

Along the Blues' River



This story was inspired by the legend of the devil's bargain of Robert Leroy Johnson: 8 May 1916 (Mississippi) - 16 August 1938 (Mississippi), one of the most influential bluesmen in history.

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Chapter 1

Somewhere, Mississippi, 1931

What follows is the story of my life. Robert Kingsley Johnson, twenty years old, penniless black man, lost child – my father left us at my birth and mum passed away three years ago.

Ever since I found an old guitar by rummaging through the garbage, I dreamt to one day become a blues legend. With the few dollars I earned myself, I bought a used harmonica, and I began to write my own music. Eventually, I began to give concerts in the dingy bars of the town.

Why did he just say that? Why did he pretend I was fully talentless?

However, all was well going until then; of course, the bar was almost empty, a few people were yawning, all were looking bothered and watching the clock hanging on the wall. Despite all that, it went quite well. Until Charlie Tyler, doubtless one of the best blues guitarists of the state, who had honored me by accepting to listen to my performance decided suddenly to interrupt my show, as I was playing *Big Road Again*.

This tall lad whose skin was blacker than mine, led me into a low-lit room that was only by an oil-lamp decorated and enlightened, and stood just in front of a dusty window whose wood was widely gnawed by termites. A weird smell of mold was in the air, that's why I felt ill-at-ease and my heart was beating faster.

"Sonny, erm... I'll be honest with you.

You should STOP playing music." he acknowledged in a low voice.

I was stunned, my mouth opened a few seconds long, as I would have got a slap on my nose.

"What?!" I answered. "I just can't stop playing. My whole life is devoted to music! I have nowhere to go...".

"You scare people away. You can't even play guitar. You can't even connect your mediocre licks together. How is this supposed to be pleasant to listen to?" he said cruelly.

"Well... I'm giving it my best! Please give me another chance!" I pleaded desperately.

"Sonny... Trust me. Just let it go." he said, putting his hat on his head and going out of the room, without looking back at me anymore.

My long arms began to sweat under my checkered blue shirt and, then, I believe I screamed but I was already unconscious. A scream of grief, despair, but of anger too.

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I don't know where I was standing. Nowhere actually. I had left the village with my flat green hat on my head, my hands in my pockets, my harmonica between my lips, and I was wandering through Mississippi's countryside for hours, days, perhaps even weeks. I had discovered lost paths, wild forests and the Great River; but never found any source of inspiration.

However, Tyler's words were still harassing me from inside and were sounding like hammer strokes. How many times had I thought about giving up? About jumping in the raging river whose whistling seemed so appealing from my position?

I had only eaten a piece of bread and drunk a few sips of water yesterday. Thirsty, hungry and exhausted, I stepped towards a crossroad. One evening, I arrived at an old sign which was indicating the nearest town: located 8-miles away. Lots of leaves were lying on the floor and the wind was blowing in my face, so that my eyelids were almost closed and hid my dark-brown eyes. A few oaks were casting their shadow on the crossing, the moon was shining brightly; hence, I began to doze off, and everything around me was slowly becoming blurry. Only my harmonica's melody was allowing me to stay awake.

Suddenly, I glimpsed a silhouette far away. I was quite surprised to meet someone here, because I had not seen anyone since morning. However, while the shadow was getting closer to me, I saw he was wearing a hat. A very odd hat, horned which was seeming as red as blood. By glaring at him – or either rather it? – I noticed that he was floating rather than walking. Who...what was that?

Terrified, I wanted to react and run away from it, but I didn't get enough time and, anyways, my knees were fully blocked and stoned. Sweating, gasping and feeling in spite of all the freezing cold, I closed my eyes and waited for the end. However, nothing seemed to happen. There, a sharp voice caught me, bit me, hit me, inside me, as if my head would have been invaded by a talking knives' army.

"I know you Robert, it's pointless to hide." the voice hissed.

"Who...who are you?" I asked, stuttering.

"Devil. Evil Devil. Just that. "

But don't get scared. I don't want to hurt you, but to help you. You're furious, because you hate those idiots who are continually criticizing your music. All you seek is revenge. I can provide it; I can make you become the most legendary bluesman ever who shall definitely enslave them."

"How?" I questioned, interested and reassured. He had caught my full attention.

"Oh, it's child's play. Just let me do it."

Nevertheless, I would need something in return..."

"How many?" I asked, dipping my hand in the pocket where I kept a crumpled bill.

