

## The Mission

The train used to run right along the river. The tracks are still there, rusty, weeds coming up between the ties. They say that on clear autumn nights you can still see the ghost fires of the hoboes under the broken bridges, still hear the phantom hobo songs and the sound of the trains whistling past.

“Days are getting short,” I say, squeezing your hand in mine as we walk.

“It won’t be long, will it?”

“Moon’s out early. And bright.”

“A bit chilly, don’t you think?”

“It is.”

I put my arm around you and feel just how cold you are. Instantly you bunch up your shoulders like you don’t want me to touch you.

“Whatsamatter?” I ask. “Don’t you like the feel of my fingers on your skin?”

“It’s not that!”

“Oh, I get it. You think I’m crazy, too.”

“No, no. No one’s saying you’re crazy. Even the doctor didn’t say you were crazy. It’s Eddy. I was just thinking about Eddy, that’s all.”

“Yeah? Well, let’s not talk about it,” I say impatiently. “I’m tired of hearing about what a lousy father I’ve been. The boy’s just gonna have to learn how to make it on his own.”

“But he needs a father.”

“Sure.”

But it isn’t going to be me. No way. I got plans of my own. Big plans. The kind most people only dream about. And I’m sure as hell not going to let anything get in my way. Not you, not Eddy, not no one!

“Look!” I whisper. “Up ahead. Someone’s coming!”

“I don’t see anything.”

I point my finger in the dark. A figure emerges from the shadows, his face bright in the light of the moon.

“It’s N.!” I cry. “It’s really N.! Why you old sonuvagun! Where the hell you been keeping yourself all these years?”

Suddenly I feel your hand on my shoulder. “Come on. Don’t you think it’s time we were getting home?”

I pull myself away from you. “Listen here, woman. I just want to stop and have a few words with my old friend. Ain’t no harm in that, now is there? Well, tell me N., what exactly you been up to? Nothing much, eh? Remember how you used to drop in on us from time to time? Always unexpected, just like now. We never knew you were coming. And how we’d sit around the fire drinking moonshine, you telling all them wild tales of your travels. Well, where you been hitching to this time, old friend? To hell and back, I’d suppose!”

I let out a big laugh and draw back my hand to give old N. a slap on the shoulder, but he slips away, eyeing me warily.

“Oh, I see,” I say. “So you don’t want to have no more associations with me neither. Is that it? You think I’m gone, too? Well piss on you, little buddy! You know what you are? You’re nothing but a ghost. Nothing but a long-dead hobo. You just been dead too long to remember.”

I put up my dukes and do some fancy legwork in the dirt.

“Come on, old man! Let’s see what you’re made of!”

I take a few wild swings in his direction.

“Now don’t start sneaking away like that. Stand up like a man and fight! What’s wrong? You chicken? Or don’t you want to come to blows with the best friend you ever had in your life? Well, you listen to me. We may have been best friends once, but that’s all over, you hear! I got no use for you anymore. It’s not my fault you went and put a bullet in your head. That was your doing. And you’re the one that’s gonna have to take full responsibility. Wanna know what your problem always was? You could never take any responsibility. Not one friggin’ ounce of responsibility. Come back here, N.! Don’t

you dare run away from me when I'm talking to you!"

I stop shouting and let my hands drop. My head drops, too.

After a moment you ask me, "Is he gone?"

"Yeah," I say, misty-eyed and quiet, "he's gone."

The voice behind me is crying, "Daddy, slow down! Wait for me daddy!"

But I just keep on walking. There's no need to worry. It'll only be a few more days.

"It's not my fault if you can't keep up," I mutter to no one.

Thankya Jesus! At last I'm a' following that ribbon of highway through the golden valley heading towards the sunset.

The cars slow down, go around me, and then speed away, the drivers looking at me back over their shoulders.

I'm the greatest rock singer that ever was. My songs have become anthems for an entire generation. My fans love me. Every night girls swarm at my feet, shouting and cheering, begging for a chance to touch my body. Sometimes I take a girl home with me. Sometimes more than one.

My agent is driving me to my next gig. I'll be playing in the world's largest stadium to a crowd of a million people. Standing room only. They had to take out the seats to make space for all the people.

Two of my best fans are sitting in the back seat of the car. I'm nibbling away like a mouse on a crumbly hunk of cheddar cheese.

The agent says to me, "Why don't you sing something for them? Betcha they'd appreciate it!"

"Sure, why not?"

The agent grins over his shoulder towards the back. I begin howling:

"Oh lordy, lordy. Once there was a tiiiiiiiiime  
when I did not have these bluuuuuuuues.

Oh yes lordy! Once there was a tiiiiiiiiime  
when I didn't—"

I interrupt myself. "You know what?" I say to the agent, "I'm really hungry. Before I do this song I think I'd like to finish this cheese."

"Go ahead," the agent says. "Your fans'll wait. You're the greatest, remember?"

"Yeah," I say, stuffing the entire chunk of cheese into my mouth. I try to sing some more but my mouth is too full of dried cheese crumbs to get out anything more than a few muffled grunts.

"That's fantastic!" the agent laughs. "Don't worry about your sound. Whatever you sing will sell."

I try to say, "You know it!" but my mouth's still too full of cheese.

We drive down one street after another. I haven't the slightest idea where we are. Looking out the window as we turn a corner I see a pizza shop that looks vaguely familiar. Oh yeah, I suddenly remember. Their pizza's lousy—that's why I never went back there. Further down the street the driver stops the car in front of a large white building.

"This is the place," he says over his shoulder to you and Eddy in the back.

