



Crooners and Guilt

By Bob Skoggins

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Charles could see his father peeking out the window as he walked up to the porch. Wade was waiting for him and opened the door before his son could knock. The house was messy. There were bags, wrappers, and napkins all over the coffee table. Different colored stains covered the couch. In the corner were stacks of records. Charles wouldn't have been surprised to see a goat in the corner.

"What's going on?" said Charles. "Jim told me you were thinking about borrowing some money and said you wanted to talk to me about it." His dad had aged horribly the last few years. He hadn't been taking care of himself. His arms were bruised, his hair was thinning, his jeans were torn. Everything was unkempt except his elephant boots.

Wade turned down Elvis and spoke, his voice loud and hoarse. He sounded rehearsed. "We are going to make what you call an investment. I will be taking out the loan and Jim will be doing the buying. We're going to buy a horse drawn hearse. That's good business. There are a lot of old guys like me who'll be keeling over soon. We've already got some requests. Arkansas is the place for this, Charles. This is a good business opportunity." He cleared his throat. "What do you think?"

"I think you're not a businessman."

"We won't be buying a hearse from a company. Jim knows a guy who can build one."

"How much will it be?"

"And there'll be some extra costs."

Charles raised his eyebrows. "And?"

"Twenty thousand."

"Dollars?"

"Yep."

"Dad."

He nodded. "We're going to borrow the money from Big Nasty."

"That's what I heard. That's why I'm over here. What about these records?" He lifted his hands towards the stacks of vinyl. "If you need cash, you can get some for these."

"I can't sell the records. They're irreplaceable."

Charles picked one up. "What about *The Best of Tito Guízar*? Big fan?"

"Someone is."

"Don't borrow money from Big Nasty. He's not called that for nothing."

Wade sat down on the couch and waved his hand. "It's all rumors."

"He got arrested last year for assault with a tool belt in Buddy's Hardware and I was there to see it. If you don't pay him quick enough, he'll take everything you own. He can't be trusted. If you need money, I can help you. The bank can help you."

"I'll be fine. I thought you'd think it was a good idea." Wade turned the music back up. "Never mind," he said. "We don't have to talk about it."

"At least talk it over with Becky before you borrow any money. She knows business." Becky owned Buddy's Hardware. If it hadn't of been for her, Big Nasty would have killed the man. She hit him on the temple with a wrench. The next day she found two rattlesnakes in her mailbox. She returned to sender.

"I'll write her phone number down," said Charles as he grabbed a napkin. "You can call her."

Wade shook his head.

"Then let's go," said Charles. "She's open." He stood up. His father had closed his eyes, mouthing the words to "Blue Moon." Charles looked outside and thick clouds were rolling across the sky. It was going to storm. Thunder rumbled in the distance. He looked at his father. "Are you going?"

Wade wasn't listening to Charles or the thunder. He was listening to Elvis.

Charles got back later than he'd expected, soaked and tired. Becky had thought the horse hearse was a good idea. She was proud Wade was going to make an investment. It would give him something to look forward to each day. "I'm back," said Charles as he opened the door.

"I've been waiting for you." Wade was sitting at the kitchen table. He'd made burgers, wilted lettuce, and potatoes, all of it sitting cold and greasy. "If you'd a been here two hours ago, this would've been a fine supper," he said.

"This'll still be good," said Charles as he sat down. Wade put down his burger. "What'd Becky say?"

"She said it was a good idea."

He nodded. "What'd she say about Big Nasty?"

"She said you'd have to be a fool to deal with him."

“Then call me a fool.”

“He won’t give you a better deal than a bank. His interest will be high, he won’t give you enough time to earn the money back, and he’s dangerous.”

“He’s changed.”

“You’ve talked to him?”

“He’s changed.”

“Becky said he’s meaner than ever.”

“Rumors can ruin a man’s reputation.”

“Too bad they’re not rumors.”

“You believe everything you hear. I’ve heard as bad about Becky.”

Charles shook his head and they sat in silence as the rain spattered outside. It sounded peaceful, trickling down the roof and running through the gutters. Wade got up and put on a Perry Como record. They listened to it the rest of the meal.

