

## Death Don't Have No Mercy

By William Boyle

*"Death don't have no mercy in this land."*

—Reverend Gary Davis

Calhoun wasn't quite sure why he'd stolen the walkman from the kid. Maybe it was just out of curiosity. It wasn't like Calhoun stole things often. He could count on one hand everything he had ever lifted. When he was in grammar school at Our Lady of the Snow, he'd snagged a quarter from the offertory basket during Mass. When he was a freshman in college, he'd stolen a pair of his girlfriend's sister's panties while he was at their house for Thanksgiving. He hadn't sniffed them or done anything weird with them, but it had calmed him down pressing them between his fingers. Most recently, Calhoun had stolen a twenty off the bar at the Clipper from his Uncle John's bill pile. And that was all. Now there was the walkman.

The thing that had really attracted Calhoun to the walkman was the fact that it was just a plain old cassette deck, the type he'd owned as a kid. It was rare to see a kid these days with one of those. Mostly kids carried those sleek little iPods or portable CD players. This kid, a little black kid dressed in worn blue jeans and a green sweatshirt, had this old walkman. Calhoun wanted to know what he was listening to. Maybe that was the only reason he'd stolen it. He'd expected the kid to be listening to something that all kids listened to. Some bad candy born into the world in a spray of shitty perfume. But he had a feeling that there was something different about this kid. He had a feeling that he'd be listening to something genuine.

It wasn't hard to steal the walkman. Calhoun walked about a hundred paces behind the kid for a mile or so. Finally, the kid met up with some of his buddies at the basketball courts over by St. Raymond's cemetery on East Tremont and put the walkman down on a bench, tying the earplugs around the deck. Calhoun just looked like some half-respectable middle-aged guy out for a walk, stopping to watch a group of kids play ball. No one—least of all the kid and his buddies - saw Calhoun lean down over the bench and scoop up the walkman. He walked away from the courts quickly. When he was at a safe distance from the courts, he put in the earplugs and listened. He was right about the kid. There was something special there. The tape, which he had rewound to the beginning of Side A, started with Memphis Minnie's "Killer Diller Blues." After that was Hank Williams's "Lost Highway" and Blind Willie McTell's "East St. Louis Blues." Calhoun was floored. He walked around until it was dark and finished listening to the tape. There were songs by Fats Domino, Reverend Gary Davis, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, The Carter Family, Johnny Cash, Robert Johnson, and John Lee Hooker. When he got home, he put the tape into the cassette deck on his stereo and listened to it again as he prepared a light dinner of salad and scrambled eggs.

The next day Calhoun walked all around looking for the kid, but there was no sign of him. He had dubbed a copy of the tape and was hoping to somehow return the walkman to the kid without revealing himself as the thief. But he didn't find the kid. There was no sign of him. Calhoun met his Uncle John and they had dinner together and

split three pitchers of Coors Light. Calhoun stumbled home at about nine-thirty, listening to the songs and singing along. He had known all of the songs by heart long before hearing them on the kid's tape, but they had become new to him somehow.

Calhoun woke up the following morning with a wicked hangover. His mother called. "Kevin," she said. "It's Saturday."

"Yeah, Ma. I know," he said.

"You promised you'd give me a ride to Aunt Lucy's."

"Shit."

"Yeah. Shit."

"Uncle John said you were out late with him last night."

"Not late."

"Kevin, you're wasting your life away. Living in that dark little apartment. Drinking. I don't know why you quit that teaching job."

"Ma, not now."

"Can you give me a ride?"

"I'll be over in ten minutes."

"We can take Uncle John's car. It's parked on Revere."

"Okay."

Calhoun got dressed, brushed his teeth, and walked over to his mother's house on Harding. It was true what she had said. He never should have quit his job teaching at Preston. He had been a history teacher and now he was a bum. He wasn't sure why he had quit. For the same reason, he guessed, that he had stolen the kid's walkman. Out of curiosity. If it wasn't for his buddy Ralph letting him live on the arm in his basement apartment, he'd really be done for.

Calhoun's mother was waiting on the front stoop when he got to her house. "Now I'll be an hour late," she said.

"I'm sorry, Ma."

His mother handed him the keys to Uncle John's Oldsmobile. "Uncle John gave me the keys on Wednesday. He hasn't driven the car in a week. He says he hopes it starts."

"It'll start. Weather's been nice enough."

