

SATAN'S SPIT

by Gabriel Valjan

An old song says that no matter what happened the night before, a new day will come tomorrow, and with it, a new chance for all of us. Not that day in May, not that Sunday morning, and not that year for the town of Trinity, Tennessee that year.

In the morning hours, Sheriff Presser and Deputy Garland were driving down to the crossroads in their Ford Model A Police Car. A mysterious voice over the candlestick phone at the station summoned them to Satan's Spit, where they'd find 'an abomination before God.'

While Presser drove, Garland read from a days' old copy of *The Tennessean*.

"Seems like the family of Sergeant Henry Johnson are at it again. His people in Nor' Carolina feel he is a credit to his race, and he ought to receive the Medal of Honor like Sergeant York."

"No Negro can hold a candle to a God-fearin' patriot. I'm surprised the army allowed Johnson to become a sergeant."

"Relax, he was a sergeant for coloreds only. No self-respectin' white man would take orders from a former Pullman porter."

"Was? Is he dead?"

"Yep," Garland said. "Family claims he'd succumbed to complications from some twenty-odd combat injuries. They say he couldn't work his last few years."

"I had a cousin gassed during the Great War, and he didn't complain none, and he worked whatever jobs he could find until he dropped," the sheriff said. "Posthumous medal. What will they think of next? What else does the paper say?"

"Rangers killed the Texas Rattlesnake and Suicide Sal."

"They killed Bonnie and Clyde?" Presser whistled, surprised. "How old was she?"

Garland rustled the page. "Twenty-three, and the gal didn't go easy."

Presser looked. "Put up a fight?"

"Women will always put up a fight. Paper states he died first, and she went in a blaze of lead, so I'm inclined she gave them Texas Rangers hell's fire on her way out." Garland paused, "Speaking of a spitfire, isn't your little girl's birthday next weekend?"

"Don't remind me," Presser said. "Hard to believe she'll be sixteen."

The deputy put down the paper when he saw what was ahead of them. "What the hell is he doing here?" Campion, the town's physician, had his car parked on the shoulder of the road. "I didn't call him. You?"

"You know I didn't."

Doctor Campion, known for wearing tailored linen suits during the high swelter of summer, bucked convention in his choice of color for handkerchief. That day, he wore workman's shoes and dungarees, a black shirt, and a fedora on his head. He waved to them, dark handkerchief in hand. The Ford came to a halt, and the sheriff cut the engine. The deputy folded his paper and said, "Hear that, Sheriff?"

"I don't hear a thing."

"That's my point."

On a normal day, broods of cicadas produced a sound to rival a symphony. There was nothing but ominous silence in Satan's Spit now.

Presser greeted the physician and asked what had brought him out to the Spit.

“Received an anonymous call. I was told I’d find something.”

Presser looked fast to Garland before he asked the question. “And did you?”

“I did, unfortunately.” The doctor wiped his brow with his handkerchief. He pointed toward the thicket of trees. “Body is about thirty yards in. My gladstone bag is next to it.”

“Whose body?” the sheriff asked.

“See for yourself, Sheriff.”

Garland came forward. “What time did you get the call?” The doctor answered, and the sheriff added, “We got a call like that an hour later. Care to tell us who we’ll find on yonder.”

“Charlie Taylor. Know him?”

“Know of the child,” the sheriff answered. “His people live in the holler, along with all the other colored folks. Quiet family, the Taylors.” He looked to Garland for verification.

“Anything you’d like to add?”

“Nothing, Sheriff, just curious as to who called us and Doc.”

The three men discussed the call, the wording the caller used. They agreed that their anonymous Samaritan was female; the voice, vague but familiar to their ears.

“Charlie murdered?” the sheriff asked.

“And more.”

“Lynched?”

“Raped, and that’s where the mystery begins, Sheriff. Have a looksee, the both of you. Twenty-five, thirty yards in, and don’t disturb the body too much for the Examiner’s men.”

“Will do, Doc,” the sheriff sighed. “Nothing worse than the murder of a child. Colored or not, it’s the Devil’s work, especially on the Lord’s day of rest.”

Crossroads were always places of superstition and legends, and Satan’s Spit was no exception. It was so named because nothing is said to grow where the Devil spits. There was a large yew tree behind Mama Raye’s juke joint and not much else. On each side of the bald spot of earth, trees, and that was where the body lay.

