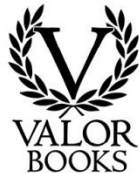


DESCENDING MEMPHIS

A NOVEL BY
ROBERT R. MOSS

**PREVIEW
INCLUDES FIRST
THREE CHAPTERS
AND ADDITIONAL
EXCERPTS**



Published in the United States of America

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Publisher's Cataloging-in-Publication data

Moss, Robert R.

Descending Memphis : a novel / by Robert R. Moss.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-0-692-36422-2

1. Detective and mystery stories—Fiction. 2. Private investigators—Tennessee—Memphis—Fiction. 3. Fathers and sons—Fiction.
4. Coming of age—Fiction. 5. Rockabilly music—Fiction.
6. Sun records—Fiction. 7. United States—Race relations—20th century—Fiction. 8. Memphis (Tenn.)—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3613.O782 D47 2015

813.6 --dc23

2015902687

I DREAMED about the guy who taught me guitar. Dan Turner. The colored guy my daddy used to hire to take care of the yard and stuff. Dan was singing this blues song. It has a guitar lick that sounds like a train whistle. After a while, the whistle sounded more like a bell. It was the phone. It woke me up. So I ran down the hall to get it.

“Is this Tommy Rhodeen?” asks the lady on the other end.

“Yes, who’s this?”

“Claire Williams. My husband is Garland Williams.”

I’m half-asleep, but I know the name. The guy’s a lawyer who doesn’t practice law. He’s an investor. He puts his money into all sorts of things: real estate, a chain of burger joints, a trucking company; if it can make a profit, he’s interested. Once he ran for mayor. He lost. I was a kid at the time, so I don’t remember much about it.

“I have a job for you,” she says. “Come to the house and I’ll tell you about it.”

I tell her I’m interested. Actually, I’m more than interested. But I don’t tell her that. She gives me the address and tells me to come around ten.

I hang up the phone and go down to the kitchen. My Aunt Norma’s already gone to the market, so I make my own breakfast and have a smoke. Afterward, I go up to my room. It’s the room I had as a boy, but I’m the man of the house. I sit down on my bed, a twin size with a

pine frame. A matching chest of drawers and a desk make up the rest of the furniture. They're solid; built to last a lifetime, the man at the store said. The desk was where I was supposed to do my homework, but rarely did. Beneath the bed I keep my guitar. It came from a pawn shop. I got it years ago; I'd saved my allowance to buy it. It's old and it goes out of tune as I play. I take my guitar out from under the bed and play that blues lick that sounds like a train whistle. That's when I remember the dream I'd told you about, the dream about the guy who taught me guitar.

Now most of my jobs are for people whose car or tools were stolen, crimes the police are unable or just too busy to solve. I find who has it, buy it back, no questions asked. But if I discover where they hid the stuff, I just take it and get it back to its rightful owner. That way I make more on my end.

One of my best jobs was finding a stolen dog. It wasn't a mutt. It was a purebred pointer that belonged to a judge. This kid cut the lock on the kennel and used a piece of meat or something. The judge loved that dog; it being stolen made him pissed. He made some calls. The cops made it their business, but they couldn't find that dog—not even so much as its bark. So when vinegar doesn't work, the judge tries honey. He posts a reward. But the kid's too scared to bring the dog back. So I pay the guy a few bucks for his trouble and return the animal. The judge wants to give me the reward. I ask if he can do me a favor instead. The judge agrees; he pushes through the paperwork for my private investigator license. That was about a year ago. The license made me legal, so to speak, but I'm still new at this and anything new takes time.

Except for the judge and a few others, most of my

customers are working people. They don't have insurance. If their stuff gets stolen, they can't afford to buy something new. Instead, they pay me to get it back. It's better than nothing. The Williamses are a whole other kind of a customer. I need something better to wear.

I put down my guitar, get up, and go down the hall to what was my daddy's bedroom. Once it had been the place of Saturday mornings spent in bed listening to stories, or where I ran to when thunder shook the house. Yeah, that was a long time ago. The knob turns, but the door is stuck. I shove my hip against it and go inside.

