

Blue Impala: Excerpt 1

We were awakened in the parking lot of the Masonic Lodge in Poseyville, Indiana, by a man's voice. "Hello, hello, what are you doing in there?" The voice was accompanied by a fist pounding on the driver's side front window.

Velvet came to, rolled down the window, and said, "If you break the window on my new car, you're in serious trouble."

"This is private property, and I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

"Well isn't that just too bad," Velvet said. "We'd hoped to stay long enough to attend one of your goddamned secret meetings. We drove all the way here just for that purpose."

"Very funny, ma'am. Now if you don't leave, I'll have to call the police."

We were still untangling ourselves in the back seat—Sam's right leg crossed over my chest and rested on Mel's shoulder—when Velvet started the car. As we pulled away, Sam said, "Was that Jesus? He was wearing a crown on his head."

"That wasn't a crown, it was just one of the funny hats the Mason's wear," Opal said.

"Why do they wear funny hats?" Sam said.

It was a reasonable question. "Why do they?" I said.

"Why do men do any of the silly things they do?" Velvet said. It was not an answer, but we knew it was useless to ask again.

Before getting back on I-64, we stopped at the Esso station to fill up the tank and wash our faces in the restroom. Velvet promised that when we crossed the state line into Illinois, we would find a place to eat.

Opal had taken over as driver to give Velvet a rest. She couldn't claim much experience behind the wheel, and normally Velvet would never have let her drive her brand new car, but she said it was straight highway so how hard could it be. We soon found out.

"There's a Sandy's hamburger place," I said, my stomach growling in recognition.

As Opal swerved across two lanes of traffic to exit the ramp, she nearly hit three cars. No one said anything until we pulled into Sandy's parking lot.

“Are you trying to kill us?” Mel said.

“Are you trying to crash my new car?” Velvet said.

“No one’s hurt, let alone dead,” Opal said. “Your precious Blue Impala doesn’t have a scratch. And if someone hadn’t yelled out ‘There’s a Sandy’s,’ we wouldn’t even be talking about it.”

I was about to feel like the whole thing was my fault, when Opal added: “Sandy’s has the best burgers around. It’s a good thing Janie was paying attention.”

A few miles after we got back on I-64, I saw the “Welcome to Illinois” sign. No one commented on our earlier than promised supper. We were full and happy for the moment.

Illinois went on for hours. I stared at rows and rows of golden corn stretched out across the flat green earth. The sameness transfixed me.

“Janie, wake up, it’s the biggest horseshoe I’ve ever seen.” Sam tugged hard on my sleeve.

The word horseshoe registered in my mind. I pictured my dream horse, King, for a second, and then heard Mel’s voice.

“It’s not a horseshoe, stupid, it’s the Gateway Arch, the brand new Gateway Arch,” Mel said. “We’re entering St. Louis.”

Opal was still driving. Velvet was sound asleep, snoring.

“We’re crossing the Mississippi River,” Opal said.

I read the sign to myself for fear of mispronouncing the name of the bridge—Eads Bridge.

“That horseshoe would fit a really big horse,” I said. “Someday, when I get my horse, King, we’ll put horseshoes on him.”

Sam smiled broadly, revealing her missing top two front teeth. I wished she smiled more often.

It was Velvet’s turn to take the wheel. Opal insisted it wasn’t necessary to stop, that they could make the switch while we drove. Velvet told Opal she was hell bent on killing us all. Opal’s response was to take another couple sniffs of her Vicks. Luckily, we pulled off along the side of the road for the hand-off.

Mel, Sam and I played I Spy for the next few hours as we traveled I-44 southwest through Missouri towards Oklahoma. Velvet was going at least ten miles over the speed limit—Opal was erratic in her

driving, but not fast—so it was a challenge to choose objects outside the car. We turned inward to the Blue Impala.

“I spy something white,” Sam said.

“The car seats,” I said.

“Which one?” Sam said.

“Hmmm, there’s one in the back and two in the front ... I’ll go with the driver’s seat,” I said.

