

HOBY BLUE BANKS

IN EXACTLY
1,000 WORDS
MORE OR LESS



BROUGHT TO YOU BY
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Hyperborea
P U B L I S H I N G

THIS HERE BOOK AND THE STORIES IN IT ADDS UP TO

THE LIFE & TIMES OF HOBY BLUE BANKS

AS TOLD TO BRUCE SAGER, TYPIST,
WHO OTHERWISE DON'T KNOW SHIT,
AND WHO, ON TOP OF HIS OTHER DEFICITS & DEFECTS,
OF WHICH THERE IS NO SMALL NUMBER,
WANTED TO CALL THIS THING

*Speak
Easy*

I GUESS BECAUSE OF THE LIZARD ON THE COVER,
WHICH, TO AN ARTSY FARTSY MIND,
MIGHT BE A STATEMENT OR SOME SUCH
ABOUT TRUSTING WHAT SPEECH COME TUMBLING OUT
OF A MAN'S MOUTH WHEN HE GETS TO TALKING

WELCOME TO MY WORLD . . .

“ . . . and there was this curve just then would of been no trouble normally, but it wasn't a normal moment, and so's just as I was getting ready to drench her tonsils the truck goes airborne and takes a speed limit sign with it and we land on some scrub in a ditch with the sign flying after us like some kind of warning, and then its pole come shooting like a harpoon through the driver's side window and went clear through the top of Sadie Belle's head and out the back of her neck where the hairline is, gaffed like a fish, and the steel rod nestled in the crack of her poor sweet ass and her head all the way down deep and her tonsils tickling my Thompson.”

. . . WON'T YOU COME ON IN?

MIRACLES, I GUESS . . .

“ . . . and one day this saloon keeper named Roy, as in Roy Orbison but it wasn't that Roy, of course, this one had but one eye and I don't think he could of hit a high note with a hound dog hanging from his hose, well, this old boy asked me if I knew how to tend bar as well as cook. Cause his day man up and quit for no good reason just that morning, and he needed someone in the afternoons when things wasn't so busy. Now it's a lot easier to pour a drink than steam a crawfish, and turns out the money was good, too, so how could I say no to that? Plus the job made for easy conversation. Especially with the women . . .”

. . . STILL HAPPEN NOW & THEN

STEP INTO MY HEART . . .

“. . . anyways, after about a week I got tired of Paris and decided to head to Amsterdam, which is a town where there’s a lot of canals and the weed is legal and the ladies is even friendlier than in the Place Pigalle, and good god damn if they don’t have streets where the gals set up in their little windows to show what they got to offer and whatnot, and the best part is it’s all legit as right on red, but maybe it’s more to your taste to find your own treats in one of the Amsterdam hash bars, and plenty of college girls from back home happy to give up for free what them Dutch girls is showing off in their windows.”

. . . LEAVE YOUR CARES BEHIND

WELCOME TO MY WORLD . . .

“ . . . and when we got to the Pit Stop he said Look, just turn down the music some and pull around back, I know this girl in there and I don’t want her to see me get out of your truck, I’ll explain later, but I just want to get in and out fast, so keep the motor running. And about 90 seconds later he come tearing around the corner and jumps in and says Step on it, Hoby, and we went screaming out of the lot and off into the night. And I said to him Where is those Marlboros, Sallie?, and he said Well, they didn’t have the 83’s, Hoby, but we can go back to your place and smoke whatever you got.”

. . . BUILT WITH YOU IN MIND

I'LL BE WAITING HERE . . .

“ . . . so it didn't take me no time to relieve Miss Brenda of her dress and her bra, and what a perfect sight she was, just like a cheerleader up there, just perfect. And then I went and pulled down her panties, and she looked me in the eye and asked What did I think of her forbidden fruit? So I got to see the real truth of it, and she wasn't kidding when she said it was a little surprise. Well, not all that little. But just then Miss Bumpus comes in and sees the two of us on the floor and gets a good long look at a little more of old Hoby's back side than she ever meant to. And probably an eye full of Miss Brenda Dale.”

. . . WITH MY ARMS UNFURLED

WAITING JUST FOR YOU . . .

“ . . . so here I was standing there, just minding my own business, when this little German boy breaks away from momma and decides to climb right up into one of them horrible ovens. Right up. Which just ain’t right. At which point I just stepped up and crawled in after him, but he was little and made it all the way to the back, and got his head stuck up the flue and started in to yowling. So’s I had to crawl all the way in to get him, and got stuck, too, seeing as my size and all, and got filthy doing it, which I know is in bad taste to say but was almost funny in its own way. But there was these two guards didn’t think it was funny . . .”

. . . WELCOME TO MY WORLD

Speak Easy

BY MR. HOBY BLUE BANKS
OF HINESVILLE, GEORGIA
(THOUGH THERE AIN'T
BUT ONE OF ME)

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Welcome to My World

by Jim Reeves

but done in the voice of Elvis



ALSO BY BRUCE SAGER

TAU

SWALE

THE DECAY OF LYING

LAST PRAYER AT STEEL PIER

WHAT LANGUAGE WOULD PLEASE ITS EAR?

FAMOUS

THE PUMPING STATION

NINE NINETY-FIVE



Get your facts first,
and then you can distort them
as much as you please.

MARK TWAIN



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*Hoby Blue Banks treats women like an asshole
plus his dick aint near so big as he thinks it is
but still its big*

– HOBY BLUE BANKS

PIG & PEPPER BAR & GRILL

THE GENERALLY UNIQUE STATUS OF HOBY BLUE BANKS

Hoby Blue Banks treats women like an asshole plus his dick aint near so big as he thinks it is but still its big is one of my many near-famous scrawls across the back of the bathroom door, stall number 2, ladies room, Pig & Pepper Bar & Grill (but mostly bar), Elma G Miles Parkway, Hinesville, Liberty County, Georgia.

Which facts are all stuffed up there in the first sentence so's you know where to find me, in case you want to test the truth of it.

Which, if you do, I strongly suggest you be a woman.

No offense.

Anyway, I'm not hard to find. Most any time, middle barstool at the Pig, taped red vinyl cushion with the exact shape of my ass pressed right into it like a fingerprint, right here, right now, middle of the day, closing time, you know where to find me, six foot five once, pushing six four now, white, ugly, fifty-three as I write this but feeling closer to sixty in my bones, specially on a wet day, a few extra pounds but I can still bring it.

Which is why I do like that Toby Keith song “As Good As I Once Was.” Now there’s an anthem for a man at a certain point in his life, the upshot of which is I ain’t as good as I once was, according to Toby, but I’m as good once as I ever was.

Go ahead, chew on that for a while. Sounds about right to me.

Truth is, though, I’m not sure I ever was all that good in the first place.

But I put on a good show. And even if I’m not your standard Toby Keith, I still have this easy smile. Toby. Hoby. Moby. There’s dicks everywhere you look.

I’ll even sneak into the ladies room on a slow night and graffiti a new testimonial in my best flowery woman’s script, just to see if anyone bites. I mean, they got nothing better to read in there, and at least it’s free advertising and can lead once in a Hoby Blue Moon to the buying of some beers for a woman that gets intrigued while she’s going about her business. Which has been quite a few, actually, as the nights stack up, which they do, the nights fly right on past us, they’re piled higher than college boys on a goal line stand by now.

So I ain’t that hard to find. And ain’t no way no one’s gonna mix me up with no other Hoby

anyways, since there ain't but one Hoby Blue Banks, just one in the whole entirety of this U. S. of A., and hardly any just plain Hobys even.

I know this for sure, about the Hobys.

I was close with this woman, Sadie Belle Beasley, looked it up for me, and turns out the name didn't even rightly come into its own but a year or two before I was born, which, by the way, was 1960, the eighth day of November, same day that Kennedy beat Nixon – or Kennedy's father outbought him – and so one way or the other JFK become president just as I become Hoby Blue.

And then got himself shot three years later, like a dog in the street, which at least I have not, though I'm not saying I'm a better man than Kennedy. Just luckier. But my life ain't over yet, so who knows? There's still time.

Now ain't that the way of the world, more or less? Getting shot just when things are starting to break right, I mean.

And they won't let it rest, some folks, not even fifty years later.

Every so often you walk past some asswipe bitching into his beer or setting in a cloud of cigar smoke, and there's this whole other asswipe setting over here, knows ever last thing there is to know,

arguing the fine points of it, saying Oswald done it all by his lonesome, and the first asswipe swearing no way Oswald done it, that it was them Cubans or the CIA or them guys in the black suits with sunglasses or the man next in line for the job or the rich men or the oil men, which is the same thing, give or take, and it's a surprise to me some pissant ain't got his fool head shot off just in the disputation of it. But men do need their small talk, so long as there's guns involved. Guns or politics or cars.

Or women.

Anyways, I knew this Sadie, and she checked out Hoby, Hoby being my name and all, and did it of her own free will, too. She liked me that much.

She was the librarian in this little town a couple towns over until just a while back, and I'm betting a good one at that. Though I knew her better from checking out the backseat of the Hoby-mobile in the back lot of the Pig at night than from checking out books from the library during the day.

And she said she looked it up and not more than one baby boy in a couple hundred thousand or some such got named Hoby back then, not even ten of us in the whole country that year, which is a

damned good thing for me, when you think on it, since I don't want nor need no other Hoby taking credit for whatever whacker size or tongue music or whatnot I've lately inscribed on the ladies room stalls.

