

PROLOGUE

So the fat guy was buying him a frank. Lookatit! Sleek and sweet, plucked from the steaming water.

And the Greek was just pouring on trimmings. Good trimmings. And plenty. Mustard, kraut.

“Put on more,” the fat guy must’ve said. Me, I didn’t hear him. He was just shiny shoes, pants, this leather case that he put down beside him. And the frank. Every corpuscle was yearning to that soft bun. I was so hungry my stomach was climbing out of my throat.

More mustard. More kraut.

Some kraut slid off, hit the ground. I kid you not, I fell to my knees, licked it right off the concrete. It was a little bit too salty. I wished there was more.

Did that fat guy show me compassion? Did he throw me a nickel? Did he throw me the hot dog?

No! He kicked me! His shiny toe a sudden shock to the ribcage. So I grabbed his leather case and I ran.

So he was yelling. The Greek was yelling. A couple of cops, they joined in yelling. And the whole bunch of them, they was running, too. They chased me down the block. But I was little, I was fast and I figured, hey, I’m home free. And then I made the corner and there was Skinny Pete and his friends beating on some guy.

WANDERING BOY

And Pete had it in his head I owed him some dough. How could I owe him dough? I never had dough. But I was holding that case and it looked like pure profit. So now Pete and his friends were chasing me too.

And the cops weren't dumb. They split up so half was coming at me down one side of the block, half was coming up the other. But there was this alley: two buildings not quite making it together. I slid in that slot, bad penny. Down I went.

It was a long long alley. I had plenty of time to think which was not my normal occupation and so I didn't. I was 15 and I was hungry. It was 1927. Good year for some. Charles Lindbergh had just flown the Atlantic. Babe Ruth was working his way up to hitting sixty home runs for the Yankees. Al Capone was running Chicago. I was... well, you might have noticed... I was just running... I had half of Manhattan now on my tail.

And then way at the end of the alley there was a car. Nice car. Bunch of boxes up on the roof like it was moving day. Back door open. A Geezer giving me the hurry-up wave. I hurried-up. I dove right in. Geezer slid in after me. Shut the door. We were off down the street. We were out of there!

I looked out the back window. If I could've breathed I'd have laughed. Cops and Pete and the guys jammed up into each other, looking after me. And some other guy with a suitcase running up and looking kind of sad.

Where was I going? I had no idea. But opportunity knocked and I jumped. I jumped blind but willing.

That's pretty much been the story of my life.

THE STORY OF MY LIFE

I'd never been out of the city. I'd been to the shore. I'd jounced on the 5th Avenue El clear out to Coney Island. I'd seen the waves punching and clawing and climbing over each other, just to be the first to smash their brains out on the sand; and then sliding away beat but never defeated, coming right back for another try.

They reminded me of me.

This place. This place reminded me of nothing. It was so incredibly... still. One single bug was singing. Or maybe it was crying. And that's all the sound there was in the world. It made my head feel hollow like all the yelling and rattling cans and sirens had somehow fallen out of it. Or like I'd fallen out of it into the empty sky.

Only this sky was green. A green that punched you in the eye. Herbaceous. I found that word in a book once. I have no idea what I was doing in that book but anyhow "herbaceous" was in there, too, and when I saw it, it brought me right back to that first day. That first day on the road with Mr. Peer and Mr. Eckhart. Eck was the Geezer who let me in the car. The car was Mr. Peer's. And as we pissed in the waist-high grass that wasn't New York brown but so incredibly herbaceous, they were still under the impression I was that sad fellow who showed up too late.

Mr. Peer said, "You're really eighteen?"

"Yeah," I said.

"You don't look eighteen," Eck said.

"Well, if you're chronologically speaking...." I was in mid-stream. It wasn't like I could run.

"I thought Phillie said he was eighteen." Mr. Peer sent this over my head to Eck. This was easy because I was short; I hadn't got my growth yet. I was starting to wonder if I ever would. Does eating kraut off a sidewalk stunt your growth? Starvation definitely puts a crimp in it. Crimped my sister Lily so much she died. Well, she was in a hole now and I was here. And suddenly Here had a wind and I was busy just trying to keep my shoes from being spattered. Eck looked none too happy, though about the risk of spatter or me, I wasn't sure...

I bet his bladder was relieved. We had been in that car a very long time. We were all, in fact, still pissing. We were standing there pissing like three rubber-bladdered horses. But Mr. Peer's tie was still perfectly tied.

"Phillie said he was a whiz," said Eck.

"I wouldn't go so far as that," I said.

"I like modesty," said Mr. Peer. "Modesty is becoming."

"As a matter of fact..." I started but Eck broke in, his mouth in a twist. I was surprised the man could be so sour. Me, I empty out, I have to feel happy.

