.

“You made a mistake in coming here.” Tommy does not have to ask Robert, just reaches into his sock and puts a fist full of dollars on the table. There on the table lies Robert’s past and his future, green sweat and greener dreams. Tommy waives Robert to

the door. “Don’t come around here no more.” Robert scrambles to get his guitar together. As Robert reaches for the door a gun shot flies through the window. Without looking back, Robert slams the door. Through the broken window Tommy yells, “Run Kid, run!” and laughs hysterically at Robert. Robert runs down the street, and across town, refusing to look back.

At the outskirts of town, Robert finds himself traveling down a dark gravel road. Few cars travel this road during the day let alone at night. Robert tries to flag a ride, but the cars just pass him by. Although it is night, the sky makes his path bright as day, but it doesn’t make this place any more welcoming. Oak trees loom like giants threatening to arrest him and large rocks block his path. To the east lies his past, and to the west his future, but right now he isn’t fit for any particular direction. Robert finds a soft stretch and sits down. He pulls a whiskey bottle from his pocket and looks over his guitar. It is in pieces like a clock with its guts ripped out.

Overcoming the tremors of his hands, Robert threads his guitar in an effort to make it whole again. Twisting the tuning pegs takes on a scorching intensity, every twist, every octave a powerful surge. Deceit burns through his body, splits his lips, bruises his ribs, blackens his eyes. Robert tunes his guitar to open-E, but he is frozen with fear. The first note, normally a small gesture, is magnified. He is afraid to play the note, afraid to play the guitar again. After a few breaths of the heavy night air, he begins. An eerie arrangement follows: haunting, extraordinary, emotional.

Robert’s eyes move heavenward, and his thoughts turn to Tommy. The stars that once shimmered like a dream now flicker like a nightmare. “You have eyes, what did you see?” The wind rises and the leaves tremble on the trees; the purity of sound reveals a

sacrilegious relationship. Tommy didn't teach Robert chord progressions, Tommy taught him how to growl, showed him how to cheat, lectured him on seducing women – all of it cunning, none of it craft. Robert cannot help but feel that, in Tommy's eyes, Robert fucking Alice was, somehow, a sinister triumph in a sacrificial game, an induction ceremony into the black mass of blues. Every one of Tommy's words is brilliant with second meanings. It is a fantastically chilling moment; a world absent of love and understanding, and full of longing, regret, and fear. He has slid over into a region of hell. How dreadful this all is in comparison to Robert's earlier visions of freedom. There is nothing here now, nowhere to go, but back north. Robert lays down his guitar and prostrates himself under an oak tree, ready, at any moment, to sink beneath the ground into the regions of hell.

A red sun wakens Robert, after a heavy slumber and smoke-filled dreams. Robert has a long strange moment; he does not know who he is or where he is. The field gives way to a busy town just inland from the raging river. Robert can see men, moving about, working and the distant sound of activity hollows him. His guitar lies motionless, strings splayed in every direction. The memories of last night haunt flash before him.

5.

Robert catches a ride to Jackson and fixes his guitar up. Immediately, he heads to the courthouse to make some money back. A nervous man is pacing out front. Spotting Robert and his guitar, the man makes a small request, "Can you play some?" And Robert says, "Sure," and plays some sweet upbeat swing. "That's alright!" and the man and throws him a dime. Soon enough, a small crowd gathers, they are making requests

and throwing dimes. In an hour, he has made over three dollars and there seems to be no end in sight. A man in a pick-up truck pulls up and offers Robert a Saturday night gig at a barrelhouse. All Robert can think is it is going to be all right.

After a week in the Jackson area, Robert catches a ride with two men in an old Model A. Something about a man, wandering down the road with a guitar over his shoulder they say; they are heading a little ways north to a sawmill camp in Westpoint; Robert rubs his palms together and rides on. During the week he plays in the section houses of the sawmill camps, and on the weekend, he plays at the barrelhouse, all the time people throwing their hard work at him in the form of nickels and dimes. Word spreads that there is a fine guitar player around and after a week in Westpoint, Robert makes a play for Kilmichael, and after Kilmichael it is Tupelo. Robert settles into a nice routine of sawmills and levee camps: Saturday is always payday and Saturday night is always barrel housing. The going rate for his services is two or three dollars and all the whiskey he can drink. The towns may change, but the barrelhouses are all the same.

For all of June and July, Robert follows the hard workers and the hustlers, the sawmill money and the good-timing, making a stake of over fifty dollars and a reputation worth two or three times that. Back in Jackson, he decides against the new guitar, but he buys a fedora, and a black suit with blue pin stripes made out of broadcloth. It is tailor-made and it costs him forty dollars, but its pencil stripes, vest and all, are worth every penny. It is real black and real slick.

A trip home is in order. It is time for Robinsonville to stand up and take notice of Robert. He will return to Robinsonville to see his mother, as well as to show himself off

to Willie and Son. Robert makes his way to the outskirts of the city dressed only his pin-strip suit, unaware that this is the suit he will be buried in.

## Chapter 9

1.

Magnolia trees with thick, green leaves and cream-white flowers obscure the small houses that peak through branches. Summer-long cotton blossoms, as far as the eye can see, drown the sharecroppers in a white sea. After a couple days hitchhiking, Robert is finally in Robinsonville, but it isn't the Robinsonville that he left two years ago. The trees are not as tall, and the houses not as wide apart. Somehow, the Robinsonville of his youth has become smaller.

On the front steps of the general store Robert pulls out his guitar. A small crowd gathers as Robert begins to play *Malted Milk*. It is a take on Kokomo Arnold's *Milkcow Blues*, but people drink it up all the same. Nobody knows the identity of the man in the pin-stripe suit and the hat pulled low down over one eye, but he sure is bringing in lots of shiny coins. His big Stella guitar spreads a loud sound up and down the streets drawing a large crowd.

