

Blind Rabbit Jackson

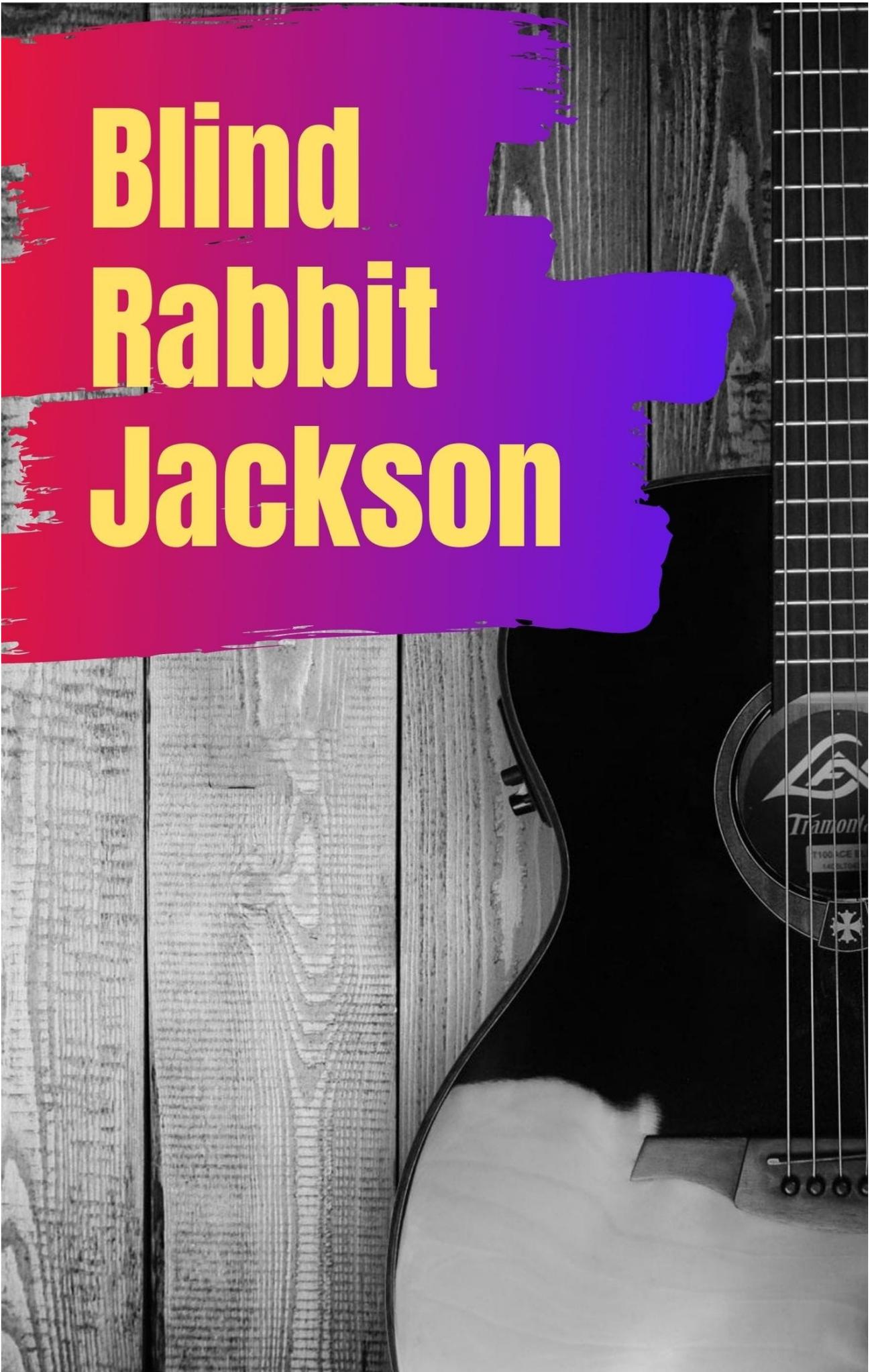


Table of Contents

Blind Rabbit Jackson.....	3
Reading Comprehension Questions.....	10
Vocabulary.....	12
Discussion Questions.....	13
Credits.....	15

Blind Rabbit Jackson

The taxi pulled up in front of the only store in the town. It doubled as the only post office, coffee shop, bank on occasion and just a general place for people to hang out.