Like the Witches’ Sabbath, people journeyed into the woods once the sun set on Friday. What made Mama Raye’s and the Spit notorious was that Blacks and Whites mingled, and they used the acre of hell as their private playground for all kinds of deviant behavior. There’d been rumors of miscegenation and morphine, of orgies and other obscenities, such as abortions, and adulterous rendezvous. A secret in plain sight, the festivities ran from Friday to the wee hours of Sunday morning before the guilty attended services at their house of God and prayed for forgiveness, left absolved and refreshed, only to renew the cycle of sin the next week.

Mama Raye’s was a stop on the circuit for itinerant bluesmen, such as Robert Johnson and Son House. Drinks were aplenty inside, and they ranged from legitimate standards to rotgut from moonshiners in the hills. People came from all three corners of Tennessee to hear bluesmen stomp all night long.

The lawmen returned from the scene. Doctor Campion was waiting for them. Sheriff Presser asked him, “Doc, how do you know for certain that Charlie had been violated?”

“Didn’t you see how the body was positioned?”

“Indeed, but I’d like to hear your professional opinion.”

“Before I do that, Sheriff, I’ll ask you, what else did you notice?”

“He was a she, but as a healer in these parts, did you know her true sex?”

“Don’t assume that because I’m a doctor everyone sees me, Sheriff. One half of Trinity can’t afford me, and the other half is scared of what I might tell them. I’d like to make two things clear. One, I never had Charlie Taylor as a patient. Members of her family, yes, and I hadn’t a clue as to her sex in all the time I was in the presence of her kin.”

Campion stopped to remove his hat and wipe the band inside the fedora.

“You said two things, Doctor. What’s the second item?”

“Whoever took her into the woods for the jump must’ve been disappointed.”

“Disappointed how?”

“Take your pick, Sheriff. Disappointed on how little money was on her, angry at the price she cited for you know what, or her killer discovered that he was a she. It’s one thing to expect meat and potatoes, another thing to find the garden of Eden.”

Presser said, “Few people in Trinity have money for a prostitute, Doc, and the lavender kind of thing doesn’t remain a secret for long.”

“Perhaps a stranger killed her.”

“Perhaps, but robbery and rape don’t go together, in our experience.” Presser looked to Garland. “Ain’t that right?”

“Yep,” Garland said, “and I have question for Doc. Victim was on all fours and you said raped, correct?”

Campion answered, “You saw the body, Deputy.”

“I did, but what was the cause of death?”

“Strangulation from behind. Small hemorrhages were visible in the whites of her eyes.”

“Is it possible that her death was an accident? You know, ecstasy turned lethal.”

“Enthusiastic intercourse notwithstanding, other marks on his body indicated a struggle.”

“Her body, Doctor. Hers.”

Sheriff Presser said that would be all for now. Campion brushed past them and said he’d call for a Weegee from his office to document the scene, and then summon the Examiner to collect the body for the autopsy.

Presser said to Garland, “This won’t play well, once the news hits. The Taylors and their kind will be anxious for justice. Life could turn from mean to ugly.”

“No disagreement with you there, but none of this will stop folks from comin’ out to the Spit.”

They watched Campion’s Ford drive off. Gravel bristled and dust kicked up.

“Doc was here before us,” the sheriff mused. “Ain’t it odd that someone called him before the police?”

“Guilty person may have thought the good doctor could do something for his victim.”

“Or maybe, the killer had an accomplice.” Garland sensed that the sheriff had calculated another angle to their case. “What is it?”

“His clothes?”

“Charlie’s?”

The sheriff shook his head. “Not Charlie’s.” The sheriff looked down the road towards the vanishing car. “Doc came here in Levi’s.”

“You’d ruin linen out there.”

“But blue dungarees would hide any stain of violence, wouldn’t they?”

Garland said, “As in on the ground, and behind the victim?”

“The question isn’t why he wore denims, but how did he know to wear them when the caller didn’t tell either of us what we’d find out here?”

After Charlie was taken away, they decided they'd visit Mama Raye. In the ride over, Presser discussed how he and the wife had saved up for their daughter's sweet sixteen party. Money was tight for them, for everyone, but he had set aside a sum each week, so he could buy the pinafore dress she's seen in a fashion magazine.

As for Mama Raye, she kept her juke joint locked up during the day, and used the daylight hours like most people used evenings for rest and recovery. On this Sunday or any other Sunday, she wouldn't be found inside a church, even if Christ himself had opened the first four of the seven seals and the Horsemen of the Apocalypse galloped forth.

She owned her own home on the edge of town, and she tithed a percentage from her various enterprises to grease the democratic machinery to keep her homestead and businesses safe from the Klan. Before she became a businesswoman, she'd worked all the trades common to poor women, from housework to minding children. It was rumored that she'd worked in the flesh trade when she toured as a torch singer. After she achieved financial success, like Madam C.J. Walker, Mama donated vast sums of money to the Tuskegee Institute, the NAACP, and the Black YMCA.

