

AIN'T NOTHIN' BUT THE BLUES

A DARK HORROR SHORT STORY

NEWTON WEBB

STEEL CROWN PRODUCTIONS

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AIN'T NOTHIN' BUT THE BLUES

Beneath the moss-draped arms of ancient oaks, an old New Orleans boarding house stood, a relic of grander times, soaked in the melancholic blues of bygone days. Jackson Gray hauled his travel chest down the uneven sidewalk. The summer humidity seeped into his starched-collared shirt. He paused outside The Grand Dame, looking up at its sagging balconies and peeling paint, a new beginning for his final year at Xavier University.

The door to the boarding house creaked as he pushed it open. He stepped inside, out of the blistering sun into the cool, dimly lit foyer. The air was thick with the musk of old wood and stale tobacco smoke. Behind a long, scratched counter sat a woman, engrossed in a paperback novel, a smouldering cigarette balanced in an overflowing ashtray. Her greying hair was a haphazard beehive, and her glasses perched precariously on her nose.

"Excuse me, ma'am," Jackson began, the delta drawl in his voice hinting at his Southern upbringing. "I'm looking for a room to let."

She gestured towards the "VACANCY" sign above the tariff board without looking up from her book.

Jackson hesitated.

"Room seven is free," she said, finally peeling her eyes away from her book to size him up over the rim of her glasses. "But let's get one thing straight, son. We run a tight ship here. Rent is due every Monday, no exceptions. You're late, and my boys will toss your belongings onto the street faster than you can say 'buttered biscuits.' And no company! This ain't no hoochie-coochie house."

He nodded, meeting her icy stare. "Yes, ma'am."

"Good, and we'll take two weeks' rent as a deposit." She watched as he pulled out crinkled bills from his wallet. Diligently, she counted them before withdrawing a ring with two tarnished keys from beneath the counter. She

slid it across the worn wood towards him. “Welcome to the madhouse. Room number seven is up the stairs, third on the left. One key is for the room, the other for the front door. You have any problems, you just ask for Miss Cherie.”

“Yes, Miss Cherie.” As he picked up the key, the melancholic strumming of a blues guitar filtered through the ceiling.

“That’ll be old Elliot Banks,” the woman commented, a note of reverence creeping into her voice. “Best damn bluesman in the whole of Louisiana, they say. He can wring out a wailing lick from that old guitar like no one else. Lives right next door to you, likes to play at night. Don’t you go pestering him though, boy. He’s as cantankerous as a rattler with a toothache, but I love the man, bless me I do. You interrupt his playing and I’ll toss you onto the streets faster than you can say—”

“Buttered biscuits?” Jackson finished for her.

Miss Cherie smirked. “Well, what do you know? The boy catches on fast.”

Jackson ascended the rickety stairs, his travel case bumping on the threadbare carpet. The music from next door was now a haunting lament. The deep voice reminded him of John Lee Hooker. It carried an ancient and heartfelt sorrow.

Miss Cherie is on the beam.

He stood outside and listened, his saddle shoes tapping away to the rhythm, before entering his new crib. The room was modest and clean. A small carved desk sat in one corner. Jackson gave a grim nod. It was a far cry from home, but it was better than last year’s accommodation and had what he needed for his studies.

Jackson undid his sweat-soaked shirt as he made his way to the washbasin. He ran the tap and drank deep before washing the travel grime from his face. The water ran cold and clear, a small mercy on this sweltering day. A floral curtain, dotted with holes, segregated the toilet area from the bedroom.

Lying on the bed, he lit a cheroot and listened to Elliot’s blues as he watched the trail of smoke lazily ascend. It added a new layer to the large yellow stain on the ceiling. Like many others before him, he was stamping his mark on his new turf.



The morning light filtered through the worn slats of the window shutters as Jackson woke. Stretching, he waited for his mind to rise from the depths of sleep-induced torpor. Rising, he gave himself a flannel bath using the wash basin and chose fresh clothes from his chest. The shirt wasn’t as neatly ironed

as it would have been at home, but it was clean. Jackson dressed, collected his copy of 'The Pharmacological Basis of Therapeutics', and set out to find food.

Opening his door, he saw an elderly black man shuffling down the hall, holding a paper bag in his arms. The man grunted at him, "Coming through, boy, coming through."

Jackson waited until he passed. As he locked his door, he noticed the man was unlocking the neighbouring room. "Sir, you must be Mr Elliot. I've just moved in."

"What's it to you?" The man said in a surly manner as he opened his door.

"Man, you can really play. I haven't heard blues that fine since Victoria Spivey came to the Preservation Hall. I'm Jackson."

The man paused. "You've heard the Queen Vic?"

Jackson beamed. "I sure have. My parents got me tickets. Queen Victoria sang with a voice that cut straight to the soul."

