



Mississippi Ramblin', Readin', Toe Tappin'

Orman Day

RELIEVED OUR CORPSES weren't resting in the murky depths of a steaming Arkansas swamp, my two sisters and I let out a trill of nervous laughter when we rode across the wide river into Mississippi, a land where we hoped to find a less frightening definition of Southern hospitality.

In my native California, I was tugged toward the Magnolia State, but I didn't know why. I felt revulsion at the murders of Emmett Till and the three civil rights workers, and had heard [Phil Ochs](#) of Texas sing about dragging Mississippi's muddy river, snagging anonymous corpses. And I had read [Anne Moody](#)'s description of growing up Black and poor in *Coming of Age in Mississippi*.

Yet there was a pull that can't be explained by my adulation of [William Faulkner](#)'s *The Sound and the Fury* and [Tennessee Williams](#)'s *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. Only decades later would I study my genealogy and trace my ancestral bloodline back to a county through which flows the Tallahatchie River of "Ode to Billy Joe," sung by [Bobbie Gentry](#), who—like virtually every writer and musician in this essay—was born in Mississippi.

And now, on a morning in '68, I had finally arrived in the state that had given the world Elvis the Pelvis and opera soprano Leontyne Price. I was grinning when my sisters and I and our mountain of luggage were unload-

image credits

ed at a cafe by the kindly man who had quickly answered the plea of our anxious faces and outstretched thumbs in Arkansas. We ate breakfast and talked to diners who were curious about the otherworldliness we represented: Candy, a cute 18-year-old whose blonde hair was topped by a beret; Laurel, a pretty 20-year-old brunette; and myself, a fledgling literary writer in search of characters to populate my fiction, a brown-haired college graduate days away from my twenty-second birthday.

Because our attire verged on hippie-ish, no one was surprised we were from southern California. But jaws dropped when we said we were hitchhiking to Maine. Asked if our parents were worried, we answered that Dad, a railroad clerk, and Mom, a yardage salesperson at JCPenney, happily saw us board a Greyhound in Los Angeles. A couple days later, without alerting our folks, we freed ourselves of bus schedules and larcenous vending machines.

Only in Jackson amidst our fellow Methodists at Millsaps College did Laurel feel safe enough to describe the previous night. She was a masterful storyteller because our family's guiding principle was—in the literary words of [Donna Tartt](#)—"that laughter was light, and light was laughter, and that this was the secret of the universe."

To well-scrubbed students who alternately shuddered and shook with mirth, she explained she had insisted

we detour to Pine Bluff and drop in on the grandfather of Russ, a college classmate who promised we'd be astounded by the warmth of the old man's welcome. But Mr. Moran was cadaverous looking, hard of hearing and confused, and no, we couldn't stay there.

As the sun was setting, my sisters and I returned to our bags out front and collapsed with hysterical laughter. A 10-year-old girl named Buzzy listened to our plight, scampered into the white frame house next door, and returned with an invitation to spend the night. Hours later, as I lay slumbering lamb-like on a cot a few yards away from the pulldown couch where my sisters were begging God to spare us, Buzzy's drunken dad stood above me in his underpants with a knife hidden beneath his undershirt. As I learned at Millsaps, he lusted for Laurel, who had rebuffed his entreaties, and figured I was an obstacle. Something—maybe my guardian angel—kept the ex-infantryman from giving in to his violent impulses, and finally he fell into a troubled sleep. By daybreak, we were gone.

In Jackson, if I had already read *Delta Wedding*, I would've steered my sisters toward the Tudor-style home of [Eudora Welty](#). Maybe she would've served us sweet tea, maybe she would've shut the door in our expectant faces because she was engrossed in *Losing Battles*. Though I never met her, my



own literary pursuits have been guided by her words: "Great fiction shows us not how to conduct our behavior but how to feel."

