

AUBURN

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Chapter 3 - Traveling

From Birmingham I caught a bus to Mobile. I found a restaurant in nearby Bay City specializing in Louisiana Cajun food that had become very anti-establishment. They were thrilled for me to make deliveries for them even in my dress. I didn't tell them my other secret. I bought a white blouse and a dark skirt.

The tips were not so large, which became OK as I found a park where I could sleep. When the police gave me a ticket for parking illegally over-night, I found a homeless shelter. My backpack stayed in the trunk of the rental car. But they didn't like my wearing my dress either. I either had to be at the women's shelter or the men's shelter.

Up a road had a seemingly abandoned house. I parked the rental car out back and slept in the nearby pine woods. Nobody bothered me for a week, but when two drunken derelicts showed up, I scrambled out of there.

That white blouse had been too hard to keep clean in the pine woods so I gave it to Salvation Army, and the skirt too. I bought another denim shirtdress there.

When I went back to the car rental agency for another monthly deal they wouldn't rent to me again. They denied the cash deposit, too. I leaned on the counter. "Just how bad do you want me to go to the police?"

"In that dress? Go ahead."

I recovered my backpack, walked out, and changed clothes at the airport. By now my hair had grown long enough that nobody gave me much of a glance in the women's restroom. I kept out of sight in a stall as I changed. I walked quickly out in my boy clothes.

The next day I saw a police car parked at a curb and told them my story. They said. "Hop in."

The rental agency gave me my deposit back. Then they spun a lie trying to get me arrested, but the police scowled at them.

Outside they did ask me for my address for their report. I told them I had been backpacking across the country. They asked me for my driver's license, checked that on their on-board computer, and wished me well.

I caught a cab back to the homeless shelter for men. They had me feeling unsafe with my money hidden away, so I left the next morning.

I counted my money at a library where I found I had more than I thought. While there at that library I searched for all kinds of things and found a vacation place on a lake which seemed old. They didn't like me, and that had been in my boy clothes.

When I called on the motel next door they were different. I asked if they needed any help. Oh yes they did, so I became their night clerk and had a little room in back. That only lasted about six weeks when they became a little nasty.

I quit. When I went back in that room for the last time I switched into my diaper and dress. I had my backpack straps over my shoulders, and walked out avoiding their office. I didn't even ask for the last pay.

Around a bend in the road had a guy buying gas for his pickup. I asked for a ride. He took one look at my dress and said "No".

Across the road had a pine woods that didn't seem connected to anything. It sat between two roads that forked and the third side resided at a fishing lake again.

I walked in there. It seemed bigger than I thought and amazingly didn't have any litter nor an old camp fire. But, I wouldn't be fully concealed in there if I lit a sterno can for dinner.

I did change back into boy clothes and walked along one of the roads that followed a river. Two miles later had another motel specializing in fishing. Yes, they needed a night clerk. I had tired of nasty bosses, and they didn't look all that happy with themselves.

"I'll take this job, but I want what I want. Let's be straight."

The woman glared.

"I want to wear a dress for my own reasons. It's a denim shirtdress and behind that counter they won't see the skirt."

She tilted her head at me long enough for me to be scared. "There's a beauty salon down that road. Go make your hair look right. Come back, and that's only a maybe."

I did, and told them straight up what that motel had said. I walked out with good looking straight hair.

That motel has been thinking too, and they were more aware of how tired they were of their own rat race.

They hired me as the night clerk, but they also needed help with the boats, boat trailers, tires, and hookups. "As long as I can wear my dress."

I stayed for the winter. A customer complained so I called a cab.

While there I had found a park with a camp site which I went to. They didn't allow tent camping, but they knew of another.

That next campground let me have a site off in the woods. They also had a brochure for a car rental company.

I returned to seeking restaurants that needed deliveries. For some reason this didn't work for a month. The camp remained inexpensive. I slept in the back seat of the car when it rained.