They walked over to Revere and found the car. Calhoun opened the door for his mother and helped her in. He opened the driver's side door and got in under the wheel. He started the car and let it run for a minute. As he waited, he took the kid's tape out of his jacket pocket and pressed it into the tape deck. "Killer Diller Blues" kicked in.

His mother smiled. "I like this," she said.

Calhoun wasn't expecting that. He had figured she would tell him to turn it down, the way she always did when they drove together. One time he had put in *Music from Big Pink*, and she had turned red with rage, demanding that he turn it down and telling him that it was junk. Now, surprised, he said nothing. His mother moved her head to the music.

They drove over the Throgs Neck Bridge and got to Aunt Lucy's in Gravesend before Side A was finished on the kid's tape. No traffic. Not even around JFK. Calhoun helped his mother out of the car. "Why don't you come in?" she asked.

"No thanks," Calhoun said.

His mother showed no sign of disappointment. "Pick me up at six," she said, and then she walked up to Aunt Lucy's front door and knocked.

Calhoun waited until she was safely inside and then drove off. He knew a bar on Avenue U called The Wrong Number. His old girlfriend Tonya, who was from Coney Island, had taken him there a few times. He wondered if he would run into her. He hoped he would. He could use an old girlfriend right about now. Especially one like Tonya.

There was a row of spots in front of The Wrong Number, which was even more of a dive than he remembered. Calhoun waited until "Me and the Devil Blues" by Robert Johnson was done and then he shut down the car and went into the bar. Dean Martin's "Memories Are Made of This" was playing on the jukebox. The bartender was a miserable codger who wore his thinning white hair slicked back. His nose had been hammered flat as elephant shit. There was a puffy blond in the corner sucking on a bottle of MGD. And there was a kid with Down's Syndrome sweeping the floor. It was a real hellish scene. Calhoun bellied up to the bar and ordered a bottle of Coors Light. He left three bucks on the bar.

The codger popped the top off a bottle he brought it over, scooping the money off the bar. Calhoun drank.

Soon enough the puffy blond came over. She wasn't his ex-girlfriend, but she was the owner of a warm box and a warm box was all he needed. She had an extra layer of meat on her that colored in her curves, and the cheap black dress she wore showed off the rounded tops of her breasts. Her hair was pitch-perfect platinum, and she smelled like she had just blasted herself with some fruity body spray. Whatever she'd done, she couldn't cover the stink of whiskey on her breath or the hot odor blooming from her armpits.

Calhoun had never sunk so low. But he had a few hours to kill.

"Buy me a beer?" the blond asked.

"Why not?" Calhoun said.

The bartender brought one over and Calhoun paid for it.

The blond went straight to work on it. After a few championship pulls off the bottle, she said, "I'm Anita."

"Anita, sure," Calhoun said.

She shook her head. "Shelley," she said.

"Make up your mind."

"Shelley," she said again.

"I'm Kevin."

"You got a cigarette?"

"No."

She leaned over the bar and those breasts went with her, flopping forward and pressing down on a couple of damp-looking coasters. "You got a cigarette, Crutch?" she asked the codger.

Crutch came over and gave her a Pall Mall, lighting it with a wooden match scraped against the underside of the bar. As she sucked on her cigarette, she began talking. She held her cigarette in one hand, letting the ash grow long before tipping it into an ashtray, and with her other hand she tapped her long red nails on the tabletop. Her nails were only grown out and polished on that one hand. On her cigarette hand, the nails were bitten low and unpainted. She was telling Calhoun where she was from, where she

had gone to school, about her old job at Meat Supreme.

Calhoun sat there and tried to imagine what Shelley's breasts looked like sprung from the tight wrap of that cheap dress. Probably like a couple of platypus bills with dark screws on the ends.

Shelley took a long drag on her cigarette and continued, "My sister's name is Anita. Sometimes I use it. Her name, that is. She got sick about five months ago. Real sick. She had breast cancer. And then it spread. She's been laid up for a while. My brother's been trying to get her to go visit him in Florida for a while now. Poor Anita."

Calhoun had no idea what she was talking about, but it didn't matter. She put out her cigarette and they finished their beers at the same time. "What next?" Calhoun asked.

"My place," she said. "It's a five minute drive. You got a car?"

Fifteen minutes later, Calhoun and Shelley were driving down Avenue U. Calhoun had the kid's tape going at full volume. Shelley didn't seem to like it. She shouted directions over the blare of "Lost Highway" and "I'm Bad Like Jesse James."

