Come and Go Blues

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"When I do, it's you," she said every time he asked her if she had "romantic thoughts" on the road. That was now. Neither one of them talked about before, not even in their dreams. Little Martha – four fingers old in the Easter portrait Velcroed to the rider side headliner – may as well have been ordered from a catalog and delivered UPS. To her grandmother's house, at that.

Martha's daddy was out of the picture. Literally. Pruned out. All the snapshots without him edited by the same shears, and same precision Jean used now, to trim Gene's beard.

Jokes about Jean and Gene flashed truckstop to truckstop transcontinental, channel 19, landlines, cell, and once Krylonned on a bridge overpass, when word got around. He wasn't used to it. Wasn't used to anything yet. He had known her for a year, but it was still sudden to him, and now he had ten days, three without pay, for a wedding and honeymoon. They were actually going to do it, get hitched on this fill-up. They'd stopped on the border, south of Chattanooga, and got the blood tests and paperwork, as much as they could do. He thought then they'd be running back by there, on the flipflop; it was a marrying town, and why not, name like Ringgold?

"Don't sweat it," she said, when he kept glancing over at the gages. "I've got two tanks, and I know how to coast." They were headed for Florida, and didn't need a map.

"After Atlanta, it's all downhill," he said.

"But the road goes on forever," she said.

That's when he knew, long before she edged left out of the 475 bypass lanes, they were headed for Macon. She was marrying him in Allman country which he thought, somehow, would have been more country than

it was. Macon wasn't a town but a city, and his hackles would have bristled if she had simply driven them right to the place, like she knew her way. But she stopped at a public phone second time around a long block, looked in the book, the Marmon idling behind them as their fingers walked. "We could have been married in Gatlinburg, no blood test no wait," he said, pointing down the page to a 1-800 number.

She glanced at him. "You ever been to Gatlinburg?"

"Is this about mileage?" He'd never been married.

"To where?" she said, rattled for the first time. They considered each other.

"Everybody's been to Gatlinburg," he said.

"I didn't see you there," she said. "Ramblin' man."

"Off season," he said. She folded her blueblockers and pocketed them, frowning at the tattered phone book.

Before the silence got any wider she said, "Oh well. Hanging out in public, bound to be some pages missing."

They'd been down that lane before.

"Where were we?" he said.

"Right here."

Floral, floral, limousine service. He muttered down the column, marveling at the complications and accessories for social matrimony.

"Guest books!" she read.

"Tented terraces," he added.

"Horse drawn carriages."

"Ballroom."

"Garden and fountain."

"seated 150, Standing 500."

"I could kiss you till Tuesday," she said.

He let her try. Who wouldn't let her try?

"Turn of the century charm and elegance," she resumed, but the first elation was fading, the exuberance, the freedom of being on earth again, away from the thrum of the road. It was a warm day, just past winter, just into the noon rush. Things were blooming, he wasn't sure what, but the petals were blowing around like snow. He pulled the tethered Yellow Pages his way, tall enough to read over her shoulder.

"Seven acres of grassy lawn," he read. Somehow that did it. That did it. Were they farming the rice or throwing it?

"Look," he said, but she was already flipping back, closing the book on what she had called – when she told him what she didn't want – "a production number."

They'd already ruled out Judge and Justice. "Been there, done that," was all she'd say. So they checked Ministers, and the book said See Clergy. But they were still in the M's.

Marriage, of course. "Yep," she said, holding the page against a puff of wind. More confetti from the wasting trees. "I'm feeling lucky," she said. But phonebook "Marriage" was about what went wrong, counseling and "unkinking and shrinking" as she called it.

"Wait now, wait now," he said, brushing off the therapists. There it was: one little entry: Marriages – civil.

She tore the page out and stuffed it in her back pocket. "Might need it again," she said. But when she saw his face, she pulled it out, ironed it high on his thigh with her gear hand. "For my files, ok?" She hated sentiment in herself or anyone. Hated froufrou and ruffles and Barbie pink and didn't own – "not one" – a dress or skirt of any kind.

"Neither do I."

"And don't expect me to cry."

"Ditto," he'd agreed.