"Well son, that changes matters." He shifted his grip on the bag to offer a hand. Jackson shook it gladly. "You've good taste, boy. Why, I even remember playing with her back in the day, though she wasn't a queen then." He laughed, a dry, crackly laugh that ended in a coughing spasm. "Where's that accent from? It sounds familiar."

"Clarksdale, Tennessee," Jackson said proudly. "I played the saxophone for a spell, before I—"

Elliot raised an eyebrow. "Clarksdale? Of course. I lived in Tennessee for a time." His face grew sombre. "That was ages ago. I was a different man then."

"Whereabouts?" Jackson asked, his eyes lighting up. "Did you perform there?"

Elliot waved dismissively. "Let a man unpack his groceries before you pepper him with questions. It was mighty fine meeting you, Jackson. Have a good day now."

Jackson nodded. "The pleasure was all mine, Mr Elliot."

But Elliot had already disappeared into his room.

Jackson descended the stairs to the front desk, a bounce in his stride after making a friend—or the closest thing to one—in New Orleans. He headed out into the searing heat once again, the humidity making his shirt cling to him. He strolled through the streets of the French Quarter, hunting for a shaded table where he could enjoy a café au lait.

By the time Jackson returned to his boarding-house, a jangling box in his arms, the woman in the foyer was back at the front desk. She looked up from her book, a different one from yesterday, and regarded him with a sour expression. A cigarette dangled from her lips.

Jackson leaned the box on the counter and retrieved a paper bag from within, offering her a sugary, deep-fried pastry. "A beignet, ma'am?"

She eyed the offering suspiciously before her face broke into a smile, lines deepening with her grin. "My dear boy, that's most kind of you." She puffed on her cigarette. "I think I just might, at that." She accepted his gift and placed it next to a vibrantly coloured green drink.

After dropping the box off in his room, Jackson poured himself a glass of water, relishing the ceiling fan's breeze and drinking deeply from the glass. Pulling out his book, he started to read, but the ceiling fan's rhythmic sound and the oppressive heat soon lulled him to sleep.

He awoke to the sound of Elliot's playing drifting through the walls. A powerful, deep-throated woman's voice accompanied it. Jackson smiled, thinking of the old man entertaining guests, and closed his eyes to savour the music. The old man had a deep, growling voice that reminded Jackson of his pop's Howlin' Wolf vinyl. He retrieved a beer from the crate and delighted in the almost voyeuristic experience of a private performance. He still had time to study before his lecture the next day.

When Jackson returned from class, his mind was abuzz. The day had been exhaustive, filled with medication names, uses, dosages, and side effects. He looked at Elliot's door and, on a whim, grabbed the crate of beers from his room. Knocking on the door, he waited.

It took a while, but eventually, the door opened to reveal a scowling Elliot.

"I brought a gift." Jackson held up the box.

Elliot peered inside, licking his lips. "So you did, son. Dixie beers, no less." He looked up at Jackson. "Well, you'd best come in then."

Jackson followed him in, accepting an open beer from Elliot and taking a seat in a worn wooden chair. Elliot's guitar lay at rest in the corner.

"I enjoyed your performance last night," Jackson said.

"It was what it was," Elliot grunted, finding himself a seat to settle down opposite Jackson. "It's harder to play now, especially with these fingers." He flexed his fingers, and Jackson noticed the swollen knuckles.

Jackson glanced at the arthritic knuckles. "Mind if I take a look?"

Elliot looked at him suspiciously, but offered his hand. "Do you have any medication?"

"Boy, I stopped all that nonsense years ago. All I have now is the blues and the odd beer. I don't even do the hard liquor any more." Elliot snatched his hand back.

"Aspirin or applying heat could help, Mr Elliot."

Elliot shrugged. "Well, if it buys me some more years of playing, I'll try it."

“Who was the singer last night?” Jackson reached for another beer. He froze when he saw Elliot’s stormy expression.

“Now, why would you be asking questions like that?” he snapped. The sound of the fan was the only noise as they both fell silent.

“I...” Jackson faltered, gripping another beer, he passed it over. “I didn’t mean to cause offence, Sir. I just thought she could really blow, that gal.”

Elliot regarded him solemnly before leaning back in his chair, the ancient wood creaking. “I suppose you didn’t. Now, let’s not mention it again.”

Jackson flashed an awkward smile. “Right you are, Mr Elliot.”

They drank together in silence, their earlier harmony shattered by Elliot’s question.

“Well, I suppose, a young thing like you has things to be getting on with,” Elliot eventually said. “I’d best not be keeping you.”

Jackson took his cue and rose, collecting the depleted crate. “It was a pleasure to see you again, Mr Elliot.”

Elliot rose unsteadily onto his feet, stretching before extending a shaky hand. “You be taking care now, Jackson.”

