

Excerpt:

Chicago Blues, Book 2 of *Medicine for the Blues* trilogy
pages 2-6

At a roadhouse where they'd stopped for lunch, the band members began talking about what they would do first in the Windy City. Chuck, the trombone player, was a big bear of a fellow who rarely talked, preferring to let his horn speak for him. He surprised them when he volunteered, "I want to see the Loop first." Everyone turned toward him. "What about you, Diggs?" he said.

The band leader and business manager of the group scrunched up his freckled face and ran a hand over his red hair. "I'm going to be pretty busy hustling up play dates for you fellas. I don't think I'll have much time for sightseeing. I'll be lucky if I can find time to practice my cornet."

Jimmy's old college friend Howard Henderson, the clarinet player, repeated his intention to go to a high-toned brothel. He had a reputation as a womanizer and his looks helped him out in that department. Because of his suave demeanor and air of worldly knowledge, the other band members tended to look up to him.

Larry, the banjo player, smirked at Howard. His long, thin face and pointed nose always reminded Jimmy of a weasel, and Jimmy often had second thoughts about Larry's judgment.

"Hey, I'm with you," Larry said. "I haven't been able to get close to a girl this whole trip." The remark was no surprise and the others laughed. Larry was so brazen with girls that he usually offended them. He affected a bravado but lacked Howard's cool finesse. "What do you say, Jimmy?"

"I don't know." Jimmy hesitated. "I'd like to hang onto my money until we see how things work out in the big city."

"Oh-ho. I bet you're just chicken." Larry elbowed Jimmy.

"Aw, get outta here." Jimmy elbowed him back.

Bill, the drummer, who spent a lot of his time with Larry, chimed in. "Why, I bet Jimmy hasn't gotten any since he broke up with his girl this summer." There was a dumb grin on Bill's face. He had bad acne, bad table manners, and a bad habit of making thoughtless remarks intended as jokes. The band members all knew that Jimmy's break-up was still a sore spot.

Jimmy shot Bill a piercing glance.

Larry caught Jimmy's look and said, "That is, unless Jimmy's turned fairy on us and he's been getting it from that doctor fella." Amused with himself, Larry let out a horselaugh, and Bill joined in.

"You haven't turned pansy on us, have you?" Bill called out. The remark could be heard across the cafe over the murmur of the

other diners.

A sudden rage flooded Jimmy and before he knew what he was doing, he jumped up, and with more force than he intended, yelled, “Oh, go to hell, you bastards.” A silence fell over the cafe. As Jimmy turned to walk away, his coat caught on his chair and it fell to the floor with a clatter. He stormed out the door.

When he got hold of his emotions, he was a quarter mile up the road. Something told Jimmy he should just keep on walking and never turn back.

The sound of a stream running alongside the road murmured to him through the trees. He remembered talking to Carl by a stream at the Grange dance not long after they first met. He missed Carl with a deep ache that surprised him.

He stopped and took a deep breath. Carl had listened with concern when Jimmy described his disastrous engagement to his girlfriend Mary. Jimmy had wanted to prove his manhood after Carl made that pass at him, so he proposed to the girl and persuaded her to have sex. She had seemed so willing and passionate, but then Jimmy wasn’t able to perform. His wounded pride resisted the memory.

To hell with Larry and his insinuations, Jimmy thought, maybe I should just forget about Chicago—and the band, too.

Deep in thought, he walked on. Up ahead through the trees, the stream babbled along below the roadway, and across the water an embankment with railroad tracks rose above it. In a clearing farther on, the smoke from a small campfire caught his attention. There sat two hobos, one was about 30 with a full dark beard, the other, a youngster. A passing fantasy about taking up the life of a hobo flickered across Jimmy’s mind. Maybe he could befriend these knights of the road and they would teach him how to hop a freight back to Oregon and Carl.

Then doubts overwhelmed him. What would he do without the band? Jimmy slowed his pace. What if they left without him?

Jimmy wanted a musical career and he thought that he could have that with the band. Besides, he had been with them the better part of a year, and now he felt somehow bound to them. He might be able to find another band or make it on his own, but he knew he was not prepared to do that now. Standing there, teetering on the cusp of the past and the future, he had no idea what tomorrow would bring, and it seemed safer to cling to something he knew than to strike out into the unknown all by himself.

Jimmy stopped and fumbled for a cigarette. As he struck a match, he noticed that his hands were still trembling. He knew he had to calm down and think this through.

Maybe the band could make it big in Chicago, and he wanted to be there with them to make it happen. Maybe he could even

learn to change and be like the fellows in the band, after all. Maybe he could go to the cat house and prove himself to them, prove his manhood, prove to himself that he could still desire women. He was willing to try. He decided he had to. Maybe he could arrange to see Mary again in Chicago and even patch things up with her after their ill-fated engagement.

He turned and headed back toward the cafe, collecting his thoughts and planning what to say to the band members, trying to think of a way to smooth over his outburst.

When he got back to the roadhouse, the band members were standing around the two cars, some leaning on the fenders, Howard with his foot up on the running board smoking. Jimmy mustered his courage and looked straight at them as he approached.

“Hey, Jimmy,” Larry began, but Jimmy held up both palms to stop him.

“Fellas, look, I’m sorry about that. I didn’t mean to fly off the handle. It’s just that Dr. Holman has been so good to me, letting me leave my stuff at his house and all. He’s been a real pal and I—I’m sorry, Larry, I know you were only kidding me.”

“He didn’t mean anything by it, Jimmy,” Diggs stepped in. The others voiced their agreement.

“I know, I know,” Jimmy raised his hands again in surrender. “I guess I’m just tired from all this traveling. I don’t know what came over me. Just forget it. Let’s go to Chicago. I’ll ride with Larry and Howard for a while.” Jimmy squeezed into the back seat of Howard’s car next to the luggage and the others piled in with Diggs.

Larry settled into the passenger seat, then half-turned to look at Jimmy. As Howard pulled out, Jimmy leaned into the front seat and put one hand on Howard’s shoulder and the other on Larry’s and said, “Say, look, I’ve never even seen a whorehouse. No kidding. Let me come with you when we get to Chicago. What do you say?”

Howard shrugged and said, “It’s your call.” He eased the car into first gear and headed off. Larry let out a whoop and called out, “Wicked, windy city, here we come!”