A seaside seafood joint did hire me for deliveries. Ten days later I discovered they had an out-of-use room upstairs. When I asked they shrugged. The door needed a padlock which I bought. That it didn't have a bathroom bothered me not. Now I had a place for free and went to a youth hostel for a shave and a shower every 2 or 3 days. The hard wood floor creaked, and I didn't quite like the air mattress I had bought.

One morning I counted my money and decided I didn't need to work. When I told them it was time to move on, they asked why the hell didn't I rent a room.

It smelled of old fishing gear, but I decided to try anything once.

One of the waitresses took a liking to me, but I didn't want a permanent job. I did take her to dinner to say no, which made her cry. I felt awful with that. Nothing I could do would make me the right guy at the right time for her.

A hurricane aimed at that town, so I tried turning in that car to an agency that didn't want any turn-ins before that hurricane. They asked me to drive inland to another agency, which I did, and caught the refugee bus further north.

Someone had a refugee camp, but only for residents of the evacuated area. My driver's license disqualified me.

Inland from there were fields separated by pine woods and forests of trees with leaves. One of those woods bent itself around a field. I walked in there and found a pleasant little place on a creek.

In there I could wear my diapers and my dress. Nobody noticed for two weeks, but when an elderly African-American farmer came to run me off I told him what I was doing.

He looked poor enough so I asked. "Would you let me stay for a little cash each week?"

I walked many miles from there during the day.

Once several teens teased me going from nasty to threatening. One of them put a hand on my knife. I brought my hand on that side straight up driving my fingers into his throat finding his larynx. He stepped back wheezing with his hands to his neck.

"Leave me alone."

His two friends came at me.

I slashed with my knife across his front slicing his shirt and drawing blood leaving the knife point in an arm. I locked my hands together and drove an elbow into the face of the other one as he came that close. I yanked back my knife. "Leave me alone."

They stood there as if they didn't know what to do. But they didn't leave.

I walked into a store. "Call the police."

They did nothing.

I reached across a counter and picked up the phone handset and punched 911 on the buttons.

The sound of a siren brought those boys to their senses. They ran.

I told the police what happened.

They wrote on a form. "Are you a girl or a boy?"

"Boy. I like wearing dresses for my own reasons." I dug out my driver's license and passed it to the officer at the steering wheel of their cruiser.

He glared at me. "Cut your hair."

I wouldn't do that, and I didn't think he would arrest me.

A woman came out of that store. She reported what she had seen, and she knew at least one of their names.

The officer turned his attention back on me. "What's your local address?"

"I pay an old black man for me to camp in a pine woods on a creek. I can show you, but I never noticed any house numbers on that shack he lives in."

The officers exchanged a glance. He handed me back my driver's license. "We can't arrest them if we can't summon you to court to testify."

I nodded at that woman. "She can. But honestly, officer, let's say that my wearing a dress had been too much for them. One of them has a crunched larynx. Another has a cut across his front and a deep wound in an arm. Think at least one of them might go to a hospital? Might you have the hospitals watch for them?"

The woman interrupted. "I know where the one in a blue shirt lives." She described that as a few blocks away.

The officer's eyes came up to me. "Get your hair cut and stop wearing that dress. You're a public nuisance."

They drove off.

When I turned to thank that woman she had gone.

I found a grocery store on the way I thought went back to that pine woods. I bought two grapefruit, brazed chicken breasts, and frozen peas which I had them triple wrap. It took me all day to find my way back.

I went to the front door of that little shack. A TV was going inside. Even outside it didn't smell too good. Sort of a cross between old moldy wood and ole unwashed black man. There were no house numbers on the wall. I knocked.

He opened the door. "News report of some toughs attacked a young man with long hair in a skirt and a faded red backpack. Was that you?"

“Yes.” I hesitated. “Sir.”

“Well, blow my feathers. The news reporters want to talk with you.”

