

The Purple Crackle

By William Matthew McCarter

All of us were looking forward to a lively night of decadence and pleasure over on the Illinois side of the river. Ole Mark Twain painted the Illinois side of the Ole Muddy Water as being almost idyllic and in many ways it was. While The Purple Crackle was not the rustic utopia of Jackson's Island, it did have some qualities that old Tom and Huck could never have imagined – Free flowing liquor twenty three and a half hours per day and eighteen year old college girls trying to get someone to buy it for them.

The black light magic of The Purple Crackle played tricks on my weary eyes. All of us looked like distorted figures in the funhouse mirror of a Saturday morning alcohol binge on the borderlands between fantasy and reality. I only hoped that the honeys in this fine establishment liked blue jeans faded on farm boys. After we got past the bar near the entrance, we found our crew from Annie Batiste's. John immediately started talking to Larry and Aaron and I began a kabuki dance on the razor's edge of fact and fiction, flirting with the Piankashaw girls sitting at an adjoining table.

Helen bought Roscoe a shot of '43 and a cold bottle of Busch beer. Roscoe held it up into the air in a mock "cheers" and yelled, "To me, cause it's my fuckin' birthday." Roscoe downed the shot and chased it with a drink of his cold beer but didn't say anything. His eyes moved around menacingly eyeballing our little circle of faces. Roscoe was 38 years old and hadn't been counting since he got kicked out of high school. I looked at this little celebration as the twentieth anniversary of his eighteenth birthday.

Helen was doing her best to ensure that Roscoe had a happy birthday by feeding him drinks and dancing with him whenever the band played a song that he liked. Roscoe loved to dance and wasn't half bad at it, but he often struggled with finding a partner because he needed about six beers in him to get his Mister Bojangles groove on and after about six beers, what little social skills he had went right in the fuckin' toilet.

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John was getting pretty loaded, which was very unusual for him, and I slowed down on my drinking, which was unusual for me. I had learned through the bitter classroom of experience that if you were out on the hunt, and I was pretty sure that I was, there was a fertile hour with us whiskey drinkers. Smart money said that you had to be alert. If you missed that fertile hour, you were no longer with that lascivious harlot who could, and for that matter, should star in a porno film, you were with an unidentified body that had been dredged up from the mighty Mississippi. When you're drunk off your ass, you are damn sure that the piece of ass you picked up looks just like Shania Twain when you are pounding her pee hole. But those drunken memories of Shania fade pretty damn fast when you wake up with a skank that looks a whole lot more like Mark Twain than she ever did Shania.

Besides that, I could drive drunk but I couldn't drive wasted – at least not in Southern Illinois on a Friday night. Annie and Cindy, the two girls at the adjoining table, were paying an unusual amount of attention to me so, as a consequence, I slowed down my drinking even more, because I knew that I would need all my wits about me if the situation arose where I might be able to get in their pants. I didn't know it then, but that was about as lucky as I was going to get that Thursday night. Lady Luck had other commitments apparently.

They were both way out of my league – at least by Piankashaw standards – they were both rich - at least by Piankashaw standards - they were both a part of the upper echelon of respectable families - at least by Piankashaw standards. Rich girls from Piankashaw's elite families have always married rich boys from other elite families but they have been known to go slumming every once in a while. I was having a hard time trying to figure them out. Sometimes their expressions read, "I'd like to take you out in the alley and blow you because I'm in college and feel like goin' out slumming" and sometimes, they looked more like, "I could do better than you in a homeless shelter." This confusion made me want to pace myself with the alcohol even more - at least until I figured out if they were slummin' or I was bummin'.

Before any of the idle prattle with the Piankashaw girls could evolve into even the remote possibility of me going yodeling in one of their canyons, Helen rounded us all up and

told us that we had to get out of there. Now Roscoe has been known, on occasion, to irritate people. It is a trait that has been with him for much of his star crossed life and this was one of the moments when Uranus was circling Mars or some of that astrological shit. According to Helen, Roscoe had gone to the bathroom and after some punk assed preppy fucker made a disparaging remark to him, Roscoe turned around and pissed all over the poor kid's Levi's. Since Roscoe was too scary to confront, the little chicken shit told the bouncer and they threw Roscoe out.

"Just let me sleep," Roscoe said as we led him out of The Purple Crackle and across the parking lot to the van, "since there ain't no more fuckin' beer."

"Don't get him started," John said as he crawled in the back with Roscoe, "he'll never shut the fuck up and I'm tired."

"Ken, the bar manager, told me to give him a call later on because he wants to book you guys again," Helen said eagerly as we pulled out of the parking lot of the Purple Crackle, "he really likes the way you sing," she continued, looking at me with her big brown eyes.

"He likes the way the cash register sings," I said as I drove down the highway and across the bridge back over to the Missouri side of the river.

"Why do you always do that when people give you a compliment, Billy," she asked.