When they got to her place, a walk-in on Bay Thirty-fourth, Calhoun insisted on staying in the car to hear the end of Johnny Cash's "Flesh and Blood." It was the last song on the kid's tape. He expected Shelley to say that it was a pretty song, but she didn't. Calhoun thought about walking out on the whole show. He wasn't thinking straight anyway. He was just looking for a piece. If Shelley could at least appreciate these songs, maybe then he'd go inside with her. But it had been a couple of weeks since he had slept with a woman and Calhoun was hungry. It didn't matter what she looked like.

They went inside. It was a modest apartment, somewhere between a shithole and the kind of apartment that grandmothers usually died in. There were no pictures on the wall. She had a clock radio out on the counter top in the kitchen, an automatic coffeepot, and not much else. In the bedroom, there were several pairs of black nylons and brassieres strewn on the floor. They looked like bunched-up parachutes. Shelley immediately went to the bathroom to take a shower. Calhoun sat on the edge of bed and continued to wonder what on earth he was doing.

After about fifteen minutes, Shelley came out of the bathroom. Her blond hair was combed straight back and she was wearing a towel. "Hey," she said.

"Hey, Shelley."

She dropped the towel. "Here I am, Kevin."

Calhoun said, "Yeah, Shelley." Those breasts didn't look so bad hanging loose. Her hips were wide and she had a potbelly, but the rest was satisfactory. She approached him, sat down on his lap, and began to kiss his face and neck. Calhoun took hold of one of those breasts and moved his hand over it.

Shelley sighed. She began to unbutton Calhoun's shirt. "I'm lucky you walked into that place today," she said.

"Yeah."

"Let's get these clothes off of you."

"Okay."

She helped him out of his pants and boxers. He watched her. "I'm sorry I'm fat," she said. "I've always been fat."

“Doesn’t matter.”

“You think I’m ugly?”

“You’re pretty.”

“Pretty fat. I’m good in bed, though.”

“Let’s find out.”

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When they were done, they sat in silence on the bed and shared a cigarette. Calhoun rarely smoked, but he was out of breath and he needed one. Shelley wasn’t kidding. She was good in bed. She moved like a high school cheerleader. She was nimble. She could get her legs up over her head. She had taken Calhoun in all the way up to the hilt. She was the best he’d had in years.

Calhoun got up and went into the kitchen to see what time it was. The red digits on the clock radio flashed 5:35. Calhoun got dressed. Shelley tugged at his pants and pressed those big breasts of hers up against him, trying to convince him to stay. He could feel heat coming off of her. She gave a hangdog face.

“I’ve got to pick up my mother at six,” Calhoun said. “She’ll be angry if I make her wait.”

“Can’t you take her home and come back?”

“No, I’m in the Bronx.”

“Can I come visit you in the Bronx some time?”

“Sure.”

“Give me your number.”

He wrote it for her on the pad that she handed him.

“I’ll call you tomorrow,” she said. “Maybe we can do something tomorrow night.”

“Sure, Shelley.”

Calhoun picked his mother up at Aunt Lucy’s and they drove home together in silence, listening to the kid’s tape on low. His mother knew that he had no interest in hearing about the party, so she said nothing. He didn’t feel like talking. He was thinking about Shelley. He was looking forward to seeing her.

He dropped his mother off at her house and helped her inside. She asked if he wanted tea. He said no. She thanked him for the ride, reluctantly gave him twenty bucks the way she always did, and he left. He brought the Oldsmobile back to Uncle John’s house on Mayflower and parked it in the driveway. He took the kid’s tape off the deck and put it in his breast pocket. Later, he would listen to it on the walkman. He went up to his Uncle John’s front door and knocked, but there was no answer. He left the keys in the mailbox.

From Mayflower, he walked back to East Tremont. In no time at all, he was sitting at the bar in the Clipper with a pint of Guinness and a shot of Jameson in front of him. Red Irene was bartending. She was from Galway, and she had an ass that Calhoun wrote poems about.

Red Irene asked, “Kevin, where’s your uncle?”

“Haven’t seen him today,” Calhoun said. “I stopped by his house, but he wasn’t home.”

“I’ve got something for him. If you run into him, tell him to come see me here tonight. Or tomorrow night.”

“Okay, Red.”

“Next round’s on me.”

Calhoun drank in the neighborhood on the spoils of his Uncle John’s generosity. He couldn’t go into a bar—the Clipper or Casey’s or Paddy Doherty’s—without having a drink lined up for him. It certainly wasn’t his generosity that the bartenders and other bar patrons were rewarding. He rarely had more than twenty or thirty bucks on him. His Uncle John was a god in the neighborhood, the kind of upper-class barfly that every true drinker aspired to be.