Word spreads quickly that a good-looking guitar player is at the general store. Julia has no interest and no time for blues players, but she is in need of some amenities, so she makes her way down to the general store all the same. It is difficult to make it to the front of the general store, so many young people just lolling about, but when Julia finds her way to the front she can hardly believe the vision laying before. Julia looks at Robert as if he is a ghost, she covers her mouth and raises the back of her hand to her forehead. Robert finishes *Terraplane Blues*, to a thunderous applause, and a lonely voice. "Yonder come, Robert." The crowd disperses revealing Julia with arms outstretched. The embrace is emotional. "Now, quit messing with that guitar and come on home." A



series of stifled laughs emerge from the crowd. Robert kisses her on the cheek, “Soon Momma, soon.”

2.

Robert puts the word out for his old friends Willie Brown and Son House. They are in Banks, just east of Robinsonville. He is already looking forward to seeing them again, so Robert promised himself a ball of a time in Banks. Willie and Son are there and Robert decides to stay in Robinsonville; he lays low during the day and plays guitar at night. He hustles with his guitar and makes a lot of nickels and dimes. People have not heard anybody play like Robert does and so he makes good money. The ten dollars and change Robert makes, he gives to his mother. Julia takes the money Robert gives her and makes him a feast for his last night in town. Although their reunion is emotional, there is really nothing tying Robert to Robinsonville and so he leaves after about a week.

3.

Willie Brown and Son House are playing at a little juke joint just east of Robinsonville in Banks, Mississippi. It is a Saturday night like any other. Men and women exchange glances and dances, and there are a group of men throwing dice in the corner of the converted house. Whiskey is a dime a glass, and there is a sign that reads “No Swearing,” but there is a man at the back frying fish who doesn’t take heed of the warning. Willie and Son have played about half their repertoire. It is almost time for a break.

Robert comes through the door, dressed in his new pin-stripe suit, swinging his guitar over his shoulder. “Look who is coming through the door?” Son says to Willie. Willie looks up from his glass, “Little Robert.” Robert moves through the crowd to the front of the stage. “Well, boy, you still got a guitar,” Son bellows, “What do you going to do with that thing? You can’t do nothing with it.” A wide grin spreads over Robert’s face. “Well, I’ll tell you what. Let me have your seat for a minute.” Robert sits down and tunes his guitar.

Robert takes off quickly, beginning with a boogie bass line. The people standing around instantly pick up the beat. Robert runs down the neck with his long slender fingers chasing the quick bass line; the people take to the rhythm and just keep dancing. His vocals are high-pitched, but smooth, carrying all the way to the back of the room. “*Hot tamales and they red hot, yeah she got ‘em for sale.*” Robert whips off a swift turnback and lets out another verse this time with a growl that catches Willie and Son by surprise: “*Hot tamales and they red hot, yeah she got ‘em for sale. I got a girl, say she long and tall, she sleeps in the kitchen with her feet in the hall.*” He pulls his fingers off his strings and his feet off the floor and looks at the crowd. “The juke erupts in laughter, and Son slaps Willie on the shoulder, “Well, ain’t that fast! He’s gone now.” Robert brings back the hard driving rhythm and snarls, “*Hot tamales and they red hot,*” but he follows this with a smooth voice: “*yeah she got ‘em for sale.*” He has four or five different ways of singing this line, the guitar mirroring the vocals every time. “*Hot tamales and they red hot, yeah she got ‘em for sale.*”

Robert is barely on the edge of control, and at the same time executing with masterful technique. It is a style different from Son’s or Tommy’s, Ike’s or Willie

Brown's. Robert is complementing his own bass lines; he is taking minor chords down to the sixth or seventh fret. No one is playing anything like this. His beautiful hands stretch past the dapper suit; long, slender fingers slide blown glass on copper wire. Robert rubs the sweat off his upper lip with his forearm and chokes the neck of his guitar wringing another midnight moan. Bursting blues hard and beautiful it is hard not to wonder where did he come from? Robert doesn't speak of the devil, but his guitar does not deny it either.

Banks is two miles high, drunk on music, blues pouring through its soul. A mile away from the house and you can still hear the guitars thumping, getting people running for the lights of the juke. It is nearly sunrise and Willie, Son, and Robert are still stomping, leaning over their guitars stretching the bounds of the song. They flatten half notes and thirds and quarter notes sending the women back and forth, back and forth until they are lost from their bodies. Son hurls hymns and initiation rites, converting the faithless as if in a revival night tent. But Robert is the sweet dream tonight, casting silver tremors and reflections off the Mississippi River.

4.

Robert stayed in Banks for a week, long enough for Son and Willie Brown to take notice of his musical development. They openly praised his improvements on the guitar, as did his audiences, who now believed that he had surpassed them in technique and innovation. He would continue to return to Robinsonville and stay for a few months at a time, but it would never be his home again. Robinsonville was a sharecropping

community, and finally he was no sharecropper. He had to move on to keep in line with what he had in mind for himself.

5.

Robert Johnson is finding the blues in the log and the levee camps, the general stores and the juke joints. He finds rhythm in freight trains and melody in the speech of the whiskey stained gamblers. The world is strange and blue, every highwayman, every cotton picker, haunts him with longing and regret. He distills their character, their history, and their wounds in epic travelogues. Images form while he watches and listens and he notes what he can for his songs; songs so uncompromising in truth they bear comparison to the spirituals or the scriptures. Sorrow and pleasure, sacred and profane, people have reason to listen to those words – it is the music of life.

6.

For the next five years Robert just ran around. Using Helena, Memphis, Greenwood, and Robinsonville as bases, Robert traveled up and down the Delta and then up and down the country hoboing and playing guitar. In the summer and fall, he played country dances in little Delta towns like Indianola and Leland, and in the winter it was sawmill towns and levee camps. He knew their paydays, and when they got paid he was right there. As he gained greater fame, Robert went as far west as St. Louis and Chicago; as far north as Detroit and New York, and in the process gained a considerable reputation.

Bus, train, the back of a pick-up truck, these were all preferred methods of transportation. Sometimes he would just set off walking down the highway, other times he would hop a freighter. Day or night, he would take off at the drop of a hat, without a word of warning. Robert slept on buses and freight trains, his money carefully wrapped in his jacket pocket. His pin-stripe suit was never crumpled, nor creased, despite the fact that he spent all day long riding the highway. When he arrived in a new town, he would play on the street corner, or in front of a general store, or in the town square. After playing a little he would set himself up with a local contact, and then make a juke joint or rent party.