"I don't want any money. Is there anything else as artificial and ephemeral as such a ridiculous piece of paper? "

No, I want something more powerful, something infinitely simpler."

"What then?"

"Your shadow," he whispered in an eager voice.

My eyes, until then almost closed, opened suddenly in amazement. I stayed silent for a few seconds. The devil chuckled loud somewhere in my mind, but I heard him barely. All was disappearing and in a little while I would be gone.

As I woke up, I was bleeding. My wrist had struck a sharp stone while I was falling. My harmonica lay next to me and above it, a bill of ten dollars. I didn't know at all where it could come from. Until I glimpsed some handwritten words: "Join me tomorrow, when the moon will be full, same place.". Letters were shining and burnt like fire.

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I did it. Why? No idea.

All I know is I'm so pretentious, eager and jealous. About my shadow, I just would have to say I had met one of those voodoo wizards who were lurking in New Orleans' alleys.

When night finally began to appear, I felt bland and I got goosebumps. Yet, it was quite mild for an autumn evening; even the wind seemed to sleep in. All of a sudden, the temperature dropped by ten degrees. I stopped breathing. Silent. Five, ten, twenty seconds.

Then, the freezing voice hissed again inside me:

"I knew you'd come back. I've never doubted.

Well... Your gift now.”

He ordered to befall toward the Father of Waters, Mississippi River. I walked, but I had lost control: my legs moved independently of any decision. The riverside was getting close faster, still faster. Ten, five, two meters. I spotted the freezing mirror just below me and dove into the water. I got the feeling my whole body would have been torn by sharp knives. Considering that I didn't manage to rise to the surface, I feared I would soon drown.

Suddenly, all around me vanished. I had the impression my soul was hovering through the air: I was floating above a quiet world; I was taking a quiet life. For the first time ever, I felt strong, powerful and relaxed. Wind was blowing around me, but it didn't hinder me at all. Indeed, I was only caressed by them which seemed to me like a female breath.

I moved, before opening my eyes. Lying on the grass, in the middle of wet leaves, I was weirdly dry. I had probably spent several hours sleeping, because the sun was shining high in the sky. Being fine, a gentle detail embarrassed me in spite of it all: my shadow had already become something turbid.

I didn't notice it yet, but death just appeared opposite to me.

Chapter 2

Memphis, Tennessee, 1934

Brilliant. This lad was absolutely brilliant, doubtless even better than me. Perhaps so much.

The whole city was only speaking about him for several weeks. Not a single store didn't have a poster showing him, with his famous hat and a so charismatic smile on his mouth, on its window. Not a single magazine didn't mention the dazzling success of his last show. Not a single record label didn't dream to engaging him.

Nevertheless, so far, he refused any offer and just continued to follow the riverside of the Mississippi River and give representations in each town he reached. From Memphis to New Orleans, from over there to here...

People nicknamed him "the blues' light", because, apparently, he owned no shadow. Sure, lots of rumors were flying about him which fueled gossip. Some told it had been stolen by a voodoo wizard in New Orleans; he had either himself confirmed this version, laughing, so that nobody could know if he said the truth or not. Others imagined he would have made a pact with the devil: his shadow in return for his huge talent. Without grasping why, I believed in such a possibility. This boy is so gifted and, at the same time, so... terrifying.

His real name, Robert Johnson, reminded me vaguely of something the first time I heard about it, but I didn't know exactly what. Whatever, considering that his telegram, sent the previous day, was announcing: *Will be tomorrow in Memphis*. I would be finally able to meet this Johnson and discuss with him. As the most respected bluesman of my generation, I had to prove I stayed so much better.

Around 5 p.m., the gossip spread that Johnson had finally arrived. Obviously, even exhausted, each one was hoping he would give his first concert on the same evening. I stood in the crowd which had invaded the biggest saloon of the city, *The Black Rider*. Nobody had recognized me, all were only thinking about Johnson what made me even angrier.

Some rare lucky men were sitting in used wood chairs around round tables and were playing cards. A heavy smell of smoking mixed with sweat forced me to plug my nose. I tried to reach the narrow stairway which led to the bedrooms. Successless. I finally joined all these people who were sitting on the stage, in order to be able to breathe again.

All of a sudden, a kid, dressed with a red and striped shirt, crossed the avenue and entered the bar.

“It is going to be there!” he shouted.

Everyone stood up and began to talk loudly, while orders were submerging the poor waiter.