"Because it's true," I said, "It all boils down to a big fat stack of cash at the end of the night. It doesn't matter how good you are or how good you think you are. The only thing that matters is how much money you make them. It all boils down to how many empty liquor bottles get thrown away."

"Don't you think that you have to be good to make them money," John asked.

"Sometimes," I replied, "but you can't be good and not make them money. There's no room in the bar band business for art for art's sake."

"We kicked ass tonight," John said, "even Larry and Aaron thought so. Why do you have such a shitty attitude all of a sudden?"

"Because I am a realist," I said.

“Well, Mr. Realist,” Helen interjected, “It looks like you’re going to be going back to Annie Batiste’s sometime soon.”

“Good,” I said, “Because I like her gumbo.”

Helen was riding shotgun and both John and Roscoe were lying on top of our speaker cabinets’ sound asleep as I drove us to the hotel in Fredericksburg. A thick, sultry smell was in the air as my long, raven hair flickered in the breeze. Helen had just put her hair up in a ponytail. I just lit up a cigarette and as I looked over toward her, the tiny blue-white flame of the lighter changed her face. I saw new hollows and ridges, outlining her straight, thin nose, the high cheekbones, the straight jaw and slightly pointed chin. Her long brown hair was in a ponytail pulled up over her left ear and wrapped around the back of her head. The different shades of brown formed a kind of patchwork in her hair. A single hair had worked its way loose and swung around her face like a halo, backlit by the cigarette lighter.

“Want this for your hair,” she asked, holding a rubber band?

“I’d love one but I’m driving,” I said.

“Let me help you.” I felt electrified as she ran her fingers through my hair and pulled a rubber band around a makeshift pony tail.

Roscoe was snoring in the back of the van and sounded like a dilapidated lawnmower on its last leg. In contrast, John was quietly sleeping beside him and I could see the two of them in the rear view mirror, watching their lungs ebb and flow in almost perfect harmony with one another. I thought to myself, “This is about the only time that John and Roscoe are being harmonious. The only time anyone in this band gives any thought to harmony is when we are singing on the stage.” The near silence was broken by the subliminal hum of what sounded like a worn out U joint in the rear end. I made a mental note to myself to have a look at it.

There was a long stretch of silence to accompany the long stretch of road leading out of Cape and back on Route 72 toward Fredericksburg. However, in this tepid cauldron of emptiness, something strange was unexpectedly pitched.

“Let me ask you a question,” I said to Helen, half because I wanted to know, and half

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just because I wanted to break the silence in the darkness as we continued down Route 72.

“Only if I get to ask you one,” she smiled.

“Fair enough,” I said, “So tell me, why are you so gung-ho about promoting this band?”

“I told you,” she said, “I think you guys are great and can go somewhere. Besides, my old boss at contemporary said that agents’ know how to spot talent. I figured if I could prove that I can spot talent, then I can convince contemporary to give me a job.”

“So your success is tied to ours, then,” I asked.

“Billy,” she said, “it’s my turn to ask a question.”

“Fine,” I said, “What do you want to know?”

“Do you know who Monet is,” she asked.

“What kinda fuckin’ question is that,” I asked, expecting something that had to do with something and not some art trivia question.

“Just answer the fuckin’ question,” she said in a playful and yet, interrogatory tone.

“Monet was a French painter. His best known work is The Garden. I think they call him an Impressionist,” I answered.

“That’s incredible,” she exclaimed, “How do you know that.”

“Well, a few of us po’ white folk around here actually is edjucated and right open minded at times,” I said in my best imitation of what I would consider to be a bad imitation of what I would call an exaggeration of the Chigger American that we spoke in Piankashaw.

“I took some classes while I was in the Navy and I’ve always read a lot. I’m not stupid, you know.”

“No, don’t get me wrong. You really seem smart,” she replied, “I just wonder why you didn’t stay in school – you know... get a degree in something.”

“What good would it do,” I said, “a college education wouldn’t get you very far in the rock and roll world. There are no degrees in sex, drugs, and rock and roll. In this game, you’ve got to assess your talents and do whatever is necessary to maximize your potential. It’s no different than life its own self – but whatever you do, it’s got to bear fruit.”

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“So, what you are saying is that you’ve got your jive down and now you’re talkin’ your shit.”

I had to admire her brutal honesty, calling bullshit “bullshit.” Before I could respond, she asked “What made you decide to become a musician in the first place?”

“I played in a band with my Uncle Jake back when I was in high school. After I got out of the Navy, and moved back home, I needed a job. I went down to the IGA and asked for a job bagging groceries. The manager told me that I was too smart to be bagging groceries and knew that I wouldn’t be happy with the job.”

“Then what did you do,” Helen asked?

“I looked at him and said, ‘Show me the guy you got bagging groceries who’s life’s ambition it is to sack groceries.’ He just looked at me and said, ‘I don’t think we can use you here.’ As I was walking out, I saw the bag boy. He was from Piankashaw Community Services – one of the retards that John is supposed to be teaching aesthetics to. It was then that I knew that I couldn’t do anything for anybody in the Piankashaw Valley. I had to be in a band. I didn’t have any other choice.”