"It's going to be a business of the young," Eck said.

"You don't know how lucky you are..." Mr. Peer was suddenly all excited.

"Oh, yeah. I do." Their car hadn't been right there, I'd a been pinched.

"...coming along just as it's finally made its leap to perfection!"

"Yeah. What has?" I was pretty sure I'd leaped alone.

"Our business," said Mr. Peer. "The recording business. Electrical styli. Electrical *amplifiers*." His voice went way

up. This was a BIG DEAL. I wish I had some idea what it was.

"Of course, I was young when I started, too." Eck was staking his claim. But all of a sudden Mr. Peer looked down at my privates. He kind of jumped. "Oh, my God!" he said.

Eck didn't notice or if he did he was more interested in telling his story. "You know how we did it then?"

I tried to button up quick. "Uh, no."

But Mr. Peer had fallen to his knees almost in my puddle. "Anita, the shovel!"

Okay, I was circumcised. My father was a drunk; my mother was a yid. It bothered some people a lot. But no one had ever tried to undo it with a round-point like Mrs. Peer was hauling fast out of the baggage. Eck grabbed me. This was gonna hurt.

"Look at this! Look at the sport on this Alba Plena!" And I suddenly realized Mr. Peer was fondling some flower.

Eck yanked me out of the way and took the shovel from Mrs. Peer and drew a circle, a perfect 360 around the flower. He was also drawing a circle in the past. "Twenty phonographs, their horns all pointing at the artist. And all connected to one crank I had to keep winding. I grew muscles fast, you bet."

He levered the plant out of the ground. "*You* are getting off easy."

Mr. Peer hugged his plant. I didn't know then, I know now it was a camellia. "But we can't count on the electricity. Not where we're bound."

"Where *are* we bound?" It seemed like it was high time I found out.

"Phillie didn't tell you?" Eck squinted.

"Uh no. Not a thing."

"I like that!" said Mr. Peer "I like that spirit of adventure...! We are going to Bristol, Virginia."

And Eck, being Eck, had to get in the last word. "To Bristol, Tennessee."

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Explanation: Bristol's main street forms the state line between Tennessee and Virginia. So the city technically belongs to them both. Compared to what else was around there, I guess it must have been considered a real big city. Compared to Manhattan, however, it was spit. Okay, the streets were paved. And down the middle of State Street there was a white line like in most places is to keep the cars going one way from crashing into the other. In this place, it was to keep you from accidentally driving from Virginia into Tennessee.

We did it on purpose, crossed to Tennessee, drove up to this building said Taylor-Christian Hat Company on its high side. High in Bristol being three stories max. Course that was high enough when you were hauling stuff up and this stuff was heavy. It was now a miracle to me that car had moved.

I barely could. Those stairs were steep and Eck refused to use the elevator. "The electric is unsound," he said. "We might get stuck."

But there was no "we" and every stretched-out muscle in my body knew it. I was hauling and Eck was upstairs comfortably arranging. Unpacking those boxes beneath shelves still filled with wooden heads for hats. It gave me a turn at first, those rows of bodiless gentlemen watching me. But then I realized that was Mr. Ralph Peer's genius. He had provided an audience for the folks he was bringing in.

Explanation: All the previous week, ads had run in the two Bristol papers. The Victor Talking Machine Company was coming to record. What I'd got involved in, turned out, was a hunt for singing hillbillies. Mr. Peer planned to make

his dough by sewing up the copyrights. Though what hillbillies and copyrights were I wasn't sure.

So he was upstairs talking to singers and Eck was putting all his strange stuff together and I was stumbling up and down, up and down, up and down those steep stairs and I really didn't want to do it anymore. But just as I was ready to bolt, I thought of the dinner and the breakfast I'd been fed and I didn't even have to steal them. The first sit-down peaceful meals I could ever remember. So I went back for another load. I figured if I played this right it could be my last load. It didn't seem like there was too much left. So I just piled all it on, meanwhile thinking it had been a real long time since breakfast and trying out ways of bringing that up.

And then I backed to the door and I realized I had a problem, actually I had two problems: the load was too heavy and the door was stuck. It was one of those moments. Upstairs I could hear some fiddler plucking out a melody. And down on the street, my breath had gone loud like I was rasping out some song. I was probably yelling, "Help. Help," but in truth I don't really remember. All I knew I was going down and all that heavy stuff was going down on top of me and I was pretty sure I was going to be dead.

And then a hand reached out and plucked off the top box. Did I mention it was toppling? Steadied the rest and opened up that door. And that's how I met Maybelle Carter. She was 8 months pregnant and a slip of a woman but she was sturdy. And that made all the difference in the world.