The room's pretty much how I remembered it. As if you could smell his tobacco and sweat and bay rum. Their wedding photo still stood on the dresser. And next to it is the velvet box that holds his medals and ribbons. I pick up the case, wipe off the dust, and open it. It gives off that tarnished brass smell. His decorations remind me of when I was little and climbed into the attic. I discovered a trunk that held a bunch of my momma's belongings, stuff my daddy saved after she had passed. I don't want to think about that. I get on with my business.

I take his gray suit out of the closet. I try it on. It looks good. The sleeves are long, but it will do. Yeah, I can call on the Williamses in that. I put on one of his ties and look in the mirror. In the reflection, I see my Aunt Norma standing near the door.

"That's fine," she says. "It's about time you made use of his clothes." She smooths the lapels, pats her big hands across my shoulders, and tugs on the sleeves.

"I'll take them in. Won't take much time. The pants look fine."

I LAY THE JACKET, now hemmed, on the backseat of my car, roll down the windows, and get going to meet the Williamses. Even with the windows down, the car heats up each time I get stuck at a light.

Soon I come to those pillars that mark the entrance to Morningside Park. I drive between them and feel like I'm a tourist in my own town. I guess you get used to it if you live or work there, but it's my first time. I drive around the bend, read the street numbers and double check the address. The Williamses live in a red brick house with six white columns. It rises up from a huge yard, the grass all mowed and without any bare spots. A brand new Cadillac sits in the driveway, so I park my old Ford at the end of the block.

I get out, put on my jacket, and walk back the way I came. I pass a colored man tending the flowers, the sun on his back; it's clear his thoughts are someplace else. My thoughts shift as I walk through the open gate to what the Williamses could be missing. In a place like this it could be anything. I continue up the driveway and on to the house. A pair of rocking chairs sits near the door. I knock. I wipe my forehead. As I stuff my handkerchief back in my pocket, I hear footsteps. The door opens.

"Can I help you, suh?" says a man with dark skin.

"Mrs. Williams called me about a job," I say.

The butler gets my name and asks if I'll wait in the foyer. The back and forth whirr of a vacuum cleaner

drifts down from the second floor. It begins to whine and whoever is using it snaps it off. I look around. There's a curved staircase with a railing carved out of mahogany. To the right is a fancy living room and to the left a formal dining room. I wonder if they eat there on special occasions, or just because it's Tuesday. A clock chimes the hour, the vacuum switches on, and the butler reappears and asks me to follow. We cross the living room. The butler stops. He knocks on a door. A woman's voice says, "Come in, Samuel." He opens it and lets me pass.

"Thank you for coming, Mr. Rhodeen," says a slender woman with blonde hair. She's attractive and in her late thirties.

"I'm Claire Williams. This is my husband, Garland."

The man pushes himself up. He's huge. He walks toward me. Garland Williams appears to be nearly sixty, but despite his age and the cut of his clothes he looks more like a roustabout than a businessman. We shake hands; his are big and coarse, and his grip is strong. His body and head are large, and he has no neck. If you saw him in the dark, you'd think he's an animal. Claire Williams is his second wife and, as second wives usually are, she is lovelier than the first. The first Mrs. Williams got into car crash years ago. Neither she nor their son survived. It's the second marriage for both.

Everything in the room seems more valuable than anything I'd ever recovered, but what I notice most of all is a painting. It's of a girl. She looks about eight or nine. It isn't a formal portrait, the kind where the subject stares out of the canvas. The girl holds a cat, and they have the same green eyes, and the two appear to be looking at each other.

Mr. Williams indicates a chair and we sit down across from each other. His wife sits to his side.

“How can I help you?” I ask. “People call me when they’re missing something and the police can’t help. What are you missing?”

Mrs. Williams’s eyes get moist and she turns them toward her husband.

“It’s Helen,” says Mr. Williams. “Claire’s daughter from a previous marriage. She’s seventeen; she’s run away before, but never this long.”

“How long is long?”

“It’ll be one week tomorrow.”

“Have you filed a report?”

Mr. Williams shakes his head.

“This is a family matter. We don’t want to create any controversy and—”

“Helen enjoys making me upset,” Mrs. Williams says as she gets up. “She does it to get back at me for remarrying after Stephen, my first husband, died.”

“Is Helen the girl in the painting?”

Mrs. Williams walks toward it.

“Yes, that was Helen. I wish she still was.”