And not only is there no other Hobys, but even if there was one or two skulking around here or there, what's the chance of them being a Hoby *Blue Banks*, is what I want to know, though I'd call it a stupid question, of which they say there is nonesuch. So no other Hoby Blue Banks.

Though there is stupid questions, for sure. Plenty of 'em.

Just no other Hoby Blues.

WHAT HAPPENED TO HOBY BLUE'S GIRL

Nearest thing old Hoby Blue got to a steady girl's gone now, dead in a ditch.

Dead on a dark afternoon, half past twelve it was on this just past 22nd day of November, which was her birthday and I believe her birth hour, dead and it all had to do more or less directly with what she was up to at just that very moment, which is that she'd decided to get buck naked in the front seat of the Hoby-mobile right there outside of Hinesville on Route 144-East, right then in the middle of the day, and right where her twin brother, Sheriff Herbert S. Beasley, would be set up in the brush by the train tracks that has been growing thicker and thicker since we was all kids.

It all had to do more or less directly with how she decided to observe "the precise minute of my debut upon the rostrum of this damned old wet blue ball," which was the way she put it, her being a librarian and all and therefore educated on most every topic, and given to stitching together strings of words better than anyone you never met.

With Sadie Belle Beasley, no sense using five words when fifty was setting there like hound dogs on their hind legs just panting to go fetch.

And it ain't comical or nonesuch, but after the fact now, just setting and talking, there might be a certain amusing side in the telling of it, how she went, I mean, humor being the flip side of what ain't so funny, what's got some tragedy to it.

And there's a good mixture in the story of both what's funny and what ain't, depending on what makes you smile or shake your head. And I'm hoping you're more the smiling type, and wise to the ways of this world. Or otherwise you should stop right here, and don't say I didn't warn you proper.

So old Sadie Belle, who had a few rings to her trunk, but still a damned nice ass and a real pretty face, had taken it into her head that there was something special to it that she was born at just the same time Mr. Lee Harvey Oswald (or someone) had the president's head directly in his sights. Her notion was that just as Lee Harvey (or someone) pulled his finger, she pulled into the station with little Herbert just behind her, and so she was fond of pointing out that she was coming just as JFK was going.

And Sadie Belle decided that afternoon that nothing could baptize the moment better than burying her head in old Hoby's jeans, which she'd unzipped, and fished out the burrito for a birthday treat, and she went real slow at first, until this ache spread all the way to my thighs, and still she was just playing and diddling with the thing, and then finally figured to empty my damned old wet blue balls, and all the while my foot on the gas, and faster and faster, her head bobbing up and down, my foot on the pedal, and then damn!, those red and blues, and who but Sheriff Herbert behind the wheel?

Now Sheriff Herbert don't cotton to being called Herbie, and so from the time he was little everyone called him Hoby, too, though Hoby was no way his real name, there being so few of us, and I'd taken to calling him Hoby 2, and Herbert didn't cotton to me neither. No love lost there.

And no missing the Hobymobile anyways, jacked up, turbocharged, all red and yellow and black and two little flags flying off the side of the bed, one of the U. S. of A. and one other, which I will not say what it was for the sake of not pissing off folks that wouldn't understand.

So there I was with his bareassed sister, her head in my lap and going near eighty and what's a

man to do? I just dropped the hammer and thought to lose him, and then I hit that moment of no return, what with her mouth like a pit bull on a pork chop, and there was this curve just then would of been no trouble normally, but it wasn't a normal moment, and so's just as I was getting ready to drench her tonsils the truck goes airborne and takes a speed limit sign with it and we land on some scrub in a ditch with the sign flying after us like some kind of warning, and then its pole come shooting like a harpoon through the driver's side window and went clear through the top of Sadie Belle's head and out the back of her neck where the hairline is, gaffed like a fish, and the steel rod nestled in the crack of her poor sweet ass and her head all the way down deep and her tonsils tickling my Thompson.

And just so's you know, old Hoby ain't got no taste for corpse love or whatnot, but what with the springs of the old truck all jostled and one popping through a generous length into Hoby's bottom, I just bubbled up and this all happened in about two seconds and then I don't know what, but I do recall her eyes was wide open and the look of surprise on her face when her brother lifted her head which I could not because I was just pinned there, and kind of not too sure of nothing.

Dead in a ditch with a dick in her mouth. That's how he found her, spear dead, sheer dead, not near dead but no-question dead, though he wasn't about to report it the way it happened and I guess that's why old Hoby Blue still has his ass planted on a taped red vinyl cushion and bellied up to the bar in the Pig & Pepper instead of a guest of the state.

OLD HOBY HAD A FATHER-IN-LAW, ONCE

Gunny Birch.

Bastard looked like a king and squirted out nothing but princesses. And one hell of a wife, too. Which is the way of the rich and skinny.

Damned closet libertines, Gunny and Saralee, lived it up real good right after the war, sweet times back in the forties, the fifties, acting so straight and all, so Ward and June, if you catch my drift. But behind closed doors?

Behind closed doors they went right at it like rabbits in a hutch on a hot plate – and pipes and patches and a bulldog by the easy chair and whatnot, sure enough, and dinner always on the table by six, *at* six . . . but still, you can't fool old Hoby. Takes more than a twist of lime before dinner to pull the wool over these baby blues.

Old Hoby knows all about the moneyed folks, and civilized, and what they was up to.

And these particular folks, Gunny and Saralee, threw three of the sweetest damned pups you ever took aim at. All girls. Each with mirror balls for eyes, each one all glitter and gush.

I mean, these was girls made a pope pass on midnight mass for a piece.

So, head turners if ever there was one – and there was three. Three. And I guess the heavens was smiling on me back then, because I loved two of 'em and wound up marrying one. And I guess that's what it means when they say You better look out what you wish for.

Now, let me tell you about Miss Edna, which ain't the fairest name, but ain't much to a name. Edna was the oldest by a year, and could be she was the prettiest.

Girl could melt the diamonds in a glass case just looking at rings. And she had talents.

Special skills.

By which I mean, I went on the computer last Wednesday to check out Michael's Angel Lounge, to see if this dancer Crystal might be greasing the pole that night, and I see this link, Michelangelo, statue of a buck naked boy and all these tourist girls looking up at his stuff just hanging out there, and I clicked on it, and turns out this Michelangelo, which everyone has heard of, was this Italian genius, and it said he was a "millennial intelligence," which I looked up and it means that a

brain like his comes along but maybe once every thousand years or so. And Miss Edna, she was a lot like him, but not Italian.

I think she was a millennial lovmaker is what, because old Hoby's had a few before her and a few since, but never a girl quite like Edna. I mean, if you liked fat, she could be fat, if you liked skinny, she could be skinny, hard, soft, just a damned octopus in your arms. So's I had stars in my head and asked her to become Mrs. Banks, Mrs. Hoby Blue Banks, and she said yes.

But turns out it wasn't the first time she'd said yes. More virgin brides than virgins.

And damn old Gunny that could slay a woman just by looking at her twice, and damn Saralee so long and fine, maybe they could of taken two minutes to calm down their girls and tell 'em a thing or two about how's a woman's supposed to act when she takes the vows, but no, they did no such thing. Or if they did, it didn't stick.

Now you might of guessed just by looking, this here Gunny had a certain way with the ladies, and a reputation, too, no matter how many Sundays him and Saralee and the girls might sashay out of church looking like a fresh box of candies,

and I come to learn that the man knew the hourly rates of every lodge in the county and creased many a sheet over the seasons, and greased many a palm, and no shortage of hairdressers and nurses and waitresses and such like to help out.

Thing is, Miss Edna, she didn't fall too far from that tree, which pretty much had but one stubborn branch. Except with her it was truckers and salesmen and gardeners and grease monkeys, and maybe a tomboy or two thrown in for lagniappe. My bride had what you might call a broad appetite. Of which I did not know.

Old Hoby has to be honest with you, though. I had my own special brand of hunger back in those days, maybe more like an itch. And only a dancer could scratch it.

So there's been many a Crystal over the years. Crystals, Ambers, Jasmines – every one of 'em straight out of a Tiffany window.

And one day I pulled round back of the Travelodge on Oglethorpe with this particular juicy Tiffany in my truck, smack into the space for Room 142, and just as I opened her door, me being a gentleman and all, the doors to Rooms 140 and 144 swung wide open, and then standing right out there in the bright afternoon squinting at each other

was 1) me and this Tiffany, and 2) old Gunny and Agnes Mae Moore, who taught eighth grade English at Snelson-Golden and who, I reckon, had painted the midnight ceilings of many an eighth grade boy, and 3) this dipshit Seymour D. Satterthwaite, who'd been the worst excuse for a towel boy ever at Liberty County and whose ass I used to snap regular with a rolled up towel after every football practice, and him looking like he'd just taken a ride through a cement mixer, and trailing right behind Seymour my sweet Edna tweaking the spaghetti straps on her little white tummy shirt.

And I lay it all at the feet of Gunny, my father-in-law, who was too damned good looking to begin with, and should have been named Johnny, as in Appleseed, or maybe bad seed, but anyways too much seed, and spread just once too often.

HOBY AND THE BAXTER SISTERS

Well, just one Sister.

And not Baxter, neither, truth be told.

It says Baxter up there in the title, sure, but that's mainly to protect the innocent. Of which there ain't so many.

And certainly not Miss Melody her own self, which wasn't her real name anyways, seeing as her real name rhymes with cheetah, but still the longest legs of the three, and that part's the god's honest truth, which you can see clear enough if you look up the Baxter Sisters at the Grammys, which they been to many times.