She just trotted easy up those stairs, my box in one hand, her L-5 Gibson in the other and I somehow staggered up behind. But before I turned, I saw out on State Street an old Essex tied up to a hitching post and three other Carters pulling out more instruments. The men were in overalls and Sara was in a long dress with flowers;

and they'd been patching tires and wading rivers in those clothes. They looked as poor as I felt but it was a different kind of poor. It was a *proud* poor. It owned the ground it stood on. And I was a boy with the taste of sidewalk on my teeth.

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They were playing a song by the time I got upstairs. "Keep on the Sunny Side". I know that now. I also know now that Maybelle was playing it upside down, plucking out melody with her thumb, scratching out the rhythm with her fingers. But she didn't know better and neither did I. I just thought she was playing as good as any *two* men. And I wanted to show bad I was good at something, too.

Unfortunately, I didn't have any earthly idea what I was doing. "Come over here," yelled Eck, "And hook these up!" And he unleashed an armload of wires from the top of this tall tower-and-weights thing he'd been constructing, like he was starting the Woolworth Building right there on the floor.

It was six feet high if it was one. He was way up there and those wires were fairly plummeting. Each one of them was as thick as my wrist. And eye-hand coordination was never my strong point. I was always the last one picked for stickball. So I just ducked. Put my hands over my head and cowered. And Maybelle laughed. I could hear her above the crash. Mr. Peer looked over annoyed but Eck just grinned and I realized he was trying to kill me. And I still hadn't had a bit of lunch.

"Plug in the disk cutter first!" So I picked up one wire.

"Not *that* wire! I thought you were a whiz at this electric!"

"I thought electric come out of the wall." I was miffed. There was a perfectly good socket he was ignoring.

"I told you the electric here wasn't sound. We need it steady to cut a decent master." He clambered down from the tower, putting on disgust. "Boy, you can take the feller out of Manhattan, but you can't take Manhattan... Well, at least try out the phones. See if they'll work."

"Sure, boss." I looked around fast. Maybelle was watching even as she was playing. But Alex Bell's invention was nowhere to be found. And he'd said 'phones'. I'm sure he said phones. "Uh, how many you want?"

"Might as well check all three."

Three. Three was the clue. There was one light-buzzer contraption; one turntable; two suitcase-y looking things I found out later were vacuum tube amplifiers; some sort of panel thing with five or seven dials, a cutting stylus, two ice chests, a heating cabinet... and one, two, three tripod-like affairs with tobacco tins on 'em. I grabbed 'em up. "I got 'em!" I said.

And looking closer, I saw two wires coming off of each of them. I figured checking didn't require the electric to be sound. I grabbed the wires and jabbed one into each of the socket holes. There was surge of white light and a yell and some sort of loud explosion. I think what was yelling and exploding was me.

I flew across the room and crashed hard into the far wall. The blankets hung there to muffle the street noise came down on me in a heap. They made it hard to breathe but I'm pretty sure I wasn't breathing anyhow. After a while, Eck yanked off the blankets and jerked me to my feet. It was a life-saving gesture though not endorsed by the Red Cross I don't imagine. It got me inhaling and for that I owe Eck thanks. The man just stared at me, ecstatic. "You don't know shit, do you?"

"Not yet," I said. "But I'm a real fast learn." He let go of me and I fell. I couldn't feel my legs and my head was pounding. Two or three of Mr. Peer suddenly appeared.

"Eck, is there a problem?"

“Just a little reverse in the power. We can handle it.”

“Well, good. But hurry up. I want to record this Carter Family right away.” And then his gaze kind of settled down on me. His voice got low. “And boys, freshen up. We are promising these folks a shot at the high life.”

He whipped out a hand mirror and combed his already perfect hair. In the mirror’s shiny back I got a good look at my self. I was black from head to toe. I looked like a well-roasted chestnut, the kind that burned my fingers when I stole them on the Bowery. Eck opened his valise and pulled out a coat. It had seen some use but it was clean. What was I supposed to wear? I hadn’t exactly packed for this adventure. And then I remembered the case. The salesman’s case that had got me run out of Manhattan. I crawled over to where I’d left it and opened it a little. Maybe there was a coat, or a sandwich, inside.

There were ribbons. Dozens and dozens and dozens of ribbons. All color ribbons in velvet and silk. I could have robbed a guy that peddled diamonds; I got a guy that peddled hair bows. I closed that case quick before Eck could see inside and confirm his bad impression. I tried to wipe off the soot but it wasn’t ready to go. So I was dirty and hungry and far from home because of some useless strips of nothing. I guess I looked pretty sad. Wouldn’t you?