“That’s it, right there,” said the driver.

Craig looked out at the nondescript flat-pack front of the shop and looked back at the driver. The driver shook his head, offered a small shrug. “That’s it.”

Craig took a breath and grabbed his shoulder bag. It had been a very long day. In fact, it had been a very long two weeks and his editor had run out of patience.

“I don’t care how close you think you are,” he had told Craig. “I need something from you very soon or you come back here.”

New York was a million miles away. Craig’s journey had taken him to New Orleans on a wild goose chase from bar to bar.

“Blind Rabbit Jackson? Yeah, I saw that cat play. Ain’t nobody play like him. Nobody.”

Everyone had a story to tell. Every bar owner, guitarist, promoter, singer. They all knew Blind Rabbit Jackson personally and had seen him play a million times. Guitarists told stories of doing duets with the man, ageing female singers told of love affairs, bar owners gazed into the distance and spoke with great reverie of how the great Blind Rabbit Jackson had played one night and the bar had never been so packed.

“I had everyone in here,” said one old guy. “Everyone. Like a who’s who of blues guitarists.”

One thing was for certain. The man was a legend among other musicians. Other guitarists spoke of their love for Blind Rabbit Jackson as if he were a ghost that just walked on to a stage and started playing.

“Y’all heard of that story of the crossroads,” said a wizened old bluesman in the thousandth bar that Craig had visited.

“Robert Johnson, yes, of course,” said Craig.

The man grinned widely and let out a silent laugh. “Robert Johnson, yeah. Yeah, that’s right. You keep believing that.”

“But that’s the story,” said Craig. He leaned closer to the man. Craig had studied the history of great blues guitarists from his college days. He knew the music. He knew the men — and the women — that made the music.

“Lemme tell ya,” said the man, he lifted a small glass filled with a dark brown liquor. It smelled of oak, old wood. It smelled of the blues itself. “Been all kinds of stories in this city about this and that. But that story — that’s all Blind Rabbit Jackson.”

Craig had pushed for more details, but the people that lived the music, that had nothing else, they clammed up as soon as he pushed for more information. It was like he suddenly became invisible.

Now outside the old storefront, Craig was at the end of his tether. It was too hot; he was exhausted. He wanted to be back in New York and go back to his simple, easy life.

He reached over and paid the driver, told him to keep the change.

“Good luck, man,” he said and nodded to Craig before driving away.

Outside the heat wrapped itself around his neck and shoulders, the thin tentacles of heat crawled into his every pore and settled there. He pushed the door open and a small bell rang out above his

head. He half-expected a cool blast of air to hit him in the face, but the stifling heat just increased in pressure.

Behind the counter, a black woman sat fanning herself with a newspaper. A radio played in the background. Craig had his customer act down pat now. Go in someplace, buy something, make some pleasantries. Gentle inquiries only, no need to go in too heavy.

“Hey,” he said to the woman.

“Hey,” she said back to him. She stretched the vowel sound out in a long and lazy drawl.

Craig walked over to the large refrigerator and inside saw a row of soda bottles, the outside of their glass fronts all glistening with condensation. He pulled one out and held it in his hand for a second, raised it to his face and ran its ice-cold surface across his cheek.

“Drinks are for buying, son.”

Craig turned to the voice and saw an ancient old man sat in a chair in the corner of the store. His head was completely hairless apart from two small white tufts coming from around the back of his ears. His skin was jet-black, the texture of old leather. It shone in the light coming from outside the store.

“I’m sorry,” said Craig. “It’s just so hot.”

“I hear Canada is real nice this time of year,” said the old man without looking at Craig. He then let out a deep cackling laugh at his own joke. Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh. He had no teeth, just two rows of dark red gums.

Craig moved towards the counter of the store. “Canada is not really my thing,” he said.

The woman behind the counter shifted her body and then pushed a button on the old cash register. It popped open with a loud ting from inside its ancient frame.

“Dollar fifty,” said the woman. Craig handed some coins over and tracked her face for any signals, anything that showed any signs of resentment or suspicion. Craig had learned to read people very well over the years.

There was a small bottle opener attached to the cracked wooden counter with a piece of string. Craig used it to pop open his bottle. He took a long draught of it, savouring the chilled liquid as it ran down his throat.

“Go right ahead,” came the voice from the back. “We don’t charge for sittin’. Make yourself at home.”