“Where does she go to school?”

“Miss Hutchison’s. Helen needs to be back before school starts.”

“Do you have an idea where your daughter might be?”

Mrs. Williams comes back from the painting and sits down.

“Last time she was found in one of those awful roadhouses out in Middleton where they have those rock and roll bands. And before that, she was pulled out of another dive. That’s why we thought of you.”

Mrs. Williams places a hand to her mouth; her husband leans in front of her and says, “Your knowledge of that rock and roll music is why I asked Claire to call you instead of the detectives my brother suggested.”

I smile. I'd made a demo at Sun Records a while back and it got played on the air a couple of times. Some people said I had talent, but not enough to make it.

"How do you know about that?" I ask.

"I make it my business to know a lot of things," Mr. Williams replies.

I nod my head.

"As far as finding Helen, I'll need a picture of her, and I'd like to speak with her friends. Can I have a list of their names?"

Mrs. Williams frowns and lights a cigarette.

"We can't have you speaking to those girls. People would talk."

"That's going to make finding Helen that much more difficult."

"You'll just have to find another way."

"Okay. Any boyfriends? Does she have a steady?"

"Helen had been seeing this older boy," Mrs. Williams says. "Dale Martins is his name. He works, of all things, at a movie theater. But she promised us she'd broken it off."

"That's good to know, but I'll check up on him all the same. Does Helen have a car?"

Mrs. Williams blows a stream of smoke at the ceiling and says, "Does she ever. Garland bought Helen a brand new Thunderbird convertible for her sixteenth birthday. She never even said a proper thank you. Helen had her eye on that car and—"

Mr. Williams clears his throat.

"Mr. Rhodeen, what do you charge for this kind of work?"

It's a question I should have prepared for, but I've never worked a case like this. I wasn't sure what to say.

"I get a percentage of what my clients pay to get back their property, but this is different."

Mr. Williams looks at me. I can tell he's waiting for me to give him a figure. I shift in my seat.

"Frankly, this is not my usual business of getting back stolen cars, tools, and television sets. But I believe I'm the right guy as far as finding your daughter."

Mr. Williams takes hold of his wife's hand. He looks into her eyes, then he turns to me.

"Would you get our Helen back for one thousand dollars?"

It's more than I expected. But before I can answer, the door opens and in walks a seventeen-year-old girl. It's over before it has started. I stand up and Mrs. Williams makes the introductions.

"June, this is Tommy Rhodeen. He's going to find Helen. Tommy, this is my niece, June, my sister's girl."

I'm still in business. June sits in the chair beside me. She's cute but seems like a priss.

"June," Garland says. "Can you tell Mr. Rhodeen anything that might help him find your cousin?"

"I've told you everything I know. She didn't like that you forbid her from going to those rock 'n' roll concerts. But she never gave me the idea she'd do anything like this."

"She never confided in you?" I ask. "Or say anything that might help us find her?"

"No, I'm afraid not."

June tells us more of what she knows about her cousin, but none of it's going to help.

Garland fidgets, then stands up and says, "All right, June. Thank you for coming."

I ask her if I can call if I have any questions, she says yes. Then June passes on a message from her momma and says goodbye. After she leaves I find myself standing between Garland and Claire.

“Do you have that picture of Helen? And a description of her car, license number and such?”

Mrs. Williams hands me a photograph. I see a girl who looks how her mother must have when she was seventeen. She has blonde hair, green eyes, and smooth skin.

“Can I see Helen’s room? There could be some clues.”

She leads me upstairs and opens the door. It’s a girl’s room. There’s stuffed animals and a lot of pink. On the dresser lay magazines. There’s a three-speed record player and a stack of 45s.

“Does Helen keep a diary?” I ask.

“Yes, it’s how I learned about Dale, and that he... That he pressured her. You understand?”

I nod my head.

“Where does she keep it?”

“It’s gone.”

“Was there anything she wrote that could help us find where she went, or what she was thinking?”

“Before Dale, about six months ago, Helen wrote about a boy. It was only a few lines; she wrote he’s handsome but unavailable.”

“Was there a name or initials? Anything that could tell us who she meant?”

“No. She only mentioned him once.”

“Did she date anyone after Dale?”

“I don’t think so. At least not that I know of.”