Then I saw Maybelle looking at me and that made me feel even lower. And then she picked up her Gibson and began to play. And Sara -- hearing the chords -- began to sing. She sang in a voice that was high and flat and tight as the ridge that they came from, the vowels twisted in ways I didn’t know vowels could go. She sang about the cold world and a child wandering homeless in it. A child so sad and lonely with no one to help him out. She sang “Wandering Boy”. And when I heard it, I felt... what? I felt I was understood for the first time. And I have to tell you, that felt good.

I even liked the chorus: a mother begging for her long lost son to be returned to her. For the length of it, I could forget my mother wasn’t waiting for me at all. She died the day after Lily was born. I was only four myself but somehow the care of the little pink and skinny thing came down to me. I did the best I could. I really did. I raised her up so she was walking and then she was talking. And then she began to run and sing. She was a pretty child. Since I wasn’t good looking and my father was ugly, I’m not sure how she came by that. My mother might have been pretty but I don’t remember her. I do remember Lily. She had dark curls and dark eyes and wide round cheeks and such a smile. It reminded me of the way I felt each dark November when Macy’s Christmas windows first lit up. She was even smiling when she died. And holding my hand. And saying my name. Now I hate to hear people say it.

“Mickey,” she said and she was gone.

The nurse down at Bellevue said it was the Spanish flu that took her. But I think if my father hadn’t drunk off all our money she might have had the strength in her to fight. I was eight by then and grief lodged in me so deep I couldn’t swallow. My father didn’t notice. He did plenty for us both.

I suppose it was at that point that I lost anything I’d ever known of hopefulness. It didn’t seem much use to such as me. But Maybelle’s song planted a seed. And when I went out the next day to take a closer look at this strange city belonging to two states, that little seed began to grow.

Bristol was jam-packed with people bustling and buying. Though they were polite enough about not stomping all over your feet. The sky was right there, high and wide and blue and open. These folks had room for their souls to breathe.

Cars were parked up and down the street. Mostly Chevrolets in a Joseph’s coat of colors and Henry Ford’s

plain-black Model Ts. I was sad to note the Essex gone but the Carters'd cut their sides and left and I figured I would never see them again in this lifetime. I took some comfort in knowing that their "Wandering Boy" was down on wax.

I headed past a sign that said EAT. My stomach grumbled at passing it by it but Mr. Peer hadn't yet said a word to me about money and I didn't believe it was some sort of invitation. Then I went back and looked in at the window to be sure. No, no one inside was giving away sandwiches. No one was even exchanging them for bows.

The next building said GAS & ELECTRIC in flashing neon letters jutting four stories above me. And something in me leapt up at its pride. At announcing in lights what we took so for granted in Manhattan... even if they couldn't quite get it steady yet.

And then I was at the station. Or as they called it there, the Depot. All pressed brick and limestone and windows gleaming like happy eyes. Lots of people were coming out and looking around with fiddles and guitars and such-like. I figured we'd have a busy afternoon. And then I heard my song. It was coming from down around a corner. I thought maybe Maybelle and the others were down there, too.

So I hurried a little and turned... and found myself in a different Bristol entirely. I'd found the folks with no automobiles and no tickets for the train. They'd come by horse and buggy and had been herded off to where they wouldn't be an embarrassment. They had worn-out faces and worn-out clothes. Even their horses were worn and their heads hung down tired in their feedbags, like they'd given up all belief they'd ever eat again. And in the midst of them was the most beautiful girl I had ever seen, ever seen in my lifetime. And she was singing "Wandering Boy".

Explanation: So he could get copyrights, Mr. Peer wanted the songs he recorded to be new and original. But what was new and original to him might not be new in Tennessee. "Wandering Boy", for example, had actually

been written in 1894 by R.S. Hanna. It had been sung in all the hollers for 33 years. The Carter Family weren't even the first to record it commercially. That honor went to Da Costa Woltz's Southern Broadcasters who had got it down on wax a couple of months before. Still A.P. said he had authored it and Mr. Peer was pleased to file the copyright and Peer Music controls the royalties to this day.

At the time, however, I knew none of this. All I knew is that some golden-haired angel was singing Maybelle's song to me. Her voice reached out and took my heart. She was really just a child... maybe twelve... and I know what you're thinking: that that would have been Lily's age had she survived the influenza. But Lily died when she was four and to me she would always be a four-year-old. This girl spoke to me of the man I would become.

She stood in a little space, dancing to her own music. She seemed oblivious to the chaos all around: the crying babies, the hollering men, the shuffling, the plucking, the whinnying, the stomping. She just danced in her little space and sang. She was barefoot and her dress was so thin with washings I would have averted my eyes had I been able. But they were attached to her by a force that made me weak. The sun caught her hair and surrounded her with a golden... well, a golden nimbus. When I thought of that moment later, I always thought "nimbus" but at the time I'm sure I only managed "cloud". Or maybe it was just my eyes that dressed her in that radiance. I know I was blinded. I'd never stopped walking and I would have gone on and crashed right into her. I was only arrested by a hand landing on my shoulder like the hand of God. I looked. The man was so tall he held me fast while still sitting.