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The Yellow Pages map led them right to the door of O. Kestrel Kirby's time-sueded board and batten home. They never had got as far as Clergy in their research, so they didn't know he had the same ad there. Civil he might have advertised, but he was Reverend also. "Either way," he said, "God presides. Just call me a marrying man." He pronounced it merrying. And he did have a twinkle. A tall, thin, spry dark brown-skinned man with a frosty halo of hair. He was dressed for his work, pulling his suit coat on over his white nylon shirt. "We can do it in the pahlor or on the poach," he said, stepping out. "Pahlor's got RCA Victor hi-fi music, you wanta stand round and lissen. Y'all? Some like that … No finger popping." He looked older unveiled by the screendoor, but sharp-eyed, crisp as bacon, and interested. "We'll need a witness or witnesses," he said, looking around. The Marmon rumbled at the curb, it and the trailer eclipsing town. Glancing down at it from the steps, Jean realized, "This was fun up until right about now."

The minister fanned himself with his book. "They come and they go," he said. "Mostly at night. Things look different in the day. Am I what you had in mind?"

"Are we?" Jean said.

"How much are witnesses?" Gene wondered.

"I genly flag one down for free," he said. "Maybe refreshments after."

"Not here," Jean said, getting her second wind. And she explained what she had in mind.

The marrying man let them park the rig in his churchyard, and gave Gene the keys to his Riviera. "I don't have no trouble with the driving," he said. "Just the stopping." They all three rode up front. Along the way Rev. Kirby pointed things out. He didn't know that much about Rose Hill. He was going to stop at the gate for directions, but Jean knew where; she'd been to the cemetery before. At the last moment everything felt right. They were the only ones except for a total stranger jogging along the low road who agreed to be their witness. There was a little breeze off the river and more of those short bent trees shook petals down on them as they walked.

Gene slapped at some going by. "What is it?" He'd heard of kudzu. Everybody knew about kudzu. "Peach?"

"Cherries," the preacher said. They were there, now, single filing down the hill. It was shady, dim. The marrying man pulled his glasses a little away from his face, to focus better, shaking his head at the dates carved in stone, doing the terrible math: "Twenty five," he said, "twenty-four." The gravesite was fenced, roped off with what looked like clothesline, a frail, ordinary cancellation, marking off Duane Allman and Berry Oakley; the wedding party stood to the side, but at the last moment, Jean took off her shoes, and backed up, so her heels were over the line. The witness checked his carotid pulse, did some quad stretches, stepped in place, and cleared his throat.

"Now then, chillen," the marrying man said, calling them to order. "It don't take long, and it's only words unless you mean it." When it came Jean's turn to answer, she marveled, after an agonizing thirty-second pause, "You know? I do. I really do." Like it had just occurred to her. Maybe a joke, who could ever know, with her? She'd rolled in one time in press-on tattoos and those fake navel and eyebrow rings, her lips blackened, her hair spiked. Something about Gene's steadiness incited her to riot.

"No rings," she said, at that point in the ceremony when rings are what is next. She drew instead two chains from his jeans jacket, claddagh charms on Italian 18kt snake. Gene's charm was larger; Jean's might have been cut from the center of his. When they had seen that, had seen the way they fit, they knew. Whatever it was that had to happen, had. These things were simply the signs and miracles. She clasped Gene's chain around his neck without looking; he bowed as though she were knighting him. He laid hers on her hair, then gentled it over her head unopened, afraid to fumble. His hands – which could hold nine large eggs and "work the grill like a Ginzu salesman on black beauties" as Jean told her mom – trembled now, relinquishing the chain. Gravity did the rest. She shivered when the gold settled, raised the charm to her lips and looked at him.

What did it matter what happened, and who said what, today in Macon Damn Georgia? "License to thrill," she called the certificate. "All it is," she said, "is the footprint of the beast, it aint the beast." They were zoned now, Gene's eyes as usual squinting a little, to see clearer, to harbor doubt, to make sure and be sure, and hers wide open, like her life, like her mind, but her tenderness deep way back deep behind the sparkle, so far he could fall for years and would never get to the bottom of her fierce hot heart. No telling how long they had been standing there like that, eye-locked. The witness laughed. The minister said, finally, "Lessen you pay for moah, that's all you get for a sawbuck and all you need fore God and man."