“John teaches aesthetics,” she asked, puzzled.

“Well, sort of...” I said, “John has this part-time job integrating the retards from Piankashaw Community Services into the community. He has to run them around town and shit. I call it ‘teaching aesthetics to retards’ because he is supposed to get them into all the cultural kitsch and consumer schlock we have. He is supposed to turn them into tourists in the Piankashaw Valley.”

“Sounds like an interesting gig,” she said.

“Yeah, it’s a good gig, if you can get it,” I replied.

“Why didn’t you move after you came back from the Navy,” she asked, “I mean, if you couldn’t find a job or anything that you wanted to do, then why didn’t you just move?”

“I thought about it several times,” I said, “You know what they say: It’s no disgrace to come from Piankashaw, it’s just a disgrace to come back there.”

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“Every time I think about leaving, reality has a way of coming back to bite me in the ass. First and last month’s rent plus a security deposit is a whole lot of money to come up with all at once. At first, it was easier and just more fun movin’ around, playing in a band, and having a good time. Somewhere along the line, that became what I wanted to do.”

“Don’t you ever wonder if there isn’t anything better out there,” she asked.

“I know there are lots of things that are better. What I don’t know is how to even begin searching for a better life. I’m not ready to let go of what little I have on the slim premise that somewhere out there, there might be something better. Sometimes I think that I might be ruining my life at the same time that I think I am enjoying it.”

“Are you ruining your life?”

“Well, before you ruin your life, it goes without saying that you have to have one. And you don’t really want to waste your life, if in fact you actually have one, by continually worrying if you’re ruining it or not. It’s really too late for me, I’m a musician. I’ve made my choice. When you do this long enough and hard enough, you break something. Emotions die and circuits burn out. For me, it’s not so much about life its own self as it is about the crazy world that we live in. We live in a fuckin’ crazy world, and if you want to get through it with your body and soul even a little intact, you might as well be a little crazy yourself. Just about every day, I say these same things, make this same speech to the Joe Camel head that is super glued up here on the dash.”

Helen laughed and then said, “And what does he do?”

“He just looks back at me through those stupid sunglasses and silently smokes a cigarette,” I said.

“Is that supposed to be some kind of an answer,” Helen asked.

“It’s the only kind of answer that people need,” I said, “People don’t want their listeners to tell them the truth, they just want people to listen.”

“Yeah,” Helen said, “but that stupid little plastic beer holder doesn’t say anything at all.”

“You’re right,” I replied, “and that’s why I keep him glued to the dashboard.” Just as I said that, I thought I felt a wink come from behind Joe Camel’s lapis-lazuli sunglasses and also

thought I saw a shit eating grin struggling to come out from his mouth as Joe continued to smoke his cigarette in silence.

“So this is how you’ve got it all figured out,” Helen asked, “by talking to a plastic Camel head?”

“Well, nobody ever gave the Buddhists any shit for worshipping a fat bastard sitting under a Banyan tree... Besides, it doesn’t take a genius to figure out that although each and every one of us Americans is somehow entitled to the pursuit of happiness, in all those pursuits, we never really catch up with it. We’re all just like the little fat Shriner circus fuckers riding one of those Honda Trailblazers in a drag race with a Corvette across the Bible Belt. We may feel like we’re moving forward, but we aint catchin’ that Corvette kind of happiness.”

“There you go with your melancholy again,” she said, “Is that really who you are?”

“I’ll tell you what I am. I’m a poor white trash Southern postmodern Gen X’er... Us white trash bottom feeders lost our broad sword and family crest a long time ago. Everything else is up for grabs.”

When we got to the motel room in Fredericksburg, A.J. was already passed out. The room had two queen sized beds, so John crashed out beside A.J. That meant that I was stuck sharing the other double with Roscoe so I poured him into the other bed and then walked Helen and Nikki out to their car.

“I really enjoyed our chat,” Helen said, just before she drove her Camaro off into the purpling Midwestern midnight.

“I did, too,” I said to the air as I watched the tail lights of her Camaro fade away into the darkness.

The End

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William Matthew McCarter bio: William Matthew McCarter, a Pushcart nominee, is a writer and a college professor from Southeast Missouri. After earning his doctorate in English from The University of Texas-Arlington, McCarter has focused on the plight of rural America in both his creative and academic work. McCarter's work has appeared in *The Dead Mule School of Southern Literature*, *Midwestern Gothic*, and many other literary magazines. His first academic book, "Homo Redneckus: On Being Not Qwhite in America" was published in March of 2012. Along with Vicki Sapp, McCarter co-edited an anthology on White Trash literature called *Trash Told Tales*. It was published in November of 2014. For more information, see McCarter's wikipedia page.