Robert had the entertainer's gift of establishing an instant rapport with his audience. He was at his best when he would stop and talk to the crowd. Smoothly adapting himself to every social situation: ready to play the clown to the varied personalities he met on the road. He was as comfortable playing Bing Crosby and Duke Ellington as he was with Kokomo Arnold and Leroy Carr. The bow to the crowd that finished his set was a telling sign of his assuredness. But he didn't travel with too many people.

Robert Johnson recorded twice, first in San Antonio, Texas, in November 1936 and again in Dallas, Texas, in June 1937. The twenty-nine songs he recorded were issued on eleven 78 rpm records. During those two sessions Robert displayed an appreciation for the medium: his guitar was tight and he was thematically poetic. Bottleneck leads alternating with driving rhythms and lyrics sung in a high tense voice led to masterpieces of the blues. The recordings yielded financial and artistic dividends, and perhaps his greatest joy in life was returning home and handing out the record to family and friends..

*Terraplane Blues* sold over five thousand copies and brought him a degree of fame and fortune shortly after its release.

Now and then he would run with Son House and Willie Brown. And he played with Johnny Shines and Robert Jr. Lockwood, but met many more musicians, like Sonny Boy Williamson, Robert Nighthawk, Elmore James, Howlin' Wolf and Honeyboy Edwards. It was not natural for men to like musicians much, and Robert was no exception. They resented his power and influence over women. When he wasn't playing, Robert would get drunk, have fun, and mess around with women.

7.

Robert always had lots of women. Robert would meet women with nice houses, and he would stay with them, take a bath, wash his clothes, lay up for a couple of weeks until he got lonesome for rambling again. In Helena, he had a relationship with Robert Jr. Lockwood's mother, a pretty woman fifteen years older than him. And in West Memphis, there was a midget Robert went with at the Hunt Hotel. In Friars Point, there was a girl named Betty, and Walter Horton's sister in Greenwood and on hot summer evenings he would case the crowds looking for a woman that he could attach to for a night or more. He loved them all: dark brown, deep brown, deep black, pale black, and golden yellow. Chocolate or olive; the color didn't matter, it was the age. He preferred older women in their thirties over the younger ones, because older women would pay his way. The most desirable quality was their ability to provide food and shelter.

It always happened the same way. Robert would drink beer with her, get her high, and make friends. She would keep saying that she was too old for him. The thought

of the young man snapping her bra undone would lead to long moments of self-consciousness, but she would end up showing him her breasts, against her bedroom door or on her bed. He would lean her back, waving his face back and forth as he pressed himself against her seventy-five cent, rose-embroidered underwear. This usually alleviated any temporary self-consciousness. Finally, he would kiss her lips, her hips, her thighs. Sometimes, when Robert was very drunk, he raised his face from a woman's thighs only to discover the face of his companion had changed. Who was this woman? Where was he? Where was he supposed to be? Out of desperation he would chase the answers with his tongue.

The relationship always ended when their husbands came home or Robert got itching to travel again. It was always sad to see them go, the dark realization that he would never see them again. But these feelings normally passed after fifteen or twenty miles, with the smile of a woman in a passing car.

8.

In winter, spring, and summer of 1938, Robert wanders the country in a pin-stripe suit and fedora. He never works, the music in his body earning him a woman and a home in every town. Music and motion are his religion, he doesn't want responsibilities, he doesn't need roots just a fast moving freighter. Moving forever and ever and never coming to a complete stop.

Two men are fighting in the boxcar that Robert has just hopped. He makes his way to the back of the train with difficulty, trying to devolve himself of any responsibility. Grasping at each other like dancers the two men waltz around the car.

They embrace like lovers, each one holding the other tightly, but one dancer drops to the floor, void of the necessary strength it takes to raise his head and look his adversary in the eye. A red line zigzags from his stomach to his throat, and in a short time a pool of blood surrounds him. The perpetrator drops his knife and turns in Robert's direction, "I got no problem with you so long as you have no problem with me." Stricken by the blood forming mixing with the dirt of the boxcar Robert can only nod. He jumps off the train before the next scheduled stop, and for the first time Robert is afraid to be riding the trains.



## Chapter 10

1.

Two roads lead into Greenwood: Highway 82 from Shellmound and Highway 49 from Itta Bena, and right outside of Greenwood, where the two highways meet, there is a crossroad called Three Forks. The Three Forks Grocery Store stands at the crossroads, but in the field, behind the grocery store, there is a large juke joint. The Three Forks juke joint is on the border of the hill country, not quite Delta, and not quite hill country, but a middle ground of rough country where people still ride around on horses and carry guns. It is tough times when Robert arrives in Greenwood in August of 1938. There isn't much money around, so all the people can do is work on their crops, listen to blues and drink whiskey. In times like these, the only people making money are the ones connected to the juke joints.

A man by the name of Ralph Stokes runs the juke out in Three Forks. A successful bootlegger and gambling house proprietor, Ralph realized that he could make a lot more money if he was making the whiskey, too. It was not difficult for Ralph to eliminate his competition. The murder was considered a civil dispute and hardly a matter for the local sheriff's office to investigate. In little time, Ralph had distilleries all over the county, out in the backcountry, where the woods were thick and there weren't too many visitors. He employed a man in each one of his distillery houses, and in short time Ralph Stokes had become a man to be revered and feared throughout the county.

For Ralph Stokes making whiskey was a relatively simple endeavor. The distillers would take thickly ground corn – chops, and place them in a big wooden barrel with water, a little yeast, and sugar. The men would let the mixture sit for four or five days

until it started to get hot, then they would put it in a still to run off the pure white whiskey. To give the whiskey some color, they would take a bread pan full of peaches and parch them in a stove until they were real brown. Then they would mix the whiskey and the peaches in a bathtub and the whiskey would change to the same color you find in the store. Sometimes, they would add a couple of drops of gin flavor to the white whiskey. Then, in the juke, Ralph Stokes could sell whiskey or gin, but it was all really the same thing.

2.

