

## DESERT OLDS Part 11 Memphis back to New Orleans

Written by Magnus King

Saturday, 13 November 2010 15:18 - Last Updated Thursday, 18 March 2021 21:08

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### THE CAR

Nantucket Blue 1967 Cutlass Town Sedan built Dec 20, 1966, Oshawa, Ontario, Canada. 330-2bbl-250 HP, two speed auto, 2.78:1 axle. To read a history of the Cutlass and check out its MPG look in the GAS LOGS subsection of the TRAVEL STORIES drop down menu. Below is the cover of the 1967 Oldsmobile dealership brochure copyright GM.



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### THE TRIP

Martin, Karen and I loaded up the Cutlass quickly and left the hostel. The streets of New Orleans were jumping with cars and people primed to escape the hurricane.

At 1 AM we pulled into the nearest gas station to fill up before lines started. Cars loaded down and all packed up with stuff vied for the pumps.

Our Cutlass hit Interstate 10 flying fast to beat the traffic jams. During the night we made good progress heading north on Interstate 55. Jackson, Mississippi was coming up when fatigue started to hammer down on us all.

A mosquito infested rest stop captured us around dawn. Karen slept in the car while Martin and I slept on a picnic table.

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Next day we headed further north. The hurricane seemed like a good excuse to see Memphis and it would also keep us ahead of the potential heavy traffic that might be spreading north during the day.

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In Memphis, Tennessee Martin and Karen crashed out in a chaste arrangement in the hotel room. I was as usual hyper and energized and went out to check out the town. I drove around the famous Beale Street and then cruised Union Street.

Drinks were reasonably cheap but even so I nursed drinks for ridiculously long times because I had nothing but a few single dollar bills to my name. This sober development turned out to be a good thing later on in the sequence of my adventures as you will see further down in the narrative. There were a lot of clubs referencing legendary B. B. King and much of the street was a shrine to early blues history.

I found myself talking to some country girls who were interesting mixes of contemporary hip cool tattoo rat rod culture and down home grassroots country. There seemed to be a bit of a retro hip self reflexive nostalgia inherent in not only the styles of clothes but in the music they were choosing to listen to on the jukebox.

I learned a bit about old time country blues music from them but struck out in the action department. They had eyes solely for musicians. Groupies can annoy me sometimes but the New Orleans 'don't give a shit energy' seemed to have really settled into my bones. I nonchalantly shrugged when things didn't pan out and kept drinking with this one petite beautiful girl, Tawny who was holding out for a 'star' but nonetheless sat closer to me than she needed to. She was pressed right up alongside me in the red leather booth. Tawny had dyed black hair in a Betty Page bangs cut and a tight short skirt.

The girls were very hung up on style. Underground hipster dudes with handlebar mustaches and sideburns were acceptable to them because it wasn't done in earnest. So long as it was a self conscious mocking re visitation to past style it 'rocked'. Much the way the gay cowboy style mimicked the real deal cowboys.

But my old jeans, Dayton motorcycle boots and t shirt? No way. Crude and obvious and too close to the real thing. No ironic distance. Real grease monkeys and biker guys are cool but only as a reference point. The retro rebooted trailer park biker trip was a subject to mine as an exercise in ridicule. It was all bullshit to me but what do I care? If I struck out because of all that shit then it didn't matter anyways.

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I tolerated the style talk and learned the ways of the places as we rolled slowly into some straight up country joints where preservation was the key theme. These places were like the traditional jazz joints in New Orleans keeping the past alive in a time tomb. The girls knew their country history and taught me a lot about music that night.

In the old time blues places I asked around if there was any kind of historic stuff related to Howling Wolf here. He recorded for Sun records right here in this town. No one had any idea but many people mentioned B. B. King.

Tawny and her friends had quite a few tattoos between them and I examined the various images and messages as the music blared at us. I thought that most of the tattoos were kind of ephemeral and too topical and lacked longevity. Tawny retorted,

"Oh, there are no set rules on this. Come on! Tattoos can be meaningful or just decorative or plain silly fun. You can show that whole range of ideas. After all there is plenty of skin there to use."

I pointed to a particularly fat skinhead covered in tats,

"Some more than others."

That got a laugh. Tawny moved in closer to me and quietly explained that yes some tattoos have special long reaching meaning. She did understand where I had been going with my criticism of the banal tattoos some people had. I assumed as much since they had such stringent rules about clothing.

Because I had given up on getting anywhere with Tawny our talk was very loose and easy. There was no tense rapid 'important' discussion or any of that 'meaningful' intensity. She was getting palsy with me and thumped my arm whenever I made her laugh at something. I gave her my hotel name in case she wanted to hang out during the day. Her lifestyle circled late night clubbing and her job as a bartender which meant she never awoke before 6 PM. Her parting line was,

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"Maybe I'll see you around again."