Her butler answered the door. If the two lawmen were surprised that a man in a formal black suit with a white shirt and black tie answered the door, they were shocked that he was white and that they knew him. With white gloves on, he parted the door wide and used a tone of voice they expected from a mortician. "Gentlemen, this way, please. Mama has been expecting you."

He offered them refreshments and to take their hats, but they said they didn't expect to stay long. He escorted them through the foyer of dark wood and portraits of Benjamin Banneker, Phyllis Wheatley, Frederick Douglas, and Harriet Tubman. In the parlor, they spied the Victor in one corner, a handsome handmade bookcase in mahogany next to it for the pressed discs of Mama's music library. Framed photographs of musicians, most of them inscribed to Mama, dotted the wall. Garland nudged the sheriff. "There's Josephine Baker," but the sheriff was interested in the Winchester rifle next to the andirons.

Mama entered the room. "Welcome, gentlemen; and yes, the rifle is loaded."

"Is it licensed and registered?" the sheriff asked.

"Ask me that question after I shoot someone with it."

She lit one of her Ashton cigarillos, and returned the lit match to the lucifer. Her butler returned and asked whether she needed anything. The sheriff's eyes tracked the servant's exit, as the sweet-smelling Cameroon wrappers and Dominican tobacco filled the air. Mama noticed and said, "I won him in a game of cards."

The sheriff and deputy stood there speechless.

"I'm teasing. I know you know Grady, and he pretends this is the first time he's laid eyes on you. Ain't it the devil's delight knowing a grandson of the Klan waits on me?"

"It was a surprise, yes," Presser answered.

"Want of money is the greater equalizer. Black and White alike are desperate for scratch during this depression. Grady swallowed his pride to work for Mama. Now, let's discuss why you are here."

Sheriff Presser summarized what had been found at Satan's Spit. They did not exclude Dr. Champion's presence, nor did they spare her any details, while Mama enjoyed her hand-rolled smoke. He asked her, "Did you know Charlie Taylor was a girl?"

"You want to know if she was turning tricks at my establishment?"

“It’s not the first question I would’ve asked, but since you’ve come straight to the point.”

“Charlie wasn’t whoring, Sheriff. I wouldn’t be surprised if the Coroner said she was a virgin, despite what the doctor said. In an effort to save you time, I’ll answer the two questions that are plaguing you. Why was she there, and why did she disguise her sex?”

Presser looked to Garland and then to Mama. “Those questions do come to the forefront.”

“Think about it, Sheriff. A young Negro girl has fewer opportunities than her White counterpart, so why not pass as a boy? Girls of either race are predestined for work that pays them low wages. Come what may, be it depression or prosperity, it’s wife, schoolmarm, or nightingale for White women. Us Black folks might receive your people’s largesse, if that.”

The sheriff seemed at a loss, so he fixed his eyes on the Winchester. Mama asked whether he knew who Ida B. Wells was, and he said he did not.

“There’s a photo of her on the wall behind you. Miss Wells covered the People’s Grocery Massacre in Memphis. She said, and I quote, ‘A Winchester rifle should have a place of honor in every Black home.’” Her eyes visited the weapon. “Hence, the rifle. Now, back to Miss Taylor.”

“You established she needed money. What did Charlie do at your juke joint?”

“She worked as a musician.”

“A musician?” The surprise came from Deputy Garland.

“Charlie played harp. For a child, she was all business and professional.”

“Played harmonica?” Garland said and looked to the sheriff, confused. “We didn’t see no harmonica on her.”

Presser ignored Garland and asked Mama, “Was she any good?”

“Yes, and she played slow blues.”

“Slow blues—is that important?”

“It is, if you want respect. The way she squeezed a note would make an angel cry.”

“Good enough that another musician was jealous enough to murder her?”

Mama answered, “Bluesmen don’t mind women talent, Sheriff, though a gal has to prove herself. Nothing new to us women, regardless of race. Murder, though, I doubt it.”

“Rob her then?”

Mama thought about it. “Money is scarce.”

“How ’bout rape?”

“Rape is another form of robbery to a woman, Sheriff.”

“Did she carry anything to protect herself?”

“Only thing she carried was herself and her harmonica when she was playing, but inside my juke she was safe and sound. I’m the law inside Mama Raye’s. Whatever happens outside, at the crossroads, is between God above and the Devil below.”

“What kind of harmonica?”

“Hohner Marine Band Classic with a custom comb, and made before the War.”

“Custom sounds valuable.”

“I bought it for her, since she couldn’t afford it.”