I didn't answer. I slipped my backpack to his bouncy porch of old wood and opened the top. I came up with a grapefruit in each hand. “Thought you might use these. Sir.”

His eyes went wide as his hands reached out for them.

I came up with that bag of hot chicken breasts except they were cold now. Then I came up with that triple wrapped bag of green peas which didn't feel hard frozen anymore. “Not to be nosey, or anything sir, but I sorta wondered about your diet. I thought maybe you could use these as I passed a store on the way.”

Maybe there were a few tears in his eyes. Or maybe his old eyes were that way anyway. He put those grapefruit down and took the two packages. “You had better come in. My missus died a few years back. Place is a mess.”

It smelled terrible in addition to being a mess. He did have two clean plates and flatware. He served his kind of coffee saying he had added his own chicory.

I took a sip. “Sorry, sir, but I rarely drink coffee. I'm not used to it.”

“No matter.” He reached in his fridge and brought out a coke which I enjoyed.

“You give people food?”

“No, sir. You were kind to me, and after that attack I became real nervous.”

He nodded at that.

“I thought I could be kind to you. Don't pay me. That would ruin it.”

“Son, you are som'pin' else. Have you ever had grits for breakfast. Good home made grits?”

“No, sir.”

The next morning we had eggs, grits, and bacon.

Warned by the news reports I didn't want to go walking the next day. Instead he drove me to his cousin's place. They had a beauty salon out front, a barber shop in the middle, and a beer hall in the back.

He didn't have to announce me. I doubt there had been a white guy in there for a long time. My long hair and my faded red backpack announced me without using any words.

One of the beauticians came to me and put a hand on my arm. “Teddy brought you here for a reason. I can guess. Would you let us wash your hair, give it the slightest trim, and smooth it out?” She ran her fingers through my hair. “You have nice hair.”

Two of them lifted my backpack and set it in a back corner. They just about

towed me to a chair.

I didn't say a word about their body odor became difficult for me.

They did a nice job on my hair. Even better than down the street from that sea food restaurant.

By now Teddy had brought several guys out front.

I brought my eyes around on the beauticians. "How much?"

"From what we hear call it fair trade. You stood up to those punks. That needed to be done by somebody. You brought Teddy good food. You made the world a better place. At least one little part of it."

Another beautician had something in her curled up hand. "You're not dressing as a woman. Are you? But you do need to get by without being noticed too much. Right?" She opened up her hand with a tube of lipstick in it. She showed me how to apply it and roll my lips. The color was almost my natural lips when I tried it in a mirror there.

I felt tears in my eyes.

Those guys interrupted. "He's ours too." They led me to the back, sat me on a stool, and gave me a cold beer. "Tell us a story. Why you? Why the dress? About the fight."

I did tell them everything. They were reluctant to say so, but I think they felt I understood the prejudice they experienced. I'm not so sure about that. We had a fun afternoon.

When they put out a second beer for me I said "no". That I wasn't used to it. "Could I have a soda instead?" They smiled and gave me one.

One of the men in the back started singing an African American spiritual hymn I had always liked of *Swing Low Sweet Chariot*. I joined right in as they kept singing other good hymns. I asked and we all sang *We Shall Overcome* except they sang it deeper and slower than I remembered it. I sang it their way.

The grits were as delicious the next morning. I brought dinner except Teddy took us in his car returning to that little store.

This went on for a week or more. I sang, whistled, and hummed those hymns on my own as I walked around.

Finally I decided I had to go. I made a little ceremony at the store after dinner that last night thanking them all for their hospitality of me as the strange one. That I wanted to say thank you in a special way. I handed Teddy a fifty dollar bill.

His eyes went wide.

"Call it rent. But to me it is something else I don't know how to say."

There were little nods of heads among the men there. I felt I had been understood when the words didn't count.

The next morning Teddy fed me grits again and drove me to the bus station.

I hated leaving, but I had to for reasons I couldn't even say to myself. We shook hands at the last moment before I went inside.