I ask if we can search the room. She gives me the okay. We go through everything: her clothes, her closet; we open her drawers and look under her bed, but find nothing that can tell us where she’s gone.

The two of us return to the library. Mr. Williams is not there. In his place is a handsome man in his forties holding a briefcase.

“Oh, hello Edward,” says Mrs. Williams. “Edward this

is Tommy Rhodeen, the detective we hired to find Helen. Edward is Garland's brother."

I say hello and shake his hand. Edward looks nothing like his brother. He looks like Cary Grant, only better dressed.

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Rhodeen. I'm glad we've enlisted your help."

Garland comes back with the information about Helen's car and hands it to me. Edward turns to his brother and takes some papers out of his case.

"Garland, I need your signature before my meeting."

"Clement?"

"Some of his people."

Garland nods, glances at the documents, and signs his name. Edward gets ready to leave, and I'm ready to do the same.

"Oh, one more thing," I say. "Do you own any other property where Helen may—"

Garland lifts a hand.

"I own a cabin at Glenn Springs. I asked my chauffeur to visit it last week. No one's been there."

"Do you mind if I take a look?"

He opens a drawer, takes a key off a ring, and hands it to me.

THE SUN BAKES the sidewalk as I walk to my car with the envelope Mr. Williams gave me. Inside is a first installment, a check for five hundred dollars; the car information; a photo; and a key. I light a cigarette and lean against my car in the shade. I gaze at Helen's photo. Except for her green eyes she looks nothing like the girl in the painting; she looks more like a younger version of her mother. I finish my smoke, get in the car, and drive downtown to take care of business.

"I have to ask the manager to approve this," the teller says, and she carries the check to a man at a desk. He frowns. I can't hear what they're saying. It's like they're a couple of mutes. The manager opens a long drawer, pulls out a card, and studies the two pieces of paper. He dials his phone. He speaks into it, but I still can't hear a word he says. He looks at me. His mouth stops working. He hangs up the phone and hands the check to the teller. She comes back to the window.

"What denominations would you like?" she asks.

I leave the bank with my cash. I take off my jacket and tie at the car. I head north. I rest my elbow out the window as I drive. I have a stop to make before I go to the cabin.

It's a quiet neighborhood where working people live in small houses, but I'm not here to see a customer. I pull up behind a Chevy and switch off the engine. Several boys play cowboys 'n' injuns in the vacant lot on the

other side of the street. I get out and cross the sidewalk. The metal gate screeches. I knew it would. Jim Gantry never oils it. He wants to hear anyone coming. Dusty sheers shake in the window. As I'm about to knock, the door opens. Jim frowns and says, "Why are you here?"

I'm about to answer. My right hand is out. Jim grabs it in his left; he pulls me through the door and slams it shut with his foot. He lets go of me and turns around. An old woman sits in a recliner crocheting a blanket. I haven't seen Mrs. Gantry in ten or twelve years, and she pays us no mind as she crochets away on her balls of yarn. There are porcelain figurines and gewgaws in a curio cabinet, and none of the furniture matches.

My eyes water as the stink of cat urine wafts by. I use the back of my hand to wipe away the sting. I blink and see Jim dangling a long .44 in his hand before he sticks it under a sofa cushion.

"Haven't I told you? Never come here."

"I thought you wouldn't mind. I brought what I owe."

Jim licks his lips and says, "All of it?"

I nod. A fly buzzes about my face. I shoo it away. I pull out the wad of bills. Jim steps forward as I count.

"Twenty, forty, sixty, eighty. One hundred. Twenty, forty, sixty, eighty. Two hundred. Twenty, forty, sixty, eighty. Three hundred."

I hand Jim the cash. He puts it into the wallet he has chained to his belt. For a moment I think he smiles. "You want anything?" he asks.

"No, I'm good, thanks."

"On the house."

I shake my head. He shrugs his shoulders.

"Suit yourself."

I nod back and tell him about the new job. Jim tries not to show it, but he looks impressed. He goes in the

kitchen, takes the percolator off the stove, and brings it to the sofa with another cup. We sit. He pours me coffee and refills his own, lights a cigarette and says, “Hey, you seen Bob Oakley?”

“No, has he got out?”

