

Such Strange a Thunder

They say Stretch McDowell decided to die. That he *willed* it, willed himself to death. And that an ineffable, blazing angel, beating white wings of wax or light or snow, came and swept him up like Elijah and his chariot. Say he was seized by the Holy Spirit, or maybe Satan himself. But that cradled in those wings, his eyes smoldered darker than ever before and he smiled for the last time in his life.

Many claim he sold his soul to the devil. He'd claim he'd sold it to heaven. Or at other times, that he wished he could. But, he wrote the "Devil, Take Me Home Blues," had two stillborn little girls, and played blues harp like the devil sure had showed him how. And those little girls damn near broke his heart; a fog in his eyes hardened to ice, wrinkles in his weary face withered into cracks. But it was Annabelle who finally left his heart sore and shattered. An accursed wanderer, he had more than bad luck against him, and so some say Satan took those babies away, made him lovesick and alone.

Her young skin was the color of dried pine needles.

"And what might be your name, Miss?" Stretch said. She was a friend of his cousin, and had just moved up from Louisiana.

"Annabelle," she smiled.

“My name’s Stretch McDowell.” He was nervous as hell, and found himself grinning obtrusively, dumbly, against his will.

“Stretch McDowell? What kinda name’s that? Sounds like a bluesy name. You play blues?”

“Well, uh, I... *can*. If you want. If you want me to. You like blues?”

“I’m in *love* with it, more than anything... so, you saying you can or you *can’t* play?”

“Well, I *can*, if that’s what it takes.”

“Takes to what?”

“To uhm, to make you—want me.” It came out as a stammer, but he stood behind its meaning, mentally bracing himself. He had had no intention of so nakedly presenting his emotional stance fully before her. But that dumb grin apparently had the intention of dragging his every vulnerability out not just visually, but verbally too.

“Scuse me?” she laughed.

“Would you like to see me play?” he asked, chasing the momentum he had initiated.

“If that’s what it takes,” she laughed to herself, apparently flattered. “Well, sure I’ll listen.” Stretch’s cousin had no guitar, but one dusty harmonica lay on a windowsill near Stretch and Annabelle. Stretch picked it up, absolutely appalled at his own audacity because, incidentally, he knew he couldn’t play. And, sure enough, when he blew into the harp, it sputtered and whistled chaotically, clumsily. Dust got caught in his throat, and he started coughing.

“I just started playing,” he said a moment later. His eyes refused to meet hers; the humiliation, however, glared enthusiastically from his cheeks, building upon itself.

“Maybe today you did,” she laughed.

“I’m a quick learner though. Really. I catch on quick.”

She laughed, and said, “Well, you sure is *something*.”

The man was handsome and youthful and surreal looking, with unkempt, shining, blonde hair that sailed around him in some unfelt wind. The night was dead and humid. His demeanor had a sweetness to it that was imploring and forlorn. And a hint in the recesses of his eyes of an ancient hurting coldness, a coldness that sought vindication. His skin radiated, so ghostly pale it was almost blue.

“I can teach you how to play. Real good,” he said. Pointed to Stretch’s harmonica.

“I reckon you can,” Stretch said.

“Well, you know, of course—you know the price.” The man smiled, a jaunty and earnest grin, and it sent a searing pang of sadness down Stretch’s soul: so dark a deed threw into harsh relief the man’s startling innocence. And something in the man’s facial expression changed as he regarded Stretch, a vulnerable hope mingled with bafflement. Then it receded, blinked away, and covered by a cloud.

“Well, you see, it’s just for a lady. Y’know I just *gotta* have her. I love her. And I know she’ll have me, I *know* it, if I just can show her somethin’. If I can impress her.”

Stretch said.

“I do know, anything for love.” The coldness flared up. “You know the price.”

“Well, what do I do?” asked Stretch.

The man pulled out a knife, a quill, and a slip of paper.