On a Saturday in early August, Ralph Stokes is in Greenwood in his black Model T, to find and hire a guitar player for the juke joint. It is imperative for him to find a good guitar player because the crowds are thinning of late. Going to Greenwood on a Saturday is the only way to find a musician, because the nature of a musician is itinerant; nobody knows where they are living, or where they are going next. On this Saturday, there is a large crowd around a man playing real loud and strong, so Ralph Stokes makes his way through the crowd to the sound. There is no denying the sway the guitar player holds over the crowd, with his brilliant smile and his sharp suit, but Ralph Stokes has never seen this guitar player nor heard his guitar style before. When the guitar player finishes another number, he announces his name, "I'm one of the Johnson boys, Robert Lonnie Johnson. You may not have seen me before, but you may recognize this next number." Playing *Terraplane Blues* is enough to establish his identity. The record, which has sold over five thousand copies, affords him a great deal of fame not lost on the local population.

Ralph Stokes has to have this guitar player. When Robert takes a break Ralph Stokes approaches him. "You want to work at my place? I'll pay you two dollars." Robert is used to the contractual process; typically, the whiskey seller will start low. It usually only takes a counter-offer to square the deal, but if you don't ask, you don't get. "Make it an even three, and you have a deal," but Ralph Stokes is hesitant. He is used to getting his way, and not to demurring to the whims of traveling musicians. "Two-fifty." Robert is taken aback by the tawdriness of his potential employer. "I do this for a living and three dollars is what I charge." Looking around at the crowd of twenty-five or thirty people, Ralph Stokes knows he is getting a good deal, so he relents. "I'd like to get you working tonight. I will come back and pick you up here at about nine o'clock." The two men shake on their changing fortunes. Before Ralph Stokes turns away, Robert is back playing for the crowd. He stays on in town for a few hours making more nickels and dimes and promoting the Saturday night show out at Three Forks.

3.

It is dark by the time Ralph Stokes and Robert make it out to the Three Forks Juke Joint, about three miles out of Greenwood. There is no electricity out in the country, but the big house in the middle of field glows brightly. Coca-Cola bottles, with kerosene and wicks, have been placed in the trees, bathing the field in a yellow-orange glow. The house is visible for miles in every direction.

The juke joint is similar to most. Ralph Stokes takes Robert on a small tour: first, to the stage area, and then to the kitchen. "Hamburgers and hot dogs are a nickel, and whiskey is a dime," but Robert is confused. "I drink for free, right?" There is a long

silence. "My wife should be coming shortly. She runs the bar and you can work it out with her." Ralph Stokes turns quickly and heads to the back of the juke joint and opens up a door. There is a big shack a short walk from the juke joint. "That is the gambling shack. It is busy at any time of the day with people gambling." Robert quickly turns to Ralph Stokes, "You'll have to excuse me, Mr. Stokes. I am working hard for your three dollars, I don't intend to give it right back to you." But before Ralph Stokes can reply his wife appears.

Angela Stokes is a good-looking woman. She has chocolate brown skin, and hair that goes all the way down her back. Angela is wearing a long black skirt slit all the way up her leg, and her red blouse is so shiny it seems wet. She has small breasts. The sight of Angela makes Robert feel weak; for the first time his suit feels worn, crumpled, almost costume-like. Robert regains himself, but cannot get over the disorder she creates within him. Ralph Stokes is in no rush to introduce her, "Angela, did you take care of the meat order?" Angela nods her head. Finally, Ralph Stokes introduces them. "Robert, this is Angela, my wife." Robert is unsure whether to move in for an embrace or shake her hand, so Ralph Stokes continues: "Angela, Robert already knows that he is not being paid to drink whiskey. He pays a dime a glass like everybody else." Robert simply delivers a shy smile that suggests he would delight in watching her from a distance removing her clothes slowly, one piece at a time. Ralph Stokes clears his throat to get Robert's attention, "Now, if you will excuse me, I have to check on the shack. When I return, your ass better be on that stage." And suddenly, Robert and Angela are alone.

Angela looks over Robert. He is not the rough type of musician she is used to. He is dapper, with long delicate fingers and wavy hair; he appears to be a good deal younger

than he acts. Angela finally breaks the long, tense silence, “Well, you heard my husband, I guess you better get started.” Robert shyly looks away and wipes the sweat from his brow; he pays for a tall glass of whiskey and downs it in one long swallow. He makes his way towards the stage and lays his guitar across his lap ready to rain blue notes over the crowd.

That night Robert is not just good, he is grand. Song after song, he offers himself selflessly to every emotion. Loud or soft, fast and slow, he plays with the sexual intensity, the perfect marriage between the dark and the beautiful and the crowd responds deeply, from the gamblers that emerge from the shack to get another drink, to the Saturday night dancers swaying in every direction. The room vanishes under the weight of those rubbing their coarse bodies over each other and Angela cannot help but notice. During a break, Robert pursues Angela with uninhibited desire. When Angela lifts herself from behind the bar, Robert is there. When she emerges from the kitchen with a hamburger for a customer, Robert’s glance greets her, but every time his eyes make contact, she turns away bashfully.

When Robert announces that this is his last number he is met by strong disapproval. He smiles and reassures the crowd, “This is a number I have not played in a long time, it’s called *Come On In My Kitchen*.” Robert throws a glance towards the bar and begins with deep, passionate groan: “Mmmmm mmm.” He plays a few slow chords, but he cannot hold back his feelings, “Mmmmm mmm. *You better come on in my kitchen, because it’s going to be raining outdoors.*” The dancers respond in seamless fashion, swaying back and forth with the low rhythm. In coarse, high-pitches Robert breathes out. “*The woman I love, took from by best friend. Some joker got lucky, stole her back again.*”

*You better come on in my kitchen, because it's going to be raining outdoors.*” Robert’s guitar seems to speak of emotions that Robert cannot sing in words and the effect is hypnotic. *“When a woman gets in trouble, everybody throws her down. Looking for a good friend, none can be found. You better come on in my kitchen, because it’s going to be raining outdoors.”*

When Robert finishes, nobody speaks, but the rattle his guitar makes as he carefully lifts it over his shoulder can be heard all the way at the bar, which is where Angela is standing speechless. Robert makes his way through the crowd, brushing past people with red eyes and faces wet with the mixture of sweat and tears. “A glass of whiskey, please.” Angela is slow to respond, unsure of her place behind the bar and the man who stands before her. Robert swallows the glass in a gulp, ready to greet the curious onlookers that surround him. He says very little, a great contrast to the man who growls onstage.

