

Red Hair and Black Leather

By Jordan Harper

She had an ass like a heart turned upside down and cut in half – and that’s what we call foreshadowing, friend. But I didn’t know that at the time, of course. All I knew was that it was a slow Wednesday afternoon at the bar and in walks this gal, red hair pouring over her shoulders, wearing a wife beater and black leather pants. And all of the sudden the Cards game on the teevee didn’t seem so interesting.

“Nice place.” She pulled herself onto a stool in front of me, thumping a big leather purse onto the stool next to her. Strictly speaking, what she said was a lie. Jackie Blue’s isn’t much to look at - brick and linoleum, bars on the only window up front, old neon signs on the wall. But still it sounded like she meant it. She had a Southern lilt, not that twang that you get around here, and it made whatever she said sound like sunshine and kittens. Sexy kittens.

“Thanks.”

“It yours?”

“Indeed it is.”

“Well, I guess that makes you Jackie Blue, am I right?”

“Well, I’m Jackie, anyway,” I said. I haven’t answered to Jackie Blue in a long time.

“Jackie Blue...isn’t that the name of a song?”

“By the Ozark Mountain Daredevils, as a matter of fact. You find yourself in the Queen City of the Ozarks just now, if you didn’t know it.”

She wrinkled her nose at that.

“Is that where I am? I had wondered. I hope you don’t mind me saying, she doesn’t look much like a Queen.”

“Well, take a look ‘round the rest of the Ozarks and get back to me on that. Springfield don’t look like much, but it beats the hell out of Rogersville or Monet.”

She dropped a smile on me that peeled about twenty years off my old hide, which might have put me about even with her.

“Jolene,” she said, and put out a freckled hand for me to take. It felt hot to the touch.

“Well now, that’s the name of a song as well, right?”

She groaned a little at this. I guessed she wasn’t a Dolly Parton fan.

“What can I do you for, Jolene?”

“I’ll take a Wild Turkey neat with a Dr. Pepper back, if you please.”

That is a drink order that makes a man sit up and take notice. I poured the liquor in a highball glass and filled a twin for myself. Owning a bar, you want to watch things like drinking in the day. But there’s exceptions for everything, and this was shaping into an exceptional day. She took a hard swallow of the Turkey. I could see it play havoc with the muscles in her throat but it never touched her face. I liked her even more.

“So now, Jolene - seeing as how you don’t know where you are, maybe it’s a pointless question - but what brings you to town?”

She smiled, but this time there was a little crack to it, like there was something that wasn’t a smile underneath. She put her hand on her purse like it was fitting to fly

off, then dug in it for some of those skinny toothpick cigarettes that ladies sometimes smoke.

“Jackie, I’ll tell you what it is. I’m in town for exactly two reasons. One’s to drink Wild Turkey. The other is to get laid.”

I’ve had it every other way I can think of, but I’ve never had it served to me sizzling on a platter like that. There was something there in the back of the skull telling me that God made up his mind long ago that I’m not that lucky and the strings you can’t see usually turn to chains. But sometimes you got to jump just ‘cause the chasm is there.

Hell, what was I going to do, go back to watching the Cards?

I topped my glass to the rim, then hers. Then I held up that near full bottle of Wild Turkey up between us and poured the whole thing into the sink.

“Fresh out of Wild Turkey,” I told her.

She laid that smile on me again and it peeled off another couple of years so that now she was the older one, the one in charge.

“Maybe you want to close up shop early,” she said, sliding off the stool.

“Maybe I do.” I walked around the bar, hoping she couldn’t see me tenting out my jeans. I threw the deadbolt on the front door and pulled the strings on the blinds on the window. Before I did, I peeked out into the parking lot, which was empty except my old truck. Maybe she parked down the street, I figured, and turned to ask her. The words got jammed in my mouth. She was in the corner of the bar, sitting on the glass top of the sit-down Mrs. Pac Man machine. I wondered if her ass was cold, seeing as how while my back was turned she’d stripped out of those black leather pants and didn’t have a thing on except a pair of high heeled cowboy boots.

“I thought this would be fine,” she said, patting the video game table under her ass.

It was fine, alright. Fine, indeed.