That is a line that usually means goodbye forever at the best of times. In this case the possibility of bumping into one another was even less likely since I was here only until the hurricane finished beating up on New Orleans. But with my down south 'let it be' vibe I wasn't disturbed at all by the brush off.

Everything was fine until the girls said goodnight. I got on Highway 240 and got turned around the wrong way somehow. I finally got it figured and was heading west back towards the hotel flying along at high speeds on Poplar when the cops roared out and pulled me over. It was 5:00 AM. I just wanted to get back to the hotel and sleep and now I had to go through a long drawn out hassle.

There was no question I was due for a whopper speeding ticket. I was out of State. They would escort me to jail where I would be stuck until Karen could come down and bail me out and pay the fine. This was going to take hours. I breathed a sigh of relief when I was able to remember the name of our hotel. Not the room number but at least I remembered the hotel name. Otherwise I would be in jail with no access to money. Totally screwed.

The good thing about being broke this evening was that it had limited me to 2 drinks and many glasses of water over an 8 hour period of time. I was stone dry sober with my driver's licence in my left hand dangling out the open window in readiness.

I involuntarily did a double take when the rear view mirror reflected the absolute hottest female cop on earth walking nonchalantly towards my car. I couldn't believe it. She was a natural blonde, petite, curvy and had the cutest face imaginable. None of the usual over compensatory body language female cops frequently employ was in evidence. She was amazingly graceful despite the thick soled shoes and heavy utility belt.

"Good morning, sir. Thank you for having your license ready."

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"No problem."

"Do you know why I pulled your car over today?"

"Probably for speeding."

"That's correct. Where are you coming from?"

I told her the whole story of getting lost and finally figuring it out and wanting to just get home to sleep. It was hard to tell in the dark with the harsh streetlights but her eyes were gorgeous blue or green. She was stunning not only in looks and movements but also in her attitude. No one was going to believe this really happened. She smiled at me and asked me to step out of the car. I walked the line and touched my nose and performed some other rudimentary drunk driving tests.

"I can understand that you're anxious to get back and must have been frustrated but you were more than double the limit."

She paused for effect before letting the penny drop,

"I'm going to let you off with a verbal warning. But please slow down. If I can see your map we can plot out a direct route back to your hotel. You get there pretty quickly even at legal speeds."

The mini map of Memphis in the atlas provided some of the main streets but little else. She remarked,

"This map only provides the barest outline of the city. No wonder you ran into trouble navigating."

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She showed me where we were relative to the map which confirmed that I had correctly figured out the layout. She provided directions and wished me a good night. I couldn't resist sending out a neutral feeler by commenting that she must get asked out all the time on the job. She smiled and nodded in a way that was a cue to not venture down that path. After one last long smile she was gone.

Martin was not going to believe this one. Even I barely believed it. This was as ridiculous as those hokey movie scenes that are so unrealistic no one can help snorting in derision. There are no real life cops like this! But it really happened.

I drove home right on the limit. If more cops had realistic and approachable attitudes like her you'd have a whole city driving within the letter of the law. Of course the gorgeous factor has to be taken into account, too.

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Back in the dark A/C of the hotel room at 6 AM I plunged into a deep sleep on the thickly carpeted floor and didn't wake up till 11 AM. I joined Karen and Martin who were watching the storm news on TV. The hotel had free HBO and we watched a movie called Regarding Henry while eating breakfast.

Our requisite visit to Graceland had one strange element to it. Tourists put their names on the wall the way people etch their names in trees. The graffiti covered the entire grounds on the outside perimeter. I hadn't noticed it last night when I checked out the place in the dark without the crowds.

Karen and Martin wanted to visit the Memory Lane Motel where a stock of newspapers from the day Elvis died were yellowing in a pile. We viewed the Lisa Marie airplanes with the TCB lightning bolts (Taking Care of Business). There was an endless supply of schlock such as Elvis clocks, cups, cookbooks, records, tapes and even a Sun Studio make your own hit. There were also good collectibles such as rare photos of Elvis. A lot of old guys with ducktail haircuts were ransacking the inventory.

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We picked up some groceries from a local supermarket named Piggly Wiggly and then headed to a drive in. We were in a rush and I guiltily recalled the lecture from my blonde cop this morning but with some other cars sucking up the fast lane at 90 MPH I fell in behind them and used them as radar shields.

The Cutlass rolled into the drive-in on Sunny Street at sundown when the films were set to start. There were no big clunky old speakers to attach to your window to provide the soundtrack. The movie soundtracks pumped into the car via our AM radio tuned to 530 on the dial. Lightning in the sky made our soundtrack occasionally crackle dramatically. We watched a double feature then headed back to the hotel.

Back at the hotel GOODFELLAS was on HBO. After it finished it was quite late and neither Martin or Karen wanted to go out. I went out alone to cruise about downtown. Karen gave me 5 bucks which I stretched out as long as possible in a couple of bars downtown. I tried out some new places.