“There’s a tornado warning till eleven,” said Wade as he sat on the couch. “I heard it on the radio when you were gone.”

“What about it?”

“I don’t want you driving all the way back in this weather.”

“I’m not staying here.”

“They say it’s a big one.”

“I’ll pull over if it gets bad.”

Wade took the needle off the record player and grabbed a small radio from the floor and turned it on. Charles rolled his eyes. They sat through a Supremes song to hear the weather report. Tornado warning till eleven.

Wade nodded and left the room, coming back with some sheets and a pillow. He threw them on the couch. Charles shook his head. “I’m not sleeping on that diseased couch,” he said.

“Then there’s a cot in the laundry room.”

The cot was made for a kid and Charles had trouble sleeping on it. He had barely slept by the time there were several knocks on the door and a grunt from the other side. He ignored it. It was too early to deal with his father. It was too

early to deal with anything. His mind had wandered all night. He had thought about times when he'd gotten along with his father. It had been when his mother had still been alive. She'd been the buffer between them and now that buffer was gone. His breath fogged the air as he stared at the wall.

He worried that it was his fault; that he was the one who was distant, that he was the reason they'd drifted apart the last few years. But he wasn't. Something in his father had changed. He was harder to talk to. He made more mistakes. He wasn't thinking the same.

Wade's footsteps scuffed down the hall as Charles pulled his legs out from the sheets.

"Son, are you awake?"

Charles rubbed his face. "I don't want to hear you talk about borrowing money."

"I've got two sausage biscuits from McDonald's."

Charles opened the door. His dad was smiling, holding a carryout bag. Charles followed him down the hall to the kitchen.

"Talked to Jim just this morning," said Wade. "Big Nasty's going to give me a special deal."

"To take all your stuff." Charles took the sausage biscuit.

"You didn't answer the door this morning."

"Nope."

"You heard me."

"I wasn't ready for you. I didn't want to hear about loans. I didn't want hear about Jim. I didn't want to hear about Big Nasty. I don't want to hear about it. I don't want hear about the bad decisions you've been making the last few years. I don't even want to think about it, Dad."

Wade stood up, taking his breakfast with him to the living room. "I was trying to ask if you wanted sausage or bacon on that biscuit."

Several weeks passed and Wade had only called Charles a couple of times. One was about a good Dean Martin collection and the other one was an invitation to have supper with the Bennett's, an older couple that lived down the road. Charles said he couldn't go.

"No. I'm too busy. I can't come," he said over the phone. "Yeah, I know the Bennett's are good people. I'll see you on Christmas. I've found a good record for you. See you."

Neither of them brought up the investment. Charles hoped it was going well. He'd seen Jim a few times at the feed store and had been assured everything

was going great. He wanted to believe it.

A few days later he got a phone call from Jim, telling him that it wasn't going so well and that there was a "small problem." That he'd better go over there and talk to his father about it. "He's pretty upset," he said. "It's about the carpenter I hired. I messed up."

"What is it?"

"I think he better tell you."

"Why can't you?"

"Because the carpenter's my cousin and I don't want to."

Wade had kicked over several piles of records and was standing by the couch when Charles walked in. "The carpenter ran off with our money," he said. "He left town sometime during the weekend. Fifteen thousand dollars."

Charles lifted his hands. "I told you not to do this," he said. "I told you this was a bad idea. I should've talked you out of it when you first brought it up. I said it at the time. 'You're not a businessman.' You never were and you're never going to be."

"You didn't tell me not to do this. You just told me to stay away from Big Nasty. I don't want to hear it. There's not a problem with Big Nasty. There's a problem with Jim's judgment."

"What about yours? The whole thing was your idea."

"Jim's carpenter cousin wasn't."

"You don't always have to listen to Jim."

"I don't." He grabbed a piece of paper from the coffee table and looked at it. "Jim said he'd help me pay Big Nasty in time. We have to pay by the fifth of next month."