“Last month. Came out with more scars than when he went in. He won’t be getting into trouble in Arkansas anytime soon.”

“I never did visit him,” I say. “Did you?”

Bob picks up a flyswatter and uses it.

“Once. Enough to know I’d never want to end up there.”

We drink our coffee, and Jim relays me stories Bob told him about doing time at Cummins State Farm. He tells me what he knows of the long line riders; the men, armed with rifles, on horseback, who oversaw the prisoners chopping and picking cotton. Bob had told him about the strap and this thing called *the Tucker Telephone*. According to Bob, the prisoners worked ten-hour days, six days a week in fields so muddy they’d drill holes in their spades to let out the water.

Jim finishes his story. Neither of us speaks. I turn the chipped cup in my hand and take a sip. One of the cats skulks along the edge of the sofa. It tries to rub up against my leg. I jostle my foot.

Then Jim crushes out his cigarette and says, “When you was a kid, you have any idea how we’d all turn out?”

I look down at the floor.

“Well at the time, I never gave it much thought.”

“Me neither,” he says.

I set my cup down and ask, “Was there something back then you wanted to be?”

Jim smiles and finishes his coffee.

“Yeah, a cowboy. Go out west where there weren’t so

many people.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“Turns out I got a fear of horses.”

Jim laughs. His mother looks up and asks what’s so funny. We just shake our heads and laugh some more. But the laughter is there to cover up what both of us are thinking. Neither of us has ever talked about fear. It’s something we didn’t do. We look at each other, each knowing what the other is thinking.

After that I get up. I say so long and leave. I watch the boys play across the street as I walk to my car. Their whoops and hollers merge with sound of Webb Pierce singing on the radio from the house next door.

I get back on the road to check out Garland’s cabin. I’ve known Jim Gantry and Bob Oakley since we were kids. Of the three of us, I’m the only one who never did spend a night in jail. Jim’s two years older than me and the youngest of five children. Now he’s an amphetamine dealer and a sometimes money-lender, who occasionally tips me off as to who might have something I’ve been hired to find. Bob, I haven’t seen since before I got drafted. The three of us were once like those boys I saw playing across the street.

- Additional Excerpts -

Don’t stop for pretty women with engine trouble

A RABBIT RUNS across the road and the man driving the Cadillac Eldorado swerves to meet it. Motoring along a two-lane road that cuts through a marshy forest, the driver takes advantage of the V8 engine’s 305 horsepower as well as the factory-installed air conditioning.

With one hand on the steering wheel, he uses the

other to turn up the volume on the radio. There's no one in the back, so the driver has tuned in to ten-seventy on the AM dial. It isn't a station his employer would listen to.

The deejay begins an outrageous radio patter full of rhyming and signifying and speaking to the astounding benefits of a particular brand of pomade. The assertions go miles beyond what can be achieved through even the most exaggerated claims related to anything tonsorial. Then he hollers out the time and the station's call letters before playing *Hold Me Baby* by James Cotton.

The man enjoys these times when he drives with no one in the back, which means he can listen to Nat D. Williams, or Rufus Thomas, or some of the other colored announcers on the radio. Furthermore, the Cadillac serves as an extension of himself and it seems to make up for things he cannot control, such as his height.

And right now, even though he is only running an errand for his employer, he can pretend that he owns such a fine and fancy automobile. In fact, in a year or two, he plans to own a similar car. Except his is going to be a convertible in cherry red. He turns the radio louder. He taps his hand on the wheel as he sings along with James Cotton.

“Hold me baby
 Hold me in your arms
 Hold me baby
 Hold me in your arms
 You can squeeze and love me
 Baby, all night long.

“Say she's mean?
 Treats me nice and kind
 Say she's mean?
 Treats me nice and kind

Don't worry about my baby
Because I know she's mine all the time."

But he stops singing when he notices a brand new two-tone, blue and white Mercury Montclair parked on the side of the road. He also notices the hood is up. And what's more, he notices a high yellow woman with a complexion like a tan paper bag standing and waving beside the car. She wears a tight red dress that reveals a pair of well-formed legs. She has fine features, and she wears her hair cut short with curls like Dorothy Dandridge. And being a man, he pulls over to get a better view. She looks drop-dead gorgeous and she looks like she needs help.