And time passed slowly and well, the way it did back when I was young and time seemed like it would last forever. Every now and then someone would rattle the door, as the regulars who couldn’t believe I would shut the door came calling. A few times the phone rang, and I knew that had to be some right thirsty boys indeed who’d go home to look the number up to see if they could rouse me. But none of the noise bothered us at all, except once, later on after the sun set and there wasn’t any light but the orange glow of the Budweiser clock over the bar. A noise like a long loud rip of fabric went by. It was the sound of a motorcycle, something chopped and mufflerless. At that, Jolene stiffened under me like a deer who hears the step of a clumsy hunter. But then it passed and faded and after a few seconds she unlocked her joints and turned back to the slippery slick she-devil. Where there’d been fear in her eyes, I only saw thunder.

So we talked and then we’d wrestle some more, and then talk again. She told me about growing up in Georgia, about how her grandmother was an honest-to-God dirt eater who’d scoop soil off the ground and pop it in her mouth, embarrassing Jolene something proper. She told me about how football was king then and how she’d put her prom dress on layaway. She told me more than that and I noticed that none of her stories ever

reached up into the past few years. What had happened to her since that prom stayed a mystery.

I talked too, and if she really listened, she might have noticed that I did just the opposite. Everything I told her was in the now, ever since I opened Jackie Blue's. Mostly stories about what the drunks did, like the time Mad Dog McClure opened up Mike Lewis's head with a claw hammer not a foot from where we now lay. Stories about bad men, but I didn't delve back into the dark days, back when I was bad myself.

So when we talked we kept our secrets. But when we wasn't talking, there weren't no lies between us, and she saw me for who I used to be – a dangerous man. And I saw her in danger. So much danger. I got it in my head that maybe I was the man to get her out, and then I thought maybe that's just what she wanted me to think.

We slept on a bed of our clothes and woke around dawn, to the song of songbirds outside. It was a sound that didn't fit in Jackie Blue's any more than if you heard Lynyrd Skynyrd coming out of the treetops. God, she still looked good in that morning light, and let me tell you: that was a thing I wasn't used to anymore. A man who owns himself a bar don't hardly ever need to go to bed alone, but what you wake up with is usually a poisoned head and possum bait smiling next to you, the kind you'd chew your arm off to get away from. But not her. I stared at her until my old eyes started to burn and then I took some time to look at me instead. The fur on my chest and belly had all faded from black to gray over the last few years, like I'd spent the time soaking in hot water and the ink had leached on out. The gut had gotten bigger, but I hadn't gone soft. No, not yet. I still had some pretty good muscle, hauling kegs and tossing drunks. And under the faded India ink tattoos on my forearm, I still had some ropes of muscle. Maybe I wasn't just Jackie the bartender yet. Maybe there was still some Jackie Blue underneath ready to bark at the moon.

She turned herself over, blinking in the sunlight, just as I was finishing pulled on my old leather boots.

"Good morning, cowboy," she said, not bothering to cover herself in the daylight. "Sorry to see you've already got yourself dressed. A lot of effort for nothing, if you ask me."

"Protein," I said. "This old goat needs protein if he's planning on walking, much less working, today. There's a diner down a block, should be opening about now. How do you like your eggs?"

She sat up and hugged herself, as if all the sudden she knew she was naked. Then she slipped that mask back on and leaned back to show herself, pale skin against the leather pants beneath her.

"I'll put you to work, Daddy," she said. "All you need is a little bit of that popcorn and a belt of brown stuff to get you back in the saddle. What do you say?"

Lord, even after the night she'd gave me there was something in me kicking its heels up for more. But I picked up my keys, partways because I truly needed some grub, and partways to force her hand. It was time to get some truth from the little lady.

"Over easy suit you?" I jingled my keys at her.

“Don’t go.” See, there was some of that honesty she showed me on the floor last night.

“Why not?”

She hugged herself tight again. “I need you. I need shelter, don’t you see?”

“You hiding from a man?”

She laughed. “I suppose you could say it that way. I prefer calling him a low-down son of a bitch.”

“And what’s this son of a bitch want with a pretty little lady like yourself?”

“Can’t you guess it?” She stood up in all her glory. “The dummy thinks we’re still in love.”

It’s a story I can believe.

That don’t mean I do, just yet.

“This dude got a name?”

“Cole.”

“Cole? Just plain old Cole? Like Slash?”

“That’s all I know to call him.”

“That’s all you know? And you’re his woman?”

“Was. As of last night, I’m all my own again.”

She’d met him in Tulsa, she said, and picked up with him and his boys. Bikers – called themselves the Sloppy Satans. That name meant something to me from stories I’d heard from some of my meaner customers. Oklahoma boys, I told her, who moved some Nazi dope up and down I-44.

“Cole weren’t a Nazi,” she said. “No more than anybody else, anyway.”

