

The Blues

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“Godamn, bitch, you made me hurt ma han’ goin’ upside yo’ hard head!” “Who do you think youz talkin’ too, raisin’ yo’ voice like that at me?!” “Git yo’ narrah ass up off that flo’!”

Betty Sizmore, a thin black-skinned woman, began to gather herself up from the corner where Big Maceo had smacked her when she told him that she was leaving him for good this time. She sat up on one arm, raising a rough work-worn hand to her mouth, checking it for blood. It was dark inside of the one room shack, even though it **was** mid-afternoon on one of Mississippi’s blazing hot mid-summer days. Betty looked up at the old man’s creased black face, round and surrounded by short curly white hair like a haze of cotton lint; it was streaming sweat; his thin, dark lips framed his open mouth showing the few astonishingly white teeth he still had left in his head. His eyes bugged with anger and disbelief; he held himself erect, chest out in a kind of dignified pose, but all that told her was that he was poised on the verge of hitting her again.

“You sorry mutha’fucka,” she spat out. “I cain’t believe that I still loved you right up to now!”

Big Maceo lowered his clenched fist to his side, and relaxed his pose, as if “Bobcat” the overseer had just rounded into sight. He thought: “What have I done?” but he said, “What duz’ I need with a skinny-assed bitch like you?” “You ain’t got nothin’ a man wants in a woman no way.”

With those words he suddenly collapsed onto his homemade bed, and set his elbows onto his knees, slumping forward staring at the floor. Betty quickly raised herself, snatched up her flowered cloth traveling bag, and brushed past him on her way out of the shack’s narrow doorway, pushing aside with a snap the canvas that served as a poor excuse for a door. Her sobs and gasps from outside reached Maceo’s ears but he just kept on sitting there; soon, he couldn’t hear anything but the locusts buzzing in the humid afternoon heat.

Maceo and I, we been friends since we wuz boys, workin’ side by side in them fields pickin’ cotton on Colonel William Howard Stovall’s big plantation, four miles outside of Clarksdale in the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta, not too fahr from the Arkansas border.

Maceo, he had moved into this shack that used to be his grannie’s, which wuz set off by itself in a clump uh cottonwood trees along-side a narrah path where almost nobody ever went. Fo’ she died, that Mildred Smithfield was one tough old woman! One morning when her husband, Chester, after all night out drinkin’ moonshine an’ chasin’ hootch, walked up tuh that shack an’ tol’ her he was leavin’ for Chicago, she said, “I ain’t goin’ to let it turn me around!” “You ain’t gon’ git too far no way tryin’ to spend those ‘billy-bills’ up north” she said. That is what we call the money that they print on the plantation,

which is only good in the company store an' Clarksdale. Then, she jus' turnt 'round, went back inside an' let that flap drop! Her daughter, Fatima, Maceo's mother, she died young of a fever. Maceo's daddy wuz a hand on the other side uh the plantation, who seldom came 'round. Then one day, he upt' an' left for the north but we heard he didn't make it no futha' than Louisville. So Mildred got stuck with the chile' all by huhself.

Sharecroppin' ain't no kind of life but there ain't much else for black folks to do down here. We didn't have no school; never learnt to read or write, 'cept for a few people who somehow could read the bible. I guess that's what some would call a miracle! Ever' now and then some niggah' ed decide he wuz a preacher, and start holdin' services on Sunday in some amplified shack they had painted white and called a church. 'Bout the only time Maceo's grannie left huhr cabin was to go to church; tall, broad and dark-skinned, dressed up in huhr one black dress, wearin' huhr wig--but she never took the boy with huhr. I think she wuz secretly hopin' one of them old mens would try gettin' next to huhr but she couldn't bring huhself to speak with anyone—too proud! She jus' came and sat down, stood up when it was time to sing a hymn, and then left after the benediction. She shared huhr shack and huhr food with the boy but that was it. When he was old enough she told him he had to go.

Maceo grew up to be a big young man, and he proved he was nobody to trifle with. He was always in a fight, and he mos' offen won. The ladies liked him, at least at first but he wasn't too interested in love an' affection; nor did he want to be tied down to jus' one gal. Afta a while, Maceo and I rented one of Colonel Stovall's shacks and went to work. Over time he moved up from pickin' cotton with his hands, to drivin' a tractor, which

paid a little bit better. But he wanted mo', so he went into the overseer's office and asked Mr. "Bobcat"--that's what he wanted us to call him!--if he could have a raise to 27 cents an hour. That skinny little cracka' jumped up from his desk and started pacin' an' hissn' an' spittin' from one end of his tiny office to the other, just like his namesake in a cage; then he shouted, told Maceo to git outta his sight! "I give you a raise and every nigger out there will want one too!" Maceo said that he knew fo' a fac' that other drivers made that amount of money but he didn't, and they wasn't no better than him. But it didn't do no good. Things wuzn't goin' too well on the plantation no way; the Colonel was off fightin' in the wahr against some yellow people called the Japaneses. Now, you mighta' thunk that, since they was printin' they own money anyway...but even paper was bein' rationed then!