“As a gift?”

“No, as an investment. She was worth it. I don’t wish to sound abrupt, gentlemen, but I have errands. If you have any more questions, please come back later or call me.”

As they approached their Ford, Grady the butler accosted them and Mama stood at the window for a moment before she disappeared. He asked that neither the sheriff nor the deputy tell anyone

that he worked for Mama Raye. He said his wife and family didn't know. They thought he worked as a traveling bank inspector.

The sheriff stopped before he opened the door. "Grady, a question for you, and your answer will be held in strictest confidence." Grady consented. Presser asked him, "Mama used to sing, right?"

Grady nodded. "She did, why?"

"Hear her sing?"

"Around the house, yes."

"Describe her voice to me, please."

"I'm no expert, Sheriff, but if I were to put words on her, I'd say, like smoke and dark chocolate."

Inside their Ford, Garland asked Presser why he had asked about Mama Raye's voice. Sheriff Presser said he had a hunch that it was Mama Raye who had called Campion and varied her voice to skirt identification.

"What now? Garland asked.

"Off to see the doctor."

"Campion?"

"Not him; the Coroner."

Presser and Garland traveled the single asphalt road left untouched by Governor Horton and his corrupt cronies. There was talk that federal dollars would arrive for projects, such as roadside parks and pull-offs for motorists, but most folks in Trinity thought that was about as likely as the Devil on his knees before Jesus.

They found the Coroner, a distinguished man of fifty, with white sidewalls for the color of his hair around his ears, and an absurd toupee on the roof that matched the dark and waxed Warren Williams moustache. Presser gave Charlie's name, and the pathologist escorted them into a refrigerated room, adjacent to where he worked, because Charlie Taylor was 'separate but equal' like the court case.

At first, neither the sheriff nor the deputy said a word, they listened.

"Negro female, fifteen years of age." They were told that Charlie was indeed a virgin; had been strangled and sodomized; that she had struggled and fought off her attacker before he overpowered her and killed her. As they listened to the description of the sequence of wounds that she had sustained in the last minutes of her life, without a word, both Presser and Garland removed their hats.

"No need for you to take your hats off for me, gentlemen. It's cold in here."

Presser said, "Not for you; for the dead. A question for you. Is there any physical evidence that could identify her killer, such as blood, semen, or the like?"

"There is proof the perpetrator orgasmed, but I can't tie semen to an individual."

Garland said, "What about her personal effects?"

"Clothes. Nothing unusual. Wait, there was one peculiar item."

The medical man walked over to another table and pulled open a drawer, and withdrew a small bag. "There's this."

Presser and Garland looked down at the table. They saw a clamshell case, labeled Hohner Marine Band Classic 1896. The doctor said, "Box, but no harmonica inside."

On the drive back to Trinity, Sheriff Presser and Deputy Garland discussed the case while Benny Goodman's "Moon Glow" played on the radio. Presser was perturbed that his original assessment about rape and robbery had been wrong. They seemed to go together. Garland said that what disturbed him was that the thief had taken the harmonica, but not the case. Both men agreed their criminal may have panicked and forgotten the hard-shell case.

Presser was the first to see Champion's house, and pulled the car off the main road and brought it to rest inside the doctor's driveway. They found their man in the front yard, on his knees clearing weeds, cursing the rabbits who had raided his garden. So absorbed was he in his yardwork that he didn't hear the lawmen until they were behind him. He greeted them and stood up.

"Quite the show you've got here," Presser said.

"The thirteenth labor of Hercules, if you ask me. This is an unexpected visit."

Garland squinted since the sun punished his eyes. "Sorry to have disturbed you. We were at the Coroner's. Seems you were right about rape and how Charlie Taylor died."

"It's not something I'd gloat over. I wish I were wrong, and she were alive."

The sheriff surveyed the scene. "You look like you've accomplished a lot."

"I've been at it since I returned," he looked to the strewn weeds and the wheelbarrow of manure. "I'd intended an early start, but with the phone call and all."

"Up early, your work clothes on, and then the phone rang."

"Why do I sense there's a question behind this social call?"

"Only one," the sheriff said. "When you looked at the body, you saw defensive marks?"

"I did, yes."

Garland added, "And Charlie's state of undress?"

Champion nodded. "It's how I surmised that he'd been raped."

"She," said the sheriff. "You suggested rape and robbery before we looked at the body, but did you check her pockets?"

"No, I have an aversion to putting my hand in someone's pockets. I saw the way the body was positioned, the eyes, and I deduced what had happened. You asked me my theory, and I gave it to you."

Garland asked, "Were you at Mama Raye's that night?"