"Sir?" Gene said absently, not half hearing it. "I'm not waiting for change …"

The jogger laughed. "Me neither." He and the preacher high fived it.

"Mr. and Mrs.," the marrying man told them, merry, shaking their hands two-fisted between his cool trembling palms. "Good," he said. "Good." Jean hugged everybody, then she bent so they could use her smooth hard shoulder for the desk, and preacher and the witness signed documents, gave them theirs. The jogger wouldn't take a thing, just ran along, pumped them a highball wave without looking back. A Norfolk Southern freight came on, and they watched the train rocking along below them northbound beside the southbound river. They noticed the sound of traffic now, and there was a jet outrunning its contrail in an unclouded sky. "My foist wedding here," the marrying man said, stepping

carefully up the hill. He didn't count the twenties Gene folded into his hand; they shook on it again. "Pearl of great price worth more to some than others," was all the marrying man said, smiling. He waited in the car for them.

Jean, folding their certificate into fourths and sliding it into her trucker's wallet on its chain to her belt, didn't even try not to grin. "Road legal," was her first married remark.

They stood and looked at the graves one last time.

"I'm glad I didn't die in 1971," Rev. Kirby said. "You folkses borned yet?"

"Yes," said Jean.

"No," said Gene, "but I'm catching up."

"It takes what it takes," Jean said, laying her arm along the seat back, rubbing Gene's neck, thumbing the exact place on his left shoulder. "We haven't wasted a second."

"We won't," he promised.

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Rev. Kirby directed them by the H&H for a little wedding supper. Mama Louise came to the front to meet them, pulled a chair around and sat through "Little Martha" on the jukebox. "Y'all dance," she urged, but nobody did. She held Jean's hand in hers, as though she were reading the palm, brailling her calluses. "Ironing!" she guessed.

"He's the cook," Jean said, pointing. "I jam gears."

Mama Louise gave them both a hug. "All I knows I been reading bad news my entire life, and I never yet see where a man get himself kill while washing dishes."

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They honeymooned in the sleeper, boogieing south a few hours at a time. Whoever had owned the truck before her had stuck Bob Hataway's Trans America warning up under some kind of sealing tape they couldn't pick off or melt away with a hair dryer or shave with a Gem blade or scrape with a Widget without wrecking the fiberglass hull. Gene read it, with various inflections and lousy accents, sometimes interrupting other conversation or music as with a public service announcement, sometimes in hypnotic cadences, sometimes seatbelted in, sometimes stretched out in

the sleeper behind her as she drove. "There comes a time when your body takes control without informing your mind of the change of command," he'd begin, coolly, saving the heat. "Your mind seems to go to sleep even though your eyes remain open." He'd give her time to fight it, lose, and blink. "Your mind fights the change of command and you will be alerted of the conflict by inadvertent body movements." She'd always laugh. She was a sucker for inadvertent body movements. He gave her time for that, too, then deep, deep, slow and low, "Be aware of your body needs …"

"God bless America," she said, being aware, aware, the third time midway across Sarasota Bay, no possible parking. He was used to hearing her voice in the dark. She couldn't get over the effect of his. "I'm glad I couldn't peel it," she said, blowing Hataway's warning a kiss after that fifth stop, seeing things in a new light. She could have driven fifteen hours, but they averaged eight.

They did everything except count down the days. Nothing dwindled.