Two hours later, a little man, wearing a tweed flat hat, pushed the saloon door, an old guitar in the right hand. His face was hidden, because he was lowering his head. Strangely, the assembly fell silent. The air had just transformed into freezing ice. Finally, the lad raised his head and looked at us. His round eyes, his light spot on the right ear were familiar to me, but I didn't recognize him immediately. Sudden: *Eureka!* That was one of those lads I had humiliated a few years ago, while I was traveling myself along the Mississippi River. I chuckled silently. However, Johnson stepped further, imperturbable. No shadow preceded him.

By crossing the path, formed by the mob *for* him, he glanced at me. Lightning shone in his eyes. Lightning of revenge. I felt ill-at-ease, just in front of this fool! Finally, he climbed up on the stage, took out a harmonica out of his pocket, still without any word. There, he spoke, in a microphone, appeared as if by magic:

“Erm... Ladies and gentlemen... Tonight, I'm really excited to perform on this stage. Why? Lots of memories are resting in this city. And, this morning, by waking up, I realized I had to get rid of the past mistakes. I really cheer up to be here.” he said in a solemn voice.

I got the odd feeling those words were concerning me.

He seized his guitar and began to play *Big Road Again*, exactly the same song that he played so bad three years ago. At the time his fingers touched the string, my whole jealousy vanished: I was in wonder. Orpheus had never played any lyra, but guitar and harmonica. And he stood just in front of me. As mesmerized as Cerberus, I decided I *had* to engage such a prodigy.

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Midnight was already past, when I finally could address him. When he sighted me, he smiled. Strange smile: hateful? Smug? I offered him a cigarette, and he showed me an empty table without a word. We sat opposite each other.

I began to speak, without any pointless presentation, considering that each one was perfectly knowing the other.

“Wow! Your progress is impressive. Tonight, you were beautiful; now, you’ve surpassed me.” I admitted.

He thanked me. I expected that, honored, this horrible smile would have disappeared out of his face. But it wouldn’t. As he stayed quiet, I decided to continue my speech.

“As you may know, you’re very successful. From here to New Orleans, your music is rocking us. But, if you would create your own one, instead of covering famous songs, you could extend your success to the whole world. And you would become one of the greatest musicians ever...”

“What do you want?” he interrupted suddenly, still smiling and stopping smoking.

“I only want you to work with me.”

His whole face began to smile. Triumph. All of a sudden, he chuckled. Loud and irritating chuckle.

“Loneliness is like **a stairway to heaven**. As free as the water, as fast as the wind, I can walk everywhere, discover and create everything. Why would I renounce to such perfection?” he answered. “No, what I’m going to do is establishing my own music label. Then, I could release my own songs, by staying free. I don’t need you.” he hissed me, enhancing each syllable.

He stood up, pushed the door, and went out of the bar. *La fête est finie*. I was furious; all it comforted me was knowing God had always punished such arrogance.

I wasn’t fully right.

Chapter 3

New Orleans, Louisiana, 1938

The whole city was stinking of Mardi-Gras and carnival spirit, so that no one paid attention to me despite my horned hat and my bright red skin. Well, the festivities hadn't officially begun yet; nevertheless, this horrible event had already invaded the city in the facts. I was wandering in the crowd, in the middle of crying kids. The heavy smell of candies was literally burning my lungs. Huge chimneys of a barge were screaming in my sharp ears.

A vampire, a siren and a clown pushed me around. Although I could have punished them severely, I stepped further as if nothing would have happened. I was still going along the river, but I suddenly turned toward downtown, following the movement of thousands of idiots. Actually, the greatest musical show would have to take place there. I thought "greatest" wasn't really relevant; "most pathetic" would have been less wrong. Whatever. All I knew was Johnson had to perform there. How? Since 9 a.m., speakers were proudly proclaiming this information on every street corner. Unconsciously, they were ringing **hell bells**.

Long multicolored garlands spread everywhere in the downtown. Red, blue, green, yellow: that was the real **carnival of lights**. I had to acknowledge the atmosphere was pretty pleasant. In the middle of the square, not far from a high fountain, decorated with little smiling angels, a stage had been installed.

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When night finally began to replace day, a smell of death ignited my heart of happiness. Indeed, a little man, dressed in a black costume and a majestic top-hat, climbed arduously on the stage. He seemed to be the mayor. Next to me, someone whispered excitedly: "That's Lord Miller!".

He addressed the crowd, speaking in a microphone:

"Ladies and gentlemen, good evening! Tonight marks the beginning of the most important event of the year, here in New Orleans: festivities of Mardi-Gras. I have only one thing to say: "Let the celebrations begin!"

