

St. Louis. It was still daytime, and no one was performing, but the bar was pouring and there were a few guys sitting at the tables playing cards. Joe drank beer and George and I watched these fellows play games with names like "Tonk," "Coon Cat," "Pitty Pat." And balefully, malevolently, they watched us watch them. "Joe," I said, "I think these guys might like to see us die—maybe we should go someplace else, while we can." So we got in the car again, and I suggested to Joe that we find a tourist area called Gaslight Square, where I'd heard a fine player named Old Mr. Gibson hung out. But Joe started ranting again.

"Don't you be tellin' me where to go! Just who here carryin' who?"

"Well," I said, "it's my car, and George has been doing the driving—"

"I don't give a care who been driving!

This is my city an' I'm doin' the carryin' an' we gonna be with my people in my part of town!"

And he got madder and madder and reached into his pocket and brought out a little penknife with a blade no more than an inch long. I started to laugh—it looked like a toy. But he suddenly reached over and popped it right into the palm of my hand. I leaped out of the car, howling. "Now you did it, you fat old sonofabitch! You cut me—I'm bleeding! I'm going to the police and have your ass in jail!" But I don't believe Joe heard me—he'd passed out. He just lay there in a mess, sweating and snoring. "George," I said, "let's find the county hospital—I've gotta get fixed up."

At the hospital they put some butterfly

stitches in my palm and wrapped me up. I left the emergency room and walked across a steaming asphalt parking lot toward the car, and from forty feet away I could smell drunken, sweaty, seventy-year-old blues singer. I got in and Joe seemed to regain his senses, what ones he had left, anyway. I showed him my bandaged hand and he claimed not to remember a thing. He behaved as though nothing had happened. "Listen, you boys," he said, "now we goin' to find the best blues singer of them all—the finest I ever knew, yes sir!"

He directed George to a place that didn't even have front steps—they'd all just rotted away. We walked around behind the building to try the rear stairs, and in the back yard was a mountainous collection of refuse—every kind of filth

imaginable was back there. There were old moldering mattresses, shredded and stained with the springs sticking out, there were pieces of cars that had rusted and reddened from years of exposure, and I don't think the garbage from the tenants had ever been collected—I believe they'd been throwing it in the yard ever since the apartment was built, and from the looks of the building, that had been a long time ago.

We started up the rickety stairs to the second floor. George struggled with Kaercher's big tape recorder while I lugged Joe's ancient amplifier, which, judging from its weight, must have been sheathed in lead. I was soaked with sweat, my head was pounding and my cut hand was throbbing, my stomach felt sour and the stench of eons-old garbage tore at my

nostrils, and as we approached that second-floor landing I didn't care, I really did not care at all, just how great a blues singer was up there waiting for us.

A middle-aged barefoot brown woman in a loose-fitting housedress let us into the apartment, which was stifling. We dropped our gear in the kitchen and followed her to the front room, and the first thing I saw in there, seated on a couch, was a twelve or thirteen-year-old girl who weighed at least 400 pounds. She was dressed in flour sacking, and you could tell by the shape of her head and the look on her face that she was an idiot. I don't mean a person with no sense, I mean a complete retardate. She was mumbling and drooling, and her face was smeared with grease. On a table in front of her was a plate of rib bones, and beside the plate was a jar of mayonnaise

that looked like zinc ointment left too long in the sun. What the girl would do was take a bone and dip it in the mayonnaise, then run it back and forth through a gap in her front teeth to get the meat off.

As sick as I felt, and as bad as my hand hurt, this was it. I mean, things had been funky before, but daddy, this was freak city.

"Joe," I said, "let's not stay here. I'm not feeling well at all—I think we'd better go."

"Shut up!" he yelled, "I don't want to hear nothin' about it! I'm the talent scout here, I'm the boss, an' you people are workin' for me! Now get in there an' set us up our machine."

So George brought the tape recorder in from the kitchen, and as he was

threading a new tape through it a bedroom door opened, and in hobbled this legendary blues singer that Joe had been touting. He appeared to have been sleeping, or passed out, and he looked as though he'd been lying in there with all his weight on his face. Joe introduced him only as Jimmy. He was old and toothless and looked only slightly less demented than the girl in the flour-sacking. From under the couch he dragged out a scratched and stained violin with only two strings on it. "Now you really goin' to hear somethin'," said Joe, pulling out a fresh pint of Schnapps. I asked for the bottle. I had heard that more drink could sometimes cure a hangover, and besides, I thought if I could get enough down me I might go numb, and at that point, numbing out seemed like just the way to go. I took a big swig of Schnapps and gagged. Joe

snatched the bottle away and commanded George to turn the recorder on.

Jimmy picked up his bow and began sawing off strange tonalities in no particular key and mumbling incomprehensible lyrics. My stomach started roiling again and I was sure I was going to be sick. I asked the woman of the house where the toilet was, and she led me to a door at the end of a hallway. I opened the door and found not a toilet, but a closet. There was nothing in the closet but a few sheets of newspaper and a hole—a hole, about two feet in diameter, in the floor. I turned and looked at the woman. "Our daughter have a little trouble with her weight," she said. "She too big, don't you know. The regular seat in the bathroom, it ain't right for her, so we done fix up this here place." I tried to stammer out a question, but the woman

just waved at the hole. "Don't worry none," she said, "no one livin' down 'neath us now. Ain't been no one for months." She walked away and I got down on my hands and knees and got sick with no trouble at all. But I faced away from the hole. There was just no way I could look down that thing.

When my business in the closet was finished I went back to the living room and took George aside. "George," I said, "this is about enough. We've got to go back to Chicago, now." He agreed right away, so I asked Joe to pack up. His eyes popped.

"What you mean we goin'? You know I'm doin' the carryin' here!"

"Joe, I don't care who's doing the carrying—George and I are going back."

"You don't like my people?"

"I like your people just fine, Joe, but

it's just not my scene, I'm sorry—"

"Yeah, you is sorry, all right! Well, you go on back to Chicago! Go on an' go wherever you wants—I'm stayin' here!"

I looked at George. He was fidgeting with the car keys. Joe pulled on his schnapps and glowered at us over the top of the bottle. "Joe, look," I asked, "do you want us to drop you somewhere before we leave?" He thought a moment. "Yeah," he finally said, "you carry me over to East St. Louis, where my cousin live."

So George and I crossed over an old iron bridge into Illinois and Joe directed us to the outskirts of town, where we drove down a narrow dirt road full of potholes. We stopped in front of a ramshackle frame house set well back off the road and Joe, carrying an old battered