And many times on the Billboard charts, too, being as they was sexy as Daisy Duke and much admired back in the day. The Baxter Sisters was rhythm and blues in the flesh, with disco, pop, jazz and a fair bit of soul all mixed together, and even a little country snuck in.

And a little country snuck into Miss Melody one night in the person of Hoby Blue, and some woolly times come of it, of which if you was to pull up a stool at the Pig and buy me a beer I might be inclined to share a few Top Twenties myself.

Now there come a time, after me and Edna hit the splits, when Liberty County felt just like a phone booth to old Hoby, and seeing as it's a big country and forty-nine other states to explore, I went to discuss it all with my good friend Kenny who was this Jewish boy from up north took the rap for a block of weed and did a little time for it. Then he come south to lick his wounds and try his luck at the music promotion game, where nobody looks too close at your resume.

Kenny and me, we had some good times, of which I don't recall that much. But still.

And the long and the short of it is, I just wanted to get out and have me some times, and Kenny and me was sitting blowing smoke rings one night when I told him I was looking for a new gig, and quick as beer shit I was signed on as a roadie, which today is called a techie, but being as this was several decades ago the dictionary hadn't caught up to the times just yet and so Hoby the Roadie got to travel with the Baxter Sisters who was signed with Kenny to do quite a few shows. And that's where it all started.

You open a door, you never know what's like to crawl through.

And so I got to hoist bags and speakers and all manner of instruments, of which I could not play a lick, but I learned the board, too, and the lights, and just made myself generally useful, and best of all was the times on the bus when the sunshine was all over the road and inside was the sunshine of Miss Melody Baxter's wide smile, and never so much light on old Hoby in all his days as when she'd set down next to me and say What is my big tall boy with all them curls and the devil in his eyes up to today?, and then I'd just look down and say You know, Miss Melody, I got these papers here with the scheme for the board, and I got to get so's I can just flick a switch in the dark without even looking so's the light hits you just right. Or some such.

And Miss Melody would just smile at me and them bright white teeth and her smelling like honeysuckle and spice and one of them long legs pressed right up against my jeans, and I'd think right about then even if the damned lights went out, every eye in the house would still be on you.

Now it was my job to make sure that everything run smooth as grits in a grinder, but seems she took the notion it was her job to make sure old Hoby was running just as smooth, and

even if I couldn't rightly believe that it was her intent to go and Hobify herself, actions do speak louder than words.

So one night after a fairly good show when we was all staying overnight at the Union Station Hotel in Nashville, me and the crew was down at the bar talking shop, and then the noise died out and the room parted like the Red Sea and right there in the center of it was Miss Melody, and every head turned and the people started to clap their hands. I guess the Opry sends a good crowd over to the Union Station after a show.

And what does Miss Melody do but plunk down with us like on the bus, and everyone turned back to their drinks then and we just sat and laughed at not much of anything for the rest of the night and drank the place dark.

And when it come time to go up, me and Melody was the last two on the elevator, and when the door opened for me to get off she said No, wait, let it close, and she kissed me right there in that elevator, and it went up and up, and when the door opened she led me out onto the top floor of the Union Station Hotel and took me down a long hall and into about three or four of the best damned months that old Hoby has ever had.

And Miss Melody didn't have a bad time neither, judging by the sound of it, and whatever millennial love my sweet Edna was busy making, well, let's just say that lightning, maybe it can strike twice in a thousand years. Melody was all that and more.

I mean, Edna might have had her palms printed on Seymour D. Satterthwaite's sorry ass, but ain't no one never pressed her palm prints on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.

HOBY AND YANCY WILKES BEATS THE SHIT OUT OF EACH OTHER

It was over the Baxter Sisters, of course.

Miss Melody.

Of course.

But also Miss Reecie, and also the state of Yancy's bottom, which I flat out knew nothing about the skin of in real life, but I had to go and open my mouth.

Cause Yancy Wilkes was like the joke about the Frenchman, Dumas.

Dumb Ass was printed all over his face so's he had to dry it with toilet paper. And he probably did, he was that dumb.

And he was mean, too, which don't mix that good with dumb, like chasing beer with Jack.

All this started when I asked him one day to help me load the belly of the bus, as the sun was steaming and a passel of bags, but all he did was lean back in the shade and tell me Kiss my ass – to which I did not cotton one bit – and so I told him No, I think I'll pass on that, I don't like pimples.

Which was a way of saying he had pimples on his ass, which dawned on him slow, like sun rise over the county dump.

And then this little maggot of an idea took root in the mound of stink that was Yancy Wilkes.

And he decided to do a public service for the Baxters. Him being very social minded and all. So Yancy goes to Miss Reecie Baxter and flat out tells her that me and Miss Melody was doing the midnight tango.

Which didn't take no Sherlock Holmes to come to the conclusion seeing as I was his bunkie, and many a night an empty bunk, and even a dumb ass like Yancy has eyes and ears, but the straight up truth is I never breathed a word to him, which is important to me you know, because I don't want you setting there thinking old Hoby's a man with a long loose tongue and dog balls for brains.

Anyways, Yancy ups and gives the good news to Miss Reecie same day I opined to him he had them pimples on his ass, to which she said I don't know what – I mean I don't think he told her the pimple part, just the part about me and Miss Melody and what we was up to.

Now Miss Reecie was no ways so modern in her mind as her little sister, and me on top of it being just the hired help and such, and a big old dumb white boy to make matters worse, and I guess they had a word or two, the Baxter Sisters.

And next thing I know Miss Melody come to me steaming and screaming like a cat on fire, how dare me noise her private life all over the crew and whatnot and it will be in the papers.

And what's worse, she said, her sister got wind of it from Yancy, so no denying it, being as Yancy and me was close as Spanish moss, and she went on and on about this and that and how she could never lie to her sister anyways, being that Reecie was the oldest, so now the cat was out of the sack proper and the fan covered in bat shit. Or some such.

And the worst was she decided that maybe it wasn't such a good idea anymore that we kept on with what we'd been keeping on with. And what was a man to do then but tell his side quiet and true, but still that didn't change the verdict none.

None of which put me at my Sunday best, not in my mood nor manners, neither. Which the long and the short was, I went off by myself for the afternoon and when I come up for air I figured that two can play at that game, and so I held my temper like the fifth card to an inside straight, held it tight, held it because I was near a foot taller than Yancy Wilkes and surely a hundred pounds to the better,

and if I'd of taken after the little skunk I'd of killed him if I'd of caught him, and I'd of caught him.

And then what? Jail and lawyers and no women for twenty years to life. I was none too smart when I was young, but still too smart to fall for that.

So what I done that night was nothing. Exactly nothing.

When Yancy come skunking in and slunk in a corner of the room and had his eye on me to see if I figured out the stink at the bottom of the well, I just talked natural and set him at ease.

And after a few days and nothing come of it I guess the whole thing just passed from Yancy's little rat brain and he thought he was in the clear.

Which he was not.

Because that Saturday I wrote out a little note in my best flowery woman's script and it was an invitation to come join Miss Reecie in her bedroom that very night, just ask the folks at the desk for the key and tell them she'd sent him for it and then slip in about midnight and get naked and slide in bed with me and wake me up with a nip on my titty and signed Reecie B. with a lipstick kiss.

And the dumb ass did just that.

At which at about one minute after midnight all hell broke loose and everyone come running out

in the hall in their shorts, and me setting back laughing, but Miss Reecie was no fool, she seen the look on my face and knew straight off, and next thing we knew me and Yancy was standing by the side of the road looking for a hitch back south, and by the time we hit the Georgia line we was laughing about it and shook hands.

And I ain't never seen none of 'em since.

HOBY AND THE BLUE BAYOU

So one spring day not long after the Baxters was over and done with I had the hankering to travel a little, having seen much of the world by then, but mostly by colored lights and fast music and a layer of smoke to it like on the stage, which those what's in the know calls theater fog.

We used to atomize a little mineral oil to get the general effect, and it wasn't just good on stage, you could set up a pump in the back of your truck if you was disposed to purchase one – a pump, that is – and they don't cost all that much, and it don't take much neither to vent it into the back of a busy bar, and if you was quick about it you could clear the room just so and pull back your rig and none the wiser.

And when you walked in then all wide eyed you had the place all to yourself and whatever women was brave enough to wait it out.

Which is the kind of spirit I look for in a woman, a woman that don't necessarily see through the fog, but it don't bother her all that much neither, she's used to it, she's used to the way life works, and so when some big old boy with the devil

in his eyes swims up out of the mist she sees what she sees, maybe a white knight, maybe a white gator, but she just sets back and smiles and then life takes us where it will.

Now I was still drawn to lights and parties back in those days, I liked the air filled with music.

And so I drifted into the oldest part of a little burg called New Orleans, and I was doing kitchen work because that's what there was at first, started with dishes and floors, but after a while, maybe cause I was white and all, I got to cook here and there.

Oh, old Hoby knows how to shimmy up that ladder like a spider on a hot rock.

So I found this gig in a greasy hole off Bourbon Street, and I was happy enough steaming crawfish and shrimp and crabs, spicing them up to taste, and even had a little change in my pocket, but not too much.

And one day this saloon keeper named Roy, as in Roy Orbison but it wasn't that Roy, of course, this one had but one eye and I don't think he could of hit a high note with a hound dog hanging from his hose, well, this old boy asked me if I knew how to tend bar as well as cook. Cause his day man up

and quit for no good reason just that morning, and he needed someone in the afternoons when things wasn't so busy.