"Boy," he said and it wasn't a question. His name was Parnell Valentine and that was his daughter I'd almost run down.

“Um, I’m from Victor.” I choked. “I’m looking for talent for Mr. Ralph Peer.”

Parnell regarded me, then pulled a scrap of newsprint from his pocket.

“The Mr. Peer in this here paper?”

“Yes, sir.”

His wife looked up from something she was mending and studied me. I tried to look tall. I tried to look eighteen.

She said, “Don’t this Mr. Peer feed you? You’re all skin and bones.”

“No, ma’am, he don’t. I guess he’s too busy.”

She looked sad. From that single look, I would have adopted her. She said, “Ida, give the boy some pie.”

And my golden angel stopped dancing and looked at me. Her name was Ida! Then she cut me a slab of pie and put it in my hands. It might have been a coal pie. Or a horseshoe pie. It didn’t matter. I could barely hold it. Because that would have meant folding my fingers away from hers.

“You must be starving! Look at you shake.”

“Ida.” I whispered. “Ida dream someday I’d find you.”

“You never knew me to lose me.” She smiled but she was whispering back.

“Doesn’t matter in dreams,” I said.

Parnell said, “Says here the Carters earned \$200 in one day...”

“Yes, sir. We’re paying fifty dollars a song. Plus two and a half cents royalty per record.” Didn’t I sound eighteen?

“It’s Satan’s wages,” said Parnell. “But the Lord has turned his back on us, looks like.” And then he stood up. Not happy. “Where do we go to sing?”

* * * *

So I took them upstairs to Mr. Peer and he told them to come back first thing on our last day and from that point on I was just useless though I admit I hadn’t been all that useful from the start. I was afraid it was too long to wait and Parnell would take them home and I would never again see my Ida. And when the long day was done, I ran back to the sad street and sure enough they had vanished, and their horse and wagon, too. Another family was there, cracking nuts and playing on accordions, and I threw up my hard-earned dinner on my feet. And when I lay down that night to sleep, with Eck snoring away, his mouth doing bass and his nostrils doing harmony, I felt this enormous emptiness within me, like I’d somehow swallowed love and it had eaten me up inside.

But then morning came, as mornings do, and one of our acts mentioned that once they were “booked” a lot of them went and camped in the valley a few miles out of Bristol, needing the grazing for their horses and the greenness for their minds. And I somehow knew Ida was there. And sure enough, Wednesday came and she walked in, in that same dress I couldn’t bear to look at head on and I climbed Eck’s tower and hauled up his cuckoo clock weights like they were light as air.

They were for driving the turntable. I guess I should have explained that already. They did it simply by falling down. It was a mystery to me how that was steadier than electric but Eck said that gravity hadn’t failed him yet. Plus it had the help of some belts and some toothy wheels. Eck called them the mechanical governor. I thought he was casting aspersions on the guy who ran the state. He was casting aspersions on me, showing how little I knew about the recording business. But I knew so little, I didn’t even know that.

Once the weights were hauled I raced into the bathroom where Eck had stashed all the apparatus: the amps on the sink, the turntable in the tub. My job was to sit on the toilet, which was the only unused spot in the whole space, and press the light and buzzer that told 'em to start and stop.

A smart dog could have done that but Ida didn't know it and I felt myself walking inches off the floor with pride.

Her whole family played an assortment of instruments, probably a few too many for only three microphones, and Ida my golden darling sang. My heart swelled up with joy. I was floating so on the song I almost missed the end of it. Then I pressed the buzzer contraption as Eck lifted the stylus on the cutter. He handed me the master and I put it on ice. Had to do that fast. It was so hot in there I felt like my teeth were melting. And wax masters were a lot softer than teeth. Then I rushed out but the Valentines were already packed up and leaving. My heart, wanting to stop them, jumped right between my teeth.

"Ida!" I gasped. She turned and looked back. "I..." but what I could I say? Parnell would never let me take her away with me. And I knew I didn't want to go with him. And then I had a thought. "I've got something I want to give to you."

I ran and got that case. Ida came and looked. They all came and looked. They had probably never seen so many colors of ribbon.

"It would please me to know you're wearing 'em in your hair. I mean, you're pretty enough without. But I thought... well, I thought maybe... maybe you'd like some." And Ida reached for them. She reached like some fairy tale princess about to take the golden apple. And then Parnell grabbed her and turned her to the door.