I shook my head.

“I’m not saying the boys are Nazis. The dope is. You ain’t never heard of Nazi meth?”

She shook her head.

“Some good old boy from around these parts, around twenty years ago, he went over to the library over at Missouri State - they called it SMSU back then - and found the recipe that the Nazis had for cooking up amphetamines back in World War II. It’s the premier recipe for Ozarks meth. Our little contribution to that world.”

She nodded, like something in her head just clicked. She pulled her purse close to her and then stood up to pull on her leather pants. It pained me to see her do it, even if it was fun to watch.

“I don’t know from Nazi dope,” she said. “What I do know, is I’ll take a whole lot off lip of a man if he’s as much fun as Cole was, but I’ll be damned if I’ll let him put his hands on me. Last night, Cole had a little bike trouble, the ride had gotten real bumpy. We were all pulled over on the side of the exit, just where the highway is up the road?”

I nodded to let her know I knew where she meant. That was only a quarter mile from here.

“Well, I asked Cole when we’d be heading back to Oklahoma. Now, I’d ridden with him long enough that I came in a weak second place, if that, to that bike of his. But I guess I never saw it in him to smack me around like that.”

She touched the side of her face, turning it towards me to examine. It looked flawless to me.

“And that was that, huh?”

She purred a laugh.

“I jumped the guard rail and marched through a couple of yards and then saw your place. I grabbed that there barstool and figured I’d start up a new life right then and there.”

“Is that what you figured? You didn’t walk into here like a woman on the run. You walked in like a goddamn cannonball.”

She smiled. “Ain’t you ever cut free of something and it made you feel wild?”

Not for a while, would be the truth of it. Not since I walked out of the life and into this bar. But the way she said it, and the way she looked, made me think that maybe I could do it again.

“Think that motorcycle man is looking for you? That why you don’t want for me to leave?”

She stepped closer, put a hand on my arm. The whiteness of her made my skin look dirty.

“You ever dump a mean son of a bitch?”

I pushed her hand away and grabbed onto the bar.

“Is he coming? Is that why you’re here?”

“I figured if he was coming, he’d come right away. It wasn’t until I thought it was safe that I made my move with you. You see?”

I did. I saw that Jackie Blue’s was on a back road, and while it might be the first place you’d find on foot, it’d be real easy to miss from the road, especially if Springfield weren’t your town. And I saw that she knew that, and that she hadn’t given that fellow near enough time to give up on her before the two of us got busy. But I also saw that it’d been near fifteen hours since she came through the door, and even as fine as she was, fifteen hours is longer than a man could look for a woman with his buddies in tow.

“If he were coming, he’d a been here by now,” I said. “So there ain’t no harm in me running to get us some breakfast. You can keep laying low here, and then the two of us can sit and figure out what the next part of your grand adventure is going to be once you leave here.”

“That’s what you want?”

I wanted to run across the room and mash myself to her. I wanted to sell the bar and buy a bike and see how far across the planet the money could get us. I wanted to shave the gray out of my hair and step back into my old boots and stomp and steal for enough money for us to last forever.

“Yeah,” I told her. “That’s what I want.”

I drove over to Aunt Martha’s Pancake House and ordered up a couple of stacks to go. I picked up a *News-Leader* and took a seat, turning straight to the editorial page to read the letters from the loonies. There was one about how abortion stops a beating heart, one about how the school board was trying to teach kids evolution, or, as the letter put it, “from goo to you via the zoo.” The last letter was about how the ten commandments needed to be posted up in every school. All three quoted the Bible in the first paragraph.

I love living in the Ozarks.

“Jackie?”

I looked up and there was Pinkle. Don Pinkle, that is, looking every bit the methed-out redneck that he was. He stood there Nazi-dope skinny with a sad, scraggly goatee and bags under his eyes that looked like full-grown slugs. If he'd slept in forty-eight hours, it had been forty-eight hours ago. He flashed me a smile, but that isn't the right word, because there wasn't nothing flashing in that brown meth mouth of his, just teeth, yellow and orange and brown like dry dog food. He came by the bar some nights with some of the boys, every once in a while getting on a rebar crew to earn an honest dollar – which must have felt lonely and out of place in his vinyl and velcro wallet. He never tipped on a drink, not once.

“Pinkle,” I said like it was the whole conversation, and tried to get back to my newspaper. But he wasn't having it.

“Went by the bar last night.”

“Did you now?”

“Wasn't open.”

I dropped the paper, seeing as it was clear he wasn't going away.