Now it's a lot easier to pour a drink than steam a crawfish, and turns out the money was good, too, so how could I say no to that? Plus the job made for easy conversation. Especially with the women, some of which were wiggly as catfish, and near as tasty. Many a fish swum into that bar wound up netted and speared. But that's another story.

This one's about this one particular woman, her name was Gretchen Reulet, and she was a bayou person, brown eyes and tight as a two-stroke, had this little cabin all fixed up that her daddy left her and a real nice camp, too, right there on Bayou Lafourche, and a boat bigger than you might guess.

And me and Gretchen had this natural way about us, right from the start, and nature done took its course, as my daddy would say, and old Hoby and Gretchen Reulet become a number.

But Gretchen had this crazy streak to her, she liked a back room better than a bed, by which I mean she would rather get a little drunk and meet me by the boxes in the back room and get taken that way, in the heat and the steam of it, and maybe

someone would walk in on us or maybe not, it was taking the chance was the turn-on for her, and so's over the course of a few months we christened many a changing stall and public park and even a few bathrooms, men's or ladies, didn't matter, and she took to wearing the commando fashion, if you catch my drift, and easy access become the word of the day, and her smile and nod like a beacon to a moth.

So one night we was back in the cabin and Gretchen says Let's go out under the stars and lay by the water, it's a beautiful night. And I said Sure, baby, if that's what you want, though honestly a mattress and a pillow would of done me just fine.

But no telling her no, and so we went down by the marsh and she was all over me, and I was all over her – you been around, you know the drill.

And suddenly old Gretchen starts to thrash and buck like I never seen nor heard, and I'm thinking well hell, this old boy's got some extra gas in the tank, I never seen her hit that gear before.

And she's screaming like a banshee, can't make out two words, and then I feel this whole other thing against me, hard and wet and cold, like it was the hand of god or something.

But nothing like that at all.

Just this old gator decided to take a piece of Gretchen, her right foot and ankle and halfway to her knee, and we got in a tug of war over her.

Which Hoby won, in the end, but not much of a prize.

Hoby got no luck when it comes to women.

And the blue bayou, truth be told, it ain't near so romantic as the song makes it out to be.

WHY HOBY DON'T OWN HALF THE LUMBER YARD BY NOW

Not long after I took off from Louisiana, which had a little too much in the way of marsh to suit me, I come home to Hinesville and was shortly looking for a gainful way to pass the time.

By which I mean I needed a job.

And I got one right off, boiling brats and slinging schnitzel at Zum Rosenhof's, which is only the best damned restaurant in Liberty County, real German food, and not so many restaurants in these parts to compete with it. Though Izola's on Willowbrook ain't bad, and the Good 2 Go is spoke of highly by folks that likes Jamaican food.

They hired me on at Rosenhof's cause they was short of kitchen help and I done a good job for Roy not Orbison, who wrote me a letter when I left said I was the best damned worker he ever had. And there was even a tear in his one good eye when he wrote it, which he did while I was standing right over him.

And one day this guy name of Saltlick Sallie pulled up in about eighty-eight feet of Cadillac and come into Rosenhof's and ordered half the menu, and we got to talking after my shift, and

when it come time to pay he forgot his wallet, but I said Shoot, I'll stake you to it.

And I pulled out some cash and even got the employee discount, and before you could say Schweinebraten three times over we become good friends.

And one night we was killing a keg out back of my place and he said Hoby, you're a damned smart fella. Why don't we go into business together?

Now Saltlick Sallie was a lumber person, but he'd been out of the trade for a while. In Canada, he said. And he had some plans to buy up the Shearouse Lumber Company out in Pooler if he could raise the cash, but he was a little short at the moment. Still, Sallie had this plan. And a big part of it depended on me.

You see, Sallie done took a liking to me as a man gets things done, and tall so as to command respect, and wide so as being able to heft things, which last comes in handy around a lumber yard. Plus he seen me drive, and I'm just hell on wheels, and that appealed to him, though I didn't know all of his plan just yet, but he said that fit right in.

So one night Sallie drops by and I can tell he's all on edge, and he says it's cause he ain't got no smokes, and I said I got some right here, but he

said no, he was particular when it come to coffin nails, and so let's go out to the Pit Stop on Airport Road and he'll pick up a box of Marlboro 83's. And then he says Ain't got much gas in the Caddy, why don't you drive?

And we rolled down the windows and I put on some Little Feat, Dixie Chicken, but not the cut from the Dixie Chicken album – I put on the live one from Waiting for Columbus, which is the best of the Dixie Chickens.

And when we got to the Pit Stop he said Look, just turn down the music some and pull around back, I know this girl in there and I don't want her to see me get out of your truck, I'll explain later, but I just want to get in and out fast, so keep the motor running.

And about 90 seconds later he come tearing around the corner and jumps in and says Step on it, Hoby, and we went screaming out of the lot and off into the night. And I said to him Where is those Marlboros, Sallie?, and he said Well, they didn't have the 83's, Hoby, but we can go back to your place and smoke whatever you got.

Then I didn't see Sallie for about three days or so, and when he next showed his face he was all dolled up in this fancy striped suit with a vest

buttoned all the way down and the tie and the handkerchief was made of the same cloth, perfect match, he was that good a dresser.

And he tells me he has a meeting with this banker down at the Heritage Bank on Oglethorpe to get us a loan for the Shearouse deal, and would I drive him? And he even has this big old suitcase, says it's stuffed with papers to show how the deal's gonna work.

And when we get there he says Hoby, let me out here and park around the corner, I don't want the banker to see me pull up in some old truck, makes me look like I need his money, and the secret to getting a loan is to make the banker think you're rich already and doing him a favor.

So I said sure, but I guess the meeting didn't go so smooth, because no sooner I backed into a space than Sallie ripped open the door and said Let's get out of here, the banker done quit the day before, nice of them to tell me, and I remember he was stuffing his handkerchief back in his pocket and we damned near got hit by a squad car as I pulled off, dumb ass doing sixty on a city street, flashers, sirens, hate to be late for his donuts.

And just the next day we was supposed to meet when the damnedest thing come on the radio,

they done grabbed Sallie out back of the Jamaican place, Good 2 Go, with six kilos of Purple Kush, which is some of the best damned ganja going.

And the only way to talk to Sallie now is through a plate glass window. Which I ain't about to, and don't plan on.

Old Hoby's too smart for that.

HOBY FEELS THE HEAT

Wasn't long after they pinched Saltlick Sallie I got to wondering about our trip to the Pit Stop on Airport Road, and then our little visit to the Heritage Bank, and old Hoby begun to put two plus two together.

And I took it into my head that maybe the laws hereabouts might get to thinking about that old Birds of a Feather notion, or maybe take an interest in where I been with Sallie on such and such a night or a certain afternoon or some such, and the next thing you know Old Man Trouble would be knocking at my door. Two plus two. Five to ten.

Or maybe Sallie might get a bad case of the runny mouth setting there rotting away in his cell, or maybe my luck might just turn bad for no good reason, seeing as all things considered I'd had me a pretty good run up to then, give or take. Or maybe someone seen me and Sallie in the Hobymobile just once too often.

Maybe, maybe, maybe.

I mean maybe it would be a slow day down at the jailhouse and one of them detectives might

have nothing better to do than roust old Hoby, so being all that as it might and may, I took a sudden hankering to travel, and I mean not over to the next county, neither.

I mean across what they calls the Pond.

Which is the Atlantic Ocean, and folks that wants to act like they knows more than they do and all sophisticated and the like calls it that from time to time, the joke being that the Atlantic Ocean is to a pond approximately by size comparison what the brain of the famous Professor Albert Einstein was to the insect mind of Yancy Wilkes. And even more so.

So I took what I had saved up from my schnitzel slinging days at Rosenhof's plus a few dollars Sallie had liberated from his suitcase so's I could buy some gas and cigarettes and whatnot and bought me a ninety day train ticket good for running between all the cities in Europe except for the ones that the boys in red and their kind didn't want to share on account of politics and the like.

Now it happened that old Hoby didn't learn all that much in the way of French or German or whatnot back in Liberty County where there was no great call for such, but just my luck, it turns out that near onto every schoolboy and schoolgirl in Europe

speaks pretty good English, so it wasn't that hard to get around, with Paris being the one stick in everyone's throat, cause they know English there but pretend they don't, and talking louder to 'em don't do a lick of good, they just frown at you and ask the next person in line what they want.

So I was having me a time in Paris anyways, what with the Place Pigalle and such, which is pronounced Plahs Pee Gal and is filled with friendly girls and bearded men running around in dresses and fellows who stand by the doors of the clubs and offer you a free show that if you go in there they first off give you a beer the color of cow piss and then when you say no they say Okay, but that will be 500 dollars or some such, which is fine with me, cause you can try to block the door on my way out but being as I'm a good ways bigger and a long ways meaner than their bouncers when I get riled up – and one night I did in fact get a little riled, and somewhere right by the Moulin Rouge (Moo Lahn Rooj) there's this one bald and very ugly bouncer with no front teeth left and a pretty good notion of my knee in his nether regions – well, point is, maybe these kinds of adventures ain't such a good idea for most folks, so I'd advise you if you go to Paris to

spend your time in just walking around seeing the sights and overpaying sullen waiters for Cokes which don't even come with no ice.

