

Laugh & Holler Woo

By Kenn Hartmann

I found myself in a fix, the rubber having violently peeled off the rim of my sickle, without a filling station, repair shop or café in sight, lacking cash anyway, not a shack on the horizon, lost in the high desert of the Shoshone Range. A couple hours passed until a passerby with both the desire and means to assist stopped and helped muscle my machine into the back of his pickup, an old one-eyed Ford, barely roadworthy and beat to shit, my salvation. In fact, the old-timer surprised me with his strength, the flexing sinew in his weathered hands and forearms revealed a lifetime of physical labor. I thanked him profusely, saying I'd ride in the bed to keep my sickle steadily propped against a rimless truck tire. He urged the pickup to life, leaning his grizzled head out the window to say, "you'd best hang on son; it's 'bout ten miles of rough riding to get'cha anywhere worth getting," the vehicle lurching forward, the rush of cool twilight breeze instantly bringing relief from the stagnant hot air that had surrounded me while stranded. With the last evidence of sunlight reflecting off the mountain peaks, casting an eerie glow across the valley, he ground to a halt at an abandoned filling station, engine still running, slowly exited the cab and quickly unloaded my sickle. I said, "don't mean to sound incredulous old-timer, but this place looks dead." He pondered the dilapidated edifice and said, "been dead for years, but Javier's in the Quonset hut out back; he'll help." As the old man and old truck sped away, his taillights obscured by dust, the sound of the Ford motor fading fast toward the horizon, at last engulfed in silence, I became aware of the tink tink of a distant hammer.



Surrounded by work benches, welding machines and tool boxes, illuminated by a single bulb hanging from the prefab rafters, standing on oil-soaked gravel, Javier stood wearing greasy bib overalls, naked shoulders flexed, flipping a hammer, deftly twirling it like a baton. "What'cha got there?" he asked, then answered without waiting my reply, "flat tire?" We determined size and make and he said it'd take a day or two to get a replacement from Reno or Vegas and he wouldn't know until morning. We negotiated labor, offering to work myself, regardless; it was going to cost half of my stash for the tire and shipping. As Javier clambered around shop banging tools and shuffling cans, suddenly arched up and tossed his hammer with a vengeance, the ballpeen exploding into a dark corner of the tin wall. "Missed," he mumbled, "Dang rattlers slither round, curl up like a hose." Javier suggested a flea-bag motel a little ways down the highway, "cheap and clean, well, cheap and there's Molly's shack just beyond. They got alcohol and, well, there's Molly." He said to leave my machine by the trailer; I unloaded my gear, a backpack and a bedroll and asked, "Molly's eh?" Javier winked at me and laughed, "hard to see though; power's been off a week, look for candles."

I hiked a mile down the moonlit highway, past vague silhouettes of ramshackle trailers, dogs barking, transistor music crackling from one shack, a baby crying at another, a couple arguing far off until nothing but darkness and silence all around and stars above and the dimly lit motor lodge sign on my right advertised \$35 a room – cheap maybe, but too expensive on my depleted budget. I kept walking and thought perhaps I had gone too far until I saw the shadow of a house with candles in the window and a strange ruckus emanating from within as if a terrible atrocity was being committed.

As I stepped from the veranda over the threshold, my eyes already accustomed to the darkness outside, adjusted easily to the candlelit interior reeking of incense and beer, the longhaired guitar player and a ruffian with pots and pans, bottles and cans stopped banging, thus ending the atrocity. "You here for the audition?" asked the bartender, a rough woman who by candlelight easily might have been a man. "You here for Molly then? She's upstairs." The guitar player spoke enthusiastically, "No, he's got bongos." It's just my bedroll, I explained. The other musician asked, "Do you know Creedence's Rolling on the River?" I said I did. "Give him a beer; let's get rolling," he said and counted one, two, three four. This is a song about leaving a job in the city working for the man; who wouldn't know it? "Sing louder, don't whisper – dude you can't sing for shit; I thought you said you can sing?" I just said I knew the lyrics. "Well, try again, belt it out." Each attempt was accentuated with another beer; the music didn't improve with each version, just became more palatable. The longhair asked, "Do you know any other tunes?" I suggested Fats Domino, 'My Girl Josephine.' Although alcohol loosened my vocal chords it also wiped out my inhibitions and soon, even the rugged bartender sang along, belting out, "you used to laugh at me and holler woo, woo, woo." Keeping count is essential in music, however I must have repeated that one line seventy-five times, virtually ignoring the rest of Fats' fine lyrics, "now you try to make believe it weren't no deal like that."

After promises and dreams of forming a rock band with the drunken reprobates, I stumbled deep into the desert brush behind Molly's, threw down my bedroll in a moonlit clearing and dreamt my motorcycle tire was a rattlesnake trying to sink its fangs into me with each revolution of the wheel. After uneasy sleep on cold hardscrabble, I was happy to find Javier had already ordered the tire from Vegas, piggybacking on another shipment, saving me money, the tire to be delivered by late afternoon. Until then, I splashed about the cheap motel's pool with hippies from the One World Community Consciousness Teleport. Their bus was broken down awaiting replacement. "The school bus that's painted psychedelic purple?" They were traveling from Berkley, California to New York. "What's it all mean?" asked one incredibly cute hippy chick I tried to seduce at poolside. I don't know baby, but someday they'll be reading this story at a deep woods biker bar in Northern Wisconsin asking that same question.

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