Red Irene was back in front of Calhoun, pouring a Bloody Mary for Ben Bethlehem, who was sitting down at the end of the bar reading the *Post*. “Got a glow about you tonight, Kevin,” she said. “You in love?”

“Freshly laid,” Calhoun said.

Red Irene grinned from ear to ear, flashing her sharp yellow teeth. She appreciated his honesty. “I know the lass?”

“No.”

“Come on, Calhoun.”

“You don’t.”

“Renee from the bank?”

“Out of my league, Red. Like you. I’m a lifer in the minors.”

“What’s her name?”

“Fat Shelley.”

“Fat Shelley?”

“Fat Shelley from Gravesend.” Calhoun was the one grinning now.

“Sounds like a peach.” Red Irene turned and humped down to the end of the bar, putting the Bloody Mary in front of Ben. Ben didn’t look up from his paper.

Calhoun finished his tall pint of the black and chased it with the Jamesons. Then he took Red Irene up on that free round. After that, Ben Bethlehem bought him a round. Then Dennis Moran, who had come in with his wife and kid for the Steak ‘n’ Shrimp dinner special that was such a big draw. Within the hour, Calhoun was loaded. Red Irene called a cab for him. He took the ride and used what was left of the twenty his mother had given him to pay the driver.

When he got home, he found the walkman, inserted the kid’s tape in the deck, and listened from start to finish. He wondered if the kid had made the tape or if someone had made it for him. The transitions were excellent. Calhoun had always paid close attention to the transitions between songs on mixtapes. Back when he would make mixtapes for old girlfriends, he considered himself a champ at transitions. Sometimes he still thought of one stretch of songs on a mixtape that he had made for Tonya, the girl from Coney. The way the songs led into each other. It was something worth cheering. Worth remembering. What he was remembering now was the way four songs ended side B of the tape he’d made for Tonya two weeks before they had split. Elvis’s “Kentucky Rain” had bled perfectly into “Poison Love” by Johnnie & Jack. Then there was “Buried Bones”

by Tindersticks. And, finally, “Who Are You” by Tom Waits. Calhoun had felt that the way he had aligned those songs had really been saying something to Tonya. He had put a lot of effort into the tape, especially that last sequence of songs, so it hurt pretty hard when Tonya crushed the tape underfoot outside Nathan’s in some kind of fit.

The kid had those kinds of transitions there on his tape. The kind that haunted you. “I’m Bad Like Jesse James” leading into “Trouble in Mind.” Calhoun thought that he might cook up a mixtape for Shelley. Show off his abilities. His record and cassette collection had dwindled because he’d sold most of what he owned for booze money, but there were still a few old records and cassettes laying around. He had that Hank album that he’d never sell, Cash’s *Folsom Prison* and *San Quentin* albums, a few Leadbelly records, two by Skip James, *Otis Blue* by Otis Redding, three or four blues compilations, and cassettes of *Raindogs* and *Frank’s Wild Years* by Tom Waits. It wasn’t as much as he used to have, but it got him through. Yeah, he’d make a tape for Shelley tomorrow, he decided. No matter if she didn’t dig the music he was into.

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In the morning, he got to work. It was the best cure for his hangover. He sat at the kitchen table, drinking water from a pint glass, eating a toasted bagel, and figuring out a possible song list. He crossed off songs he thought Shelley would find too depressing in favor of more upbeat tunes. He imagined that she would think this was a very romantic gift and that they would fuck all night while the tape played over and over in the background.

Around noon, he got dressed. He walked to the dollar store on East Tremont and bought a blank cassette tape. He went back home and began dubbing songs, trying to match ends with beginnings and doing the math to make sure he came in just a few seconds under sixty minutes.

By the time he finished, it was dark and he was hungry. He kept expecting Shelley to call, but she never did. He thought about calling his Uncle John and asking to borrow the Olds again, but he didn’t want to seem desperate. He’d feel like a heel if he showed up at The Wrong Number begging after Shelley. He decided to wait for another hour. If she didn’t call by then, he figured, he’d go to the Clipper.