On a southbound highway leading out of Jackson, a luxury car stopped for us. Radiating wealth and power, the silver-haired driver introduced himself as either Mr. Justice or Mr. Justin—we couldn't tell because of his accent. He loved hearing our stories and watching Laurel try to smoke one of his expensive cigars. He hinted that he had connections to the CIA and knew the truth of the Kennedy assassination. Enchanted by our exuberance, he drove many miles out of his way. If we met

him in Hattiesburg in a few days, he promised, he'd treat us to lodging at the Carriage Inn. Letting us out in New Orleans, he gave us ten dollars to buy steak dinners. That bought us four dinners, including one for Herman the Hippie, who guided us to the loft of a riverside warehouse where we rolled out our sleeping bags and prayed cops wouldn't climb the creaky steps to roust us.

Mr. Justice/Justin wasn't at the Carriage Inn and the manager didn't recognize his name, but we were in luck. That morning in New Orleans we woke up in the water-stained flophouse room we shared



with Squirrel and his motorcycle gang and joined them for breakfast at a rescue mission. Now we were comped a spacious room with our own bathroom. Laurel and Candy bounced on the wide, soft beds. At the motel, we were interviewed for the *Hattiesburg American* by Winfred Moncrief, who wrote about our near-death experience and then quoted me as saying that in New Orleans, I

was warned Mississippians would as soon gun down a “foreigner” as look at him.

In the morning, we were photographed and taken to breakfast by ever-grinning deputy John Quincy Adams, who dropped us off just outside city limits.

We stopped in Laurel, where Laurel—wearing her blue Ben Franklin glasses—posed for an Instamatic

snapshot sitting in the mayor’s chair with her knee-length boots propped up on the desk while Fern the bemused mayor looked on. By the next day, when the *American* was slapping against porches in Forrest and Lamar counties, we were thumbing across Alabama.

From Kittery, Maine, we jotted a postcard to the reporter who wrote a follow-up piece that quoted Candy on our decision to ride the bus back to California, “Like climbing a mountain, who wants to walk down?”

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Out of a Los Angeles hobo jungle in February of ’69, full of Mulligan stew generously spooned out of a sooty pot by an old Black man who looked like he had lived a lifetime of the Delta blues, I hopped the first of the boxcars that would freeze and rattle me to New Orleans for Mardi Gras, embodying words sung by [Mississippi Fred McDowell](#) about being possessed by the boxcar blues to the soles of his wandering shoes.

In a Dallas cafe, I was joined by Rog, a college student. I warned him not to close the boxcar door, lest we become entombed, and suggested that out of common courtesy to railroad workers, he should poop like a parakeet on a newspaper in the non-sleeping end of the car.

Neither of us had much money, certainly not enough to rent a bed in New Orleans or buy ourselves a beer,

so we mooched sips from strangers’ wine bottles and created our own fun, including a fake fistfight.

[Otis Rush](#) sang about roaming roads and tracks, looking for his baby. Near Jackson Square, I thought I found the “Dream Girl” who would inspire me to write great literature: Mary, a fellow Aquarian, an 18-year-old chaste blonde. We talked about religion, the war, my travels. She said she’d never met someone like me. I asked if she wanted to go to La Casa, and she turned me down because “dancing is probably sinful because you wiggle.” We promised to write.

I was never desperate enough to sing “The Road I Travel” along with [B. B. King](#), who moaned that his pillow was a pile of stones, the frigid earth his featherbed. Our third and last night in New Orleans, Rog and I curled atop the floor of a bus station. As shabby as my shoes were, I tied them to my hands so they couldn’t be stolen, and used them as a pillow. In the pockets of my lone set of clothes was seventy-five cents.

Collecting stamps in my boyhood, I was enamored of one that was issued in 1950 to honor America’s train engineers because, like [Jimmie Rodgers](#) (“The Singing Brakeman,” son of a maintenance-of-way foreman), I was from a railroad family. Under my magnifying glass, I studied the portrait of the heroic [Casey Jones](#), whose Canton-bound steam engine collided with a stalled freight train



near Vaughan. Later, I'd hear Casey elegized in ballads sung by [Furry Lewis](#) and [Mississippi John Hurt](#). Casey saved the lives of passengers, but his skull was crushed and his arm torn asunder. I decided my freight hopping days were over.