The man brings the Cadillac to a stop. He steps out of the car and into the steamy air, oversweet with honeysuckle, and shuts the door with a whack. He's five-foot-four with two-inch lifts in his shoes and he's conscious of his small strides as he walks the twenty yards back down the road. To make up for his lack of height, the man affects a rolling swagger.

"Can't git her started?" he asks.

"No. It was driving fine. Then there was this noise and the car died. So I pulled over. My man's gonna kill me when he hears about this. Oh, he told me to never mess with his car."

The man beams as he says, "Aw, he don't need to know nothin'. Lemme take a look."

She smiles back and says, "Would you?"

"Sure I will. I know me a thing about cars."

The man removes his chauffeur's jacket, as if he is a surgeon preparing for an operation, and he holds it out to her. She takes it and folds it with care while the man rolls up his sleeves.

"Sugar, try to start her while I listen to the engine."

He opens the car door for her and watches her legs as

she slides onto the seat. She twists the key. The car goes chugga chugga chugga chugga.

“Try again, sweetheart.”

She does and the car keeps making the same chugga chugga. That’s when another man, a big colored man, steps from behind the trees. He has a body and face like a bear. His eyes seem too small for his head. He creeps toward the guy leaning over the engine.

“One more time,” he tells her.

The car goes chugga chugga chugga chugga. And the noise covers the last two footsteps, the swish of the tire iron, and the grunt as the man crumples to the ground. Then the motor catches, the engine starts. The assailant scoops up the man and swings him into the trunk. He tosses in the tire iron, slams the trunk shut, and slides through the open door and onto the passenger seat. The woman leans over and kisses him on the mouth as they speed down the empty road.

Truck stop diner breakfast

Just outside Memphis, I stop at a diner. There’s a gravel lot to the side of the place. I drive past the rigs and park. I walk in and take a seat at the counter one spot over from where Jim Gantry sits holding a cup of coffee. We ignore each other. I study the menu. He reads the paper.

The waitress sets down a plate with a single large pancake in front of Jim; it comes with a big pat of butter. She refills his coffee and pours me mine. Jim tilts the bottle of syrup. He pours it until the pancake can’t absorb another drop. He cuts a piece from the center of the plate and forks it into his mouth.

I look up. The waitress taps a pencil on her pad; I or-

der breakfast. She walks away, tears off the paper, and clips it into the order wheel hanging in the pass through. A cook sets down a plate of eggs, rings the bell, and pulls my order.

Alone, I swivel in my seat and say, “Hey Jim,” to the tall man in blue dungarees, plaid shirt, and cowboy boots. Jim raises his cup. He holds it there and stares over it as if he’s reading the specials on the wall. A second or two passes. He says, “Tommy,” takes a sip, and sets the cup down. I swivel back in my seat and mutter, “Heading to Nashville,” between my teeth.

“That so? Business or pleasure?”

“Business.”

Jim cuts another bite.

“You need another loan?”

“No, but can you fix me up?” I say out the corner of my mouth.

“You got cash?”

“Yes.”

“Can do.”

Jim eats his pancake. He works his way out from the center—forming an atoll in a sea of buttery syrup—until the only thing left on his plate is a maple slick.

The waitress says, “Here you go honey,” and sets down a plate in front of me. I spread jelly on my toast and stab my eggs with a fork. Jim goes back to reading the paper. Two truckers nod at him as they leave the diner. The waitress refills our coffee. She leans over me; her breast rubs against my shoulder. I finish eating and pay for my meal.

I go into the men’s room and clean my hands. The door swings open as I pull the loop of towel from the box on the wall. Jim checks if anyone’s in the stall. I set my money on the edge of the sink. Jim picks up the cash.

He takes a small plastic bag full of pills from his jacket and places it where the money had been. I pick up the bennies. No words are spoken. I leave and get back in my car.

A bad night in Nashville

I sit on the curb. I look at the bar across the street and realize I'm lost. It's as if I have walked into a different city. I close my eyes, but the sound of shouts and shattered bottles breaks my thoughts. Wild men in oil-stained coveralls and patched-up dungarees, lugging clubs and knives, approach each other. Their thin faces wear cruel expressions that bare the marks of malnutrition. I jump out of the way and ask the man next to me what it's about. He tells me the fight began years ago, the impetus long forgotten. One side comes from some meager place up in Kentucky and the other from some rundown quarter in Knoxville. Year after year, they come back to settle their score. An ugly crowd gathers and cheers till somebody fires a shot. They all scatter. A siren wails and I get moving; my shoes crunch the broken glass reflecting in the street.

