

It's Hard Out Here for a Wimp

By Dave Mondy

Phenice bends over and grabs the pool table.

Then she bends lower — so her posterior is the highest point on her body. And she shakes it, in that amazing way you see on rap videos.

She shoots a sly smile my way, as if to say:

This is for you.

And the problem is: I'm the only Caucasian in a dirty down-South juke joint.

The climate in the room changes.

This was to be my first trip as a Professional Travel Writer — oh yes, capital P, T, and W!

A couple months previous, an editor in my hometown of Minneapolis said she liked some of my essays. She said I should take a new trip, and then send her a story about it.

Bill Bryson, Paul Theroux — you're on notice! Here I come.

"Go somewhere you've always wanted to go," the editor had said to me; so I decided to follow Junior.

Junior was an old white hillbilly who didn't like old white hillbilly music.

He liked the blues.

So he traveled the South, in a beat-up Buick, looking for juke joints — hidden little blues joints that you couldn't find listed with any Chamber of Commerce. Many times, the places didn't have signs.

And after each successful find, Junior would write about the juke on his primitive website.

Junior loved these juke joints, and — clicking onto his site over the years, bored at my office job — I grew to love them, too.

I climbed into my own beat-up Grand Marquis and drove South.

Junior wrote that B.B. King had grown up playing in a club in Indianola, Mississippi, and that the club still existed.

But, once I actually arrive, I realize that Indianola is scary.

Broken-down buildings, bars on the windows, stray dogs roaming the streets — dogs so mean that they won't even move for your car. You have to wait for them.

And the only bar I can find is a place called Club Ebony. It's pretty clear that I'm not the target demographic.

But I'm a Professional Travel Writer!

I walk inside.

The old couple manning the door looks at me as if they've seen, well... a ghost.

"You here to pick up food?" the old woman asks.

"No... just grabbing a drink."

"What are you having?" asks the man, now stepping behind the bar.

"Ah, Jim Beam on the rocks?" I was going to just have a beer, but, looking around, it's pretty clear that I'm out of my depths.

Sure, there's a little stage in back — just like the perfect picture in my mind. But there are no blues. Only rap. Hardcore, gangsta rap. And a DJ. And young women. And a red strobe light. And in the flashes it makes I see snapshots of dirty grinding that, until now, I've only witnessed on TV.

"You should come back tomorrow night," the old man offers. "We got a blues band, real good, get a good crowd, mixed, a lot of *white people* [his emphasis]."

"You know this is the club B.B. grew up in?" the old lady adds. "Played here first! I got T-shirts..."

And I get it.

A person will travel most anywhere based on a romanticized notion from the past, but once you arrive, well, that's the reality. This is Saturday night — and Saturday night has always belonged to the young; and right now, it's not the blues that moves them — it's rap.

There it is: My little epiphany, my Professional Travel Writer moment; now I can go home safe and sound.

But then Phenice walks in — young, attractive, and loud — and says to me, “What you doin’ on my side?”

“Just having a drink,” I say.

“Buy me one,” she says.

“I was just leaving.”

“Well, let me buy you one.”

“That’s alright.”

“What,” she says, “you won’t let a black girl buy you a drink?”

“No no,” I say, scrambling. “It’s just that I don’t think a woman should buy a man a drink, in general.”

“Oh, so you sexist, too?”

“No.”

“Well good,” she says with finality, and orders us two Miller Lites.

I’m unaccustomed to being bantered into checkmate — usually I’m pretty quick.

Now, I just sip my Miller.

“Let’s play pool,” she says.

“I’m really bad at pool.”

“Well let’s dance, then.”

I look at the grinding and say, “There’s a better chance I’d play pool.”

“You’re no fun!” she concludes, playfully.

Then she takes off her heels, balances them atop her purse, and slides the whole mess onto the bar. “Watch my stuff. You won’t leave and let nobody take it, right?”

Now let’s not pretend I’m some Innocent — I was watching her stuff, and, as she walked away, I was watching her stuff.

She’s wearing a yellow dress with black stripes, those V-stripes — and the stripes have to describe some pretty perilous parabolas before completing their circumference. Which is to say:

She looked good.

I watched her dance.

And this is when the room changes.

It’s as if I’d been getting by on the goodwill of those around me, and something about that will has turned. And I remember something Junior wrote on his website, a few simple rules for visiting a juke joint. And rule number two was:

If you are a young white man, you can only dance with older black women.

Now I’m not actually dancing with Phenice – not yet — but I get the idea. I have to let Caution trump Lust. When Phenice returns, I’ve got a plan.