The next day an assortment of eccentric drivers took Rog and me into Mississippi. During stops, I sought out stores with aftershave testers to give myself a horse bath, clandestinely spraying the armpits of my Pendleton shirt and the crotch of my trousers. As we were stamping our feet outside to keep warm, an old guy—bushy white hair, wire-rimmed glasses slipping down his pocked nose—walked toward us swinging a gas can. He eyed

my mustache skeptically, but agreed to give us a lift if we were still there when he came back from the service station. Because we exaggerated our hunger and didn't raise objections to his scurrilous rant against Blacks, Catholicism, hippies, draft card burners, and the state of California, he slipped us five bucks when he let us out in Brookhaven . . . a lot of money when I could lunch on a dozen cookies sold for a penny apiece in country grocery stores.

Reconnoitering the Holiday Inn, we found an unlocked storage room. Rog dragged a chaise lounge from poolside to our hideout. I balled up on a torn box. Rog fell into a deep sleep immediately, but I couldn't keep myself

from imagining us being arrested for trespassing and—shackled to other inmates—singing the words made famous by [Sam Cooke](#) about laboring on a chain gang.

In the morning, we shaved in the restroom, ate pastries at the restaurant counter, and hit the highway north. After a few rides, we were waving our thumbs when a middle-aged woman told us she had two sons, one with brown eyes like Rog and one with blue eyes like me. She said mothers were waiting and loving us somewhere and gave us a dollar.

After a ride with a Pentecostal preacher on his way to a tent revival, Mike stopped his VW Beetle for us. Twenty-three, round-faced, black hair, half Eskimo and half Scots-Irish, a Vietnam vet. We told him we were coming from New Orleans. He said he was coming from nowhere in particular. He offered to drive us to St. Louis, where I'd stay with a cousin and Rog would fly back to Colorado and give his girlfriend a souvenir mug he shoplifted in New Orleans.

Mike asked where we'd been sleeping. "Anywhere we can," I answered. "Last night, for instance, we stayed at a Holiday Inn in Brookhaven."

"That doesn't sound so bad," said Mike.

"In an unlocked storage room."

"Oh."

I asked how he could be coming from nowhere.

"I don't know where I'm going and I don't know where I've come from. Isn't that nowhere? Just got out of the Army . . . that I know. And I've been in Los Angeles and Dallas and Jackson . . . those I remember. Never any good times or bad. I was just there and there and I'm still going."

He talked about a young woman he saw hitchhiking in an orange bikini in a California beach city. "She looked like the sea, which has always seemed loose and playful and free and unafraid. I was on the wrong side of the street, so I went down to the first place I could to make a U-turn and when I got back, she wasn't there anymore."

Mike sighed and said he wondered if his standards were too high and if he was too ugly to marry the girl he pictured in his mind. "Maybe that's why I'm just driving all over like this, using up all the money I got from the Army."

[Charlie Patton](#) pretty much described some of the towns the three of us saw: one dust-blown, monotonous road, and not much else.

Mike treated us to burgers, and in Oxford, spent three bucks for a motel room for us to share. Elsewhere in the city, a small, unathletic high school senior was struggling to pass English class, which he would have to retake in summer school to get his diploma. His name was [Larry Brown](#), the future author of *Joe* and *Big Bad Love*.

While Rog was showering, Mike

gave me some ointment for my sore foot, explaining he'd been a medic assisting in the operating room. "In Nam, I saw young kids brought in. Some not nineteen. They weren't even sure what they were doing there and yet some of them would die or lose their leg or arm."

His testimony was yet another reason I was going to resist the draft on moral grounds and likely go to prison. [John Lee Hooker](#) expressed some of my thinking in a new song, "Sittin' Here Thinkin'": let's fix our troubles here before we go to Vietnam.

While Rog was drying off in the bathroom, I told Mike, "What's funny is that years from now, when I'm thinking of this little trip, I'll think of all the good times and I'll forget how my foot hurt like crazy and how I kept coughing up phlegm."

Rog yelled from the bathroom, "And how you smelled like an outhouse in the summer!"