Beyond the mayhem, I pass men going in and out of peep shows. I head north and wind up in Printer's Alley. I drift past the Black Poodle and the Rainbow Room, while the barkers describe the sights and the talents and the measurements within. Through the gutters and along the sidewalks flow the last of the partygoers. A man bumps into me, he pukes on my shoes. It's obvious I will not find Helen here, and this night walk has become something less than futile.

The bars close. I wander toward the river in the dark. I see the shapes of hobos and of degenerates curled up in doorways, hugging their bottles of 'splo or squeezing

Sterno juice through a sock. Their eyes reflect back at me as I pass. The sound of urine splatters against the wall. The shadow of an old man turns around and exposes itself before it buttons its fly and hobbles away like a glue factory horse in search of cheaper whiskey.

I shuffle forward. A gust of wind comes up from the river. It carries the reek of muck, and it pushes forth a wave of handbills and candy wrappers and grit. It traverses along the sidewalk, until the wind dies, and the swell of detritus breaks hard upon the concrete. Two figures emerge from the gloom and they take position under the glare from a sign of a cheap hotel.

“Hey sport. You like to dance?”

She hikes her dress above a knee revealing a pair of bruised legs. Her hair is unkempt and hangs down in strings.

“No thanks.”

“Come on handsome,” says the other. She sets her hands on her hips and flashes a smile short a few teeth. A black eye is visible under a crust of makeup. I ignore them both.

Then the sound of the horn and the rumble of the wheels precede the flash of the headlamp as a northbound freight train labors along the tracks above the Cumberland. Its hot sulfurous breath blasts as it passes. Gnomes stare out from empty boxcars, their malevolent eyes glowing. A devilkin clutches the handrail atop a reef-er. I walk on. The ground shakes harder beneath my feet until the locomotive and its load has passed.

I light a cigarette in the newborn silence and notice something low that moves in my direction. It seems to drop down in a swimming motion as it comes forward. Together we enter from opposite ends of the yellow pool of a street lamp. It looks up at me. The top half of a man

propped on a roller board. It holds a pair of wooden blocks that it uses to propel itself forward. It stares into my eyes and demands a cigarette. I shuck one from my pack; it snatches the cigarette from my hand. It strikes a match, lights itself up, and pushes itself away on its wheels. Smoke trails in its wake like exhaust.

Someone laughs. I look up and see the glow of a cigarette bob up and down in an open window. I turn back toward town. The two streetwalkers no longer stand on their corner. I make for the same rooming house as the night before.

Watch out he's got a knife

I hear footsteps behind me. I turn around and see the punk.

“You still owe me a finder’s fee,” he says.

“You’re a broken record, kid.”

He pulls a knife and pushes the button. The narrow blade flips open and catches the light.

“Nothing doing. You’re not gonna chisel me.”

He takes a step in my direction.

“Where’s your two gorillas, your goons?” I say. “Isn’t that how you operate?”

The punk cackles in a singsong voice, “Just you and me and my blade makes three.”

I roll my eyes.

“Come on, cut the tough-guy act. You’ve been watching too many movies.”

He coughs up a lung and spits it at me. It lands with a splat between us, but I’m not laughing.

“I’m going to ask you nicely, put away the knife and go home.”

He doesn’t reply. We circle each other. He feints with

the knife. I use my hands. The punk springs forward; I dodge to my left; the blade punctures the side of my shirt.

We circle once more. His eyes stare into mine. Sweat drips off his chin. He lunges at me. This time I'm ready. I step to my left and grab his forearm with both hands. I crank it against my hip. Then I give him a right hook to his nose. The cartilage snaps. He yelps and lets go of the knife. It clatters to the ground. I step on the blade with my heel.

Before he knows what I'm doing, I reach down and grab hold of it. I yank up on the handle so the blade snaps off beneath my boot. In a single move, I drop the broken handle and rotate up with my right into his belly. I follow with a left across his already broken nose.

