

black cat bone

The rain was coming down wit' that sound that everybody know and up on Earl's old jukebox, Muddy was singin.

I got a black cat bone

I got a mojo, too

I got a John-the-Conqueror Root

I'm gonna mess witchu

We was all sittin round the bar that night, listenin to Muddy sing that song and to the rain comin down outside the screen door. there was me. and Earl the bartender. Blind Jesse and Jesse grandson Ray. This here white man name Leonard who Earl say look like a professor but drink like a goddamn fish. And LaDonna, who was Arvelle Moore's woman till he went away; but Arvelle be so bad that no one touch her even though he got them two life sentences to run consecutive.

The song stop and everybody just sit, listening to the rain outside. Blind Jesse hold up one of them bent old fingers and Earl come over fill his glass with I.W. Harper. Jesse nod his head *thank you* and have a little taste. Then he set his glass down and say, yes, that black cat bone, it done in more'n one man. I know that's right.

I smile. everybody smile, cept LaDonna. Jesse was an old bluesman himself and he have that sound. Like Ray say sometimes the only way he can get his kids on to bed is get great-grandpa tell a story and they are like hypnotized, he is that good.

So I say, whatchu talkin about, old man?

If Jesse couldn't actually make no sly look, he could slap work that voice of his so it just pour that stuff. He say, you wanna know what I'm talkin about?

Go 'head, I said.

I'm gon' tell ya.

I said, go 'head.

It got kinda quiet then, and everybody settle down. Leonard make a sign to Earl and he set us all up one time. Then he kinda whisper somethin to LaDonna and she move outta that lonely seat down the bar and into the empty one between me and him. Ray light a Camel for his gran'daddy and one for himself. He knew what was comin. We all know.

Jesse listen until everybody set back and till the only sound was that rain out on the street and onst in a while a match bein lit or some ice cubes hittin on a glass.

He start like this: man, it go be fifty years ago, back before Muddy first cut that song. Back then, everybody know all 'bout that black cat bone. And the mojo hand. John-the-Conqueror root. All the juju, you know. I mean all of that stuff that come over from Africa with my granddaddy and them others and got all messed around over here.

He stop, take a small sip, clear his throat.

Well, there was folks believe all that, a lot that didn't, but in any case if shonuf sound good in a song. I spose people believe in it bout as much as they believe in jesus and it did em about as much good. but you know there's always folks gonna get crazy on that kinda thing. and that's what I'm talkin about, man make that black cat bone *work*.

He take another slow sip, lettin us all get in on it and I am thinkin the man ought to be on TV with this stuff.

He say: we was out playin the jukes, you know. in those days, that's what we did. Just drove all over, playin one town right after the next. it was in the town of Swansea, South Carolina, which is down south of Columbia and ain't by no means, Atlanta, G.A. I was travelin with two boys, one name Henry, out learnin the blues... 'nother boy, his real name Zekiel McCoy, but he call hisself Savannah Slim. damn good harp player. damn good. both of em from down there round Edgewood, down my old neighborhood. family's still down round there, I believe.

Jesse start laughin. you git back in them woods and there ain't a damn thing out there but sand and pine trees and scorpions. and them black folk out there, got the African blood, Cherokee blood, white

blood all mixed up together. they be mindin they own bidness, but you don't be messin with em, cause ain't a damn one wouldn't be totin a razor or a gun. Or a razor *and* a gun.

We was playin a juke in this little town like we did in some little town every Friday and Saturday night and onst in a while on Sunday in the afternoon. If the church folk'd 'low it, that is.

They was plenty of music and dancin and plenty of food and liquor, too. an there was a couple fights, like there generally was whenever we play.

He take another sip and now it got dead quiet because that rain slow all the way down till it ain't even a drizzle. Jesse say, now this ain't the first time I been round when a man go down. I mean this one time, boy got shot they say you like to stick your whole hand through an another time, man got his throat cut so bad it damn near took his head off. but I won't never forget this one.

I almost laugh right at him. He's makin this story out of it like it was one of them ole Vincent Price things. But he was good. Had every damn one of us sittin there, eyes all wide open, nobody hardly breathin. And he was just gettin started.

Now y'all know this mess started over a woman, like it usually do. LaDonna, she just stare into her glass.

Jesse say: What happen was there was this fine pretty gal at this juke, least ways I suspect she was, counta the trouble she cause. Well, Slim got to eyeballin this here woman and I know there is gonna be trouble because a local gal like that is gonna have a man.

He make a big sigh drink off the rest of his whiskey in his glass. That she did, he say.

Out the corner of my eye, I see Earl reachin for that bottle of Harper and I make a sign for him to go head set everybody up.