My folk-singing partner Rich returned home in late '69 from Vietnam, divorced and disillusioned. Unlucky in the new draft lottery, I knew I'd receive my induction notice in a few months and surely be imprisoned. We decided I'd quit my child care teaching job, and we'd thumb around the country, leaving California with a lucky penny each. He'd play the guitar and I'd bang a bongo drum and shake a tambourine made of bottle caps

nailed to a wooden paddle. Sing for our supper and free housing or starve and shiver trying. No planning at all. When we returned home a hundred days later with five cents each, just before I refused induction in L. A., our official map was a wrinkled tangle of purple felt-penned ink reaching Maine and Florida.

During the times we rode into Mississippi, Rich's hair was longish and he was bearded, raising the suspicions of cops who thought they might have hippies or outside agitators in their midst. A misstep—and as we were to learn at Mardi Gras, even singing can get you jailed—and we might've ended up in the Parchman prison farm, once home to check-forging Vernon Presley, and bluesmen [Son House](#) and [Bukka White](#).

Given our disdain of injustice, Rich and I easily could've led a hunger strike at the prison and faced the lash of Black Annie and confinement in the black hole: a six-by-six-foot windowless cell without a toilet, sink, bed, or light.

In Oxford, we paid our respects at William Faulkner's grave and, earning our keep, entertained at Ole Miss fraternity and sorority houses. We sang popular songs and some originals, including a country tune with the chorus, "I sold my heart at the swap-o-rama / And now I have a hole in my chest." We asked if anyone had a request, besides for us to quit singing. We did whatever it took to



keep everyone's attention: fire-eating, a ventriloquism act with Rich as the dummy, a demonstration of flamingo guitar (not to be confused with flamenco guitar), in which Rich stood on one leg.

In the state, we got rides with a leader of the racist White Citizens Council ("negras in white schools feel lied to when they find out they're not equal to whites"), a guy who said his relatives were involved in the killing of the three civil rights workers in '64 and two young legal aid activists who had been shot at and run out of town while poll watching.

In New Orleans for New Year's Eve, we were busking on Bourbon Street

when Ole Miss students—in town to watch Archie Manning quarterback the Rebels against Arkansas in the Sugar Bowl—called down to us from their balcony. We sang, we drank their beer, we were given twenty-seven bucks, we slept askew on the floor with dozens of partygoers.

On the first day of '70, we thumbed to Slidell, Louisiana, to see Mary, my dream girl and pen pal. Her father was encased in an iron lung, so he used a mirror to watch the Rose Bowl. After they fed us dinner, the father offered to pay for a motel room. We shook our heads and carried our duffel bags out into the frigid night. I didn't have a single moment alone with Mary nor

did she even give me a quick parting peck on the cheek.

Waiting at a gas station near Gulfport, we didn't care which direction a driver took us; we just wanted to warm our feet and dry our runny noses. [Robert Johnson](#) experienced a similar dilemma, falling to his knees at a Mississippi crossroads, praying for a lift.

Legend says Johnson met the devil at a crossroads and traded his soul for success. We met two young gals from Purvis.

Black-haired and in their late teens, J. and S. looked like a female version of the comic duo of Laurel (J.) and Hardy (S.). They were returning home from a rock concert when they saw us illuminated by overhead gas station lights. They spied Rich's guitar case and couldn't open their doors quick enough. Our first groupies. S. kept calling us "cats." Though my voice was hoarse from overuse, the four of us sang all the way to the outskirts of Purvis, a town of two thousand. We pulled up next to a hidden police car, and a cop named Earl said Rich and I could sleep on the floor in city hall.

After we rejoined them the next day, S. and J. drove us to the house S. shared with her widowed mother. In a surreal scenario that could have been written by [Barry Hannah](#), we spent the next twenty-four hours in a tedious psychodrama in which S. and her mother fed off each other's neuroses,

constantly bickered and took turns playing martyr.

S. kept calling Rich to her room to emote about her mom and try to entice him into her bed. Meanwhile, J. didn't bother to comb her hair and the two of us had little to say to each other. She was no dream girl.

In a whiny voice, S. begged us to go to Natchez to hear a band. When we said we were heading to Birmingham, S. said they'd take us there after Natchez. By late Saturday afternoon, we felt so suffocated, we pleaded for a ride to Hattiesburg, a half-hour away.