Shelley never called. Calhoun put the finished mixtape in his jacket pocket and went to the Clipper. His Uncle John was there, and the drinks started coming. First there was the pitcher of Coors Light. Then there were a few shots of the Irish. Dave Keelan came in and bought Calhoun a pint of the black. Red Irene was bartending. Her ass, looking especially swell in a pair of tight black cargo pants, made him forget all about Fat Shelley. The night wasn’t so bad after all.

Calhoun stayed at the bar until closing time. He hit on Red Irene and helped her clean up. He told her that he would fight a war for her ass. She laughed at him. “You see,” he said. “You’re the Yankees. The Cardinals. And I’m the Pawtucket Shitheels. All washed up.”

“You’re cute,” Red Irene said and that gave him hope.

“Cute is shit.”

“What happened to Fat Shelley?”

“I’m over her. She probably ate too much and fell asleep in the gutter.”

“Nasty, Kev.”

“She had underarm odor anyhow.”

“Thanks for sharing. Really.”

“And big fleapit tits.”

“Fleapit tits?”

“Yeah.”

“What are those?”

“I don’t know. Shitty flopping tits.”

“Poor Fat Shelley.”

“Poor fucking Kevin Calhoun. Come on, Red. Let’s spend the night together. I won’t tell anyone. Tomorrow, we can go back to being strangers.”

“Don’t think so, Calhoun. Now, I’ve got to close up.”

Calhoun took the tape he had made for Shelley out of his jacket pocket and put it on the bar.

“What’s that?” Red Irene asked.

“A mixtape. I made it for you,” Calhoun said.

“A mixtape? How 1992 of you.”

“Yeah.”

Red Irene took the tape and looked at the track list. “Looks good.”

“Yeah. Take it. I’m good at making them. Listen for the transitions.”

“Okay, Kev. Thank you.”

“That offer stands whenever, Red. You wanna slum it in the minors for a night you let me know.”

“Okay.”

Calhoun left the bar and started on the walk home. Halfway there, he decided to turn around and head to the park where he’d stolen the kid’s walkman. When he got there, he sat down on the bench he’d lifted the deck from and looked around. The park was empty. No kids playing ball at five in the morning. Calhoun didn’t know what to do. He felt lost. He thought about Red Irene in those tight black cargo pants. He thought about Shelley’s apartment, bare, just the clock radio and coffeepot, and the way they’d fucked there. He thought about the kid’s tape, the top-shelf transitions, the surprising mix of blues and classic country.

He heard some footsteps behind him and turned. It was Ben Bethlehem, wasted to high holy hell. He was wearing a big bomber jacket that hung loose on him.

“Ben?” Calhoun said.

“Yeah.” Ben sat down next to him.

“What are you doing over here?”

“Fuck if I know.”

“Yeah.”

They sat there in silence for a while. Ben farted. Calhoun got up and left, walking away up East Tremont. Ben followed him. Calhoun turned and said, “You following me, Ben?”

“No,” Ben said.

“You sure?”

Ben said nothing.

It was then that Calhoun saw something dark pass over Ben Bethlehem's eyes. A grim crookedness that he could just make out in the low light of early morning. Ben bared his teeth. Calhoun thought about turning tail and booking it. He wondered if Ben had gone off the deep end. There had always been something sinister about him, about the way he ordered Bloody Mary's from Red Irene, about the way he read the *New York Post* down at the darkened corner of the bar.

Calhoun didn't run. He just stood there. The knife was out in Ben's hand before he knew what was happening. It flashed, and Ben snapped it at him. It went in above his ribs. Calhoun felt it cutting through him. It was a hot feeling.

Ben, slurring his words, said, "I followed you. I followed you the other day too. When you stole that kid's radio. I followed you to Brooklyn. I watched through the window as you fucked that fat girl. I followed you before that. I followed you when you taught at that school a few times."

Calhoun went down, bleeding out on the sidewalk. He said, "What the fuck, Ben? Why? What did I ever do?"

"Nothing," Ben said and that word rang in Calhoun's ears. *Nothing*. It was shitty word when it was used the wrong way. The worst word of them all.

Ben leaned over and pulled the knife out. Calhoun put his hand over the wound and felt the blood rushing through his fingers. He didn't care if he died, and he didn't care if he had no idea at all why Ben Bethlehem had stabbed him. At that moment, his only hope was that the kid whose walkman he'd stolen would find him in a few hours and call the police. That kid was special, he knew it. He could sense it. Calhoun wanted the kid to remember him for something. For some reason. Even if only as the dead man he found on East Tremont near the park where he'd lost his walkman. After all, that was the kind of thing that stayed with a kid. That shaped a life.

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