Anyways, after about a week I got tired of Paris and decided to head to Amsterdam, which is a town where there's a lot of canals and the weed is legal and the ladies is even friendlier than in the Place Pigalle, and good god damn if they don't have streets where the gals set up in their little windows to show what they got to offer and whatnot, and the best part is it's all legit as right on red, but maybe it's more to your taste to find your own treats in one of the Amsterdam hash bars, and plenty of college girls from back home happy to give up for free what them Dutch girls is showing off in their windows.

But to get to Amsterdam you need to take the train, and they can get pretty full on the holidays, which happened to be the very time I went to travel.

So I was sitting in this compartment with five nasty Frenchmen, and standing room only outside in the hallway, cause the trains in Europe is set up that way, little compartments that seats six with a narrow hallway that goes the whole length of the car.

And when we got to Brussels, which is a stop on the way to Amsterdam, it was night time, and my whole compartment emptied out.

Now the problem is, old Hoby's set himself a limit of a thousand words, no more, no less, for each of these little stories – and I've just about used up my ration. So's I'm going to have to sign off on this one, but if you want to know what happened after the Frenchmen up and left, well, it's a good yarn.

So just go on to the next page.

HOBY WRITES A FIB

Now where was I?

Well, like I said, when we got to Brussels, which is a stop on the way to Amsterdam, it was night time, and my whole compartment emptied out. And I was thinking how nice it would be if I had the whole place to myself so's I could stretch out on the bench (there was two benches in there, each of 'em facing the other, real cozy) and grab me a little shut eye.

So I quick made up this sign on some letterhead I'd borrowed a handful of from the American Embassy in Paris where I'd stopped to discuss the rude manners of the bouncers in the Place Pigalle, and the sign looked all official and it said:

NO ENTRER ICI

VERBOTTEN

PROHIBITO POR FAVUR

IT IS FORBIDDEN TO ENTER

by order of the American Ambassador

and I tacked it up to the window and pulled the curtains and went off to take a piss.

Which is perfectly understandable, as it is quite a ways from the train station in Paris to the train station in Brussels, and I'd been holding it so no Frenchman would jump in my grave, if you catch my drift. Which if you don't, it means sit in my seat the minute I got up.

Anyways, I made my way down the crowded hallway of the train, and no shortage of fine looking women standing about. Of which I took note. And then I waited about half an hour for this Frenchman in there needed to squeeze out every last thing he'd eaten the past year, and when the door opened he didn't look me in the eye, which is not because of his being French and all but because he left the place with a stench would have made a hog heave his breakfast.

So I just done my business real quick and when the door opened I apologized to the French lady standing outside about the stink and all, but if she understood English she didn't let on, and no sense telling it to her louder. I'd learned that much.

And as I was making my way back to my compartment I struck up a conversation with a nice little girl from the state of Minnesota, which I ain't visited yet, but old Hoby ain't one to discriminate.

And the long and short of it is, I explained to her she didn't have to stand there in that hall all night because if she wanted she could take the empty bench reserved in several languages on the letterhead of the Ambassador of the United States, and she didn't look none too eager, but it was a long night and a narrow hall, and so she said I guess so, which made me think I'd put my dollar on the wrong horse, but it was too late to back out, and so we made our way down to our compartment.

But when we got there damn if the door wasn't locked. Locked tight as a nun's knees.

Well, I just went ahead and knocked on that door, but no answer. So I put my ear to it, and you could tell there was not a soul in there. Which was a bit of a mystery to me and Minnesota, who was looking at me the way I reckon one of those detectives back home might of been if I hadn't taken the Pond option.

And not just my bench in there, you see, but my bags, all the worldly possessions of yours truly.

Nothing to do then but find the conductor of the train and ask him for the skinny.

So I go off into the hallway and sure enough, there's this man looking vaguely official and tired

and sweaty and I tell him what happened, and he says he don't understand me, he don't speak English, all of which takes a good five or six minutes, and people looking at me like I done pulled off the Great Train Robbery or some such.

And this little man standing next to us says he'll translate, and then the conductor nods and says I have to see his boss, who's the conductor for that whole part of the train.

So I find him, and he's better dressed and all, and his English not half bad, but I don't get twenty words out when he says I have to see his boss, who is the regional conductor or some such.

And takes me to him. And I begin to explain and he smiles kind of sad and says I have to speak to the chief conductor.

Of the whole damned train.

Who he takes me to.

And the chief conductor speaks better English than I had a right to, and now I'm getting someplace. But the first thing he says is, Am I the American Ambassador?

And old Hoby is quick on his feet, and says no, I am his assistant. And my boss is going to be P-I-S-S-E-D if I don't get into that room. Pronto.

So he says yes, he will let me in. And we get to the door and he takes out this serious looking key, and looks left and right and puts it in the lock. But first he tells me No way I can let anyone else in, because it is forbidden by international law.

And I promise him. And he turns the key then and opens the door, but he turns his head away. And I ask Why are you turning your head? And he says Secret papers!, and shuts the door behind me.

And a little while later I opened the door and there's Miss Minnesota, just fainting on her feet. And I smiled and said Your room is waiting, ma'am. And in she walked, and took her bench, and I tried to talk her up some, but no dice.

Hoby don't have much luck with women.
Not here, not across the Pond.

HOBY GETS EXPELLED FROM CAMP

So after I done all there was to do in Amsterdam I pulled out my little map and ticked off all the places sounded good to go to.

And I went up where the Danish live and the women were very excellent there, little noses and nice and slender like does in the field, and I took to wandering around the streets and the stores, but all the men up there looked like models fell out from the pages of a womens magazine, and old Hoby didn't feel like competing with so many other fishermen, so's I took off for Oslo, Norway and walked around the Frogner Park, but there was no frogs, and on the light poles and in the windows and the like all I saw was signs for a club with a black woman dancing in it, seems like she must of been the only woman of her color in the whole of the country, and very popular. So no sense trying to get something going there, too many fishermen.

And then I took a train to Finland, and got bored, and so I shot down to Germany what fought against us in two wars but today we are very good friends with.

Now the Germans done some pretty bad things which all of us knows about, but seems like the current residents is happy for the most part, like folks everywhere, but still a little sad about what their parents and their grandparents done, though most say they didn't know it was going on right when it was going on under their noses the whole time.

Which is the way of the world, better to say the summer's coming even when the snowflakes is falling on your shoulders. If you catch my drift.

And I read up on it and took a hankering to see where these crimes was committed, so one day I left the city of Munich on a train just like so many people left on a train so many years before, and I got to this camp called Dachau. Which is like Dock How for those of you who don't talk in German. Which, I reckon, is most.

It was about forty minutes on the train, and I was reading up on the place, but when I got there it wasn't what I was expecting, because I guess they was ashamed of what went on there so they went and cleaned it up, mostly, and now what you see isn't the buildings where the prisoners was kept but beds of rocks and stones, long ones, rows and rows of them, and you have to use your imagination.

Except after they tore down all of the thirty-four barracks they realized it wasn't going to be all that much of a memorial, so they rebuilt two of 'em to look like what they was when the prisoners was in there. We all seen the pictures.

And they kept this gas chamber they hardly used, being as Dachau's inside of Germany, and they're fussy about these things and rather of gassed their prisoners on non-German ground, being much less messy for them in the end.

And there was this place in the woods where they shot the prisoners against a wall, very close to the place where they burned the bodies, and there's still bullet marks on the walls amidst the ivy.

And they have a guard tower standing along the camp border, a barbed wire fence in front of it, and a moat, and a strip of grass that if a prisoner was to set so much as a toe on it he'd be shot, and a little museum.

They even have a fence with a German saying, says Work Will Set You Free, which is why the fence is made of iron, because that is the irony of it. Because the only way to get free back then was to leave your body behind.

And yes, there's ovens for burning bodies. I don't understand why they took down the places

where the prisoners slept but left up the places where they burned. But that's just what they did.

And even though old Hoby is no way a religious man and such, there's a sense of something on the grounds which is like it's a sacred place, and many dead and tortured there, so not much laughter as you're walking around except for some of the tourists making quiet jokes to each other which is not so much for the laughs as to keep them that visits from crying.

And the best place to get a sense of it all is not the museum with its pictures and statues and historical words. The best place to visit is called the crematorium. Obviously on account of that is where they cremated, and no shortage of pictures from back when the ovens was hot and filled with ashes and whatnot.

So here I was standing there, just minding my own business, when this little German boy breaks away from momma and decides to climb right up into one of them horrible ovens.

Right up.

Which just ain't right.

At which point I just stepped up and crawled in after him, but he was little and made it all the

way to the back, and got his head stuck up the flue and started in to yowling.

So's I had to crawl all the way in to get him, and got stuck, too, seeing as my size and all, and got filthy doing it, which I know is in bad taste to say but was almost funny in its own way.

But there was these two guards didn't think it was funny. The ones who had to pull me out.

And when they escorted me to the gates they wasn't all that polite, but I didn't care, I was just thinking the whole way, what kind of fellow takes a job like that, a guard at Dachau?

HOBY AND CHICKEN LITTLE

The sky done fell.

That's the message. Don't do no good to run about making no great noise about it.

Don't do no good to run about like the farmer's wife done took your head off, neither. Hell, there's always some fox waiting to do that for you.

You just have to keep your wits about you. That's the trick.

And remember, don't run when walking will do as good. And don't even walk if you can help it. Not if you have a taped red vinyl cushion setting at the bar with your ass printed on it. Too much exercise will age you unbearable.