Robert turns back to the bar for another glass of whiskey and when Angela passes the glass across the bar, Robert brushes her hand. He is direct, not crude when he asks her, “Can I be with you?” Angela has been waiting for this moment, not impatiently, but unsure how she will approach it. It is not that Angela does not want to be with him; all she wants is to be with him, but she doesn’t know how. “Come home with me,” Robert rephrases the question, but Angela just looks away, “I could never.” Robert is crestfallen, but it is all part of the seduction. He waits without saying a word as she pours drinks for the other customers. When Angela finally looks over in his direction she realizes that he has not moved a muscle, he is just waiting for her. Finally, Angela relents: “Where are you staying?” “At a rooming house on the corner of Pelican and Young in Baptist

Town.” “I can’t make any promises.” And with that Robert picks up his guitar and makes a round of routine gestures, careful all the while, not to look back at Angela, but he will see her again.

4.

The next morning, when Robert wakes up, his throat is coarse, his body is soaked, and he has no idea what time it is. Sun pours over his bed, but he is unsure whether it is a morning greeting, or an afternoon wake-up call. It takes him a moment to get his bearings. He is in a rooming house behind the fire station in Baptist Town. It costs him six dollars a week and that includes two meals a day. Robert figures he has probably missed the hot biscuits and bacon, but that is just fine. He swings his body like a pickaxe just to get up; he prays to god that his knees will not buckle beneath him. He smells like cigarettes and frustrated sex and if only he can stop the dogs barking in his head, he may make it to the knock at the door.

Angela stands in front of him; long black hair flows from her shoulders and covers her small breasts. She stops awkwardly before speaking, her plan took her as far as this door, but not any further. Robert opens the door wider to invite her in and Angela obliges; he takes a look down the hall before closing the door softly, and securing the lock. Angela quickly traverses the squeaky hardwood floor and moves to a small chair by the window giving Robert the opportunity to reach for his pants that are sitting on the chair beside her. Closing her eyes and taking a deep breath, Angela wonders what man has driven her to this. First, she blames Ralph Stokes; his domineering personality, his

rules, his control, then she blames Robert; his beautiful hands, his voice, his brashness. But only one person can be responsible for her presence here today.

Robert kisses Angela, but she draws away shyly. Whiskey. From the nightstand, Robert pulls a fresh bottle of whiskey and a single glass. "Sorry, I am not used to having guests." Angela smiles and takes a heavy slug from the tall glass, thankful for the refreshment that will calm her nerves. It is sweet at first, but leaves a coarse reminder as it makes its way down her throat. Robert sits down, tops up the glass, and swallows it whole. Pouring another tall glass he looks over at Angela. "Just need a little strength."

Before Robert can put the glass down, Angela is on top of him, her cold tongue sweeping up lost liquor in his warm mouth. Robert bites back softly, nibbling her cheek, her ear, her neck. Picking up Angela the glass tips over and breaks on the floor, but nothing is stopping them now. In his haste, Robert nearly tears Angela's dress; Angela promptly slaps his face. Robert pulls her hair causing her head to rock back, but their mouths quickly draw a truce and they are back to groping each other greedily.

Afterwards, they lie very still, ready to stay that way for days, but keenly aware of the world that lies beyond the door. "I have to go," Angela tries to explain, "I am late already." Angela tries to explain, but Robert just looks out of the window. "When are you coming back?" She stands in the middle of the room, suddenly alone. "As soon as I can." It is the answer Robert is looking for. He turns away from the window and gives Angela a long look. His smile is gracious if not a little mischievous.



5.

Angela's sister has a large family, and a hard-working husband, but Angela's older sister is ill. Each Monday, Angela visits her in order to help her with cooking, laundry, and cleaning. The chores are easy, the difficult part is watching her sister slowly waste away. It is a stirring alibi that Angela knows will work; Ralph Stokes never cared about her family, and would not begin now. Angela's sister lives in Baptist Town near where Robert is rooming, so Robert plays the Three Forks Juke on Friday and Saturday nights and Angela lies with him all day every Monday. Few people are aware Robert and Angela are together each Monday: just the owner of the rooming house, and she has changed the day she cleans Robert's room from Monday to Wednesday. This arrangement goes on for all of July and most of August.

6.

Robert never speaks about his past. To people in Three Forks he is a musician who arrived in town at the age of twenty-seven. It is easier to move about without a past; there are no awkward questions, no expectations, no guilty consciences, and certainly no remorse. But with Angela it is different. In her presence, his seven-year exile comes to a temporary end. Laying up one Monday afternoon, Robert tells Angela about his past. He is selective in what he tells her, limiting the conversation to stories about his two wives.

"What did Virginia look like?" Angela wonders as her hair dances between her eyes.

"She was thin and real dark; she wasn't but a kid, really." Robert moves the hair in front of her eyes to back behind her ear.

“Did you love her?”

Robert pauses a long time before answering. It is an uncomfortable question that Robert doesn't know how to answer. “I don't know if it was love, God we were just so young.”

“What about this woman in Martinsville? What was her name?”

Robert sighs and moves the pillow behind his head. “Callie.”

“What kind of name is that? That's a state, not a woman's name.” They exchange an easy laugh, but the moment isn't right for details and corrections.

Robert puts his arm behind his head. With her lips Angela inspects the warm, smooth skin that stretches from his forearm to his bicep. “I used to stay home all day playing the guitar, avoiding the police, while she went to work.”

“What did you do at night?” Angela asks abruptly.

“I got satisfied,” Robert answers with a wide smile.

“That doesn't sound right.” Angela sits herself up and looks right at him. “I'll tell you one thing Robert, around here, you earn your own keep.”

Robert is unimpressed. “Spoken like the true wife of Ralph Stokes.”