“Wrong.”

“Front passenger seat,” Mel said. “And if it’s not, let’s see if Janie can guess right.”

“Wrong,” Sam said.

“Back seat,” I said. “I spy something blue.”

Sam and Mel guessed everything from the carpet to the exterior paint. Finally they both gave up.

“Velvet’s eyes,” I said.

“That’s cheating,” Mel said. “No one can see her eyes.”

Velvet looked in the rearview mirror, her eyes wide as saucers. “Can you see them now?” she said.

We passed through Hornet, Missouri, and then into Oklahoma. Ado Annie, AKA Velvet, began to sing all her favorites from her starring role back in Coal Creek.

“Okla-homa, where the wind comes sweeping down the plain ...”

We all joined in for the finale: “You're doin' fine, Oklahoma, Oklahoma O.K.L.A.H.O.M.A., Oklahoma!”

Blue Impala: Excerpt 2

“Girls, lets go. I don’t want to be late.” Velvet was already halfway out the door. Sam and I were watching *The Edge of Night* on TV. Mel now lived in the dorms at the University of Miami.

“Where are we going?” we said in unison.

“To see Mambo Mama Matabay, High Priestess of Voodoo.” She said it casually, as if we were going to get our hair cut.

A half hour later, the bus dropped us off in Little Haiti. We walked into the Voodoo Botanica, a colorful shop with a variety of tiny wooden and cloth dolls, candles, bones, potions, books, and of course straight pins.

“Good afternoon,” a black lady with a scarf wrapped around her head said. She had an accent, but it was nothing like the Appalachian drawl I once had.

“I’m Velvet Summers. I have an appointment with Mambo Mama Matabay. She’s going to teach me a spell.”

“Yes, she’s expecting you. The children will need to wait out here.”

“Can we pet the chickens?” Sam said.

“Janie, watch Sam.”

About an hour later, Velvet emerged from behind the beaded curtains and said, “I need three dolls, some rope, a black candle, and straight pins.”

The black lady gathered up the items. “That will be twenty-five dollars including the session.”

Velvet paid and we left. On the bus ride home, we got an earful.

“Girls, we’re going to cast a spell on the rotten men in our lives. Do you have any questions?”

“Is Daddy a rotten man?” Sam said.

“Your Daddy will be exempt from this one.”

“What kind of spell?” I said.

“It won’t kill them, but they won’t mess with us again.” I had hoped for more details.

“Can I help?” Sam sounded just like that Shake n’ Bake commercial on TV.

“You can both help, but you have to promise never to tell anyone.”

Sam and I both crossed our hearts and hoped to die promising to keep the secret.

“We’ll start practicing tonight right after the *Ed Sullivan Show*.”

Ed’s “really big shew” having ended, Velvet removed the dolls, the rope, the black candle and the pins from a brown paper bag. She turned off all the lights except for one and we sat on the floor in a circle.

“This is our sacred circle,” she said. “Now keep your voices very low and do exactly as I say. We don’t want this to backfire.”

“How will we know if it backfires?” I said.

“You might wake up blind in one eye or with a terrible pain in your leg, that kind of thing.”

Velvet had our full attention. She spread out a towel on the floor and placed the three dolls on top. Next, she pulled three black and white photos, one each of Ray, Tommy Clay and Jim the mailman, out of her pocket.

“Get me some scissors out of the drawer,” she said.

I got up as quietly as I could and returned with the scissors. Velvet cut Ray’s, Tommy Clay’s and Jim the mailman’s heads off the pictures and pinned each of them to a doll. She wrapped a piece of rope around each doll and lit the black candle.

“Okay girls, repeat with me. ‘Curse my enemies, curse my fears, curse those who have brought me tears. Curse those who have done me wrong, make their punishment long and strong. This is my will so might it be.’”

We repeated the curse three times, one for each rotten man doll. “What will happen to Ray, Tommy Clay and Jim the mailman?” I said, when we had finished.

“That remains to be seen,” Velvet said.