J. and her pretty sixteen-year-old sister fought over use of the car. The sister went home, but when she saw the four of us heading out of town, she screamed and shook her head violently. Rich and I persuaded J. to turn back for her. Naturally we flirted with her on the way to the Stone Toad dance club, which the girls fortuitously couldn't enter because they weren't twenty-one.

Left at the club, we auditioned for the owner, who hired us to perform during band breaks. An hour later, we were shooting pool when the bartender employee informed us, "There are two girls lookin' for y'all."

I groaned. "Tell 'em we left."

Whenever we told the story, Rich and I called the city Perverse.

More than a month later, after singing and being jailed for reviling a police officer at Mardi Gras, Rich and I thumbed toward the Florida Panhandle,

passing the wreckage left by Hurricane Camille six months earlier. Gulfport native [Natasha Trethewey](#) was only three then, but poetically she would one day describe the scene from film footage: vacant lots, boats washed ashore, a swamp where graves had been, her house on its cinderblocks seeming to "float in the flooded yard."



At age fifty-six in 2002, paunchy and tired of a comfortable routine that included a P.R. job, I felt the stirrings of wanderlust again, recognized myself in the song by [Muddy Waters](#) about being born a rolling stone.

In southern California, I was telling my young poet friend Paige that I'd achieved all my travel goals but one: canoeing the Mississippi. She said she was experienced in the outdoors. I said I had the money to buy a canoe, two tents, gear, and food. I wasn't troubled that I had never paddled a canoe outside the artificial river encircling Disneyland's Tom Sawyer Island. The ghost of Tennessee Williams goaded us, "Make voyages. Attempt them. There's nothing else."

We provisioned ourselves at the St. Paul REI, where straight out of a meet-cute movie, Paige and a clerk named John instantly became enamored of each other. He dropped us and our boat at the river the next day and met us along the way.

Though I didn't bring a disc or tape

player, I paddled to an inner music dependent on the moods of the river and my shoulders. Later, listening to CDs with eyes closed, I would recognize those rhythms. The jazz piano of [Hank Jones](#). The work songs of Parchman inmates. The sorrow of [Tammy Wynette](#), whose voice had a tear-drop in it. The riffing guitar of [Albert King](#). The mezzo-soprano of [Faith Hill](#). The nature-saturated sounds of a composition by [John Luther Adams](#). The booming voice of [Howlin' Wolf](#). Gospel from the [Five Blind Boys of Mississippi](#). The electric blues of [Jimmy Reed](#). The Gulf-and-western of [Jimmy Buffett](#). The blues harmonica of [Sonny Boy Williamson II](#). Even the yodeling of Jimmie Rodgers.

More than a month after our departure from St. Paul, we paddled ashore at Tunica and stretched our legs. If we had had the time and a secure place for the canoe, I might've convinced Paige to thumb to Oxford to see Larry Brown, the fireman-turned-grit-lit-writer who was my mentor at a writers conference. Larry had chuckled at my stories about Purvis and knew the Stone Toad well. Maybe he would've taken us to his pond to fish for crappie, catfish, and Florida bass.

We paddled into the landing named for Feyton Mhoon, an African-American settler who nightly in the mid-1880s set a lantern inside a lighthouse on Rabbit Island to guide riverboats. Here we needed to thumb a ride over the levee

to a small town a few miles away to get food and water. After a Black farmer gave us a lift to and fro, we offered to reciprocate with a canoe ride, but he was fearful of the river and canoes. He was like many folks who knew of someone who was either swept away or swallowed by currents and eddies, or drowned by churning floodwaters.

In Rosedale, we camped amidst armadillos at the Great River Road State Park. After we hitched downtown, we saw young Black men wearing pants with horizontal green and white stripes. I wondered if they were making a fashion statement until it dawned on me they were county inmates tidying up the place. At his pharmacy, Doc Lewis sold us medication for my eye (irritated by sand) and Paige's hand (a large splinter had wounded a finger). We dined on burgers purchased inside A-1 Cleaners. Robert Johnson had a different take on Rosedale. We found it sedate, he remembered it as a wild place where he made blues music and love on the riverside.