“Is there a cash machine around here?” I ask.

“Yeah,” she says, “at the Sinclair up the street.”

“Cool, I’m gonna grab some cash and be right back,” I say. But I won’t be. I’ll be gone. I can almost hear Junior saying, Good plan... good plan...

“Good plan,” Phenice says. “I need to get some smokes anyway.”

So now everyone sees Phenice and I leave together, get into my car together. The ghost of Junior throws up his hands and says, Kid, you’re on your own.

I withdraw cash, she buys cigarettes; and on the way back, she asks, “You like this hairstyle?”

It’s an elaborate system of cornrows.

“I’m not the right guy to ask.”

“Just say what you think,” she says.

Something about the dome light, half-highlighting her face, makes a vivid (and pretty) picture. “I like it.”

“I know, right!” she says, smiling and scrunching her nose. “It’s cool, ain’t it?”

I was thinking about that smile/nose-scrunch as we walked across the parking lot – a warm feeling. Maybe Junior was–

And now guys are yelling at me– a whole group of guys– what are they yell– I can’t tell I’m too scared I’m only hearing sounds I need to be–

“Don’t talk to him, talk to me!” Phenice is yelling back. “You got something to say, say it to me.”

This only makes them angrier.

One guys steps from the group. “I seen you,” he says. “I seen you come in on the Greyhound this morning!”

This is meant as an insult — an implication, in front of Phenice, that I’m so poor I don’t even have a car, I’m just some bum riding the bus — but I don’t get it.

“No no, that’s my car right over there,” I say.

And something flashes into his face — a wrath. Rare.

It’s not that I haven’t seen it before — I have — but most people have to build up to it, dig down deep, go home and get it. But he just wears his right on his hip — ready.

He puts his hands in his pocket.

Then he turns away. It’s an angry Turn Away, an if-I-don’t-turn-away-right-now-I-might-do-something Turn Away.

He turns back.

And there is no longer a Professional Travel Writer present; in fact, there's not even an adult here anymore, because I just start saying, "I want to go home I want to go home..." in the exact same cadence as, "I want my mommy..." I'm saying it out loud, to no one in particular, as I walk to my car, like a robot, like a toddler:

"I want to go home I want to go home..."

With apologies to Three 6 Mafia, I must say: It's hard out here for a wimp.

Things diffuse behind me.

Tucking my tail between my legs has calmed the guys down. They are no longer yelling, just laughing. A man in a long white T-shirt runs from the club and further stills them.

"Don't leave me now," Phenice says at my car. "Everything's fine now, I promise, don't leave me in front of them, it's embarrassing."

Salvaging the last of my manhood, I escort her back inside.

Now, finally, Phenice is less attracted to me. No woman wants to see her inamorato actively emasculate himself.

Instead of flirting, we just talk.

She tells me of her life: Dropping out of college, working day care jobs, waiting tables — so far, her history doesn't sound that different from my own. But the difference is that her father doesn't bail her out. And she has four kids, from three different dads, the last of whom cheated on her with her sister. I'm suddenly immersed the Jerry Springer casting pool, but it doesn't seem funny, or even ironic, and I don't feel superior. I just feel sad.

"Those guys out on the corner was out on the corner five years ago and they gonna be out on the corner five years from now. But I'm getting out," she says, and I want like hell to believe her.

"You look tired," she adds. "Need me to walk you to your car?"

"No," I say, like a brave little train engine. "I think I can... make it on my own."

Back at my Motel 6, I can't angle it all out.

Within the next few weeks, I will go into countless juke joints — in Memphis, and in the country outside of Oxford — and always, I will be welcomed. So much so that the term “Southern Hospitality” doesn’t seem like a cliché, but, rather, an ironclad guarantee.

But tonight, I don’t know any of that yet.

Why did this happen, I wonder. Was it because I was white?

Well, even if it was, that doesn’t matter, my Guilty Liberal Mind immediately replies.

But this happened. This is something that happened. Can I not even admit what actually happened, or—

Don’t.

But it was—

Don’t you dare say, ‘reverse racism’.

But—

Listen: It’s like complaining about the refs missing one call, when they have otherwise just handed you the Super Bowl. It’s not that you’re wrong, per se; it’s just that you seem like an asshole.

My thoughts are finally resolved when I remember something else Phenice had said: “That one guy, the one on the left, was an ex-boyfriend of mine.”

And right then, I knew I would never know if the altercation was really about Race, or, instead, that other great divider of men: Love.
