

Blind Rabbit Jackson



a short story for English reading and speaking

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Introduction

What is the blues?

Where does the blues come from?

Is it possible for an old blues guitarist to just disappear?

What happens to them?

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.”

Taking a breath and not knowing what to expect next, Craig 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.

Everyone had a story to tell.

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

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 onto 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, lifting 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, the crossroads? That's all Blind Rabbit Jackson."

Craig had pushed for more details, but the people that lived the music, 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, telling 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 some place, 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. *Heeeeyyy*.

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 sitting 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 there.

"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." He let out a short hiss of contempt from between his lips.

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 another cackle.

Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh.

Craig breathed in, let the air out with 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 records 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 bristled at the comment. “You people?”

The old man clenched his gums together and let out another hiss.

“You news people,” he said in a low voice.

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.

No need to write any story about the great Blind Rabbit Jackson at all.

Sometimes just meeting the man was enough.

Reading Comprehension Questions

Who are the characters in this story?

Where does it take place?

Where did the taxi stop?

What were the different roles that the store in town served?

Is Craig sure he is in the right place?

How long has Craig been away from New York?

Who is Craig looking for?

Why did Craig need to find something soon on his trip?

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

Where did Craig go on his journey to find Blind Rabbit Jackson?

How did people in New Orleans react when asked about Blind Rabbit Jackson?

What kind of stories did people share about Blind Rabbit Jackson?

What was the significance of the "crossroads" story mentioned in the story?

Who does Craig believe wrote the song about the crossroads?

How did the old bluesman's perspective differ from the story of

Robert Johnson?

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

Is Craig having any luck finding Blind Rabbit Jackson?

How did Craig feel when he reached the storefront?

Who is inside the store?

What was the woman behind the counter doing when How did Craig plan to interact with people in the store?

What did Craig say to the woman behind the counter as he approached the refrigerator? Craig entered the store?

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

How did the old man respond when Craig explained his actions with the soda?

Why does he do this?

Who reprimands him about this?

What does the old man suggest about Canada in the story?

Describe the old man in the store.

Describe the old man's physical appearance.

Why does the man talk about Canada?

Why did the old man laugh at the mention of Canada?

How did the old man react when Craig mentioned that he was looking for Blind Rabbit Jackson?

How did the old man respond when Craig mentioned that Blind Rabbit Jackson was well-known?

What does the old man think of New Orleans?

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

What did the old man reveal about his opinion of blues musicians' names?

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

Who is the old man, do you think?

Essential Vocabulary

doubled as	on occasion	to hang out
nondescript	flat-pack	shrug
grabbed	editor	run out of
patience	a million miles away	journey
wild goose chase	cat	guitarist
promoter	personally	duets
ageing	love affairs	gazed
distance	great reverie	packed
who's who	legend	musicians
ghost	stage	crossroads
wizened	bluesman	thousandth
grinned widely	lemme	liquor
oak	clammed up	invisible
storefront	the end of his tether	exhausted
keep the change	wrapped	tentacles
crawled	pore	settled
half-expected	blast of air	stifling
increased	pressure	counter
fanning	newspaper	background
down pat	pleasantries	inquiries
stretched	vowel sound	drawl

refrigerator	row	soda bottle
glistening	condensation	ice-cold
cheek	ancient	hairless
tufts	jet-black	texture
leather	cackling	gums
cash register	popped	ting
coins	tracked	signals
resentment	suspicion	to read people
bottle opener	attached	cracked
draught	savouring	chilled
liquid	ran down	throat
charge	barest	plucked
nonsense	tax	conversation
grunted	positive	response
ambled	accommodating	easing
hiss	contempt	clue
no mistake	shifted	split second
blinked	scrutinised	flicker
twitch	goddamn	fool
gotta	cackle	forty-five record
damn	harsh	finality
bristled	comment	clenched
barely perceptible		

Exercise

Write down all the words and phrases in your vocabulary notebook. Look in your dictionary and find the meaning of each word. Write the definition next to each word.

Then make up your own sentences using each word or phrase.

For example:

Editor — *a person who is in charge of and determines the final content of a text, particularly a newspaper or magazine.*

On occasion — *occasionally; from time to time.*

Then write a sentence of your own that uses the new word or phrase correctly.

I sent an article to the editor of the school magazine. I hope it gets published!

On occasion, I like to go for a long walk around the lake.

Do this with all the vocabulary and, over time, this will help improve all your English skills — reading, writing, speaking and listening.

Colloquial English

The characters in this story speak in a very defined colloquial form of English.

Below you can see a list of the phrases and terms the characters use.

Do you know what they mean?

How can you say these things in more formal English?

"Yeah, I saw that cat play."

"Ain't nobody play like him. Nobody."

"Y'all heard of that story of the crossroads."

"Lemme tell ya, been all kinds of stories in this city about this and that."

"That's all Blind Rabbit Jackson."

"Dollar fifty".

"Drinks are for buying, son".

"Go right ahead. We don't charge for sittin'. Make yourself at home."

"Don't mind him none."

"Ain't got nobody to listen to his nonsense."

"Nobody got no business going there."

"They all want paying, but you'll find someone."

"And what kind of fool would call hisself after a rabbit? Gotta be some kind of fool to do that."

"You people don't know nothin'".

"You news people".

"Pleasure's all yours".

Discussion Questions

What is the setting of the story, and how does it contribute to the atmosphere?

Describe the main character, Craig. What is he looking for, and why?

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

Who is Blind Rabbit Jackson, and why is he significant in the story?

Why is he so determined to find Blind Rabbit Jackson?

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

How do the various people Craig encounters in his journey view Blind Rabbit Jackson?

What role does music, specifically blues music, play in the story's plot and theme

Discuss the relationship between Craig and the old man in the store. How does the old man's attitude toward Craig change throughout their conversation?

How does the story explore themes of cultural differences and

misunderstandings?

What does the old man mean when he refers to "you people" and "news people"? How does this reflect his perspective on outsiders?

Describe the dynamics between Craig and the woman behind the counter. How does her attitude differ from the old man's?

How does the story portray the idea of legends and myths, especially in the context of Blind Rabbit Jackson's identity?

How does the heat and the setting contribute to the overall mood of the story?

What does the interaction with Blind Rabbit Jackson symbolize in the story?

Compare and contrast Blind Rabbit Jackson with the story of Robert Johnson and the Crossroads. What similarities and differences do you notice?

What do you know about 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 did 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?

Writing

This is a journalistic writing exercise.

Imagine you are Craig in the story.

You have travelled all the way down to New Orleans in a quest to meet the legend Blind Rabbit Jackson.

But you find out nothing.

Until you end up in a small store in a little town outside New Orleans.

You are not sure, but you think you just encountered the living legend himself.

The very man — Blind Rabbit Jackson.

Now you are going to write your story.

How you travelled all the way to New Orleans. How you met so many bluesmen — and blueswomen too — and heard all their stories.

Then finally, you think you met Blind Rabbit Jackson sitting in a store.

Write your article.

When you have finished, read your article out loud in front of the class.

Or give it to your teacher for review.

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