Jackson left the old man’s apartment and returned to his studies until the sunset and the voice of the mystery woman rose up again in a duet with the deep, sonorous tones of Elliot Banks. He smiled at the unfamiliar warmth he felt in their voices. It was a far cry from the grumpy bluesman he’d been drinking with earlier. Lying back in his bed and staring at the ceiling, he lit a cheroot and took a long drag, imagining himself in the audience when Elliot was in his heyday.



When it came time for Jackson to leave for his first seminar of the day, he found himself loitering by the front desk of the Grand Dame. “Miss Cherie?”

She looked up, eyes still bleary from the morning rise, her steaming coffee cup untouched. “Yes, son?”

“Who is the woman who sings with Elliot--”

“Ain’t no dame been here. No dizzy skirts allowed. I told you that,” her voice cracked like a whip.

“But--”

“No buts, unless you are a married man, you don’t bring no women here, this ain’t no juke joint, are we understood?” She looked sternly at Jackson until he nodded.

“Yes, Miss Cherie.”

“Good.” She sniffed, picking up a worn paperback. When he remained loitering, she raised her eyes. “Something else?”

Jackson started. “No, I mean, I’m sorry, no ma’am.”

“Well, then.” She adjusted her glasses and sucked her teeth as she found her page.

Jackson nodded and left.

I guess it is an open secret of some kind. There is no way she couldn't have heard the woman.



For weeks, Jackson listened to the old blues man play throughout the night, with his mysterious partner. He dropped in on Mr Elliot, bringing him a Dixie beer whenever he could, but he was always alone. The floorboards in the corridor creaked as the guests walked upon them, but whenever he opened the door, he never saw anyone except his neighbours and the familiar form of Mr Elliot with his daily groceries.

The mystery burned within him. He had tried talking to his other neighbours, but they were either casually indifferent or feigned ignorance. Having built a friendship with the old bluesman, he had tried to raise the topic a few times, only to be met with outright hostility.

Miss Cherie flat-out denied the existence of the woman.

If Jackson hadn't heard the voice every night, he would doubt himself, but it was clear as a bell through the thin walls of the Grand Dame. Always in concert with Elliot, they mostly sang to the guitar, but, sometimes, Jackson would hear the shrill sound of a harmonica, wailing like a lonely train in the night.

It was a normal evening for Jackson, smoking a cheroot and listening to his once famous neighbour when the music stopped. It had never stopped before. The music had always flowed like the Mississippi River, deep, soulful, and never-ending.

The woman screamed.

Jackson leapt off his bed and ran to Elliot's door. The sound of growling came through the ancient timbers as he pounded on the door. “Mr Elliot, Sir, are you okay? Mr Elliot?”

“Sing your song, Elliot, please, you gotta sing,” the woman pleaded. “Sing!”

Elliot's scream rose as the growling increased in volume.

The door splintered open as Jackson rammed his shoulder against the worn timbers.

The room was steeped in a graveyard blue. Elliot was surrounded by black hounds whose gleaming, fiery red eyes glowed like embers as they circled him. The ghostly figure of a woman tried to shield Elliot from the demonic creatures. One of them lurched forwards and bit deep into Elliot's arm, causing the elderly man to cry out again.

Jackson pressed himself against the wall, frozen in horror by the macabre scene.

With his free hand, Elliot pulled out his harmonica and started playing. The hounds retreated back into the shadows as the wraithlike woman joined him, her strong voice echoing with fear and sadness. Elliot looked up at him, the lines of his face etched with pain and exhaustion, and shook his head, nodding at Jackson to leave him be.

Jackson slid along the wall. He didn't go back to his apartment. Instead, he sat by the Mississippi and stared into the muddy waters as they reflected the bright lights from the street. The echo of a distant trumpet gave rhythm as he worked through his last cheroots, sucking down the harsh tobacco smoke as he tried to make sense of it all. His mind struggled with the surreal scene. When the sun rose, he tried to pretend to himself that it was all a dream.

I shouldn't have left him.

He pounded his thigh with his fist, gritting his teeth. Jackson knew he had committed the act of a coward, abandoning his friend.

He isn't my friend. He is just my neighbour. I should leave and find another room in another boarding house.

Jackson grimaced. Elliot *was* his friend. There was no justification for leaving him. Whatever the hell-spawned mess had been, Jackson had left him alone to deal with it. He pulled out another cheroot, lighting it with his last match. Around him, people were rising, and the streets were filling with people getting ready for work. The hustle and bustle of everyday life made his memories of the previous night seem even more bizarre. Jackson tossed the butt of his cheroot and rubbed at his eyes. He had to see Elliot. He had to know what had happened to the old man. Jackson wandered slowly through the uncaring morning crowds as he prayed the old man had survived. The entrance to the Grand Dame took on a sinister, warped appearance as he approached.

