

Tupelo, Troubadour, Memphis
A Short Story

Sonny's fingers weren't supposed to be frozen along this particular stretch of highway, at this particular time of year. As he stood between mile markers 60 and 61, waiting for a driver to set aside any preconceived notions of race, baggage and adolescent strangers looking for a ride, the morning's vacant mercury that nipped at his skin did little to lift the numbers of his body temperature, as well as, the worth of his spirit. Having spent the night underneath the Highway 30 overpass, its unexpected shelter was now considered a luxury when compared to the disregard of Highway 78's northbound travelers. Jefferson Jones, Sonny to his friends and family, blowed harp on the side of the road while only sticking his thumb out when his intuition told him that the driver was either Black like him, young like him or chasing a dream like him. When the '45 Tudor appeared above the horizon that stood between Sonny and yesterday's paid homage to Tupelo, Sonny put the harmonica back in his pocket, blew on his hands and stuck his thumb out.

"Where you headed?" The driver, a bit older and whiter than would normally qualify as a potential chauffer leaned over and asked. Must have been a dreamer.

"Memphis." Sonny answered. He stood and spoke with the perfect balance of humility and aspiration. His Sunday's best adorned and worn from the few days of traveling.

"Well, hop in, that's exactly where we're going." Sonny poked his head through the open window and saw two other passengers sitting in the back seat,

presenting as uncomfortable, but for what reasons Sonny could've never guessed at first glance.

"Keep that up here, with us. We'll make room." The man offered kindly, pointing to Sonny's 1951 Gibson J-45 acoustic guitar with a sunburst finish and maroon pick guard. The only driver thus far that morning to have pulled over to collect Sonny sat there smiling, his blonde hair and blonde handlebar moustache hiding his age.

Sonny wriggled his body and six-stringed soul into the front passenger seat, awkwardly shifting his shoes and knees to make room for his personal caravan of one plus one.

"My name's Aaron, but everyone just calls me E.P. Don't have much use for my proper name. Not with all the quakin' and shakin' these days." He was referring to the advent of televised music performances that began streaming through millions of American homes just a few years back. Sonny wasn't quite sure what to think of E.P. or why exactly it was that he went by such initials, but reminded himself of his own recently experienced pilgrimage and let his judgment go. Not to mention, they were already hitting speeds of 60 miles per hour by the time he made the connection.

"This here's Allen and his best girl Sue Ellen. I picked them up a while back as well. Seems we got ourselves a convoy now." E.P. laughed and Sonny turned around to nod his head and smile at his fellow hitchhikers. He found it strange that E.P. did the introductions for the young couple in back, considering it couldn't have been more than a few hours since they too were strangers. But, then again, white

folks always spoke and behaved in inconsistent ways around Sonny, so, for the time being, he shrugged it off.

“What’s in Memphis?” E.P. asked, praying his hunch was right.

“Sam Phillips.” Sonny responded, short but polite. E.P. looked him over with a salivating grin and his right hand started to tap rapidly on the gearshift. Sonny tried not to pay attention to E.P.’s notable excitement and distracted himself with the neck of his guitar and fingered a few chords.

Meanwhile, E.P. swallowed a glass shattering “yee-haw” and started bouncing in his seat. He let out a whispered, “Jackpot” and turned the radio up loud and hit the gas. After a few songs of chicken pickin’ and rockabilly spokes, E.P. turned the volume down and began to speak again.

“You think Sam Phillips wants anything to do with a colored boy like you?” he asked Sonny, as plain as day, breaking the ice that need not be broken.

“Sam didn’t seem to have any problems with Baby Boy and Ike.” Sonny reminded him and somewhat killed his buzz.

“Yeah. I reckon, but these days, it seems that the King and the Killer have helped ol’ Mr. Phillips get around all that.” E.P. tried to volley back, at which point Sonny looked over at the man behind the wheel and started to wonder just exactly what vehicle his life had wandered into. Sonny considered calling the stranger by his real name, Aaron, from that point forward as he pondered whether or not referring to him as “E.P.” was actually feeding some sort of obsession. An obsession that went well beyond Sonny’s own personal admiration, that which he showed in Tupelo.