"Yes, but the question, gentlemen, is who wasn't?"

"See Charlie play?"

"Heard a set, and I mingled like other folks did, but I never stepped outside, if that's what you're implying."

"Not implying anything, Doc. I'm sure others can verify it."

"Don't you mean corroborate? Talk to Mama Raye. I talked with her for the better part of the evening about a singer named Billie Holiday."

"Good to know. Anything else you remember?"

Champion approached the lawmen and pulled off his gloves. "Most of the town was present, most of them doing things they shouldn't, but I meant what I said earlier, gentlemen."

Presser said, "And what part was that?"

"I didn't know he was a she, and I know people talk and comment as to how I dress and act, but one thing I am not, gentlemen, is a pederast. Correct my pronouns all you want, Sheriff, but no child deserved what happened to Charlie. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have zinnias that deserve my attention."

As the day drew to a close, the sheriff said he'd wanted to visit Mama, to ask her about Billie Holiday. Both men agreed that they didn't like the idea that the homicide might go unsolved. The more time that elapsed, the colder the trail to a killer and conviction.

As they neared Mama's property, they wondered how long Grady had conducted the charade with his wife. Traveling bank inspectors were a despised lot, hated by the banks and looked upon with suspicion by everyone else. Banks failed and people were destitute, mistrustful of the government, despite the president's fireside chats in the evenings.

On the porch, they found the door ajar. The sheriff reached for his revolver. Hand on his weapon, Garland said, "Hear that? It's music."

"Coming from the Victor inside, the sheriff said.

The door swung wide with the slightest touch. The air felt heavy, and not from the melancholy melody of the singer's voice. Each man kept close to a wall and proceeded through the foyer he walked through hours ago. Garland noticed some shattered glass on the floor. A framed photograph had fallen from its place on the wall.

The sheriff was the first to see the corpse. Grady lay there, a harmonica next to him. He'd changed out of the butler's uniform into his street clothes. A bullet had slammed into his chest, blown him back and killed him.

The sheriff looked to the fireplace and saw the Winchester rifle missing, and didn't dare enter the room without announcing himself first. "I know you're armed, Mama. We don't want to have to shoot you."

"Pay me no mind, Sheriff. Mama won't shoot you."

"Will you lower your weapon?"

"I will if you will."

Garland asked, "Tell us what happened?"

"He wanted to kill me. He must've figured out I called the doctor and you."

The sheriff peeked around the door's edge and saw her sitting at her desk.

"Why don't you enjoy one of your cigarillos, and we'll come in, and you tell us what you think happened, between Charlie and Grady."

"He raped and killed her is what happened."

"Any idea as to why? Garland asked.

"I thought it was because he feared she'd tell someone he worked here."

The sheriff glanced to his deputy. "But you think there's another reason?"

"I know there is, Sheriff, but he didn't have to rape her."

"No, he didn't," the sheriff said. "He didn't have to do any of it."

The sheriff eased into the room, and Garland followed. The rifle lay on the desk. Garland kept his revolver drawn and the sheriff moved the Winchester away from her.

Mama Raye explained that she would keep the harmonica locked up, on account of its being valuable. Most weeknights she kept it under lock and key there at the house, which is how Charlie had become aware that Grady worked as a butler. Come Friday night and the weekend, at the juke joint, Charlie kept the instrument on her, case and all.

Sheriff Presser said, "Grady knew it was valuable."

"He must've seen her with the case and assumed the Hohner was inside of it."

"He somehow gets Charlie alone, intent on stealing it. Figured he was a child."

"And discovered he was a she, and assumed he had the right. I'll have that smoke now, if that's okay with you."

"It's your house."

“Am I under arrest, Sheriff?”

Presser looked to Garland. “I think my deputy and I see this as a stranger breaking into a home, and the owner defended herself and her property.”

“But I killed a white man.”

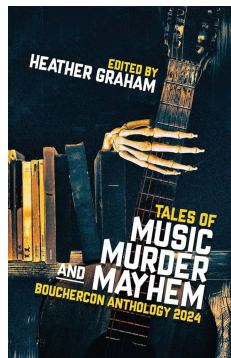
“But he’s a traveling bank inspector, a liar, a thief, a rapist, and a murderer.”

Mama sat there, cigarillo in hand. “But a grandson of a Klansman.”

Presser said, “His grandad is long dead, Mama.”

“But, his friends ain’t, and then there’s the rest of his kinfolk,” Mama said. She smiled and then sighed, “Look like I need to decide whether I stay or go, for what’s comin’ next.”

They sat there for a long time, long enough to hear the first cicada, and then another, and then the chorus before the darkness fell.



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