When they got to Homestead, she dropped off the trailer and they ran the Marmon bobtail down the Keys, to Pennecamp, and snorkeled. The next day Jean's mother and Little Martha met them there, and afterward, they made a convoy back to the mainland. Along the way Gene noticed houses for sale, listed higher than ones he'd noticed all the way south in the newspapers he'd bought every time they fueled. He wondered about apartments, maybe. Jean's mother said, "Why?' with her and Little Martha rattling around in that big old place at the end of a sand road. Dogs didn't even need a fence. Jean's mother had given this some thought. It made total sense for him to relocate, as far as she could see, which wasn't, she had to admit, any farther than Coral Gables. She and Little Martha had gone north with Jean at Christmas, to meet his brother and aunts in Harlan. She never had seen anything like those coal hollers, steeps and seeps, icicles hanging off rock cliffs and roads graded onto what seemed to be thin air. She rode along with her eyes shut, Jean saying, "Look, Mama. Oh, you missed it!" They'd gotten lucky, a skiffering of snow on Christmas Eve, six inches on Christmas Day, Little Martha's first chance to play in it. The power was out for a while. Jean's mother–who had a bikini figure, thousands of dollars invested in electrolysis, Jazzercise three days a week, canasta club on Tuesdays, a harbormaster boyfriend and lots of salt-water tackle – did not appreciate how firewood warms you twice and said so and considered anything north of

Atlanta to be the arctic and said so. "You don't have to shovel rain," she told Gene.

The newspapers had want-ads too. But how did he know where to want what he wanted? Just somewhere along the interstate, somewhere she could find him, somewhere she could park awhile. That's what got him, on the trip north, the long leg of their honeymoon, how differently they looked at things. He was adopting Little Martha; they'd already seen a lawyer about it. He liked the idea of more – "a house full" – and Jean hadn't said no. He'd been saving for years and a home of their own wasn't going to be impossible, even with her weekly truck payments of $290. She kept a clean logbook and used a laptop to stay in touch with fuel prices, tolls, and regs. She'd been trucking for seven years, in her own rig for three, and as she told him, "I don't need advice, just a place to park."

For her, the cab was home. She had all those photographs on the headliner and bullhead, a quilt of her grandmother's on the bunk, and over the visor a chipped and cracked old brownie snapshot of her daddy's great-grandfather's brother at the wheel of a vintage Marmon, as though that explained everything. Her daddy hadn't made it past thirty, but that was hurricane Andrew and nothing at all to do with driving a truck. "Gone is gone," her mama said, picking up the pieces. It was Jean who renamed their little boat "Moving Target." Speed was one thing, but Jean wanted power, too. They lived near the highway, not the railroad, or she might have found a different way out. It was almost a relief when she left high school one May day after graduation practice and someone reported seeing her swing up into the cab of a Kenworth idling at the end of a grove.

The next news came from California: they were married and she was riding shotgun on a north-south drybox run. Then it was Utah for a few months while she studied for her CDL, and a trip home to Florida to have the baby and leave it with her mom, "just until," and then long hauls from Arkansas to Pennsylvania, and finally divorced, signing on as newbie on a north south route in a company rig, saving every penny she could for the down on the rebuilt Marmon. For all her baby knew, Jean and that red truck with "Little Martha" painted on the hood were her own personal circus coming to town. Now and then a ruckus, lots of laughs and a few tears, after which the even tenor resumed, the sandy yard empty except for Mama Gail's Bronco and jonboat.

Jean would've laid her life down, waded through blood neck deep, and or been dropped from a height on to nails and fire for that child. But she didn't know how to do any of that except by running. Not away, just on and on. She'd learned out west how they have to cut the rug from the loom, whether they finish weaving it or not. To leave off now would be to waste all her work. Patience is what fills the loom. Every mile whittled her debt and chinked a few more coins into the piggy bank for their future. Besides which, she had discovered what she was glad at, not just good at. She had – in one impulse – found the way to find her way. The running was instinctive, purposeful; it tamed her, she knew it, recognized it in herself, that first ride, the day she left school forever. She could laugh about it now. It was the truck, more than the man, she'd fallen for. But thank god for the man who'd opened the door.

She had plenty of time to figure things out. When she ran across Gene that night, when he turned from the grill and faced his future, she didn't plan on tenure. If he lasted, he'd be just one more landmark along the route. For all she knew, he saw it the same. Who could imagine it worth more? Or lasting longer? The biggest surprise of both their lives his handing her that note.

"Here is what I want you to know," he had said. His sermon was written on the back of a check carbon. Funny paper, like the inside of a Band-Aid wrapper, gave her the same feeling, like there was a wound being tended, nothing too major, nothing past healing. That was the thing about flesh wounds.