I don't know what my face did but my heart fell down at my feet and lay there pumping away my lifeblood. Oh God, it hurt. I'd forgotten how bad having a heart could be.

Mrs. Valentine touched me gently. "I don't think you should be giving such fine gifts to such a young girl."

"She just reminds me of my sister is all. My sister Lily. She died. She used to like bright ribbons." And to my absolute mortification, I began to cry.

I think the missus touched me again. I can't be sure because the tears were flowing so hard I couldn't see her. But I heard her say, "I'll let her have *one*." And Ida came back. She came back! And she stood beside me, her hand hovering over the ribbons, overwhelmed by choosing. And somehow I got my voice to working. "The blue would go nicely with your eyes." And she took the blue, not smiling, as though she understood this was Important.

"Thank you, sir," she said.

"Mickey," I said. "Mickey's my name."

"Thank you, Mickey."

"You're welcome, Ida."

And then, with a hard cough, Parnell dragged her out of there. Mr. Peer, checking his watch, accompanied them down the stairs. Parnell grilled him all the way. "How soon do we get our royalties?"

"Just as soon as the record begins to sell."

"It comes to the house?"

"If your mail comes to the house, that's where the check comes too."

Parnell and Ida disappeared through the door. I ran back into the bathroom and climbed up on the toilet. If I bent over the sink and stretched out a little there was small window gave a piece of a view onto the street.

I saw one of the boys had brought up the buggy and they were all taking off their shoes and their good clothes before climbing into it. And then suddenly Eck was bustling in and pulling something off the ice.

"Well, that was a waste of time. No way Victor is going to put out a record on a 12-year old." He handed me the wax disk. "Scrape and warm this again. Next guy's alone on

guitar. I gotta move the microphones.” At least, later on, that’s what he told me he said. At the time, all I heard was blah, blah, blah because I was watching Ida ride out of town in the buggy, getting smaller and smaller, her golden hair with a blue ribbon floating as she turned back to look for me. I was hoping she saw me wave.

And then suddenly there was a voice. “Feller said there was a toilet in here. You see a toilet? I just see a stepstool.” And I looked down into a thin face with a real big grin. I jumped off the toilet but the guy just stuck out his hand. “The name’s Rodgers. Jimmie.”

I shook it. But my mind was still on Ida. “Derow. Mickey,” I said.

“Derow’s an interesting first name. Your people French?” I knew he was teasing but it kind of snapped me back. And I suddenly discovered I had a wax disk in my hand. “What you got there?”

I truly didn’t know. And then on it, I saw the letters I’d scrawled. IV. “Must be the record we just cut. Gotta put ’em on ice to keep ’em from melting.”

I opened the chest and saw the disk on top wasn’t Ida’s and yet I distinctly remembered putting hers in. It must have jumped out to be with me. The magic of love made me giddy; but I stuck the disk down deep so it would get colder quick.

Jimmie laughed. “Must be some real hot songs.”

“Well, these are just wax,” I said. “We warm ’em up first so the needle cuts easy.” And I showed him the little glass cupboard that took up all the floor that the ice chest didn’t occupy. In it, a burning light bulb kept a blank master toasty. Jimmie pointed.

“You warming that up for me?”

I guess I am.”

“Can I see it?”

“Sure.” I removed it from the warmer and passed it over to him. He inspected it mystified.

“Nothing on it now.”

“No. But then you sing and your voice moves the diaphragm in the microphone... and that sends electric signals down the wire into the stylus... and that cuts a groove in that wax and then, hey presto, we’ve got that song forever more.

Jimmie was silent. “You sure know a lot for a little guy.”

“Amazing what a person can learn in twenty-four hours.”

“Well, you keep learning...”

And then we both heard Eck calling, “Mr. Rodgers?”

And Jimmie handed me the disk, smiling but a little bit serious. “I’m gonna go become immortal now.”

* * * *

Well, he didn’t. Not yet. First Eck had to adjust the microphones and Jimmie had to figure out how to use them. The places he’d been singing hadn’t seen electric yet. So I put the disk back in the warmer and I got back up on the toilet and watched and listened and Jimmie let rip with a song I liked a lot.

I call it “T for Texas”, because that’s how Jimmie started it, in his deep and pleasing Mississippi holler somewhere between a wail and laugh. He sang T for a lot of places. He was bouncing out a regular gazetteer of ’em. And then he broke off and yelled, “That getting all the way in there to you, Mickey?”

“Yes, sir!” I said.

Eck said, “This here’s the phone, feller. Don’t have to yell.”

“Just like to be sure,” said Jimmie. And then he recommenced to singing. Back to the gazetteer. Who knew place names could be so wonderful? Made me wonder what else I had missed at school.

This time Eck broke in. I swear the man had no kind of ear for music. "We'll be recording any minute. You want to tune up?"