He left the stage, loudly applauded by the mob. Under a shower of confetti, Johnson appeared suddenly. He was wearing his eternal flat hat, his guitar in the right hand, his harmonica in the left one. However, he had replaced his usual shirt by a new wet black costume which he had sure paid quite expensive; in any case, he could widely afford it. Indeed, he had eventually decided to write his own music, alone, and release two successful and already legendary albums. What he didn't know is his gift was only temporarily valid, and therefore, it was widely time to get rid of it. One single possibility: death.

Thousands of voices were suddenly raised and were scrolling his name. Gently smiling, he raised his harmonica and blew inside. As always, each vibration of the air was transformed into a tiny gold droplet which, linked to billions of others, was now making up a huge waterfall, the highest **wonderwall** ever. Tears were streaming down everyone's face. Everyone's. Except mine. I was indeed busy enough to order Johnson's shadow to climb on the stage. Great reunion in perspective...

By the way, why did I offer this poor lad such a present, as he was passing by my cave, just in return for his shadow? It was so funny. However, after a while, such a spirit always becomes... ponderous. Unfortunately, the only way to get rid of that was to make his original owner disappear.

I was the only one who could presage the coming disaster, because I was the only one able to see the dark silhouette on the stage who was getting closer and closer to Johnson. Nevertheless, I didn't do anything to prevent the drama. I did just know that neither Johnson nor his shadow could support that forced reunion, after an as long separation.

I was right. Once the dark form brushed Johnson's arm, this one collapsed, letting go of both instruments – the fall of guitar sounded like a **thunderstruck** on the assembly – and screamed of pain. He yelled, yelled, and yelled still louder, by hiding his face with his hands. Hundreds of Sydney funnel-web spiders seemed to bite him at the same time, planting their tiny and hence even more sharp teeth in his chair. However, no blood was flowing, no injury was visible.

The most horrible thing was that no one could simply understand *why* he was writhing like this in pain.

Some people who were pretending to be physicians rushed toward him and tried to revive him. Successless. Actually, he wasn't unconscious at all; he continued to scream, without stopping, burnt from inside by his own shadow. A blue taxi, a quite ancient Chrysler, arrived suddenly, apparently from nowhere. Still yelling, he was installed within. The vehicle started up and moved away as quickly as possible.

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Stars were enlightening the whole hill at the bottom of which the house where Johnson had been carried lay. Actually, it looked more like a shack than a house. Crooked wooden boards were hanging here and there on the outside walls; some bricks were missing regularly which resulted in unpleasant draughts. Any paint seemed to have disappeared for many years.

Moon was full. Perfect, that's always a good presage. I came in. No risk, no one could see me. And, even though they could, I'm not sure they would have noticed my presence. As they only moved to bring water glasses, stale pillows and a like, their eyes were only staring at a shabby wood bed. A corpse was lying and was constantly yelling, a dark shape still bent over him. Only he could glimpse me. Either, I believe he did, because his eyes fell suddenly on me, without stopping shouting to death. Just a moment. He would have surely dreamt. His funereal scream resumed.

I waited. Time required. A bell tower rang far away. Midnight. Some minutes ran out again. All of a sudden, I noticed his cry had become lower, his breath jerkier. As well as others imbeciles too, considering that they looked still more anxious and worried than before; they were constantly making sure Johnson was warm enough or something like this. No word was coming out of their mouths; without daring to say it, they were as aware of the final outcome as me. By and by, this slowdown sped up, progressively and vertiginously at the same time.

Then all ceased. No more noise was coming from the body. The heart stopped to beat, the muscles to twitch. However, eyes were staying open, as well as the mouth. The shadow had vanished, annihilated in an instant.

When the **morning bells** sounded, the world just lost the most genius bluesman of all time.

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A strange feeling of happiness was flowing in my veins, when I came out and laid my eyes on the aurora sky. I nevertheless felt that something was still missing...

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Three days later, I surfaced back. I had just stolen the heavy Wind Scepter that I held in my both hands. The diamond at the top reflected the sun's light. Like an emperor, I stroke it against the floor. Threatening black clouds darkened the pure sky. A huge spinning cyclone immediately rose up from the Earth's deepness and befell toward the house. Ten seconds later, nothing left. Boards, bricks, Johnson's grave, all won't ever be found.

By breathing in quietly I was looking at my achievement from the top of the hill. I had triumphed, one more time.

In the end, Evil always wins.

quotes (just the names of songs and albums)