She read it then, with him watching, just let him watch. She wasn't a speed reader and he wrote it small as book print. She read like it was a trick, or a test. Or the Bible. She read it again, to be sure she got it all; she had an orderly mind that way. Then she folded it, and nodded – not a yes nod, not a no nod, just an all right I'll consider this nod – and left. Filed it in her logbook. He was working on the southbound side, and she didn't see him for the rest of that trip, and then all the way north, and then the turnaround from Columbus and slingshot out of Cincy over the Ohio, too road-busy to get more than a glimpse of the water, and back down into Kentucky. She didn't call or write, even though the check carbon had his address on it, and her mudflaps had the truckstop phone number. But what would she have said? He'd blindsided her. A few miles she let anger keep her from admitting the answer. "He's crazy," she said. That was all.

She couldn't even remember his face or his voice, except for the one line, over and over and over, "Here is what I want you to know," as he handed it to her, with her change. The furtive sly look of the counterman, at the office door, a set up job, so Gene could be the one to wait on her. But not laughing at her, laughing at him. That flew all over her, too.

"I come from coal," he wrote. "We dig in. Live & die by are own –" the ballpoint balked against the waxy paper and he switched to pencil – "light. My daddy walked seventeeen miles in a day & a night to hear my mama sing in a church qwartet. He claimed her on a handshake, walked home again with nothing but her smile for supper in breakfast too. Coal & tobacco, and having to & meaning to, killed my daddy & my mama both. Something better going to hapen to what of thems alive in me. & mine." In felt tip, this PS: "I dreamed threads showing on that front right driving tire, it scard me. You want a new one I can help."

She didn't think she did, hadn't thought she would, ever, but there she stood, telling him less than a week later, yes: "I want a new one," and she didn't mean a retread.

They courted to the rhythm of the road, at the mercy of the dispatchers. They marveled how their paths had ever crossed. They ate at the Chinese All-U-Can buffet and discovered from their placemats they were water horse and fire dog, a match made in heaven. "Marry early," it advised, and she frowned, but he said, "Maybe they mean a.m. not p.m. It's upside down in China."

"We don't have to marry," she said.

He agreed. "Have *to* sucks. Let me know when you *want to.*"

That was how he asked.

This was Jean's new route. She had had this dedicated run since October, a reefer out of Homestead, all the way north to Cincinnati on 75, then a turnaround in Columbus and back again. Before this she had worked open fleet, three weeks on, hauling anybody's anything anywhere, gone twenty-one days before coming in for time off. He'd hated that. The sound of it as much as the schedule. "Coming in" was what she'd say, on the cell phone talking herself down to sleep, her LadySmith under her pillow, her rig queued up at some argon-lit receiver's dock, waiting for the lumpers to unload her in the morning.

"Coming in" – like a radio signal. Like her voice passing through the air, invisible, finding its way, ricocheting off towers, bouncing over

mountains and dark waters, flung dish to dish by satellites winking like stars. He wondered how she found him, how she ever found him. He had loved her from the first like this, with a heart's harking, when she was just cracking wise, tough-talking but not profane, when the counterman that rainy night vanished to the can to smoke, and Gene had turned from the grill to ring out a customer, tired, nobody on the graveyard shift dreams enough, and her eyes fresh, fresh, taking him in, not tired, never going to be that tired, not looking for a fight or a friend, just looking.

Even later, when she was headed straight for him, she still said it: "coming in" not "coming home."

"Come on," she'd say across the miles, for hello. And "Gone," for gone. Weeks and weeks of gone.

She wanted to tell him – when her route finally turned, and "Little Martha" began adding up the miles and counting down the days – how she felt, how she was arriving at herself, where her life fit her soul like a wetsuit, and her heart sang as she speed dialed the news of her nearing into the pager on his belt, how if she weren't so eager, so urgent, she would haul to a stop right on the side of the highway, wade out into the wind-riffled weeds and slush, kneel in thanks, cry up to what had always been sky to her but now was heaven, and praise something, bless back – like the woman the troopers found wandering on the median out west, arms wideflung, thrumming, blinded from staring at the sun – staggered not by choice but by possibility, "coming in," coming in to her own.