“Shut-up” Angela shouts as she tries to push Robert; he puts his arms around her and gives her a long kiss. When they settle down, Angela curls herself under Robert's arm and inspects his fingers. She starts in on him again: “What happened to her?”

“I don't want to talk about it.” Robert lifts his hand away from her.

Angela senses guilt in Robert's words, but she cannot ferret out the truth and this upsets her. “Why won't you tell me?”

Robert stands up and begins looking for his pants. “We grew apart. I had to move on. That’s it.” He digs through his pockets and pulls out his pouch of tobacco.

His story is told and they subside in silence, bodies touching, but anger separating them. Angela turns over and draws the sheet tight around her shoulder.

“Is that what is going to happen us?”

And in that moment Robert realizes that their union is anything but temporary. Although Angela is cheating on her husband, her idea of passion is one grounded in love. It is a stark contrast to Robert. To Robert, sex is raw and crude; a basic need, like hunger, that needs to be satisfied when it arises.

“Is it?” Angela’s tone speaks to the end of the world. That her life is at risk is difficult for Robert to believe. Her marriage to Ralph Stokes is difficult, but disposable; her relationship with Robert is something more – it is a ticket out of Three Forks. Robert senses this and feels himself speeding toward disaster, because Angela is nothing more than a beautiful distraction to him.

“Answer me.” Angela cries as she turns over. God she is beautiful, Robert thinks, but instead of answering he moves closer and rubs his chin against her face. His coarsely shaven face scrapes her skin. Why couldn’t he take her with? But Angela is not his only allegiance, and she seems to know this; she pushes her small arms against his chest.

“Stop it. Stop it!” Angela pushes Robert away, promptly leaves the bed and rushes around the room collecting her clothes. Robert sits on the end of the bed watching her dress, wondering what has gone wrong. “Stay away from me, Robert, or you’ll be sorry.” Robert tries to stop her by grabbing her arm, but she twists away and tries to hit

him. She misses, but does not wait long to leave him. She slams the door and this is the blues. Looking over the wreck that is his room, Robert finds Angela's underwear on the floor. He catches his smile on the mirror and moves in closer. There are deep lines around his eyes; he is getting older, ruining under the days and nights of reckless passion. How much longer can he manage this?

7.

Ralph Stokes is sitting in the empty gambling shack counting money, when there is a knock at the door. He pulls out his gun, rises from his chair and opens the door a crack. "Excuse me, sir." It is Freeman Dixon, one of the distillers in Ralph Stokes' employ. Ralph Stokes lets him in. "I thought you ought to know that musician that comes around here on Saturdays is sniffing around your wife." "I seen her when I was delivering whiskey to Emma Collins. I asked Emma Collins, and, sure enough she says Angela comes by every Monday around eleven, like clockwork." Freeman Dixon has no reason to lie to Ralph Stokes and both men know this, but Ralph Stokes is not surprised. Angela has not been happy for some time, but he cannot have his wife messing around with some traveling guitar player. "Don't say another word about this to anyone, Freeman." I am going to take care of this myself." As Freeman turns, Ralph Stokes calls him on again. "Don't tell nobody."

## Chapter 11

1.

Honeyboy Edwards was born on June 18, 1915 in Shaw, Mississippi. After listening to local legends Robert Petway and Tommy McLennan, Honeyboy taught himself the basics of the blues, chord structures that wandered and returned back quickly. When Big Joe Williams came to Shaw in 1929, he couldn't get over the raw, blue sound of a local teenager. Big Joe Williams offered to take Honeyboy on the road with him, but only if Honeyboy's father agreed – he did. Honeyboy had found himself a benefactor and by the age of fourteen was playing picnics and juke joints up and down the Delta. Honeyboy rode with Big Joe Williams for two years, and after that he was ready to travel on his own. During the next fifty years, Honeyboy played for audiences all over the United States and even Canada. In that time, he formed many musical relationships: he befriended Walter Horton, and played often with Yank Rachell and Homesick James; but perhaps his most unforgettable encounter was with Robert Johnson.

2.

Robert is not at all surprised to see a musician on the streets of Greenwood. After all, Greenwood is a familiar and lucrative stop for musicians traveling through Mississippi. The guitar player is playing on Johnson Street in front of Lindley's General Store, but there is not much of a crowd, just Mr. Lindley and the occasional passerby. The guitar player sounds oddly familiar to Robert; he has a combination of Big Joe Williams' powerful chords and Robert Petway's ghost-like voice, but it is his odd sense

of timing, his predilection for changing chords at whim that makes this guitar player unique.

There is no mistaking Robert Johnson as he is walking down the street. He is impeccably dressed; his pin-stripe suit is pressed and he is wearing a fedora – a stark contrast to the straw hats that dominate the area. There is a swagger in his step and if you didn't know better, you might think he is the mayor. Realizing it is Robert Johnson bouncing down the street, Honeyboy stops what he is playing. They embrace warmly, having met before through Walter Horton, whose sister Robert has gotten to know quite well. Honeyboy picks up his guitar and looks down the empty street.

“Man, where is everybody?”

“It is Tuesday, ain't nothing going on in Greenwood on Tuesday.” Robert shakes his head. “I am just going to get something to eat, but after I am going to Emma Collins. We can play for awhile there.”

Over catfish sandwiches, the two men spend the afternoon swapping stories from the road, catching up on who they've seen where and what they're playing now. Later that day, they walk across town to Emma Collins' good-timing house. They play from eight until midnight, first for the girls, and as the customers file in they play for them too. The girls throw out nickels and dimes, but the men are good for at least a quarter or two. Robert and Honey get on real well and make a few dollars each. Walking back to the boarding house, they get a chance to talk again.

Honeyboy turns to Robert, “Shoot, where do girls get asses like that?” Honeyboy has a wide smile.

“That’s for damn sure, Honey.” Robert slaps Honeyboy on the back. “I am sure you are getting some more action now that you can play.”

Honeyboy smiles: “I do and thank-you.”

“Listen,” Robert continues in a more serious tone. “I been in this town for far too long, but I got good work at the juke near Three Forks. One more Saturday and then I am out. If you’re interested I could put in a word for you.”