The front desk was vacant. Jackson was glad. He didn't want Cherie to see him shamed. Guilt lent strength to his steps as he strode towards Elliot's room, each step faster than the last. If he slowed down, he might stop. He wanted to stop.

Silence came from the room as Jackson stood outside it. He knocked and then immediately stepped back, pressing against the wall. "You best come on in." Elliot's voice was weak, thin, and tired.

Jackson tentatively pushed the door open. It was still broken, held closed by a box of empty beer bottles. He saw Elliot was sitting in his favourite chair, the same one from last night, his arm was wrapped in a blood-soaked towel. Jackson immediately approached, gently unwrapping the towel to see the deep bite marks on his arm. "We gotta clean this. You got any of that iodine?"

Elliot motioned to the cabinet over his sink. "And boy, I could use a cold one right about now."

"First, you can tell me what happened last night." He went to the basin to fill a pot with water and grabbed a bar of soap along with the iodine. "Hold steady, old timer." Elliot flinched as Jackson cleaned the wound.

"I ain't got much to say. I made a pact at a crossroads to play for a demon at midnight every night. In return, he lets me see my Sweet Bea again."

Jackson dressed the bite marks with a fresh towel, tying it tight. The old man sounded like he was spouting nonsense, but he'd seen the ghost, he'd seen the demonic dogs. "How do you mean you made a deal? You shook hands or something?"

"Son, I signed my life away with the devil's own ink. I sing the blues every midnight. In return, he lets me see my Sweet Bea. But I'm old and I'm tired, my pipes are weak and my fingers arthritic. I won't be able to uphold my end of the deal soon. I almost slipped up last night. His cursed hellhounds are always there waiting, eager to take my soul." Elliot looked down at his swollen fingers. "And now, I've got a dickie arm to boot."

Jackson went and got them both beers. He drank the first half of his in a giant pull and then sat regarding the wounded man. His mind was still reeling from the events of the night before. His logical mind wanted to reject it as the ravings of an old man, but he'd seen enough to believe it. "Do you still have this contract?"

"I've tried to throw it away, tried to burn it, but it always reappears." Elliot motioned to a leathery scroll on the sideboard.

Tentatively, Jackson went over and pulled away the carved bone binder, revealing a contract written in exquisite penmanship. Two signatures were written in a faded dark brown ink at the bottom of the page. "What did you do?"

"What did I do?" Elliot chuckled. "Son, you have been on this earth for barely a gnat's breath. I was grieving. My Sweet Bea, she was my melody, my tune. Every time I strummed my guitar or sang a line, I felt her spirit with me." He looked down at his beer, letting the morning light play over the glass. "When I lost her, I would have done anything for just a few minutes with her again. My soul to see her again, every night for nearly forty years? Well now, that is just a bargain, worthy of an eternity in hell."

Jackson was looking at the scroll closely. "So, if you can't perform your part of the bargain, your soul is forfeit?"

"That's right," Elliot said, looking out of the window. "Damned to hell for all time."

Jackson looked up at him, eyes narrowed. "How far would you go to get out of this contract?"

Elliot didn't say anything for a while. He just watched as the shadows were slowly banished by the rising sun. "Son, when you've walked this Earth as long as I have and carried the weight of a promise made to a damned demon, there's very little you wouldn't consider."

"I need to get some things. I have an idea, but it will be painful."

"At my age, what isn't?" Mr Elliot chuckled. "Tell me what you need. I know people."



Jackson shook nervously as he lay in his bed, waiting. He could hear Elliot as he started playing.

Idiot, why did you think you could outwit a demon?

Only yesterday, he'd thought that demons were a myth, a religious superstition.

Why did you have to get involved?

His breath caught. Elliot had stopped playing. He was talking to someone. Jackson pressed his ear against the faded wallpaper and tried to make it out.

A guttural howl of primal fury made Jackson stumble backwards, his heart pounding a furious rhythm in his chest.

Then, the raw, soulful wails of genuine Delta blues filled the room.

Jackson raced round. Not bothering to knock, he flung open the broken door to see a smiling old man.

Mr Elliot sat, his eyes now empty sockets with fresh stitches, the surrounding skin raw and red. He was swaying under the effect of the morphine.

"Well boy, it turns out that the devil is in the details. As through no fault of my own, I couldn't 'see' Sweet Bea, the contract was voided."

"I'm sorry. I couldn't think of a better way."

With a trembling hand, Elliot gently touched the scarred hollows that had once been his eyes. "This here? Boy, this ain't nothing but the blues."

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Newton Webb was born in RAF Halton, England, in 1982. He has worked as a computer programmer and a table top games designer, but now writes full time.

He has a pet tortoise called Gill, a red cherry shrimp tank, an ever expanding shoal of corydoras, and two pet venus fly traps called Frank and Audrey II.

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