"Shoot, son. I'm ready to go. This train's been buildin' up steam all morning." He moved from the gazetteer to some woman who did him in.

At which point Mr. Peer reappeared. "So I'm coming up the stairs," he said. "I don't know if I'm hearing a white man or a black man singing."

"Just little ole me..." Jimmie said.

"But I don't need race music, Jimmie. I'm done to death with race music. What I need to put over now is those old hill billy songs... Preferably one you wrote."

"You want a newfangled old-fashioned song."

"That's right."

Jimmie thought about this, strumming. "Well, okay, I got this song I worked over some years back, in memory of a pal who died."

"Died is good."

"Died in the war."

"Died in the war is better."

"Well, okay. If that's what Mr. Victor wants to hear." But Jimmie didn't seem sure and he even frowned just a little bit as Eck tightened the 'phone and backed away.

"There'll be a buzz and a flash of that light," said Eck. That's your signal to start singing." Mr. Peer sat down and Eck sent me up the tower to get the weights set and then I squeezed into the bathroom, too. I couldn't quite close the door 'cause of the wires so I could see that Jimmy looked nervous. His one shot and he wouldn't be doing what he'd prepared.

Eck started up the turntable and put on the stylus. By then, I knew when to hit my switch. The light flashed and the buzzer went *bzzt*. Jimmie jumped at it and then settled down and strummed two chords and commenced to singing. Oh my god, it was a terrible song. It rhymed "true"

and "blue". It used sweetheart *twice* in the first line. But the turntable spun and the disk cutter cut.

Eck had taken my spot and just sat on the toilet and stared as if it was as good as anything. But it wasn't. And I knew it. I don't know how I knew but I did. There was like a fist in my chest that wanted to jump out and grab that stylus and stop it. I pressed tight against the tub and couldn't watch.

It was still Jimmie singing. It was still his great voice and his not so great strumming. But the tune and the words... And then, mercifully, he stopped.

"George," he yelled, "Could we try that again?"

"George? Who's George?" said Eck. He lifted the stylus. Curious, I opened the door to the main room.

Jimmie said, "I forgot what the next verse was."

"That's okay," said Mr. Peer. "We got more disks. You think you know it now?"

"Yeah."

"Then we'll start over". And he settled back comfortable in his arm chair. I couldn't believe it. He *liked* this song.

"Okay," said Jimmie. Eck switched out the disks and started up the turntable. I gave the signal with no great zeal and Jimmy began to play.

The song droned on. He was going to war and giving his girl a ring and asking her to remember him. And then Mr. Peer yelled, "Stop it right there!"

Hallelujah, I thought. He's come to his senses. Eck lifted the stylus and I opened the door.

"Jimmie, you're turning from the mike when you're singing."

"Where's the mike at?" said Jimmie.

"Right there," said Mr. Peer, pointing at the cigarette tin on the tripod.

Jimmie looked at it. "Feller said that was the 'phone."

“Mike-ro-phone,” said Mr. Peer. “You want to sing to it.”

“Oh,” said Jimmie and now he was grinning. “I thought Mike was that boy in the john.”

“Sing into the mike-ro-phone,” said Mr. Peer. Don’t turn away. You got that okay?”

“Sure.”

“Okay.”

“That’s what cuts the record,” said Jimmie

“That’s right.” Mr. Peer said. And then he yelled to us, “Anytime you’re ready!” I went out and hauled the weights back up and pressed myself into my corner of the bathroom and my misery began again.

True, blue, a golden ring, and darling, please remember me. The guy goes to war. And thank heaven, he dies. Barring resurrection, this song *had* to almost be over. But Jimmie was still strumming and Eck was looking grim. He pointed to the empty master box and then to the turntable. We were on our last disk and we were quickly running out of it. But I had no signal to tell Jimmie to hurry up.

Wah wah wah, the girl promises to be faithful forever. Jimmie plunked one more chord and the stylus ran out of wax. Eck shoved me out of the bathroom. Oh, *I* was the signal. “That’s the end!” I yelled.

Jimmie said, “Well, that’s the end of the song, too.”

Eck was playing back the disk.

“Is that a keeper?” I said.

“Yes,” said Eck.

“Yes, sir!” said Mr. Peer.

Jimmie grinned at me. “By God, I guess we got that one, Mike!”

“I like the other one better,” I said.

“What?” said Mr. Peer.

“I like ‘T for Texas’ better.”

“Well, sure,” said Jimmie. “That’s the one my fans go wild for, too.”

“Your fans prefer that one?” Mr. Peer frowned.

“Sure do,” said Jimmie.

“So I suppose you’re telling me we should record it.” Astonishing but true, Mr. Peer was directing this at me.