“You sign here. An X will do.”

Stretch cut his hand, and signed an X in blood. A moment passed and then:

“Well. Well, how do I play?”

“Friend, I’ll teach you the blues. You’ll see soon enough. I’ll teach you to *feel* the blues.” And the man walked off. Stretch McDowell stood bemused at that dusty crossroads, and his eyes, too, clouded over.

“Why, hello, Miss Annabelle,” said Stretch. He hovered excited and impatient.

The harmonica was in his shirt’s front pocket, visibly sticking out, and Annabelle glanced down at it. He wielded it proudly.

“I can play,” he said. “Real good.” A wave of nervousness hit him.

“Can you? It seems you was hurting my ears tryin’, just a few days ago,” she said, laughing. However she was smiling and looked expectant. “Go on, play—real good.”

Stretch pulled the harmonica out, uncertainly. But to his horror, his mind began to swoon and reel, and a disturbing echoing closed in, like a train thundering throughout his head. Every nerve and sinew in his body strained, to the point of splitting. And then all he could see was white, a terrifying white, everywhere, with no limit, with nothing to hold on to. And it was silent, as though submerged. His mind struggled and floundered and

pounded violently, unbearably. Then somehow it had already ended, and Annabelle's face came into view, unfocused and smiling.

"That was *amazing!*" she cried, clapping. She threw her arms around Stretch.

"*However* did you learn to play like that?"

"What? Why, I didn't, er—you liked it?" he said and blushed. *What?* he thought.

"I *never* heard a man play like that ever before!" She paused, and regarded him, played with his collar. "You sure is *something.*"

Stretch grinned, thunderstruck.

Annabelle's belly was swollen tight and smooth, and the stretch marks on it resembled the long dimples in a ripe peach. She lay on a bed with Stretch. He kissed her belly lovingly, ran his fingers around it in a circle, then ran them over her breasts which were spread wide to the sides.

"I love you," he said. Annabelle trembled where he touched her, an effervescence which traveled into her face and shone.

She didn't scream. Her eyes were bluish-purple, glazed shut. Her tiny face seemed misshapen like a potato, asymmetrical. Her name would have been Mary. Her name was Mary. She didn't scream.

And the sound of a train wreck split Stretch's ears, closed in. Violent anger surged through Stretch's being, as he was plunged into the absolute whiteness, felt as though he were plummeting, somehow, aimlessly, against nothing. He came to, saying "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, Annabelle, I'm so sorry."

"She's dead," Annabelle said flatly. Something seized, locked inside of Stretch, something like guilt. And it seemed to simultaneously urge him to rectify and to self-destruct. He stood glassy-eyed and solemn as an unwanted dawning drew itself out of the recesses of his mind.

The heavy summer evening hung like molasses, sticky and drawling and sickeningly sweet. Crickets warbled in unison in a chilling lullaby that engulfed all the air. The terrain seemed luminescent under the darkening sky as fireflies lingered in a flickering miasma. Stretch McDowell swayed on his dusty porch, several men and women crowded around, and he was singing:

Hell is hotter than it's been befo':

Mmhm, sweet devil, come on and take me home.

He put his harmonica to his lips and wailed into it a soaring melody brimming with unholy beauty, with jaded, crying, lilting blue-notes and jagged winds.

On my trail, I see the smoke:

Mmhm, sweet devil, come on and take me home.

Another pentatonic howl, then he slapped the harmonica against his pant leg until it cleared out. The people around him clapped and whistled.

“I love that song, Stretch McDowell!” one of the women said.

“Well, sweet devil,” Annabelle said to Stretch, and she stepped in front of the other woman. “Why don’t you come on and take *me* home?”

“Just one more song!” a man said.

“I best be goin’” Stretch murmured.

“Well, someday, Stretch McDowell, you gonna teach me to play like that. Greatest bluesman in Mississippi!” the man said and laughed. Several nods in agreement.