In Tupelo, just a day removed from the Tudor, Sonny had hopped out of his cousin Walt's pick-up truck, grabbed his guitar and walked around to shake hands and say good-bye.

"You got everything you need?" Walt asked. Sonny held up his guitar and nodded. "What about your suitcases?" Walt asked and Sonny shook his head.

"You can have 'em. They're empty anyways." Sonny replied, already looking around the small town, tuning up his intuition.

"Sorry I can't get you no further. I need to head back before everyone starts wonderin' where I am, let alone yourself, Sonny." Walt said with a small bit of urgency and discomfort, knowing all along that he shouldn't have let Sonny talk him into the ride to Tupelo. "You're gonna have to make it on your own from here." Walt told Sonny, to which Sonny replied,

"I won't be the first."

Once on his own, Sonny toured Main Street and walked through a few neighborhoods with no address or landmarks in mind. He just peeked his eyes around and waited for his gut to bite down before deciding which one he'd take a mental snapshot of and hit the road again. He was merely curious what made the town so special that it could produce the first and only undisputed king of these democratic states.

Hours later, after a few short lived rides and about thirty miles outside of town, he was forced to tuck himself in under the pitch black sky, his only blanket the twelve-bar blues and the humming cars that passed above.

Now, his quest had landed him in the passenger seat of what seemed to be a fanatic, the self-proclaimed namesake of the very king he had paid reverence to just a day before.

“So, what are you gonna play for Sam?” E.P. looked over at Sonny and questioned the young man who rode along silently, barely mouthing the words of the juke joint hoppin’ sounds that channeled through the airwaves and blasted through the front speaker of the old Ford.

Sonny blushed and gazed further out the window and simply shrugged his shoulders.

“Don’t know, huh? Well, ol’ Sam Phillips ain’t gonna just listen to a little colored boy like yourself strummin’ chords and humming along to nothin’ at all. You gotta have a song, ya hear? You gotta be ready. You gotta show up with gold in your hands and the voice of God firin’ out your belly. C’mon now, what you got? Play me something.” E.P. insisted.

“I’m just a little shy, that’s all, sir.” Sonny politely declined the request and reached up to the radio to turn the volume back up. E.P. immediately turned it back down and lifted his eyes to the rearview mirror and smiled.

“Sounds like Sonny hear needs the kind of encouragement that Allen needed. Ain’t that right Sue Ellen?” E.P. looked over at Sonny one more time, a devilish smile strapped across his face and he reached over and trespassed the six strings of Sonny’s guitar. “Now, I ain’t askin’, boy. Play me somethin’.”

Sonny turned his head and saw that E.P.’s full body was twisting towards him, his eyes now and then glancing at the road. Sonny turned to the backseat of the

car and saw that Allen, still silent, sat upright, staring forward, like he was strapped with dynamite. Sonny looked at Sue Ellen and she smiled and lifted her left hand and allowed a small pistol to dangle from her index finger before taking control of it again and pointing it at Sonny, and then back at Allen. Sonny took what little room the front passenger seat afforded him and he began to nervously pick and poke at the fret board and strings. "Go on now," E.P. commanded and eventually Sonny began to gain a little cadence and a peek of his real talents showed through.

"Ain't that somethin' Sue Ellen? We finally got ourselves some rhythm to go with our poet here." Sue Ellen laughed at E.P.'s claim and then gazed over at Allen and threw a look of shame his direction, pointing the gun closer to his face.

"This little t-t-tease ain't done sh-shit yet." Sue Ellen remarked, her first words of the road trip, at least since Sonny joined in, coming across as rough and nasty. Her mind and her voice seemed to be at odds with each other as she stuttered through her syllables.

"Now, Sue Ellen, don't get impatient. We was just missing a key ingredient. But we done found it. Thank you Jesus. A colored boy with a dream. Our prayers have been answered, Lord." These blasphemous gestures to the sky proclaimed loudly and insincere caused Sonny to stop playing and fidget in his seat. He considered jumping out if the right moment ever came. "Okay boys, now that we got a poet and the colorful rhythm of the hard times of the South, let's get started with a new song. Mr. Phillips is waitin'." Sonny looked at Allen and Allen back at Sonny, their assignment seeming somewhat clear, though the outcome was ostensibly far from possible.