In Greenville, I was reminded [William Alexander Percy](#) was born here in 1885. He achieved literary success with his autobiography, *Lanterns on the Levee*. Of the river he wrote, "Every few years it rises like a monster from its bed and pushes over its banks to vex and sweeten the land it has made."

Paddling fifty miles a day now, we found tempting the rooms and buffets at Mississippi's casinos. So at Lula, we

bushwhacked our way from the river up a snake-infested thicket to the Isle of Capri Casino, an oasis with a waterfall. The perky young woman at the counter didn't wrinkle her nose at our sweat-drenched clothes and even smiled when she issued me a card confirming my status as an Island Gold Member. The room only cost twenty-nine bucks, and that included complimentary club sandwiches. For dinner we fattened ourselves on roast beef, shrimp, crab cakes, salad, and pecan pie slathered with ice cream. Sure beat a beef jerky burrito and a desiccated granola bar.

Of course, this generosity was meant to lure gamblers to the tables and machines. I was willing to drop a buck's worth of quarters into the slots, but no more, since the bells never rang for me. Yes, I decided, on an afternoon when sweat was cascading down my face, I'm sure glad I kept enough coins to buy ice cream cones dipped in chocolate.

Days later, *The Vicksburg Post* ran our photo and an article headlined, "California pair canoeing down river; 'God protects fools,' traveler says." The reporter quoted me talking about my unplanned journeys and my philosophy that God protects fools. After mentioning Paige's departure from the voyage in Baton Rouge to join the new boyfriend we met in Minnesota, I was asked if I would attempt the rest of the trip by myself if need be. I answered, "God protects fools, not idiots."

Of Vicksburg, [Ellen Gilchrist](#) wrote, "This is where I learned to swim, where mud first oozed up beneath my toes . . . This is where I believe that if I was vain and looked too long into the water, I would turn into a flower."

If I looked too long into the water, I'd be blinded by the sun's reflection. What [Kiese Laymon](#) was to write about August was true of September, "I didn't understand hell, partially because I didn't believe any place could be hotter than Mississippi in August."

At a casino in Natchez, I sacrificed a few quarters to the slots and then we headed to the buffet. Natchez was the birthplace of Varina Davis, First Lady of the Confederacy. In a novel based on her life, North Carolina-born Charles Frazier described her childhood living in an old-fashioned house called The Briers in the 1830s and 1840s, "Growing up, she witnessed every day all the dirty business of cotton and slaves, all the criminality and culture of the new country passing in miniature below her on the big brown river."

If she gazed downward on a certain September day in 2002, Varina might've seen our green canoe bobbing in the water: Paige and the river rat who introduced himself as Ol' Man River. Perhaps she would've watched us fight for our lives, trying not to capsize in a wake created by a riverboat crowded with camera-clicking tourists.

And then we left Mississippi behind

and entered Louisiana, the Land of Canoe Thieves.



A few years ago, I received a family tree from a niece. My Grandpa Day died when I was a little boy in Glendale, California, where we lived. No one ever told me that he and his parents were born in Mississippi in the 1800s. I was startled to learn that my great-grandfather fought for the Confederacy and was imprisoned by Union troops.

Now that I'm nearing eighty, if a recording of Muddy Waters is played, no one's going to point at me and say there's the Hoochie Coochie man. I may bob my head when John Lee Hooker sings about hoboing, his friendship with freight trains. But I wouldn't trust my knees to sprint alongside a speeding boxcar nor my arms to swing my heft up through the door. Still, I can squeeze my bent body behind the wheel of a car.

So, now I'm daydreaming of a road trip, following Faulkner's words, "Wonder. Go and wonder." I'll tap my toes at Club Ebony in Indianola and the Ground Zero in Clarksdale, and stop in Tippah County to read archives and seek out weathered tombstones. I might even pause in Purvis to see if two elderly women are rocking in squeaky chairs on a splintered porch, awaiting the magical return of the minstrels they long ago discovered beneath a Mississippi moon. ✱