Craig caught the woman’s eye, and she gave him the barest of a smile. “Don’t mind him none,” she said, her voice as soft as a plucked A string. “He sits there all day. Ain’t got nobody to listen to his nonsense.”

Craig turned to the old man. “How much is sitting down tax?”

“Depends how long you plan on sittin’ around for.” The old man stared at the door as if to tell Craig that he best be using it for leaving and getting out of here.

“What about talking and having a conversation tax?” said Craig. “There a tax for that?”

The old man grunted. Craig took that as a positive response and ambled back towards him.

“This town looks a lot more accommodating than New Orleans,” he said, easing into it.

The man grunted again. “New Orleans. Nobody got no business going there.”

Craig took another sip from the bottle. He was so tired. He had come so far. And not a single clue to be had.

“I was there looking for someone,” he said.

“Oh no mistake,” said the man. “You’ll find someone there. Plenty of people you can find there. They all want paying, but you’ll find someone.”

“This one person I was looking for was a bluesman,” said Craig.

The old man’s eyes shifted for a split second and Craig thought he might meet his own eyes. But he blinked and stared back at the door.

“I was looking for a man by the name of Blind Rabbit Jackson,” said Craig. He scrutinised the man’s face for any sign, maybe the smallest flicker, a twitch at the corner of his eye. But nothing. Not a single movement.

Finally, the old man spoke. “All those bluesmen. They all named after some goddamn animal or another. Whistling Dog, Lemon Wolf, Lil Boy Cougar. Goddamn. And what kind of fool would call hisself after a rabbit? Gotta be some kind of fool to do that.”

He spread his lips wide again, revealing the two dark red gums and let out a cackle. Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh.

Craig breathed in, let the air out in a long sigh. “Yeah. But he was one of the best. One of the best known —”

“And what do you know about it, son? They got the blues all the way up there in Canada?”

“I’m not from —”

“Y’all come down here and think you know a thing about the blues just because you collected a couple of old forty-five rpm’s from — what d’they call that damn thing? – eBay. Or whatever the hell that damn thing is.”

“I’m just asking,” said Craig. “I’m sorry if I —”

“You people don’t know nothin’,” said the old man with a harsh finality.

Craig finished his soda and went back to the counter.

“It was a pleasure meeting you, sir.”

“Pleasure’s all yours,” said the old man followed by the cackle. Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh.

Craig nodded to the woman behind the counter. “Thank you, ma’am.”

She nodded and offered another of her barely perceptible smiles.

Craig walked out into the heat again. Sometimes just meeting the man was enough. No need to write any story about it at all.

Reading Comprehension Questions

Where did the taxi stop?

Is Craig sure he is at the right place?

How long has Craig been away from New York?

Who is Craig looking for?

From the story, what can you say about Blind Rabbit Jackson?

Who does Craig believe wrote the song about the crossroads? Who does the old bluesman think wrote it?

What do you think the old bluesman is drinking in the bar?

Is Craig having any luck finding Blind Rabbit Jackson?

Who is inside the store?

What does Craig do with the ice-cold soda bottle? Why does he do this?

Who reprimands him about this?

Describe the old man in the store.

Why does the man talk about Canada?

What does the old man think of New Orleans?

What does the old man think of all the old bluesmen?

Where does the old man think Craig bought his blues music records?

Who is the old man do you think?

Vocabulary

Go through all the story and find any new or difficult words and phrases.

Look these words and phrases up in your dictionary and make a note of them in your vocabulary notebook.

Write down the meaning of all the words and phrases.

Now try to use these words and phrases in sentences of your own.

Discussion Questions

What do you think Craig's job is? Why do you think this?

Why is he so determined to find Blind Rabbit Jackson?

Is Blind Rabbit Jackson a real person? Why is he so revered and admired?

What do you know about the blues music? Is it popular in your country?

What do blues singers and musicians sing about? Why do they sing about this?

Is there a singer or musician in your country that has a kind of mythological status?

Why do certain singers and musicians have so many stories about them?

If you were Craig and you were in the shop, what would you ask the old man?

What about the woman in the shop – what would you ask her?

Do you think people do not wish to help Craig? Why/why not?

When Craig gets back to New York, what will he tell his editor? Will the editor be angry with him?

What is the story of Blind Rabbit Jackson do you think?

What did you think of this story? Was it interesting?

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