Sonny had never written a song with anyone except his father. They'd sit inside their own personal recording studio with used equipment purchased in Atlanta, all stacked up and organized in the basement, and they'd have at it. Sonny was more than prepared to meet the inevitable high criticism of Sam Phillips, but he had never imagined writing music at gunpoint while traveling 60 miles an hour towards Memphis.

"Allen here's a b-bean-dip. Ain't that r-r-r-ight pretty boy?" Sue Ellen announced, laughing, though unaware of her own mistake.

"Its beatnik, honey. Claims to be a poet on his way to Denver. We picked him up last night just east of Holly Springs." Sonny was immediately confused. Holly Springs was still up the road a ways, maybe fifty to a hundred miles in the exact direction they were heading. He couldn't figure out how they'd picked up Allen ahead of where they already were. "We told him he could just give us some lyrics instead of cash for gas, but he seems to have what they call writer's block. Sue Ellen here has been tryin' to serve as his personal Muse, but apparently Mr. Ginsberg doesn't take to kindly to Sue's, shall we say, motivational tactics." E.P. eloquently finished the word 'tactics' while Sonny turned around to see if Allen really was the famed poet, whose face he knew from pictures and book covers.

While Allen sat there, frozen, Sonny shook off the possible stargazing and turned his attention back to E.P. as he started spouting again.

"Yeah, we had a couple other boys join us over the miles, but I thought we had something when Allen told us he was a man of the written word. He's been nothin' but finesse and useless dribble. But, when I saw you this morning, well, I

sure as shit just had to turn around and grab you. Remember Sue, I said, if this boy has a real colored soul inside of him, we may just have somethin' with the two of'em put together."

"That's right, he did. He said, 'What we needs here is a c-colored boy.'" Sue Ellen confirmed proudly.

Neither Sonny nor Allen cared to participate in the conversation, but neither the driver nor his accomplice seemed to care whether or not they did. All they seemed to care about was matching Allen's words with Sonny's assumed rhythm. Sonny began strumming again, lifting the pitch of his hum a bit as Allen started scribbling. A few miles went by and they hadn't gotten any closer to perfecting the musical gold that was demanded of them. They'd start and stop. They'd start again. They could never seem to get into each other's minds like good songwriters know how to do. In their defense though, Sonny couldn't even face Allen due the awkward positioning of the Tudor's biggest interior design flaw: not giving enough room for guitars and acoustics. After thirty minutes or so, E.P. began to get anxious and angry with their lack of productivity.

"C'mon now. We're less than an hour away and y'all ain't got nothin'. Enough with that Greenwich Village...Bohemian...Blues shit. Get to honky tonkin' and rock'n'rollin' already."

At the conclusion of these words, Sonny glared straight down the throat of E.P.'s soul and didn't let go until cower took hold of E.P.'s shoulders and he shifted his attention back to the front of the vehicle. Sonny paused and changed the tuning of his guitar and even pulled out his harmonica and blew a few chords. Even when

Allen started to mumble an idea, Sonny struck the air above his head and commanded any and all interruptions to halt. All three of Sonny's proximate audience members apprehensively sat still while they awaited the broken silence to emerge.

Sonny began to hit a new tempo and mumbled a few words before stopping. He retuned and began again. He got a littler further and choked on a few notes. Allen reached his hand forward and placed it on Sonny's right shoulder and the two of them allowed for the calm to drop in like skydiving reinforcements. Sonny started up again and maintained a chord progression that hit all inner corners of the crowded Ford concert hall. Allen threw a few words at him and Sonny picked them up and turned them into song. They went around and around, back and forth, changing keys, crossing bridges and landing back home again.

*You can take me back to Memphis,
But the Sun's already gone.*

Sonny threw in some seven notes and slipped in the rockabilly jerk that E.P. was dying to hear.

