

## ***BROKE-DOWN IN BOSSIER CITY***

**By Michael Ventura**

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The motel was a short walk from the garage. Belinda, the gal who answered the garage's constantly ringing phone, told me to be careful of "that motel" – stay in the room after dark, don't stroll about at night. Belinda said it mainly housed "those people from southern Louisiana" – Katrina refugees who had evidently overstayed their welcome in Bossier City, across the Red River from Shreveport. Belinda had a point. The motel was what I call "a felony motel," the sort of joint that attracts folks who have just committed, or are about to commit, a felony. Interesting places, and I've stayed in many, but only when traveling alone. Apparently this dump was FEMA's idea of a fitting place for helpless families.

The motel clerk defined the word "blowsy" – a little drunk or a little high, a cigarette hanging from her lips, heavy, and showing a lot of breast. Her smile had died a long time ago, but she mechanically displayed its corpse. She said her motel was almost full, though I hadn't seen any cars in the lot, just kids on skateboards. These Katrina victims either didn't own cars or their cars hadn't made it out. I asked for a smoker and was given a small white ashtray to take to the room.

Some room. One dim bulb on a wall fixture. White cinder-block walls. A TV with a few fuzzy channels. The thinnest possible towels, and on the bed a blanket almost as thin. Burn stains on what was left of the rug. Two plastic glasses, one small bar of soap. The toilet didn't flush until I thought to fill the tank from the ice-bucket. A family had lived here?! The TV had an FM radio tuned to NPR. On the bet that NPR listeners are people of some sensibility, I tried to imagine such people (or any people) living in this room for nearly five months. One resident said they'd just left, and I thought of Butch Hancock's line, "Where do you go when you're already gone?"

My Chevy had barely made it to the garage. The transmission couldn't get out of first gear and was screaming an awful whine and emitting a horrible smell. When Rodney and Virgil put it up on the rack and took off the tranny pan, out poured a black, stinky liquid full of ... stuff. But the thing about a '69 Malibu Chevelle is: Mechanics love it. They've owned cars just like mine, and they rhapsodize about their engines, races, and close calls. "Man," Rodney said, "Ya c'n fix a car like this sometimes with bale wire an' a screwdriver." I told him I knew he was right, because a passerby in a pickup had once helped me fix my cracked fan casing with exactly that, some bale wire. I showed Rodney and Virgil where and how. Maybe that was when they decided to like me.

Rodney wore overalls, a sporty red beard, and the satisfied expression of a man for whom the world makes way – not the whole world, but his world. It's his shop now, and when a driver needs a transmission there's no arguing the price. Rodney naturally likes that. His father Virgil started the joint around when I was 5 – which would be 1950.

Virgil was somewhere in the vicinity of 80, a tall man for his generation. One eye looked off to the side seeing nothing, while his better eye saw just enough. He told me that back before I-20 paralleled U.S. 80, Bossier City was known as "Little Las Vegas," and this stretch was known as "the Strip." Anything and everything happened here then, when half this building was a garage and the other half was a honky-tonk. "This here's where the stage was," Virgil pointed out. Virgil fronted "a hillbilly band," played all night, fixed cars all day. He called the life of a musician "a sacrifice," because you needed so many uppers and downers to keep the schedule going, and eventually that ruined you – though he seemed not to regret it.

When Virgil was a small boy in the Thirties he and his family were the only whites picking in the fields. When they got the work they were told "never say 'nigger'" and they'd be all right. The farm boss was a black woman named Amy. Her word was law. She was their family's "doctor" too, and delivered his four brothers. She'd lecture the "young 'uns," Virgil remembered, saying, "See deym horses, see deym mules, see deym hogs – dey's equal but dey's different, an' dey don' mix wey-ll. White an' black is equal but different too, an' dey don't mix wey-ll. Best da white boys don' mix wid da black girls, an' best da black boys don' mix wid da white girls." In Virgil's view, Amy was approving segregation; in mine, Amy was trying to save her people a lot of grief. Seventy years later she was still fresh in Virgil's mind, no-nonsense, a midwife, a boss, a protector of her own and holding her own, back when a black woman in Bossier City had no rights and no recourse. All this time later, via Virgil's memory, it was a privilege to meet Amy.

I reproduce Virgil's dialect because you so rarely hear a deep accent any more, and the music of his speech is part of the man. To make a point about why his time was better than mine, he spoke of working for a woodchopper. They'd chop the wood, load it on a wagon, haul it to the railroad depot and report to "the depot man," saying, "'Dayr's fah [four] staycks [stacks] of fay-ar-wood [firewood], ayn [and] two of [railroad] ties.' Ayn dayt depot man wouldn't'ah think t'go out ayn check, he'd pay rayt [right] dayr, 'cause'n deym days a man told the truth."

Virgil said, "We worked sun-up t'sundown in deym days, but know whut? It made people of us." Then he said, "It was a culture. We had a culture."

Virgil understood that a culture is built upon assumptions shared so deeply that they require no discussion. And Virgil was right, we don't have that any more. I don't miss the culture he had; I doubt Amy would miss it either. But we've not replaced his culture with a functioning culture of our own, and that's what much of our conflict is all about. We're a fragmented people living out our fragments without much chance for one fragment to talk to, and listen to, the other personally. Unless my transmission conks out in a place like Bossier City, a guy like me hasn't much chance to hear out a guy like Virgil.

Virgil was for capital punishment "'cause the Bible says 'an eye for an eye.'" In the Bible Jesus also instructs, "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist one who is evil. But if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also" (Matthew 5:38-39). That was a point hard to

make on that stretch of U.S. 80 in Bossier City under the flight path of Barksdale Air Force Base. Every 10 minutes or so our conversation was drowned out by the screeching engines of a B-52 rising into the sky.

On 9/11 George W. Bush touched down at Barksdale just long enough to tape a message which was aired after he took off again. Bush assured us we would be safe, though human beings have never been safe. My transmission had conked out at an intersection of the past and the present, Katrina and 9/11, war and peace, Amy and Virgil, Virgil and me – the intersection, too, of people trying to hold on to a capital-S Something against the onslaught of the aggressive capital-N Nothing that we're afraid our future might be. I thought of Dylan's line: "Now it's that day of confession and we cannot mock a soul, for when there's too much of nothing no one has control."

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