I'm sorry, but I simply can't forgive you, N. Not for what you did. You were like a brother to me. More than a brother, a father. And now you're dead. You left the burden to me, you know. Now I am the father. Now I am God. No longer just God the Son, but also God the Father. We are one. I am all-knowing, all-powerful, all-good. I've got the whole world in my hands. The whole wide world! It is my responsibility! Goddammit N.—if things get fucked up now, I'll be the one to blame!

"Hey, thanks for coming. It's been a long time. Seems like you don't get over here much anymore. I haven't seen Eddy in ages. How's he doing? Must be a grown man by now. And how about yourself? So you're doing pretty good, huh? Yeah, you always were a fighter! Me too! Just look at these muscles! Well...maybe they do sag a bit—but they're bigger than they used to be, don't you think?"

"Listen, I gotta tell you: I saw the doctor yesterday. You should see his office! It's unbelievable. That man works in style! A huge desk, walnut bookshelves along the walls—not to mention a humongous picture window with a great view of the city. Anyway, he sits me down in this big,

overstuffed chair and asks me to start telling him my dreams. I say, 'Listen, doc, I'm no fool. I used to be something of an intellectual myself. Maybe I don't have a Ph.D. in psychiatry, but I do know who and what I am. "Know thyself!" Do you recall who said that? Socrates! A direct quote! Fooled you, eh? You didn't think I was that bright, did you? Well, maybe it's me who should be sitting behind that big fat desk of yours, unpeeling you like an onion. Layer after layer, illusion after illusion. What you still don't realize, even with all your fancy college degrees, is that after you've peeled away the last layer and get to the absolute center, there's absolutely nothing left. It's empty. Completely empty! It doesn't really matter if you believe me or not. It's true, all of it. But OK, quit pestering me—if you want to hear my dreams I'll tell you one:

"Once, when I was a little boy, my mother and I were in the kitchen. It was fantastically bright. My father was in the basement, where it was totally dark. He was yelling, "There's a bat down here!"

"Suddenly the bat flies into the light upstairs and I see that it isn't a bat at all, but a strange and beautiful black butterfly.'

"That was the dream I told him. But there was another one even more esoteric, a dream within a dream. I haven't told it to anyone yet—not even the doctor—and before I tell it to you, I want you to promise that you'll never tell this dream to anyone else. It has to be our little secret, OK? If you promise, I'll tell it to you then:

"After I saw the black butterfly, I fell into a deep sleep right there on the kitchen floor, still in my dream. And while I was asleep I dreamed that N. and I were sitting on top of a rocky, barren mountain swapping stories. 'You see, it was like this,' N. was saying. 'We were just a bunch of regular guys who one day got this crazy idea that we could change the world. What we didn't know then was that the only way we could ever really change the world was to change ourselves first. But no, no. We figured that the first step'd be to get rid of everything that was already here. You know—tear down the old to make space for the new. So we go to this old geezer's house. We were going to blow it up. And one of the guys says, "This old shack'll fall in about two seconds. I could take it out with my own hands!"

"So he commences to pound away at the shack. But nothing happens. I start punching it myself. Still nothing happens. I say, "Wire the bombs." And someone wires the bombs. I'm all excited. I can just see the shack getting blown to smithereens, all the little pieces lying on the ground. I push the plunger. There's an explosion, a blinding flash of light. But when I look, I see that the shack is still standing. Not a scratch on it!

"And then N.'s face got real serious and he said, "That's when I knew that the only way I could ever save the world was to become a martyr.'

"I say, 'The only problem was, you couldn't get anyone to kill you, huh?'

"'Nope. No one.' he answers.

"'So you had to do it yourself.'

"N. nodded."

I'm walking down a white corridor with white doors. The doors are open but the rooms have no windows. I have to get out. I have to escape. The world needs me.

I pull my hat down over my eyes so that no one notices me. But the rooms are empty. There are no people. It is I and I alone in a building of pure white. "Where is everybody?" I ask myself as I slink along from doorway to doorway, casting furtive glances all around me.

Suddenly at the end of one of the corridors there's a glass door. People are walking past on the sidewalk outside. The top half of the door has been painted a shiny black, so I can't see the people's faces, only their legs. I can also see the tires of busses and cars. I can hear the rumbling of the engines as well. Faintly I hear the voices of the people as they pass.

Ah! the world. To go back to its filth and grime. To be born again, reincarnated. To become its savior!

I stand there in front of the door looking at my reflection in the shiny black glass. I haven't been eating properly. I have scurvy. My teeth are falling out. I have to get outside and buy some fruit, an apple or an orange. If only I had an apple or an orange! God, I would trade away all future glory for an apple or an orange right now. I would stay in this building for the rest of my life, I wouldn't pass through that door, if I only had an apple or an orange.

The door itself no longer interests me, only the image of myself that it reflects. I am an old man now. My hat's spotted, my clothes are in rags. I need a shave. My face is covered with dirty gray stubble. I smile a knowing smile and say to myself, "You old hobo!" The teeth that remain are just barely

hanging on to their gums.

I notice that there is an apple in my hand. A big red juicy apple! I put it to my mouth, but before I take a bite I decide to test the door just to see if it's locked.

It isn't.

Oh what a fine day it is. The sun's out. Children are playing in the park. The benches are full of old men like myself. Tonight we'll be together, sitting round our hobo ghost fires, singing our phantom hobo songs, listening to the sound of the trains whistling past. I shuffle along happy, blessing the people as I go. There's a young boy sitting with his mother on a bench by the fountain. I walk over to them and say to the mother, "What a fine-looking boy you have."

The lady gets up without a word. Taking the boy by the hand, she begins to walk away.

"No harm intended," I say after them. "It's just that I once had a small boy of my own, you know. Sorta looked like that little fella there."

Yeah, sure I still remember. I even remember you. But really, what more could I ask for? The birds are flying in the clear blue sky, flowers are growing by the lawn. And most important:

No one knows who I am.

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