*So now don't you go a tattlin',
While this pick up truck goes by...Highway Rattlin'.*

Just about ten miles outside of Memphis, maybe twenty minutes from Union Avenue, all four riders had memorized the song. They clapped their hands and harmonized and rolled down the windows to let the wind in on their secret. Sonny felt good, forgetting all about the gun, the apparent kidnapping and the pressure to

sing. He felt like whatever nerves he'd have had entering into Sun Studios just a few hours ago had vanished and he was ready to knock'em dead.

E.P. pulled off the highway into the deserted corner of a farm field and reached for Sonny's guitar.

"Now, teach it to me." He stared and pulled at the neck of the guitar.

"You know how it goes. What are you doing?" Sonny asked, pulling back.

"C'mon now boy, we made it this far. Now, teach it to me." He emphasized the order and motioned with his head to have Sue Ellen point the pistol in Sonny's direction. Sonny allowed the guitar to slide through his fingers, plucking a few strings, tempted to pull them so hard they'd break, but reluctantly allowed E.P. to hold it and begin strumming. "Now what was that? E, E7, A? Muffle the low E and hammer on the B string? How'd you strum it? Show me."

Sonny mimicked the shake of his hand on his belly and one by one stated the chords that E.P. needed to know before he too could play the little tune they'd just written. After a few minutes, E.P. got out of the car, walked around back and placed the guitar in the trunk. He returned to the driver's seat, started the engine and slammed his door shut.

"Thank you boys." Was all he said as he turned back onto the highway and resumed the journey towards Memphis.

Once they arrived at 706 Union, E.P. parked the car across the street, took a deep breath and looked back at Sue Ellen and the boys,

“Now, you all wait here.” He used his hand to comb his hair in the rearview mirror, placed sunglasses upon his face and put an unlit cigarette above his right ear. His dirty and worn white shirt stuck to his body, its short sleeves rolled halfway up his arms. He got out, slammed the door, ran around back to the trunk and contemplated which guitar to grab. Sonny’s Gibson, or his own hand me down from years past. He decided that Sonny’s was to be his Holy Grail. He slammed down the trunk and leapfrogged through traffic to the front door.

Sonny sat there, curious why they were still being forced at gunpoint to remain in the car.

“Now what?” he asked.

“Now, we hope Mr. Phillips likes it and plays it on the radio. If so, we get to go, right Ms. Parker?” Allen responded, looking towards Sue Ellen. Without the distraction of speeding cars and writing songs, Sonny could see that Sue Ellen couldn’t have been more than eighteen years old, the very age Sonny was at the moment.

“I reckon. We’ll see what Mr. Parker says.” She responded, nonchalantly pointing the gun at the two passengers while fixated on the windows across the street. Sonny looked out and saw his Mecca. He noticed right away its lack of glamour and how it just sat on the corner like it was an old barbershop.

“How do you know what happens next, Allen?” Sonny asked.

“Because this ain’t the first time I’ve sat here with these fucking lunatics, staring at those damned windows. You heard him. They picked me up yesterday. This is the fourth time in two days we’ve sat here. In all honestly, the only difference

this time around is you.” Allen, for the first time in Sonny’s presence, was speaking with an arrogant tone. Maybe he didn’t fear Sue Ellen or her gun, maybe he was just tired. Either way, with E.P. out of the car, Allen seemed to be bothered more than he was worried. Sonny started to realize what was going on.

Obsession can pierce its teeth so deep that your consciousness shatters and the line between reality and reverie disappears.

Sonny watched E.P. walk right in and turned around to ask,

“Why would Mr. Phillips let him keep coming back like this? Doesn’t he have better things to do?”

“They cut a d-deal.” Sue Ellen filled in the blanks. “E.P. gives him \$75 each t-time he cuts a t-track. If Sam likes it, he gets the DJ across the str-str, road to play it on the r-radio. If he doesn’t, he k-keeps the seventy-five. It’s win-win for Sam.”

“Where do you get the \$75 each time?” Sonny asked a question that he already had a hunch to its answer long before the words escaped his lips.