Too much exercise will age you quicker than a cop at the front door, quicker than a flat tire on the way to the courthouse, quicker than a lost box on tax day. A good barstool's better than a damned old barbell any day. But that's another story.

Or maybe it ain't. Maybe you just got to run and run until you run into trouble. Maybe you're of that type.

Maybe you got an itch for it, maybe you're the type hankers to get your head bit off. Maybe

you're the type, like Cassandra Landry, what don't feel whole until you're sure you been wronged, wronged through and through.

At which point you got the satisfaction you been craving, better than pie.

In which case you just got to run long enough to find your fox. Always a fox out there ready to bite your head off.

And praise Jesus if that ain't the way of the world – always an antelope or two, and always tigers in the trees.

So if you got that little bit of Beat Me in your blood, don't worry. You'll find her. Or him, depending on whose meal you're thinking to be.

Or maybe not to be. I mean, sometimes a leaf falls on your tail feathers and you tell yourself it's a piece of the sky.

At which point trouble.

But if you're smart enough or lucky enough to get older, and got the wisdom come of your ways, maybe you'll just tell yourself Some damned old leaf just fell on my tail feathers, and I guess that means the winter is coming, I can feel it in my bones. And then pull down some extra blankets.

So like I said, no need to run. If it's trouble

you want, you don't have to find her. Just set still. She'll find you.

Which brings me back to Cassandra Landry, whose momma named her for some fairy tale princess or some such. So C.L. was her initials, and I got to calling her Chicken Little, which is another C.L., and comes with a story built in.

Because like in the story she was always telling you not to make that left, there's a truck bearing down, don't eat that shrimp, it'll give you hives, don't vote Democrat, it'll bring on the plagues. That sort of thing. Always those cautions, until your damned head was spinning and you was afraid to go over 25. And all the traffic was made to go around you.

Chicken Little.

Because of all those warnings.

Because she was always wrong.

Peck peck peck. Peck peck peck.

Because she had a sharp beak like a chicken.

And was smallish. And beady eyes.

But a warm body on a cold night, and some seasons a warm body is about the best you can hope for. Ain't every woman an Edna nor a Sadie Belle. Much less a Melody. Plus C.L. had an ass like two

softballs, hard and round and could make a pair of jeans look like Victoria's secret.

Anyways, this C.L. was always checking to see if old Hoby was doing the two-step with some other woman, which at the time I was not, but that didn't stop her none, she had an active imagination.

So's if I was to give a woman a lift, for example, and she caught wind of it, the next three months was all about Did she give a better blow job than me, was her tits bigger and so forth.

And one day I was shopping for some chaw in Mobley's Countryside Store on Oglethorpe and I run into C.L.'s sister, Rodney Ficklin's wife, Callie, and we was just talking for a long minute about Rodney's rig, which was a crop duster and aging poorly and how he was always bitching about it. And C.L. comes round the corner by the Frito display and sees us standing there and takes it into her head we was doing her dirty. Which we was not.

And on the way back all hell broke loose in the truck, like a twister in a tool box.

And oh lord but old C.L. was so damned sure of herself, and so much hurt in her voice and the soul of what's right and proper like a preacher on a pulpit spitting brimstone. Whatever that is.

Now Cassandra Landry wasn't one to just wait for trouble, she had to nose it out.

And so soon after she sashays her two little tits and two softballs ass over to her brother-in-law Rodney's old tin hangar and tells him whatnot, and the two of 'em goes up in the duster and best I can tell the higher they went up the deeper she went down, if you catch my drift.

And I reckon old Rodney just lost control of his joystick at some point cause that old plane fell out of a sky so blue you could of swum it and nosed headfirst into Mr. Landry's corn field, which was sort of funny seeing as C.L. was his daughter.

And *was* is the word for it, as in past tense and over and out, because that was the day the sky done fell, good and proper.

And Hoby don't have much luck with women, as a rule, but maybe that day was the exception proved the rule.

HOBY AND THE WIDOW FICKLIN

Callie Ficklin had a big nose and a belly to match and as many of what she called tags on her skin as there is stars in the sky on a spring night.

Tags. You could of connected the dots on her and come up with a map of the Lower Forty-Eight, with her left nipple being Columbus, Ohio and her right being Salt Lake City, Utah. Plus if you stretched around to the back of her there was the Hawaiian Islands. Though her back was none too sunny, truth be told.

But being as she was barely a day over twenty-six, and an heiress of sorts, seeing as Mr. Landry her father was a widower and she his only child, what with C.L. gone, and Mr. Landry in none too good a way his own self – a bad ticker and a taste for whiskey that drank up most of his days and all of his nights – well, old Hoby took it into his head that the young Widow Ficklin might not be the worst investment a man in my position could make.

So what started by the Frito display and might have ended in Mr. Landry's corn field didn't come to an end after all, because from the smoke

and stench of that busted duster rose a romance in the corn stubble. Poetic.

Old H. can be a bit of a poet at times, which you might of noticed, being as I have my sweet and soft side, though you might not see it right off when you first lay eyes on me. But Callie Ficklin could see it sure enough, and back in those days that was all that mattered.

I pictured myself as King of the Corn Fields, being the farmer Landry's fields at that very moment, granted, but a man can only drink so much whiskey before he drowns in it.

Now this little Landry/Ficklin clan was but two once Rodney had dropped his duster in the corn, and my family was down to just one, so to speak, as that duster was parked on top of my own dear C.L., so I was doing the math the whole while I was courting Miss Callie, and let me tell you, this here Hoby was sweet as a sack of malt back then, just a sugary southern beau with baby blues that got all teared up when the talk turned to Cassandra and Rodney and our great mutual misfortune, and Callie lapped it all up like a kitten in a cream shop.

Not that it was all chitlins and gravy.

Because not only did I have to overlook Callie's nose and so forth, I had to put up with her

two dogs, and never two creatures less suited for civilization.

And I should of known right off, seeing as they was husky dogs with eyes as blue as mine, and everyone called them darling for those eyes, but I know better than most what can lurk behind ice blues. Them huskies was a con job proper.

Now the husky is descended from the wolf, and a wolf ain't a thing you'd normally take two of to install in your home sweet home. But the farmer Landry's daughter come lock and stock with a pack of huskies, and the pair of 'em slinking into trouble all the time and about as much fun as an all-boy wedding in a Tennessee gun shop.

There wasn't nothing they didn't get into and chew all to hell and drag into the fields and I mean nothing, you couldn't leave your boots by the bed without risking one of them, and what good is one good boot and one chewed?

And they was up at dawn and howling just like it was the moon and not the sun come up, and never a moment they wasn't looking at your dinner with them great icy stares, and no way to keep them off the chairs or lock them away, they would scratch and chew through the door and howling the whole time like a nursery worth of unfed babies. Plus their

entire job in life was to find holes in the fence and then you was driving half the night to find them.

And it was even hard to tell where they was when they was right in front of you, seeing as they shed more hair than you'd find at a hundred barber shops on the Saturday before Easter, and so heaps of husky hair on the steps, the couch, the bed, like snow around your ankles as you moved around the house, and then you'd trip on the chewed up edge of some fancy rug they'd already peed on so much that you'd of swore a pack of camels, and I don't mean the cigarettes, I mean the humped kind, had took up residence and mistook for the toilet.

And so forth.

And it come to pass that the farmer Landry slipped off one night with the huskies howling at his feet and lapping at his whiskey what got knocked over when he kicked the bucket, and nothing better than a drunk husky and a dead farmer. Except two drunk huskies.

But at least my plan was coming to pass.

That is, until Miss Callie showed me the mortgage papers on the house and the farm and the fields, and I come to realize that her old daddy was deeper in debt than I was in dog hair.

But Callie said no never mind, we could stay in the little shack by Rodney's old tin hangar, just her and me and the two dogs, and I could get a job and support us all, and she would stay home and cook and make us a passel of babies.

Which was when I nodded and said I got to run to the store to buy me some smokes, and then burned some serious rubber off the Hoby-mobile and headed for parts unknown.

HOBY AND JUNIE J.

It was a one-street town – really just a trail of potholes with a few houses and a run of corrugated buildings on either side of it, one garage, one general store, one place that sold used everything, one diner that was always going broke. It was called Richman, but there was no rich men there, none that I ever seen. Nor women.

There was no doctors, no lawyers, none of it.

The best off of any of us by a long shot was Junie J. Duisenberg, and that's because she wore many a hat, amongst them midwife and undertaker. She could get you coming and going.

Not that there was all that much traffic, not coming, not going, not in babies, not in corpses, and you could pass a whole day setting by the dusty windows of the Tee Rex, sipping coffee and spending not over two dollars, and the whole time not six cars. No reason to come to Richman.

No reason to stay.

Well, no reason but for Junie J.

And also another reason was, it was a good place to lay low for a few months or even the better part of a year.

Which was something I had a notion to do right then, right after my adventures with Callie Ficklin was over and done, seeing as the last time I laid eyes on her she was looking mighty ripe, and I was afraid it might not be just the food she was eating, of which there was no noticeable shortage.

Some news a man just don't want to be aware of right off, and this would of been a good example of that. Not wanting to know, I mean. Which wasn't right. I know.

I know.

Which is why I knew I had to head back, sooner or later, because a man has to deal with his devils, but I couldn't face her just then, not her big plans, not her big nose, not her big belly, and whether it was an L or an XL or an XXL at that point, well, who was to say?

Not me. Cause I was in Richman.

Just me and the Hobymobile, which makes real good time on the road and a real good little hotel when times ain't so good.