“I think it’s a whole lot better than that sob song you got there,” I said, feeling something, dinner maybe, slipping away from me.

“I *like* that sob song,” Mr. Peer said.

“My daddy drank coal oil,” I said. “‘No accounting for taste,’ my Ma said. You really believe that girl’ll stay single her whole long life? Bob her hair and go buy a Packard car more likely.”

“Down here in the country,” said Mr. Peer, “Old values maintain.”

“So where do Jimmie’s fans come from?” I said. “Brooklyn?”

“Down the Delta way mostly,” said Jimmie. “And I play that radio over in Asheville...”

“Okay, we’ll record it,” said Mr. Peer. “Let’s go.” But I couldn’t move. I couldn’t believe he was taking my opinion. A man who wore a suit and drove a Cadillac car. “What’s the problem?” said Mr. Peer.

“Uh...” And then I realized we did have a problem. “You want to record over Take 1 or 2?”

“Use a new disk,” said Mr. Peer. “There might be some value in those errors.”

“We got no more unused masters,” I said.

“Well, I’m sure we must,” said Mr. Peer. “We had ten heading into today. We used four on that fiddle band. Two on those holy rollers. Three here...”

“One,” I said, “for Ida Valentine”.

“I told you,” said Eck, “to scrape that one clean.”

“Scrape it?” I said and the words were like thorns in my mouth. It hurt to say them. And I got ice cold for all the heat in that stifling room. Jimmie gave me a look.

“That that pretty little thing with the gold curls I saw leaving?”

“Oh, she was pretty all right,” said Mr. Peer. “But the family was hopeless. And that father could see Satan in a dime.”

“So she won’t get a record?” I said and even to me my voice sounded funny.

“Well,” said Mr. Peer, “what do you think? A 12-year old singing a song that wasn’t her own, or ‘T for Texas’?”

All of them watched me; but Mr. Peer and Eck were just having some amusement. Jimmie knew I was being ripped in two. Then I went into the bathroom and scraped Ida’s master clean and put it on the turntable.

And my recording career was born.

* * * *

That about wrapped up what would be known later as the Bristol Sessions. By the next February, “T for Texas” would have made Jimmie a household name. But on that hot August night, we were all just tired and hungry and ready to be out of there. Jimmie got back on the train and went back to wherever he had come from. Eck and I packed up the Caddie. Mrs. Peer put on her traveling clothes and settled herself in the front.

“Well, climb in, Mickey,” Mr. Peer said and pointed to a spot. It rightly belonged to the amplifiers but if I shrunk down the amps would let me share it.

“No thanks, Mr. Peer,” I said. “I think I’m gonna stand pat.”

“Well, that’s crazy. I’m sure I can find some sort of use for you up north.”

“How ’bout right here? How ’bout you pay me to find you more singing hillbillies?”

“You’re a city boy. What on earth are you going to do down here?”

“Look for that little girl,” said Eck. Who knew the man was paying attention?

“Now that’s a lost cause,” said Mr. Peer, “and you and I both know.”

“You got her address,” I said.

“No, never wrote it down,” said Mr. Peer. “And they weren’t town folks. There could be ten thousand hills and hollers they could be living in.”

“So if I don’t find ’em, I’ll be fine.”

“And what about your family?” said Mr. Peer.

“Got none,” I said. “Not since Lily. None that ever gave me nothing. At least nothing as nice as a piece of pie. So what do you say?”

“About what?”

“About me working for Victor.”

“Well, I can’t pay you a salary,” Mr. Peer said. But then he took out his wallet and counted out some money. “But here, I’ll give you twenty-five dollars. To get you started out.”

I took the money in my hands. I don’t think I had ever held so much at one time.

“Any songs you find,” he said, “you split with me.”

“Including ‘T for Texas’?”

He hesitated. “After ‘T for Texas’.”

Eck said, “Seems to me if it flops, he should pay you for the wax.”

“Well, I’ll do that,” I said.

“No,” said Mr. Peer. And then I realized that even he had been paying attention. “You already paid, boy,” he said. “You already paid.” And he handed me his card. “You call me here, you got anything to say to me.” And he got behind the wheel.

WANDERING BOY

“Okay, Mr. Peer. And thank you,” I said. “And thank you, Eck”.

“You’re not welcome,” said Eck.

“Good-bye, Mickey,” Mrs. Peer said.

“Good-bye, Missus,” I said. And then the Caddy pulled away. And left me standing right in the middle of State Street. Not entirely sure what I had done.

’Cause there I was, alone in the world. Or, at least, alone in two states. I felt a very Colossus, the demarcation passing between my feet. And to be honest, I’d been alone so long, it didn’t feel hardly different... except now I had some sense that somewhere... there was a place called home.