Some folks were startin' up juke joints in their shacks on the plantation. They got things goin' on Friday and Saturday nights, servin' moonshine to the customers. They'd have some boys in to play some blues, too; that kept the church goin' folks mosly away--they didn't want to hear that "ol' Satan's music"--and that was just fine. Maceo could pick a little banjo, so he caught himself up a couple uh other boys--a drummer and a fife player--and they formed a group that was able to pick up a little cash playin' at some joints, and at parties thrown by some of the overseers around Clarksdale and Coahoma County. The joints staded up because you wuz takin' a chance goin' in to the clubs in town, where on Saturday nights, the deputies would be layin' fo' a drunk nigga who couldn't walk straight. The plantations are so big there ain't no room on the Delta fo' renters or small farms, so the po' whites take to the hills up to the north and east, just behind Choctaw

ridge. That ain't good farm land tho', so they is all jus' as po' as colored folks. The only cash work they got is as overseers, moonshiners, or deputies. Those who prefer to make they livin' beatin' up negroes sign on as sheriff's deputies. The sheriff is mean as a cottonmouth, with a body like a pot-belly stove, topped off wit' long scraggily red hair. His name is Woodrow "Lockjaw" O'Reilly. Peoples calls him "Lockjaw" because of his tenency to latch on to somebody with his teeth in a fight an' not let go.

Now, Maceo used to go into town to those clubs; he being so big and not opposed to some fisticuffs, the deputies usually lef' him alone. But one weekend he took his grannie's cousin's boy, Jimmy Smithfield, with him to a club in the low end of town called "One-eyed Jack's." Jack used to didn't have no sign or nothin'; but then he los' his lef' eye in a knife fight; befo' that, the club didn't have no name neither. Afta a late evenin' uh drinkin' local whiskey an' waltzin' 'round the flo' with Bessie, a married woman whose husband, "Ice-pick totin' Slim," was passed out at their table, Maceo an' Jimmy left to walk back to the plantation. They wuz laughin' and sayin' it wuz a good thing that ol' Slim had not fallen on that **pick** he carried in the chest pocket uh his suit, when he dropt his last whiskey and suddenly decided to sleep. "Yeah," Maceo said, "but that Bessie sure got some big, fine titties on her!" Jimmy said back "Yeah, an' you had yo' hands all over that behind, too!" Maceo said, "In a si'iastion like that, I grows mo' arms than an octopus." Jimmy replied, "You got to wonder what she sees in a skinny ol' dude like that but I guess he got one thing that's big on him, an' I don't mean his wallet!" Just then sheriff "Lockjaw" and a couple of his deputies stepped outta they police car and hustled into the light on the sidewalk, like a pack uh rats scurrin' acrosst a flo'. Big

Maceo looked over at them and smiled: He say, “Well, if it ain’t Clarksdale’s own fightin’ red snapper!” “But, what chu’ doin’ way up here on dry land, sheriff? The Yazoo’s down thatta way!?” Maceo pointed over his shoulder towards the darkness at the end uh the street. Jimmy was laughin’ so hard ‘till he fell upside a lamp-post, an’ had to hang on to keep from rollin’ on the ground. “Nigger, you gonna be laughin’ out the other side of your mouth by the time we finished with you!” Lockjaw shouted. Maceo looked at the two other deputies, standin’ there shiftin’ their weight from one foot to the other, shiftin’ ‘round their eyes too--white trash who looked to be a number of days removed from they last good meal, and none too anxious too try they luck out on him. Then he said, “You sho’ ‘bout that? ‘Cause ya’ deputies seems to be lookin’ fo’ they mammas.” At that, one uh them swung his stick at Jimmy usin’ both hands, catchin’ him flush behin’ the right ear, an’ he went down and out. Then they all three went to work on Maceo with night sticks, an’ brass knuckles after the sticks broke, but ‘though they couldn’t put him out, they did get him into the police car and took him up to the jail. Out uh the car’s back winda’, he could see that Jimmy was still on the ground, an’ he wasn’t movin’.

A few days later, afta they decided to release Maceo, he had jus’ got back to the plantation, walkin’ in the rain, when some men came up with Jimmy’s body wrapped in a blanket; the deputies had dumped him inta’ a ditch outside uh town. Jimmy’s mamma fell out on the muddy ground when she saw her boy’s body. She an’ none of her family never spoke to Big Maceo again; they blamed him fo’ the boy’s death. Afta’ that, Maceo started up his own juke.