And not much in the way of fuel being eaten up in Richman, of that I can swear to, as there ain't nowhere to go you can't walk. Not that far from Hinesville, but still a world away.

And a few dollars goes a good long way in Richman if you stick to sensible food. Them ramen noodles come in right handy at times.

So I had a general wrap on the situation, and even picked up a few dollars here or there being handy for folks that needed it.

And then there was Junie J.

Old JJ was all that and then some. Not perfect, mind you, but a man tends to overlook a few extra pounds when a woman has a face like JJ's. Which I would describe but the poets done it better, and anyways not a man in those parts would take issue with you if you was to say that the best proof of god was to look in JJ's great green eyes.

Not all that many men hanging out in those parts anyways, which I took as a good thing, seeing as it was that much less competition, not like those boys up in Denmark chased me on to Norway and Germany and whatnot.

So's I was courting JJ real slow, which was the only speed the woman would abide, and just trying to be helpful to her when she needed a hand moving a coffin or whatnot, and I think I might of been getting under her skin, in a good way, cause she told me stuff like Hoby, no need for you to stick

around here and bust your back on these chores, I handled 'em before you got here, I'll handle 'em after you're gone. Which I took to mean that she had a genuine concern for my wellbeing.

But which I never got to learn the extent of, because one day I was setting and sipping some cold coffee at the Tee Rex when this car pulls up outside and who other than Callie Ficklin steps out onto the sidewalk and puts her hand to her eyes to shade the sun and looks up and down the street like she has a purpose to it.

So's I shot up out of my chair, but done it so fast that my thigh caught the table and the damned thing went flying a good eight, ten feet and come down on young Caleb English's table and spilled his beans and beer all over him, and he was madder than a hound dog on a hornet, and a big fellow, too, so I thought there might be trouble, but then I forgot all about it because standing in front of me was Callie her own self, and just kind of laughing at the sight of it.

And she says, Well, Hoby, I got something for you, plus I thought you might be interested in meeting my new baby, and I said You know, Callie, I was fixing to come back and do just that, honest,

and she says You was fixing to come see me and my baby?, and turns to look at the door, and there comes Donnie Wynne Cuthbert through it, who used to hang around Callie even back before the days of Rodney and whatnot, and all proud and smiling now Callie was his girl.

And then Callie laid down a summons for me that someone paid her good money to deliver and said You're served, Hoby, and then her and her baby took off in a cloud of dust.

And about six minutes later so did I.

Though I do wonder if JJ still misses me.

HOBY IN THE GARDEN OF GOOD AND EVIL

So I landed in the very town which the famous General Sherman gave as a Christmas gift to his boss, none other than Honest Abe, this back in the Civil War days, being the city of Savannah, Georgia, and a prettier place there's few of.

Plus being as I was able of body and sound of mind and willing to work for the minimum, plus a good memory and a slick tongue, I got a job guiding folks that had some interest though this old house with its high ceilings and antique furniture that the Ficklin huskies would of had a field day with, seeing as there was no little number of couches and what they call chaises to stretch out on, and big flabby chairs scattered in every cranny, and expensive rugs from China they'd of loved to pee on, plus old clocks and tables and wardrobes and wood floors to scratch up, and in two weeks they would of turned the whole shebang into a shit hole.

But it was no dogs allowed.

It was called the Mercer House, which a lot of folks thinks because Johnny Mercer the composer lived in Savannah back in the day was named for

him, just naturally assuming he lived there, but no, he never did. His great-grandpappy did, except he didn't. By which I mean, General Mercer had it built back at the beginning of the Civil War, but he never lived there. And then he sold it.

Which is the way of the rich and the semi-rich, and the sort of gossip that the staff learns so's they can scuff and smile and answer all manner of questions for people slung up with cameras and palm tree shirts that wants to know all about these very important things, as if they was somehow a question of life and death.

Though this here Mercer House was a good place to discuss life and death, actually, because plenty of it had gone on there.

Back about a century ago, the owner of the house tripped over the second floor banister and bashed his head in. Over and out.

And then there was this boy up on the roof where he had no business and fell off and spitted himself good and proper on the iron fence below, which story always reminded me of my poor Sadie Belle, except I don't believe this boy was doing nothing but chasing pigeons.

All of which wasn't by far what made the Mercer House so famous.

What made it famous was a story you probably heard of, or seen the movie, which to this date I ain't yet seen, but I hear it's a good one.

Seems this antiques man name of Jim Williams had restored the place and was living there high and mighty, which explains the fancy furniture and whatnot, and he got into a tiff with this pretty boy called Danny Hansford.

Which tiff led to Danny becoming dead on the floor of the joint. Which led to four trials for poor old Jim Williams, who started off as Guilty but, after trading Bobby Lee Cook his first attorney for another name of Sonny Seiler, finally got off as Not Guilty cause of Reasonable Doubt, of which in my own life I know there's no shortage of.

Anyway, they made a book, they made a movie where Sonny Seiler got to play the judge, and the Mercer House got famous even though Johnny Mercer never played so much as a note there – though he did play once on the lawn, for a party, and then it come to the point where so many people wanted to see it that they begun to give tours.

But they don't want folks snitching the snuff boxes, so to speak, so that's where old Hoby comes in, seeing as you ain't gonna snake not a thing into your ugly palm shirt with a big old guide looking

you up and down like you was the one shot JFK. Which is a different story than Jim Williams, but still, guns and gore, which everyone seems to like.

And speaking of Jim Williams and trouble, I hear tell he hung a Nazi flag outside the house one day just to piss off this movie company that was filming in the square. Which the neighbors didn't much cotton to, nor anyone else.

But seeing as I got pitched from the Dachau camp one day, I understand how you can be well-intentioned when it comes to the Germans and still end up getting your ass burned.

Anyways, I could go on and on about Mr. Jim Williams and how crazy and smart he was, and sometimes a part of the in-crowd of Savannah and sometimes not so much, and why exactly the old general had to sell the house before he so much as got to pee out back, but I see I'm getting in trouble here, trying to hold each of these stories to exactly a thousand words.

And speaking of trouble, I managed to find me some in the most unlikeliest of places. And there was a woman involved, if you can believe it.

You see, one night I got off work and here's this tight little lady called Brenda Dale that I met outside the Club One cabaret on Bay, and when I

say tight, you had to see this. God what made pigs and politicians didn't waste no extra fat on Miss Brenda Dale.

She reminded me in some ways of Miss Melody Baxter, not just because of her color, which was about the same as what you get when you mix a little milk into your coffee, but also because she was a singer, and you just had to stand next to her for about two seconds to see she was as sassy and sexy as they come.

But you're going to have to go on to the next page to find out about me and Brenda Dale.

HOBY DISCOVERS A SMALL TRUTH

So I was standing there under the street lamps with Miss Brenda Dale outside the Club One cabaret, just chewing the fat and whatnot, and what better way to impress a girl than asking if she might be interested in a private tour of the Mercer House.

And she starts to laugh and laugh, turns out she been in it, and she asks me Didn't you see the movie, I was in it, and I tell her No, I ain't had time yet, what part did you play, and she says Oh, I was the exotic side story, sugar, the forbidden fruit, I was the hidden mystery that runs through all of Savannah, dark and racy and hot.

And I told her I believed it, especially the dark and hot part, and she asks me Have I ever tasted of the forbidden fruit, so there I was naturally thinking she meant like Miss Melody, which right to this moment I think you could understand where I was going with that, seeing as the two of them have dark skin and whatnot.

So I told her, Hell yes, I love the forbidden fruit, it's my favorite, and she said she had a little surprise to share with me, and that was the truth of

it. And you know old Hoby, he ain't never been one to duck the truth.

Well hell, you can see things was going pretty good up to this point, and so's not to mess up the moment by moving too fast I asked if I could see her again tomorrow, and she says Yes indeed, bitch, cause she liked to call me bitch, I'm not working tomorrow, so I'll be happy to get a private tour of the house. And you can show me what things old General Mercer got and what things Jim Williams got, and maybe even what you got, and if you're lucky and play your cards right I might even show you what I got. But make sure you treat me like a lady, bitch, because I'm not one of those pushover types, you know.

And I told her No ma'am, it never so much as occurred to me that you was a pushover, and then she bends in to give me a little peck on the neck and before I know it tweaks me right on my John Henry, and Little Hoby whispers to old Hoby, There ain't much room in here, you gotta let me out to breathe, but right then Miss Brenda Dale says, Alright, I'll see you tomorrow, and there goes the sweetest two little butt cheeks in the South strolling off into the night.

And next day, sure enough, it was right near the end of my shift and there's this commotion in the gift shop and I head over to find out what's going on and see if I have to pitch some drunk out in the alley, which Miss Bumpus who runs the place told me if there was ever trouble it was up to me to sort it out and try to keep the police out of it, but it wasn't trouble, it was just Miss Brenda talking to a whole gaggle of tourists in their palm shirts and posing every which way for their cameras, seeing as she was a celebrity and all to them cause she was in the movie and had a fine good body and such.

But to me she was a whole lot more than some nickel and dimer, and after the place closed down we was lingering in the big hallway inside the front door, just kind of kissing each other, and I had my hands on her little waist but she was a lady and didn't want me to go no lower just then.

And she says Slow down, Hoby, I thought you wanted to give me a private tour before you took one, and so being a gentleman and all I said, Yes, Miss Brenda, I believe I did promise you that, and Hoby Blue is a man of his word.