Jesse say, I know somethin goin on the minute I hear that man of hers. W jes finished the gig, it was maybe twelve midnight, and I hear this voice kinda high like a girl say, whatchu lookin at, boy? And I hear

Slim say, that woman there. That fair brown. And the local boy say, she taken. she mine.

Then Slim say, maybe you wanna try and keep her, huh?

And the other boy say, Man, I am warnin you. Don't mess wit her.

Then in this here real lazy voice, Slim say, so whatchu gonna do? Cut me if I stand and shoot me if I run? It that old blues line, you know, so Slim be makin fun of that homeboy.

Boy say, I'll put a bone on you.

Slim say, do what? I could tell he be smilin. He just be askin for it.

Boy say, put a black cat bone on you, man.

And I tell you, Slim laugh like it was funny, but I wa'nt laughin, not one bit.

Jesse's voice got this here hollow sound and I see LaDonna rub her arms like she gettin cold, so I put my old coat round her shoulders. She don't say a word, just pull it tight.

Outside the rain start turnin into somethin like fog.

No, sir, Jesse say, I did not think it was one bit funny. But Slim, he keep laughin and I hear this other boy say, I am warnin you and then I hear him walk away and the door to the kitchen slammin shut.

It ain't but a couple three minutes later Slim have that young girl in the corner and then he come ask Henry for the keys to the car. Had this big old Hudson with the big back seat like a couch, know what I mean? Naw, ya'll don't know nothin about it. Damn fine car.

Anyway, Henry say, whatchu want em for, Slim?

Slim say, just gimme the damn keys, man.

And I say, Slim, boy, you do not know whatchu messin with.

Slim laugh, you know, and he say, I know exactly what I'm messin with. Boy just like that stuff too much, so I know there wa'nt no talking to him. I say, Henry, go head, give him the keys.

Well, we hung around for bout a half-hour and then I heard the door open. and Henry, he say, Lord, Lord...

I say, what is it, man?

Henry say, look like Slim done her good.

Slim, he come up by the stage, struttin, you know, like the young men do. Another minute, and I heard that kitchen door open. Nobody say nothin. Then that local boy say, man, I done warned you.

And Slim say, shee-it. Like he puttin this boy down like he ain't nothin. and the kitchen door slam one more time.

I say, Slim, we got to get the hell outta here, boy.

Slim say, why? Cause what that nigger say? You think he's gonna put some kinda juju on me, man? He be laughin like he crazy.

Jesse set back a little bit, shook his head, and say, I believe that was the last time he laughed.

Now he had everybody and he knew it. Earl had set up drinks without makin a sound and he poured some of that Gordon vodka in a glass for himself, which he hardly never did at all. So Jesse went on with his story.

We did get outta that place directly, but Slim, we had to tell him we was gonna leave him there, because he want to be waitin to see if that local boy gonna come back and start somethin over what Slim do to that young girl. Finally, he come along and we all get into that Hudson, damn thing smell all like fish, you know, and me and Henry sat there waiting while Slim walk around one more time lookin for that local boy to come back.

I say, Slim, come on, we got to *go*.

Slim get in the front seat there, but he yell and jump up right away and he say, goddamn, Jesse. Shit.

I say, what's wrong now?

He say, I got stuck man, musta been a piece of one of them guitar strings of yours. Damn. Tore these britches, too.

I heard that and I know Henry be smilin now, cause Slim, he fussy bout his clothes and all.

Jesse smile for a minute and then he stop.

We go on back to the hotel, he say. Coirse, this was when they was *colored* hotels. and that's where it happened.

Jesse let it go for a minute. Ain't nobody even moved.

He say, it was about three, four in the mornin and I hear this sound comin from Slim's room next door to mine. I hear this moanin sound and I sit up and call over there. Slim? what is it? but he just went to moanin louder and I sit up in the bed and say, Slim, boy, what is wrong? but he just keep on moanin like that and I get up and go over to the wall and I can hear him sayin somethin. somethin like, *that bone, boy put a bone on me* and he go to moanin real loud. and then it was almost like he be laughin bout somethin in there and then he go to cryin, sayin, *boy put a bone on me.*

I get up and go to the door and out there in the hall, I start to poundin on his door, say, Slim! lemme in there, man! But his voice jes got louder and the next thing I hear is this crashin sound and Slim go to screamin like a girl. *goddamn man put the boy on me!* he say. *motherfucker put a fuckin black cat bone on me!*

Jesse stop right there and take slow drink out of this glass.

Man, I gotta tell you I wanted to walk my ass down the steps and out the door and onto the next train outta that place, but Slim, he wa'nt but a young boy, y'understand I told his mama that I'd look out for him, so when Henry come outta his room, I say, man, bust it down, bust it down!