I ended up in a joint with pool tables and a small stripper stage. Someone was calling out to me. It was Tawny and the hipster girls from the prior night. This marked the only time in history that someone has said to me "Maybe I'll see you around." and it has actually happened. The girls were very happy to see me and each gave me a long hug hello. That put me in a good mood.

I lost a game of pool against the girls and they bought me a drink as consolation. I teased them about their groupie mission,

"How come you girls are out here? There's no bands playing in this place."

"Every once in awhile we go out just for the heck of it!"

They brought me along to a hole in the wall hardcore punk rock place which seemed light years

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away from anything Memphis traditionally stands for. It was hard to believe this place existed in Old Opry land. Notably there was a very small audience. I guessed that there were very few people in all of Memphis who dug this stuff. The girls straightened me out quickly.

"There's a whole scene going on here and it's bigger than you think."

True to their word the place filled up later on and was unbearably hot and packed. Later in the night I needed some air and relief from the pounding noise. We drove along the river.

Along the Mississippi River a big dark pyramid rose up into the black sky. The Pyramid Arena is a stainless steel pyramid 32 stories high. Memphis built this tribute to the original pyramids that originated in the ancient city of Memphis in Egypt where stone pyramids sit along the Nile River. The girls explained it all to me while Tawny got slightly cozy with me leaning her head on my shoulder in the front seat.

I put the car in park and we all got out to walk down to the river. I draped my arm around Tawny while her friends were were finding a spot to sit ahead of us. Tawny lifted my arm off and said,

"Just what do you think you're doing?"

"Giving up."

Instead of spouting out some jokey comeback leaving the possibility open for something later I abruptly let it drop and lay back against the grassy slope. We watched the river. The New Orleans lax vibe is some kind of vapor which rode all the way up to Memphis on the black oily looking Mississippi River to puncture my initiative.

A languid dark energy wafted off the Mississippi sapping my mojo and making me unwilling to fight the uphill road of the groupie mindset.

Groupies 'save' themselves for someone 'important'. That meant anyone that stood on a stage

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anywhere no matter how minuscule the venue and no matter how shitty and banal the band. I had easily maneuvered in those situations before. All it takes is confidence, charm and a few hours. But tonight my initiative was gone after encountering mild resistance and negativity. Martin commented once that New Orleans is the place that ambition goes to die so I must have absorbed the Nawlins energy somehow.

The girls wanted to go to a liquor store. We headed down to a seedy area of Elvis Presley Boulevard where cheap alcohol stores stayed open late. I instructed them,

"Vodka!"

Since I had the car my rule stood. Brandishing 2 insanely big bottles of vodka we stood under a night sky lit up with blazing lights. The fire of petroleum plants festooned with mazes of pipes and twists and turns. All this churning industry pumped away behind big barbed wire fences.

As we drove around President's Island the girls regaled me with stories of moonshiners and other outlaws that used to roam this area according to local legend. It was pretty barren with heavy industrial stuff scattered around on scrub brush.

When her friends got out of the car to go giggling behind some bushes to pee Tawny and I had a quiet talk. She was warming up to me but I was feeling the vodka which mixed with my Nawlins reinforced ennui regarding fighting the streams of life. I just left things as they were despite the sense of 'maybe' hanging in the air between us.

The girls directed me to Graceland. The front gates shone with multicolored lights. Elvis seems to unite the hillbilly crowd, the country crowd, the rockers, the crooners and even the punks. He was a conduit to everything. Elvis had so many phases in his career he is perceived as the precursor to just about everything. There were several other people at Graceland despite the late or now probably technically early hour. The different demographics and age groups were all united in their Elvis moment.

The alcohol was working on Tawny and she snuggled up to me and we kissed then began

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making out. It was 6 AM and her girlfriends wanted to crash out.

I drove them back to their place. After the other two had rushed off into their rooms to collapse Tawny stood in the door and smiled hesitantly,

"Why not come back at dinnertime? We can go out on our own."

"With the storm dying down Karen isn't likely to spring for another night in the hotel. I'll probably be heading south in a few hours."

She shrugged and said,

"What will be will be."

We looked at each other for a second. It was as if someone was waiting for something to happen. That New Orleans 'let it flow' mindset allowed the moment to dwindle away. I was supposed to make it happen. I had the car and no one could go anywhere without me. I could call the hotel and tell them I was busy for awhile. I could give a push to the Tawny situation. I could suggest we go inside and 'talk'. New Orleans style languid looseness prevailed. The moment passed.

I never saw her again.

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Back at the hotel I conked out on the carpet sometime after 6 AM. I woke up with a hangover pondering that New Orleans energy that let the Tawny thing dribble into nothing. A sort of fatalism or maybe a passive way of observing the patterns of life and the world. Everything is vague or murky... misty. Maybe the humidity creates that slowness and lack of punctuation or urgency. I wondered if Tawny would ponder things that happened between us when she woke

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up tonight or just shrug and carry on with her night scene.

At 11:00 AM we checked out of the hotel and left Memphis.