“You don’t wanna play like me,” Stretch said. A weariness sighed shadows into his eyes. “I ain’t got no God-given talent.”

Claustrophobia. Panic. White terror fading in and out.

“Is she moving? Oh, please be breathing! God forgive me! Is she?”

The baby was silent. Stretch took her in his arms, and kissed her, said, “I love you. Little Sally, my little girl, you always gonna be my little girl.” He was crying.

Annabelle said, “I love her too, Stretch.” And Stretch laid himself down in Annabelle’s arms.

“I would sell my soul to heaven for you, Annabelle.” Either absolute surrender or serenity, and Stretch couldn’t tell which.

A man drunkenly yelled. “Is it true? Is it true!?” He bristled with malignant, black anger.

Annabelle stood frozen, unresponsive, on the porch next to Stretch McDowell. Stretch turned to her.

“You messin’ around with that *man*?” the man cried. Annabelle said nothing, but a look of raw terror filled her face.

“Who is this man?” muttered Stretch.

“I’m sorry,” whispered Annabelle. And the drunken man whipped out a pistol.

Stretch registered this fact, but internally nothing faltered. Rather, he felt cold and sunken and starkly aware.

“I swear to God, Annabelle, I’m gonna shoot ya. I *swear to God*, if you don’t say somethin’.”

“Ye-” Her voice cracked, and she swallowed to clear it. “Yessir. With him.” The man swayed and staggered forward. Stretch recognized a floundering defeat in his eyes, the same as was in his own. And then the man pointed his pistol at Stretch.

“You stupid son of a bitch. You stupid fuck. I can show you who she loves,” the man said. “Annabelle, I’m gonna shoot this man here, or I can shoot *you*. But I can’t seem to choose. Now tell me, who do you think should I *choose*?” Annabelle began to sob.

And so, Stretch McDowell decided to die.

A dreamlike crescendo in his heart swelled, and the world seemed to rock backwards and forwards and backwards. Then the whiteness. Mute whiteness. And Stretch didn't struggle, he just thought of Annabelle. *I love you, I love you, I love you...* And the whiteness didn't stop.

Then, the churning sky yawned, a strange thunder roared, and a terrible split raced across the heavens like a seismic rift. A gazing angel reared its ferocious head, came careening down, left rippling, ruptured sky in its devastating wake. Its features waxed and waned in and out of focus, evanesced at the edges. And a teeming funnel of light spiraled and swayed drunkenly above it, as a sickeningly euphoric, wordless chorus swept across the terrain below. Annabelle and the man with the pistol fell to their knees and bowed, humbled and darkly weeping. And as the angel descended, it slowed and curled its beating wings around Stretch, hung as if suspended, or tethered to him like a balloon. He stood tall, a solitary figure eclipsed by whipping light. Then he stretched his arms wide and embraced the ineffable angel. Bittersweet joy clenched his heart, a smoldering yearning for his own deliverance, his own absolute annihilation, his relief. And he sailed heavenward. Then the sky closed with a mighty sigh that reverberated throughout the land.

Two men with weathered, leathery, old faces sat in rocking chairs upon a porch. They disputed.

“It was just a tornado... Stretch McDowell died in a storm. Got sucked up, like anything else.”

“Nah, I heard that ‘tornado’ was *white*. They don’t come in *white*.”

“Well, it struck water. They come white, *then*.” Silence. “Ain’t no angel, he got sucked up.”

“You just don’t see. He got *swept* up, by an angel. My ma said she never would forget.”

“Well, she just might should’ve. ‘Cause he’s dead and gone anyhow, we can both agree on that. Ain’t no angels ever been in Mississippi.”

“I s’pose so. Just so many people seen it. This *heat* must’a got to folks’ heads.”

The heat seethed such that the land shimmered before their eyes. One of the men pulled out his harmonica and began to wail a lonely song.

“Say that he sure could play the blues, though...”