Now this was not one of your finer hotels, and Henry only had to hit that door one time fo' it come loose like it was made of paper. I hear Henry say, oh, man... and Slim twistin all around on the floor and groanin like. There was some kinda smell in the air, bad, bad smell. and I went in and get down there on floor, and now Slim be cryin like a child, and I get hold of him round the shoulders and I say, Slim, boy, what's wrong? and he say, *goddamn nigger use that stuff.* and I say, man, what are you talkin about? And he just say *goddamn, man, god damn,* and he cough and I feel this wet all over my hand, and I knowed what it was. Then I hear that sound, you know, that sound come up from inside a man, mean he goin down, f'sho.

Jesse take his hand and wipe his mouth and it be shakin.

It was funny. All them grown-up people there, actin like children, listenin to some old man tellin a ghost story. The rain stopped, but

there was this fog out on the street and the only thing you could hear when the wind come up on Earl's rusty old sign.

Boy died right there.

He say it so soft we all had to kinda lean over to hear.

Lord have mercy, he died while I held him like a child.

For a long time, nobody said nothin. The water was goin tock-tock-tock down the drainpipe by the door. Jesse sit back and make this hummin sound down in his chest.

Earl say, What was it, Jesse?

Jesse lean his head to one side. What was what? he say.

What was it killed Slim?

Oh, yes, Jesse say and start to nod. Well, God's truth, what killed him was that black cat bone.

We was all waitin, but Jesse just sat there makin them ice cubes go round and round in his glass. Finally he say, one more please, Earl and set his glass down on the bar.

Earl didn't move an inch. he look at each one of us, then back at Blind Jesse. Whatchu doin man? he say.

Jesse say, excuse me? Lookin like some schoolboy.

Earl say, you gonna finish the story or what?

Jesse grin, all white teeth and say, who said that ain't the end right there?

Earl say, oh, man, come *on* and Jesse start to laugh.

Well, you right, Earl, that wa'nt near the end of it. Earl smile and get busy fixin another round. Jesse say: the po-lice come right after that and took us down the courthouse, didn't want nobody leavin till they found out what happened. Bout nine o'clock, this here detective come round, heard em say they have to call him down from Columbia, young colored boy.

He come into that room where they kept us at. he say, c'mon, uncle, tell me what went down over there. Who did your boy like that?

I told him about that local boy and the girl and the black cat bone and he laugh when he heard that, but the way his voice sound he was also gettin hot about it. This was just befo' integration start and I suppose he was standin there thinkin, what we got to do is get rid of these fools with their mojos and jujus and all, cause he was a modern-type Negro and was disgusted with the whole thing, y'understand.

Finally he say, fact of the matter is we've got a homicide here and I'm going to find out who did it and how.

I say, man, I tole you who did it and I tole you how, but it was like he didn't hear at all. Cause he say, well, we are gonna sit right here till the coroner bring the report so we know exactly how Mr. McCoy died. though I expect I already know.

I say, you know what happen to Slim?

He say, I do. and it doesn't have anything to do with that hoodoo either. he was respectful, though. I'll say that.

Jesse say: bout fifteen, twenty minutes later, the door open and I smell this white man. He come into the room, but he don't say nothin, just hand that colored detective some papers and walk back out. you know how white folk sometime got that way of not being there at all? That's what I'm talkin about and no Leonard, I am not referrin to you, so you don't need to say *nothin*.

Leonard already have his mouth half-open. He laugh and sit back so Jesse can get on with it.

Well, he say, that detective be studyin this piece of paper which is the corner's report on Slim. When he make this *mm-mm-mm* sound, then I know somethin is goin on. I hear him stand up and fold them papers and put em in his pocket.

He say, I need to go downstairs and take another look at the body. Ya'll wait here.

An I say, if ya don't mind, I'd like to go along down there.

It take him a minute, but then he say, alright and let me grab hold of his elbow. I say, Henry, whatchu gonna do? and Henry say, I'm staying right here and he sound so scared, I smiled. I believe that detective was smilin, too.

We went out into the hall and then we went down the steps and down this other hallway, man it was summertime, but it was cold down there and you could like hear your heart beatin it was so quiet.

We get down to the end of the hall and stop by this here door. And this detective say, we got your boy Slim in here. But before we go inside, I want to know is there anything you have to say? Anything you want to tell me? I just shake my head no.

I hear keys and the sound of that door goin open and this cold air come out and the detective, he kinda push my arm till I step inside. I know that Slim right there and after a minute, I say, tell me how he look.

This young man say, he look like he's sleeping. And then he say, sometimes they do. And by that I figure he seen more than a few boys laid out on a coolin board. Kind of thing a man like to forget but can't, counta they always be another one to remind him.

Jesse stop then, let out this long sigh. Earl go to fetchin him another drink while Ray light him another Camel.