“R-Rhythm & Blues ain’t all we hijackin’ on 78.” Sue Ellen said with a smile.

Sonny stared back to the front door of Sun Records and his blood began to rise. It’d been his dream to make it this far, though he hadn’t anticipated being held hostage just ninety-nine feet away from entering. Sonny thought back to all the memories of his father and him playing music together since he was a little kid. Sonny was nervous though that *Highway Rattlin’* would expose his true identity through it’s lack of soul and suffering. Sonny wasn’t a poor colored boy from the other side of the tracks as E.P. assumed and fancied him to be. Both his mother and

father were learned individuals, pioneers and leaders in the small southern Georgia town he'd grown up in. Sonny grew up memorizing the script of his parents' college degrees that hung on the wall and was assured that one day, he too, would have the same certificates framed and mounted. Relative to society's expectations and the assumed history of all Black folk, the Jones family actually had plenty of money and opportunity for advancement and schooling. But Sonny wanted to impress his father in a different manner.

Jefferson, Sr. was a high school music teacher, as well as, the conductor of both the community and church choirs. Father and son loved playing, singing and listening to the blues. Their most heated conversations came when debating the histories and influences of blues, jazz and eventually rock'n'roll musicians. As Sonny grew closer to high school graduation, it was assumed by all that he would accept a scholarship to and attend Miles College just outside of Birmingham. On the morning he left, his family gathered around, shared in hugs and kisses and watched as he loaded two suitcases into his cousin Walt's truck. After waving good-bye and watching the truck roll down the road for a few minutes, the family went inside, shared in prayer and an early lunch and, eventually, everyone went about their day. Just about an hour later, Sonny's mother was picking up around the house and, when walking into Sonny's bedroom, noticed something odd.

"Jefferson, come in here." She hollered.

"What is it?" Jefferson, Sr. asked, walking towards her, standing in the doorway of their recently departed son's bedroom. Nothing had changed. His clothes were still hanging in the closet and his possessions were all still in place, as

they were the night before. The only things they could see that were missing were his Gibson and two suitcases. While Sonny's mother shook her head, Jefferson Sr. simply nodded, gave his wife a big hug from behind and said,

“Good for him.”

Sonny wasn't sure if he'd ever had what E.P. thought he had stolen from him, but he was eager to find out. On the surface of his conscience was the reality that his labor, his calling, and his father's passed on talents had been robbed from him the moment the '45 Tudor slowed down to pick him up. However, deeper down, below the white waves of his steaming conscience was a recognition that, right now, behind those windows, was his first audition. The irony of it all was that, Sonny knew very well what E.P. was talking about when he spoke of his color and the new trend of quakin' and shakin' on national TV. Since Elvis and the rest of the Million Dollar Quartet had taken shape, B.B. and Ike were somewhat left to fend for themselves, back-ups to all the rage. Sonny knew what true musical talent was. He knew all about crescendos and measures and real rhythm and songwriting. He knew that Elvis never bothered to write any of his own stuff but, sure enough, there he was, making the girls scream and lose their minds. Where the irony played was that Sonny just wanted a way to find out what Mr. Phillips thought of his music, regardless of his color. So, in a way, E.P., or Aaron, or whoever this psycho was, had actually done him a favor. As much as Sonny wanted to smell the inside of that studio and count the dots on its famed ceiling tiles, he was more interested on what the most important man in music had to say about his song. He contemplated

heading all the way up to Chicago and giving Chess a shot, after all, it worked for Chuck, but something grabbed him in this moment, like it was the twisting of fate that landed this opportunity to audition, behind the scenes.

E.P. came out of the studio with a great big smile across his dumb lookin', toothless face. He pulled the cigarette off of his ear and threw it down on the sidewalk, unlit and unsmoked. He ran across the street and back to the car. Everyone reshuffled their weight and sat upright for his return. He ducked into the car, handed Sonny's guitar back to him, started the engine, checked his mirrors and took off without saying a word. A few minutes went by and E.P. turned on the radio, adjusting the dial to the specific station he had memorized by touch. Sonny, confused by the silence, looked around and both Allen and Sue Ellen hushed him with their fingers in front of their lips. They drove around the streets of Memphis, sitting at stoplights longer than needed, waving pedestrians to cross, taking their time. Finally, after a few songs played through, E.P. spoke,

"I could feel this one. They were nothing but smiles in there. I tell you, we're gonna be rich. I just turned \$75 into endless gold. It's like alchemy. Like Goddamned alchemy." His devil finally poured out and the dual violations of the Good Lord's wishes were acknowledged and understood immediately by Sonny. His stomach twisted in discomfort and his heart pounded in anticipation.