“Now, Pinkle, don't you think I know that?”

“Knocked on the door and everything.”

“Well, trust in your senses, boy. We were closed.”

“Thought I heard something,” he said, scratching a scratched-up face. His nostrils stood out blood red and ragged against the trout belly of his skin. “That's why I knocked, see? But nobody answered.”

“Hear voices? You? You can't tell me that hearin' voices is some sort of strange occurrence in your life, the shit you've got floating in that lump of gristle you probably call a head. I bet it sounds like happy hour in there most times.”

“I thought maybe you were in there with someone, is all,” he said, trying to give me a saucy look. “Ain't nothing to it but to do it, right?”

I stood up fast and took pleasure in how he scurried back a few steps. Sometimes folks forget just how big I am, or what I used to be able to do. Sometimes I forget myself.

“And I thought,” I said, “that what I do in there or don't do is exactly one-hundred-percent none of your goddamn business. Care to tell me how I got so misled about that?”

Just then a waitress called out, saying Pinkle's food was ready and that mine was getting bagged up.

“That's a whole lot of food for a body,” he said, looking at my order. “Got yourself a tapeworm?”

“Got something to plug that hole I'm getting ready to stomp into your head?” I asked back.

“Not meaning to aggravate you,” he said, holding up his palms.

So I took a few deep breaths and just told myself that the dumb twiddlepatted motherfucker is too stupid to barely breathe, much less know when to leave well enough alone.

I was wrong, it turns out. Pinkle really is stupid, just not as stupid as I gave him credit for. Not that I figured it out by his next move, which was to try to pay for his breakfast with a hundred dollar bill. It was early yet and of course the joint couldn't

handle that, so I groaned and paid for his while mine was still being put together. I didn't even ask where he'd gotten the hundred. I didn't want to know.

"Could you throw in a dollar extra?" he asked me with a sheepish grin. "I need me some quarters."

"You need to be laying off that dope," I told him, but pushed the quarters across anyway. "And you need to not think about setting foot in Jackie Blue's until you're ready to pay me back, hear?"

He grabbed his food and hotfooted out the door. I went back to the waitress, who was kind of cute, and gave her a wink. Well, the goat had really woke up, hadn't he?

"Some dude, huh?"

"Yeah, people suck," she said. "Bank on it."

"Rosy disposition." God, I wish I knew what it was about girls with too much eyeliner and a bad attitude that got to me. Then I thought of Jolene grabbing the brass pole that ran under the bar and I knew that I was good to go again.

"Mister," she said, pushing my bag of food over to me. "Work the night shift at a diner some time, and then you can tell me about how great people are. Especially people like that one."

I was about to tell her about how I worked a bar and knew how people could be, when it struck me that there was something strange in the way she'd said "like that one." She stressed the *that* like she could still see him, so I turned around, and there he was at the gas station across the street, jabbering into a payphone. I didn't like that. And then I remembered that hundred-dollar bill, and I liked it all even less. There was plenty of ways that a man like Pinkle could get some cash money, none of them nice. But to have a fresh hundred to spend on breakfast at the end of a binge, that didn't set right. It was probably nothing, I thought, but decided I'd walk over there and see what he had to say. And then he looked up and saw me crossing the street and dropped the phone. A piece of paper fluttered to the ground in his wake.

A big semi rolled past the road the road and by the time it passed, Pinkle had a good head start. Besides, I wasn't going to win no footrace with a methhead. I stopped at the phone and picked up the paper scrap. Then I dropped the breakfast. There was an out-of-town phone number scrawled on it, with one word under it, and that word was 'Cole'.

The chopper was a beauty, all silver fire and wheels. It slouched in front of the front door of Jackie Blue's, which hung open. The wood around the doorknob was splintered like someone had kicked it open. He couldn't have been there long - less than ten minutes had passed since Pinkle made his call. In fact, when I climbed out of the truck I could still hear the bike's engine ticking. Then that sound was ripped out of my ears by a scream coming out the door. I ran inside, my fists balled at my sides, hoping he didn't have a gun.

He probably had a gun.

The insides of the bar looked like someone had picked the whole place up, turned it upside down and given it a shake. The register was popped open and the cash drawer hung crookedly out, the shelf lifted to search out the underneath. Bottles had been

shoved off the shelf, some of them breaking on the floor. A cloud of booze stung my eyes and plugged my nose. All this came to me out of the sides of my mind. Right there in the foreground was a big old boy with a arm inked with jailhouse tats he had wrapped around Jolene's throat. His other hand muffled the screams with his palm. Jolene's eyes bulged out over his hand, and her own hands didn't fight his but instead clutched her black leather purse.