I hear a gasp. A couple going to their car does a double take. They rush back inside the bar. I grab the punk by his shirt collar and toss him onto the hood of my car. I lean into his pimply face.

"You still want your finder's fee!" I shout.

The kid groans. I wipe my car with him with like a dirty rag. I push him down to the gravel. He curls up in a ball, expecting to feel my boot in his kidneys.

My hands are streaked with the punk's blood. My shirt is also marked. I'm too revolted to take it further. I wipe my forehead with the back of my hand. I light up a smoke and flick the match at the punk on the ground.

I get in my car and speed off, kicking up a load of gravel. My body shakes, my heart beats fast, and my lungs can't get enough air. I toss the cigarette out the window. A shower of sparks explodes into the night.

Killing time in Nashville

I get in my car and drive to the river. I park in a lot

and try to nap. I can't sleep. I get out and step through weeds and gravel and trash, and cross the tracks until I am under the shadow of the Shelby Street Bridge. I hear the clank clank of the cars and the ruffling of pigeons roosting on the girders overhead. Below, I see an old colored man in a skiff on the river. He hauls in a trotline and comes up with five or six catfish.

I take the footpath down to the water. I tread between knotted-up coils of fishing line, dog turds, and broken glass. The old man has tied up his boat. He steps onto the bank and gives me a nod as we meet.

"What are you using for bait?" I ask.

"Mostly days-old chicken livers, gizzards, and hearts. Them cats like stinky stuff."

The old man holds a catfish from behind its pectoral fins, and he sets it on a broad piece of driftwood. The cat opens and shuts its mouth and raises its spines. Then the man clubs it upside the head with the handle end of a hammer.

"You not from around here," he says.

"No, I'm from Memphis."

He mutters something, picks up a sixty-penny nail, and hammers it through the head of the fish. He uses a pair of pliers to rip the skin off the cat. After he peels it, he works the nail back and forth till he can pull it out. He grips the naked catfish and pokes the tip of his knife into its gullet. He runs the edge of the blade toward its anus, cutting a vent from which the cat's innards pour out in a wad of gore.

"So Memphis? What you doin' this aways?"

"Looking for a girl."

"She run off on you?"

"No. Nothing like that."

He makes a humph sound. Then he wipes his knife on

the leg of his pants and wraps the fish in a sheet of newspaper. The old man speaks while he does the same to the rest of his catch.

“Bud, lemme tell you somethin’ ’bout women. They got this sixth sense. Let’s ’em see things plain as day. The problem is they think we see ’em, too. You see where I’m goin’ with this?”

I smile and nod my head.

“So this girl who run off on you.”

“She didn’t run off on me. Her daddy hired me to find her.”

The old colored man laughs as he picks up his parcel of papered cats.

“Okay, bud. I see you don’t wanna be helped. That your perogativ’. But if it was me I’d study on what this girl done see that you don’t.”

The fisherman shoves off in his boat. He gives me a wave and calls out, “Open your eyes, bud. Open your eyes!”

There’s no point in arguing. I wave and watch him as he goes about his boat. He resets his trotline before he rows his way downriver; his oars make whirlpools in the Cumberland.

I sit on a piece of driftwood and scratch my back. The sun feels good. I close my eyes, letting the sounds of the river fill my ears. My head falls forward and I think I fell asleep. It may’ve only been for a few seconds. I sense a bug land and crawl on my arm. I open my eyes. I hold still thinking it’s a wasp until I realize it’s only a mantidfly. It takes off as I get up and wipe the dirt from my pants. I walk along the bank and look across the water to where they’re building barges. One looks days away from sliding into the river. A tugboat chugs beneath the bridge, causing a squad of pigeons to take off and fly in an arc before

returning to their roost. I look at my watch, turn around, and toss a stone at a snapping turtle. It falls short, but the turtle plunges off its log.

As I head up from the riverbank, I pass a ring of charred stones where hobos made their cooking fires. I turn my ankle on a loose board. I cuss and shake out my foot before I trudge up the rest of the way and cross the tracks to get back to my car. I start the engine and drive on over to Lower Broad.

There's 40 chapters, plus an epilogue. A whole lot happens to Tommy Rhodeen before he reaches the end of his story. Order the book to find out.

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