The songs continued, the sun rolled through the sky, the songs continued. Elvis, Jerry Lee, Johnny, Carl, Elvis, Roy, Johnny....

The excitement in the Tudor dropped to the depths of no return. Or so it felt. E.P. hit the gas and soon enough they were back on the 78, heading towards Tupelo.

“W-What now, Aaron?” Sue Ellen asked.

“It’s E.P., Sue, call me E.P.” Was all he said. Sonny and Allen exchanged glances in their shared space of obliviousness. Eventually, back across the state line, they pulled into a gas station and E.P. told them to sit still while he “conducted business”.

The gas jockey sauntered up to the driver window with a little hop in his step, tapping his hands to his thighs. When E.P. rolled down the window, Sonny could hear the filling station’s radio playing the same songs that came through on the car stereo. The attendant, whose nametag read Tony, had thick sideburns and he kept his shirt buttoned halfway, exposing his chest under the hot Mississippi sun. He didn’t walk, he shook.

“Dollar gas, please.” E.P. said, casually. Sonny could see Sue Ellen passing the pistol to the front seat while E.P. reached his hand behind him, wiggling his fingers for its touch.

“Yes sir.” The young buck responded and waltzed across the black top as Carl Perkins sang Matchbox through the speakers of the gray box plugged in through an extension chord that ran all the way inside.

E.P. continued to wiggle his fingers and eventually turned around to see what was taking Sue Ellen so long to hand him the gun. When he did, he saw that Sonny had excused himself from the car and Sue Ellen was staring out her window, unaware of what had just transpired, watching the young man dance around the car, checking the oil and shaking his rag.

“Where’s the gun Sue Ellen?” E.P. asked through his teeth.

“I handed it to you. You ain’t g-got it?”

“No ma’am I do not. And where is Sonny?”

E.P., Sue Ellen and Allen all looked out their windows and, as if their necks were synchronized, all turned towards the driver’s side as Sonny and the dancing fool walked forward. The young man had his hands up, above his head and looked terrified.

“E.P., Sue Ellen, get out of the car.” Sonny said, looking around, protecting his appearance.

They did as they were told, assuming they were making room for the newest member of their traveling band before they’d hop back in the car themselves. However, once Tony was inside the car, Sonny slid right behind him on the front bench and bounced into the driver’s seat. He shut the door without saying a word and peeled out. E.P. and Sue Ellen stood their, not even bothering to wave the exhaust smoke out of their faces, dumbfounded by the last four seconds of their lives.

“Hot Damn, Sonny. Nice work.” Allen said from the backseat as the speedometer rapidly approached eighty miles per hour. “Get me as far the hell away from Memphis as you can. Tony, where can we drop you off?”

Sonny didn’t say a word and just kept driving. His nerves were ricocheting throughout his body, penetrating his skin from the inside. After a few miles of loud engine revolutions and speed, he eventually slowed down and could hear Tony crying and Allen shouting.

“Sonny, what the hell are you doing? What’s going on? Take this kid back and let me out of this car.”

“But we ain’t finished yet.” Sonny replied. “They didn’t play our song.”

Allen was terrified by the tone of Sonny’s voice and his words downright killed him.

“Sonny?” Allen asked nervously.

“The song never got played.” Sonny smiled. “But we traded those two bags of deadweight for this here dancing sensation. Now we got it. Poetry, Rhythm *and* Shake. Can you play the guitar?” Sonny turned towards Tony, he and his sideburns involuntarily shaking in the passenger seat.

At the next exit, with obsession behind the wheel, the car around and headed back to Memphis.