Then he say, me and this colored detective be standin there over Slim and finally he say real soft, like he afraid he gonna wake him up, he say tell me once more what happened out there.

I told him. I told him what happened at the juke with the young girl and that local boy and how Slim be wantin to start somethin just to get that boy goin and then what happen at the hotel. and then he make me tell some of it all over again and he say, is that all? Every word of it? And I say, yes, sir, blind man tend of have good ears and ain't no way I am ever gonna forget what went down here. Finally he say, all right, thank you, y'all can go back to the hotel, but don't even think about leavin town.

Course he know the only way we gonna do that is ride the blinds or walk, cause he had the Hudson, want to see if that car tell him somethin.

Well, we did that, went on back to the hotel and it wa'nt but maybe two hours later the detective send word for us to come back down to

the station. And when we got there, he took my arm away from Henry and take us into this little room smell like about a hundred poor niggers and white trash crackers done sweated their skins off in there and he show me to a chair. Henry, I could tell he be scared, pro'bly thinkin we ain't never gonna get outta this place.

Jesse took another long sip of his drink and got quiet again. Earl, he look like he bout to jump over the bar and shake the rest of the story out that old man, but I held up my hand until Jesse start up again.

That detective, he say y'all can go ahead and make arrangements to take the body back to Atlanta. we got what we need.

I ask him did he find out what happen to Slim.

He say, I did, yes.

He don't say nothin else so I say, what was it, then?

I hear him reach into his pocket and he lay somethin out on that table, somethin make a little click on the wood there. I didn't need to be touchin it to tell what is was, but I did it anyway. We all look at one another, everyone of us 'cept LaDonna.

That detective, he sit down then. He say, that young man. His name is Elwood Gates. And this is the third time he tried this little trick.

I say, what trick would that be?

The detective say, your boy was telling it right. It was a bone. You feel how sharp that is. Like a needle. probably from a cat, too. Black cat, I'm sure. What he did was put poison on it.

I say, put what on it?

Poison, he say. Rat poison. He got it in his head he was gonna get your boy Slim. So he carried it out to your car while y'all were inside. Put it down in the seat there. So that it got Slim when he sat down.

The detective tap his fingers on the table.

We found the poison, he say. In the kitchen of that juke where y'all played.

Henry say, damn...

The detective say, Elwood confessed. As a matter of fact, he confessed to the two other fellas he did the same way. One died. The

other one was blinded. Seems that young girl couldn't keep her eyes off other men and they couldn't keep their hands off her.

He reach over and take that piece of bone from outta my fingers.

I say, he put it in the car?

The detective say, that's right.

How he know he wa'nt gonna get me or Henry. I asked him that.

The detective say, he didn't. Ya'll just happened sit in those seats, what, same as when you first drove up?

Henry say, yes, sir, that's right.

The detective say, yeah, otherwise, I guess he would have gone after you one at a time until he got the one he wanted.

Nobody say nothin for a long time, and I know me and Henry is thinkin the same damn thing, like how easy it could be one of us down there on that coolin board.

I said, seems to me, ya can't get much of anything on some little bitty piece of bone like that.

Doesn't take much, the detective say. According to the coroner, it doesn't take much at all.

He light up a cigarette and put it in my fingers, and then light one for hisself. He push the pack across the table. he say, you keep em, uncle.

We sat there, smokin our cigarettes.

Finally I tell him, you know I don't believe it.

He say, believe what?

That it was some kinda poison killed Slim, I say. That bone, that black cat bone, that's what did him like that.

The detective make a little sound, like he's tired, you know.

I say, you found the poison out there at that juke?

He say, we found the box.

And what was in it? I ask him that.

He say, it was empty.

I say, and y'all didn't find no poison on no bone nowhere, didja?

He wait for a minute and then he say, we got a confession. And that's all we need.

I told him, it was that bone. That black cat bone.

Jesse stop there. The rain came up again and there was even some thunder way out the other side of the city.

We had em carry Slim's body back to Atlanta, Jesse say. We didn't want his mama to know, so we tole her he got sick out there and that Jesus called him home.

Jesse's voice was so low he was almost whisperin. Nobody ever knowed what really happen, 'cept Henry, of course. And then he went off to Korea and didn't come back.

Jesse drank off the last of his whiskey. So nobody ever knew that what killed Slim was a black cat bone, he say. Then: man, that was a long time ago. Long time ago.

He tilt his old head to each one of us case somebody want to say somethin, but nobody did. And anyway the rain was gettin real heavy again.

Jesse pick up a quarter from the bar and hold it out. Ray took it and walked over to the jukebox in the corner.

The song come on. Muddy's song. The one about the black cat bone.

We sat there listenin. And the rain kept comin down.