Like I was sayin' befo', Maceo liked the ladies. Between runnin' his juke joint an' playin' music at parties 'round the county, he had his way with plenty of them: Tall thin ones; big wide ones; short plump light-skinned gals; even the occasional overseer's daughter. An, tho' he always was a hard man--or maybe becauz of it-- even harder after Jimmy, some of those soft ladies fell in love with him. A couple uh times he let one move in with him; but he really just seemed to enjoy playin' with their emotions. Handsome and dark-skinned he was still a good lookin' man but gettin' older and dryer now. When he wuz drunk, which was lately mos' uh da time, he would finish up an evenin' with a beatin'. Some uh his gals would hang on for a few rounds uh that befo' they decided to move on. Like mos' mens uh dat type, he came to take a woman's leavin' real hard; so the mo' they left, the meaner he got. One time, he took up with Miss Mae Ella Walker, a real pretty high yella' gal with light green eyes an' short brown pressed hair, who taught at the school now that they let us have one. She had come up from Mound Bayou in Bolivar County to teach the kids to read; a real well-spoken woman, edge'ecaited and church goin'. Some uh huh friends had talked huhr into goin' to a joint one Saturday, wher' she heard Maceo pickin' some blues wit' his banjo, and that was that! Everybody was shocked, uh course: This didn't seem to be no natural match, but they stayed together 'bout a year, until he hit her onct' too often too, an' she moved out. When Maceo heard that she had taken up wit' another fella mo' huh type it seemed, an' they wuz 'bout to get married, he dropped by her shack one evenin' an' blackened her eye as a weddin' present. Then, peoples stayed away from him mo' an mo' till his business dropt off, and he couldn't run his juke no mo'.

Wuzn't long befo' the women stopt havin' anything to do with him. All he did was drive that tractor an' come back to that shack an' start drinkin'. Maceo even stopt playin' his banjo. Folks started sayin' he wuz turnin' inta a lone wolf, jus' like his grannie. No one went down that trail to his shack but me; no one else passed his way—'till Betty. Betty Sizemo' showed up on the plantation one day an' went to work pickin' that cotton like all the rest uh us. She said she wuz on her way north from Mussel Shoals but we really didn't know where she came from, an' she didn't appear to be in no great hurry tuh git back on the road. Betty was 'bout 35 and lookt like life had been real hard on her; there wasn't no fat on her face, but there wuz scars, an' some dark brown eyes with a dreamy, fahr' away look in them sometimes, an' sweet, soft lookin' lips. She said that she had lef' huhr las' husband, that she jus' had bad luck wit' men. But Betty was a sweet gal any way, an' I could tell that she wasn't ready to give up on that dream of love. She didn't **have** nothin' else no way! She jus' knew that she was goin' tuh find the right man tuh hang onto, then everything would come out alright. I cain't say how much I loved her; I had nevah loved any woman befo' then, but dammit if she didn't fix on Maceo!

They met when she went to take him some water while he was drivin' his tractor. I akst huhr to do it 'cauz I felt sorry fo' him wit nobody to speak wit' 'cept me. He took one look at huhr, an' he figured out quick that she had an itch he could git at with no trouble at all; so he askt her to go out to a juke Saturday evenin'. In a few weeks, Betty was moved inta that old shack, cookin' an' cleanin', takin' care uh his clothes, even massagin' his big ol' rusty feet. Between age, work and drinkin', Maceo wasn't no longuh the tough man he once't wuz but he turnt into bein' pure mean with words. Fo'

every kind thing Betty did, he liked tuh run her down aftawords. It wuz like he couldn't stop himself. 'Course, he would hit huh, too, 'specially when he wuz drunk. Then, he'd say he was sorry—he tol' me that he came to mean it-- that he loved her an' would straighten hiz-self out; he would even shed a tear or two! He had huh tied up in knots! She would tell me 'bout how bad he wuz treatin' huh but then he'd turn 'round an' make love to her like she wuz special. Then, he would come up to me an' say how dumb she was, how she would take anything he would thro' at her and come back fo' mo'. The las' time he did that, I hit him in the face so hard while he was laughin' that he went down in the dirt. Then I walked off leavin' him sittin' in the dust holdin' his face, an' we ain't spoke since. Betty had disappeared; maybe she did head to Chicago after all.

“That buzzin' is 'bout to drive me crazy!” Maceo thought to himself, “I been sittin' here a long time; it's almos' dark out now, and the crickets is join' in.” “I guess I betta' light this lamp befo' it gets too dark tuh see.”