So I showed her around, and we talked a lot about old Jim Williams and young Danny Hansford

and how they was in love, which comes in many shapes and forms.

And while we was staring at the very place where Danny fell down dead and was bleeding like a shot pig all over the Chinese rug, I felt Miss Brenda's hand reaching around, and she says Bitch, seems like you might be carrying a gun yourself. What you got in there?

At which point me and her slides down to the floor, right on the Danny spot, and this time she didn't much seem to care how fast I went, cause she was going faster still.

And she had my pants around my ankles, and my shorts, too, and was kissing on my chest and went down lower to my belly and then went lower still.

But old Hoby knows a gentleman gives as good as he gets, so it didn't take me no time to relieve Miss Brenda of her dress and her bra, and what a perfect sight she was, just like a cheerleader up there, just perfect.

And then I went and pulled down her panties, and she looked me in the eye and asked What did I think of her forbidden fruit?

So I got to see the real truth of it, and she wasn't kidding when she said it was a little surprise. Well, not all that little.

But just then Miss Bumpus comes in and sees the two of us on the floor and gets a good long look at a little more of old Hoby's back side than she ever meant to. And probably an eye full of Miss Brenda Dale.

And soon after that I just lost my taste for Savannah and headed back to Hinesville, still a dumb ass white boy, but better educated than most.

HOBY ON THE FLOOR OF THE SENATE OF THE U. S. OF A.

Set down.

Now you might be thinking at this point that this here Hoby is a bit of an angel what got thrown in with devils much of his life, but the truth is that even when I was thigh high to a hognose snake I wasn't hardly no angel.

I know this might come as a surprise to some, which is why I told you to set down if you wasn't already.

So back when I was about seven or eight my daddy took me and my brother Bailey to visit our uncle in the capital of these United States, being no less than Washington, D.C.

Old Uncle Atticus was doing poorly back in those days, having inhaled a whole chest full of some gas or other in the jungles of Vietnam, and he was in a hospital for veterans that had no better luck than he had giving their all and whatnot to keep America safe from whoever it was back then wanted to pinch our pockets.

And Atticus even though he was sickly spent some time telling us boys about what it was like to soldier in the jungle and how them boys was more

interested in humping hemp than hellfire, plus he had his views on all the nurses and what they was wearing or not wearing underneath them tight white dresses of theirs.

The thing is, a hospital's not all that much fun, and my daddy said one morning Well, you boys been good so far, so today, instead of going to visit Uncle Atticus again, we's going to visit the big houses on the hill. Which I took in my brain to mean maybe where the nurses lived or some such, but it wasn't that at all.

It was the place where the senators and the others hung out in, making laws and overseeing the health and wellbeing of the entirety of the country, plus being policemen for the rest of the world. And we got to see it, too, a lot of it, cause back at that time you could go just about anywhere up there and nobody was running you through no x-ray machines or any such thing, you was free to just wander about and see where the laws got made and where they got their hair cut and whatnot.

And me and daddy and Bailey had us a time riding on the subway cars that went beneath the buildings and was like Disneyland but for real, and them that had white sideburns and looked like their hair been plastered down with paste was the

senators, which you could tell also because they had on dark suits and white shirts and their ties was blue or red, every last one of 'em, and when you sat down by them in the little cars they looked at the walls and every which way but you. Because they had the laws on their mind.

And we went up to where the senators had their offices, and daddy explained that it was busy being a senator, so each office was filled with about a hundred or so young women, and they had the law on their minds, too, because they was very solemn and the like, and you could just tell they was there to make sure that the senators' needs got fulfilled right and proper so they could do their jobs and etcetera.

Well, we was walking down this one hall and where it met up with another hall there was this corner office, a big one, and it said Senator Edward M. Kennedy on the door in gold paint, and daddy said that Teddy was a big cheese, but to my mind Teddy was a bear, so there I am picturing a bear made of cheese when daddy goes right through that door and asks if the senator might be in to set down with us boys to teach us the in and outs of the law some, seeing as we was up from Georgia and wanted to learn more about the northern ways.

And he struck up a conversation with this real pretty girl setting at the front desk, and daddy started to ask her how fast could she type, and did she have nimble fingers, and he sure did like the color of her fingernails and such like, and she started to play with her hair and just curled up in that chair looking like a little kitty cat and when she talked back she talked real low and it sounded to us like she was purring, and here was daddy all suave and southern drawl with a bowl full of milk and the Banks baby blues.

But me and Bailey was getting bored, so we slipped out the door and went round to the side hall, where the doors didn't have no names on 'em, just cloudy glass that you couldn't see through and very mysterious.

And there was this big canvas bin with wheels on it all filled with files, I guess it was headed for the trash, and I said Look at this, Bailey, these are the laws!, and I dove right in and spilled a whole passel of folders on the floor, right outside a door with that foggy glass.

So I got down on my hands and knees to shuffle 'em up when the door opens, and two shiny shark-nosed shoes then, right under my face.

And I looked up and up and up, past the dark pants and the white shirt and the red tie, and two of the bluest eyes I ever seen looking down right through me, it was the Teddy bear his own self, shaking his head, smiling bright, Tsk tsk he says, and steps right over the little angel of myself and heads down the hall and disappears through another door and leaves me right there, with the bare naked laws, on the floor of the U. S. Senate.

Truth.

HOBY AND THE TRUTH OF IT

I learned a thing or two on this barstool.

The dog didn't shit under your shoe, you went and stepped in it.

When things is going bad, what is there but to wait for better?

There's no such thing as a bad book so long as there's skeeters on the porch.

When things is going good, what is there but to wait for a twister?

Men's prisoners of the times they grow up in. Women, too.

The road from heaven to hell ain't no road at all – it's a dance pole. Greased.

When a woman goes bad on you, what is there but to let her go? And if you come back to each other, it's because you let go, and so there was some light by which you could see each other true to make your way back.

You can shit yourself a whole lot quicker than you can clean it up.

When you catch a young fish, let her go.

You ain't smarter than a shark. He just don't like the way you taste.

It takes a good shipwreck or two to see if a marriage has the floats to it.

A box of chocolates is like life. You rush through it and end up with zits on your ass.

Life ain't like a box of chocolates, neither, unless a good half of them's got shit in the center.

You can put a dress on a pig, she'll still steer you right to the mud.

The trucks are never but two steps from the sidewalks.

A bad guest can turn roast duck to road kill.

It's good to eat local, but don't shit where you sleep.

Time has value, so's the best thing to do with wet fart underwear is throw it away.

It don't do much good to turn off lights or recycle the trash if you ride something with more than two wheels.

A white glove can hide a dirty fingernail.

There's only two kinds of people on this earth. You're one of 'em.

Don't believe everything Merle and Waylon sings, no matter how pretty they make it sound.

Manners has more to do with who you is than how you was raised.

A bathroom's the only place I bother to read
the writing on the wall.

If there was a reason for us to be here, we'd
of come with an instruction manual.

Dice can kill as sure as guns.

Cards is like women, don't set there waiting
for your queen.

When you ain't got but one way to go, no
sense arguing the direction.

If you ain't bright enough to make sense of
the facts, there's always prejudice to fall back on.

A man ain't willing to open his mind most
likely ain't worth knowing.

It don't take the devil to fuck things up.

A priest ain't got no need for reason, a
pauper can't live without it.

The funnier a man is on the outside the
more scared on the inside.

Women was born to rule, that's why the law
sides mostly with men.

If something don't turn out just right, you
can always remember it different.

Ain't no sense in washing a wet dog.

No one can explain love, but most everyone
can feel it.

If you can't laugh at yourself, you can be sure I'll do it for you.

If you eat grass, don't be surprised when you shit green.

I don't know if I ever discovered true love. I might of detected it a few times.

You pay it more mind when you got a dog in the race.

No woman stays honest past fourteen years.

No man stays honest past fourteen minutes.

Better the man thinks he might sometimes be wrong than the man sure he's totally right.

If there ain't no ice in your drink, you just might be in Paris.

Most things don't stink so bad till you look back on 'em.

If a king tells you what to do, what to think, what to eat, who to love, he's called a tyrant. Unless he sits in heaven.

The music you hate the first time you hear it could be what you dance to in the end.

A man can't fall in love with the world till he falls out of love with god.

Many a woman won a beauty contest with the lights turned off.

I never seen a gang of atheists, much less a crusade of 'em.

The government keeps the poor in line and the rich in a shorter line.

The law works different depending on whether you're perverted or it is.

When a man gets a crowd riled up, the best thing to do's go home and take a shower. He'll still be yapping, but you'll of washed the shit off.

Sometimes the best lie is saying nothing.

If you ain't working, you're called a bum.
Unless you're rich, then you're called a boss.

Do unto others. And then run like hell.

Many people are considered to be heroes for minor reasons.

Christmas was made for kids and stores.

It pays to be straight with people, unless you're running from something. Or for it.

Even the ocean has limits.

The meaner you are, you must be hiding something. Or feeling guilty about it.

If you ain't laughed at least six or eight times today, you're taking yourself too serious.

You can write what you want in the ladies room stalls, so long as you come clean in the end.

Memory's a stream always running towards
a mouth.

When you set down to write one thousand
words, exactly, it makes the day marvelous clear.

It makes the way marvelous clear.

And here's one I heard, I just thought I'd
stick it here because I like it:

The snows of fortune drift without notation
across the plains of time.

I learned a thing or two on this barstool.
And off it, too. A thing or two. I just thought I
might share 'em with you.