Honeyboy is excited at the prospect of steady work. “I sure would appreciate it,” he snaps fingers and pops his palm, “cause if I can’t beat, I can’t eat.” Honeyboy laughs heartily.

But Robert is uneasy. Talk of the juke joint, however brief, troubles him. He turns to Honeyboy, who is still talking about the girls at Emma Collins’, “Let’s get a little more whiskey, I’m feeling a little tight.”

They spend the rest of the evening, and the early hours of the morning talking. Honeyboy is young and full of life, while Robert is more reserved; he is content to listen to Honeyboy, his stories remind him of more unrestrained times. Robert is careful not to mention anything about Angela. It has been a while since Robert has been around a familiar face, someone he can trust, but the timing isn’t right to talk about Angela.

For the rest of the week, Robert walks Honeyboy up and down Main Street introducing him to the people he needs to know for the places he needs to play. There is Mrs. Wong who runs the Chinese grocery on Main, off of Johnson, and Honeyboy has already met Emma Collins, but Robert introduces him to the Lemons, who run a crap house on Avenue F. Honeyboy can now play guitar at any one of these places for nickels, dimes, and drinks.

Robert takes Honeyboy out to Three Forks and introduces him to Ralph Stokes. On the surface, Ralph Stokes does not have any particular problem with Robert leaving Greenwood. Ralph Stokes mutters something about musicians never sticking around for long: “the nature of the business,” but Robert does not pay Ralph Stokes much attention. As Ralph Stokes works out the finer details of the juke joint engagement with Honeyboy, Robert scans the room for any trace of Angela, but she is nowhere to be found. He wonders if Angela is at her sister’s house. The thought of Angela actually playing out her alibi brings a small smile to Robert’s lips.

“I know you wanted tomorrow night off, Robert, but you’d better come in with Honeyboy,” Ralph Stokes looks to Robert for an answer, but receives none. Robert eyes are fixed on the door and the possibility of running into Angela. “Then it’s decided.” The sound of Ralph Stokes voice wakens Robert from his daydream. “You’ll come in tomorrow.”

“Pardon me.” Robert rubs his eyes. Honeyboy explains the situation to Robert and he agrees reluctantly to play with Honeyboy on Friday night. Robert just hopes he can avoid Angela.

On Friday, Honeyboy puts on a show. Robert sits in on a few numbers, but the kid is certainly strong enough on his own. Even when Robert is playing with Honeyboy, Robert is looking around the room for Angela and while Robert is looking around the room for Angela, Ralph Stokes is studying Robert, watching Robert as he scans the room.

Angela has still not appeared by the time Honeyboy finishes up his last song and Robert is feeling more alarmed than relieved. What if something has happened to her? Taking one last long look over the juke joint, Robert’s wandering eyes fix upon Ralph



Stokes. He is watching him from behind the bar with hard eyes. It is definitely time to leave. Robert turns to pick up his guitar, but stumbles and nearly knocks over his chair. Honeyboy steadies Robert, and Robert whispers to Honeyboy: "Let's get out of here."

Honeyboy is high, his show was real strong and so he wants to celebrate.

Honeyboy has Robert stay out and drink white whiskey, and when they run out of that, they spend their money on the girls on Avenue F. But instead of enjoying Emma Collins' girl Robert's thoughts turn to Angela and Ralph Stokes' menacing look. Robert begins to wonder if he should not give Honeyboy his last gig and leave the next day. But it isn't until nine-thirty the next morning before they stumble back to the boarding house and nearly eight o'clock the next evening when Robert awakens from his slumber. It is too late to leave now. He will have to play one more night.

3.

During his first few numbers Robert Johnson is rigid and not feeling right.

*They're Red Hot* begins the night, but his voice is raspy, and his fingers fumble their way to the finish. *Kind Hearted Woman Blues* is an easier song for him to play, but it isn't much stronger. He hasn't seen Angela in five days and Ralph Stokes is missing too. Thoughts of Angela plague him as he stumbles through *When You Got a Good Friend*.

Robert picks up his glass of whiskey and takes a sip as he looks out over the crowd. He has just got to put it all behind him. He tips the whiskey glass back and drains it. He wipes the sweat from his brow and with firm resolution breaks into *Cross Road Blues*. Mississippi magnolias rain down like gunshots firing up the crowd. People move quickly to the dance floor to take advantage of Robert's sudden surge of strength. They have come to recognize and seek out these moments when sheer talent takes over

and he weaves together a song both haunting and beautiful. A silent dancer makes her way to the front. She is a good-looking girl with hard breasts and thin legs. She mirrors the sound of Robert's guitar, every stroke of the slide sending long shockwaves through her body. The private dance attracts Robert's attention and soon he is moving his slide in an effort to stir her. She runs her long arms through her hair, down her neck, over her breasts until they come to a rest on her hips. Robert plays this game as long as he can, but the song must come to an end sometime. *Terraplane Blues* is fast, loose, and full of dirty words. Robert plays the number quickly so he can take a break and find out her name. The song finishes to a wild chorus of cheers and hollers, but he doesn't stay around long enough to accept them; he makes his way to where Honeyboy is sitting, no sense in being too eager.

Honeyboy slaps Robert on the back, but Robert slaps back harder, excited about the night and all of its sudden possibility. The dancer walks over to Robert and he offers her the open chair.

"My name is Robert." He taps his hand on the chair.

"I know that, silly," the woman says in a baby-like voice

"What is your name?" Robert smiles.

"Mary." She draws out the name and traces it with her eyes.

"I guess that makes you heaven sent," Robert winks at her.

Mary leans in close and rubs Robert's cheek. "Maybe I am," She licks Robert's ear and pulls her head back quickly, "And maybe I am not." Robert shakes his head, "Shoot." And Robert and Mary go on like this, ignoring the presence of Honeyboy, the

glasses of whiskey sent over by admirers, and the crowd shouting: "Play! Play! Play!" to get Robert back on stage.