"Just stand back there, Pops," he said with an Oklahoma twang. "Just keep a cool head and we can all walk out of this."

"Funny words coming from a man just trashed my bar."

He barked a little laugh at that.

"Brother," he said, "I just got here. This little bitch," he gave her a shake for emphasis, "is the fucking source of all our troubles, yours and mine. I don't know how she's been playing you, but if I had to guess, I think I could. I know how she suckered me."

He took his arm away from her throat and cupped the crotch of her leather pants. She tried to say something through his other hand, but it kept it muffled.

"Played me but good, brother, and now she's playing you. When I came through that door she'd done cleaned your register out."

I took a step forward. The place was cleaned out, all right.

"You really Jackie Blue?"

For the first time in a long time, I said yes.

He shook his head sort of sad like. "Well, that's what I get for opening my big fat mouth. I done told this cooze enough stories about Jackie Blue back in the day to fill her head with 'em. See, my pops used to ride through here, and he always told me that back then the hardest man in the hills were Jackie Blue. And so when we'd ride by, I'd always have to tell this bitch here about it. I guess I might have oversold you and made Jolene here get some mighty bad ideas."

She tried to shake her head, but I could see it was true – she'd known just who I was the moment she'd walked through the door. Makes sense. Lucky is just what you call someone who you don't know how smart they are.

"That may be, son, but still all the same, if a gal wants to take her leave of you, it's best to let 'em go without a fuss. What do you say?"

He laughed and yanked Jolene's purse out of her hands. He shook it and it dumped out on the floor. First out came all my money that she stole and then came pinkish white bricks, one two three.

"Brother," he said as I watched the Nazi dope pile on the floor, "it ain't the leaving so much as the stealing that bothers me."

Well, damn.

"All right," I said. "I see it now. She done played you and then she played me. Figures. So you take what's yours and get on out and we'll call it a day. How's that sound?"

"Sounds fine," he said, then turned to the woman. "Scoop that shit up – leave Jackie Blue's money – and let's get going. Let you have one last ride before you get yours."

"No," I said. "You misunderstand me. The lady stays."

He looked at me like I gone plumb crazy. “Jackie, I know she’s got a snatch like hot butter, but come on – this bitch is pure poison. You can’t want her to stick around after she tried to rob the both of us.”

“That’s so. But as much as I might like to see it, I can’t let you hurt her. See, even if it was partway, or even in total a lie, that girl made me wake up last night – she made me see who I am. And no woman under the protection of Jackie Blue is going to get dragged off and dealt with by no biker piece of shit like you.

The fear hit his eyes and I thought it was going to be easy, but then it went away. At first I wasn’t sure why, but it’s that his young ears heard them before mine did – the sound of a group of motorcycles rolling down the road.

“Now, Jackie, I got all sorts of respect for you, but I got to think of my own image too. Can’t let my boys think I got taken by a slut and a geezer.”

He reached behind him and pulled a little flat pistol. He moved the girl in front of him, as a shield like. His boys were rolling into the lot – I had about fifteen seconds to make this right.

I walked in, stepping to the right, putting Jolene totally between us. That suited him fine, he thinks, as I’m not going to hurt the woman. But also it meant he can’t see me to shoot me. I took Jolene’s head in my hands – our eyes met and I laughed – then I slammed her skull straight back into Cole’s nose. He dropped and just for a second I stood holding Jolene by the head like I was getting ready to lay a Hollywood kiss on her.

But instead I tossed her to the side so I could stomp Cole while he’s down. Three times did nicely. Then I picked up the pistol with my right and his shaggy greasy hair with my left and I dragged him to the door, just in time for his three buddies to come to full stops on their bikes. The dust swirled up and their engines roared and I stepped into the storm of it all dragging Cole behind me.

By God, I felt good.

“Welcome to Jackie Blue’s,” I said.

Jordan Harper is a Missouri-born writer currently living in Brooklyn. This is his fourth story for Thug Lit. His story "Johnny Cash is Dead" was nominated for a Derringer, selected as a notable short story by The Million Writers Award and will appear in The Best of Thug Lit Vol. 1. His story "Like Riding a Moped" was selected as a notable story by The Million Writer's Award and will appear in The Best of Thug Lit Vol. 2. He also writes movie and music reviews for the Village Voice chain. He's recently completed his first novel. He could use an agent, don't ya think?