Robert stands up and takes a long look around the room. The shouts and the hollers are intoxicating. Scanning the faces that dot the room, Robert spots Angela. He smiles at her, but before she can smile back Ralph Stokes puts his arm on her shoulder and steers her back toward the kitchen. Robert is confused; is she alright? Is she safe? But before he can find the answer to these questions, Honeyboy nudges him in the side. "Well, what are you waiting for?" Honeyboy shouts, "They need you." But Honeyboy is referring to the crowd; Robert will have to wait until the end of the next set to sort this mess out. Robert looks at Honeyboy and Mary and takes down the two glasses of whiskey that are sitting in front of him, setting each one down lovingly. He is ready to play again.

On stage Robert is a monster. Blues burst loud and strange, but always strong. He runs through all of his up-tempo numbers; he is not going to leave Three Forks without a fight. He whips the crowd into a heavy frenzy mixing passion and penitence, jest and revelation. But around one in the morning, Robert feels he can go on no longer; his side is splitting, and there is a strange burning feeling in his stomach. He starts in on *Stones in My Passway* a slow number that takes less up less energy. His hands are tingling and he can barely feel his guitar. "*I got stones in my passway and my road seems dark as night. I have pains in my hearts, they have taken my appetite.*" The notes begin tapering off, Robert is missing one in every three, but he is still trying to sing. "*My enemies have betrayed me, have overtaken poor Bob at last.*" When Robert repeats this

verse his voice weakens, but the crowd dismisses it as part of Robert's stage theatrics.

*"And there's one thing certainly, they have stones all in my pass."*

The guitar falls out of Robert's hands. "I'm sorry. I can't," he says before tumbling out of his seat. Everybody is quiet. Honeyboy rushes the stage and gathers up Robert. With the help of a few men Robert is laid out limp on a table in the kitchen. Angela appears and the sight of Robert makes her scream. She clasps her hands over his body, making Robert wriggle in discomfort. His sudden movement makes Angela scream again. Just then Ralph Stokes pushes through the kitchen door and pulls his wife away from Robert. After steering Angela out of the kitchen, Ralph Stokes reappears and looks over Robert. Ralph Stokes summons Honeyboy and suggests that Robert should get back to Greenwood as quickly as possible. He sends for Freeman Dixon and within twenty minutes, Honeyboy, Robert and Freeman are heading back to Greenwood.

4.

When Honeyboy lays Robert down on his bed he is groaning and muttering. "Honeyboy, what is happening?" But Honeyboy does not have any quick answers. "Did you eat something funny?" Robert is sweating profusely. "I don't know. You've been with me all night I didn't eat anything funny. I didn't even eat the hamburgers." Honeyboy doesn't know what to say, but he tries to comfort Robert all the same. "You're just sick is all. Rest up good, and you'll be fine in the morning. You'll see."

In the morning nothing has changed. All through the day, Robert's condition deteriorates, but Honeyboy is not around to help him. Thinking that Robert just needs his

rest, Honeyboy walks around town his guitar over his shoulder. He heads around town, playing guitar, and getting it on with a woman on Avenue F.

When Honeyboy returns, he finds Robert caked in blood, on his mouth, his arms, his shoulders. He is crouched over on his hands and knees; he is trying to clear himself by vomiting. His eyes are red and yellow, and he is moaning low and grimly, like a dog. “Jesus, Robert, I think you’ve been poisoned.” There is no response from Robert. Robert is aware that Honeyboy is in the room, but he has no way of communicating with him. Honeyboy runs out of the rooming house to find help.

In the next few hours, friends bring by home remedies. Robert is placed back on his bed, but this brings him little comfort. He lies on his right cheek, blood dripping from his mouth, staring out of the open window at the rows of cotton blossoms beyond the houses.

By the late afternoon a calm comes over Robert. His mind is clear and sharp again. It is as if Robert knows that he is not going to live, that this will be his last room. Watching the bright landscape through the window frame, Robert manages a brief, tight smile as the cotton blossoms wave in the wind. But pain, like a hot blade driven into his gut, leaves him writhing again. Poison burns every recess of his insides. He throws himself to the floor and tries to vomit, but there is nothing left to throw up. His breath is short and he grasps desperately at his lungs. Robert is able to manage his breath again into regular streams, and he rises to his knees. He lets out a short moan. Honeyboy grabs him around the shoulders, but there is nothing he can do. Robert lets out a long, dismal moan before his lungs give out. Honeyboy lays Robert down and listens intently for air,

but there is none, Robert Johnson is dead. “May the lord protect you and sing you to thy rest,” Honeyboy whispers and closes Robert’s eyelids and lays his arms across his body.

5.

News of Robert’s death travels quickly through the Delta and up to Memphis. Robert’s mother, Julia opens the door of her home to find Honeyboy standing with Robert’s guitar in his hand. Honeyboy has traveled to Robinsonville to give Robert’s guitar to her with instructions to bring it back to Memphis. This is Robert’s last wish: to give his guitar back to his brother, Charles Leroy. Julia thanks the young man for fulfilling Robert’s final wish and sends him on his way before breaking down and crying. That night, Julia walks fifteen miles, from where she is living to her daughter, Bessie, all the way out in Penton.

Bessie is surprised, but not shocked when Julia tells her of Robert’s death having feared this moment for a long time. Always the pragmatist, Bessie makes a plan to go down to Greenwood and bury Robert herself, but when she arrives in Greenwood, it is too late. Robert was buried by the Three Forks grocery store the week before. There is a lot of hard mud and black-looking clods piled on the grave, and there is a little cross made out of branches. Bessie has Robert dug back up and put in a decent casket. Looking at Robert in his casket, she is struck by his pin-stripe suit that looks as smart as the day he purchased it. Bessie remembers how Robert strutted around Penton like a peacock when he made that record. Bessie moves Robert to Morgan City, just outside of Greenwood, where there is a Baptist Missionary Church. This time there is a proper ceremony with a pastor.

Afterwards, Bessie heads to Memphis to where Charles Leroy is living. When Charles Leroy answers the door, he finds his sister Bessie standing with Robert's guitar. "Where's Little Robert?" But Bessie is unsure how to answer him. Out of the interest of taking care of Robert's final wishes she has managed to suppress his death until this moment. Now that she is finished she cannot contain herself. "He didn't pawn it," is all she can manage, as she begins to cry.

The end.