Charles walked over and looked at the paper. "That's too soon," he said. "You won't have it." He shook his head. His dad wouldn't have been able to pay in time even if he'd gotten the hearse and half the county croaked in one night. "Jim will help?"

"He has to."

"He won't. Look at the interest. It's ridiculous. Why didn't you listen to Becky?"

"I can make my own decisions, Charles. You think I'm helpless now, but I'm not. I'm a grown man." He bent down and looked through his records. He threw some

to the side and slapped one on the player and stuck the needle to it.

“Dad. This time listen to me. Let’s go to the bank. We can work something out. We’ll get a loan and get the money soon enough to pay Big Nasty.”

His father turned up the volume and sat down on the couch. It was as loud as it would go.

“I give up,” said Charles above the music. “I’m done trying.”

There were several knocks on the door. It was the fifth of December. Big Nasty needed his money.

Charles got up from bed and saw that Jim’s jeep was in the snow-covered driveway. He opened the door, and Jim was standing there, part of his comb over flapping in the wind. His nose was bloody and both of his eyebrows were swollen.

“We better go to Wade’s,” he said. “Big Nasty just gave me a visit.”

“What happened?”

“He came with a horse trailer and said he was going to pack up all our stuff.”

“He took everything?”

“No, my wife came out with the shotgun and told him to get off our property or she was going to shoot.”

“That didn’t stop him?”

“No, look at me. But Imo peppered him a little.”

“With a shotgun?”

“Just a little bit. He left in a hurry and said he’d be back, but I don’t think he will be. Imo told him if she saw him again she’d kill him. She was telling the truth and he knew it.”

“Let me get dressed,” said Charles. “I hope Big Nasty hasn’t been there already.”

“I think he was there before he came to us. The trailer looked full.”

“Then go on and see how he’s doing. I’ll catch up.”

Charles got ready as fast as he could. When he came outside, the snow had started to pick up again and was swirling in the air. He started his truck and waited for the windshield to clear. He turned on the radio to listen to the weather,

but he couldn't find anything. Just Christmas songs. He left it on anyway. "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas" was playing.

Big Nasty had taken everything from Wade. All the records, the furniture, the food, the appliances. He even took the elephant boots. By the time Charles got there Jim was standing in the corner with a fixed comb over.

Wade was on the couch in his sock feet, holding frozen meat to his nose. If it hadn't been so sad, Charles would've laughed. Even Big Nasty wouldn't touch that couch.

"He took every last one," said Wade. "All my records. Gone."

Charles sat down next to him and put his hand on his shoulder. He stared ahead through the window as the snow fell down in waves. "Even Tito Guízar?"

Wade didn't answer.

Charles looked over at Jim, but got no response. He was staring at the floor. "At least they left the couch," said Charles.

Wade turned to him. "This is not funny," he said. "I guarantee you if Big Nasty walked through your door and took everything, you wouldn't be making jokes. What'd they take from you, Jim?"

"Imo shot him," he said.

"I didn't mean anything by it," said Charles. "I was trying to lighten you up."

"Don't," said Wade.

"This'll work itself out somehow. I'll help if I have to. Jim'll help."

Jim put his hands in his pockets. "Yes, sir," he said. "I've got a new investment that'll take us out of this trouble, Wade. You'll be able to buy everything back."

"Don't make Dad lose the house, too," said Charles.

"No, go on. I want to hear it," said Wade.

"Dad, he's gotten you into enough trouble. What would Mom say? She wouldn't want to see this."

"Don't bring her into this."

"You never bring her into anything," Charles said.

Jim walked down the hall to the bathroom.

"Don't talk to me like that. She wouldn't want to see that either." Wade stuck the meat back to his nose. "I can't believe those records are gone."

“I can’t believe that’s all you’re thinking about,” said Charles.

“My own son doesn’t care about what’s happened to me.”

“You would’ve never done this before. Wasted money. Made bad decisions. Dealt with Big Nasty. I told you this was coming.”

“It was what you call an investment.”

“Why didn’t you borrow from the bank?”

“I don’t want to hear it. I lost all my stuff.”

“Dad, they’re only records.”

“They’re more than that to me.”

“What about Mom’s stuff? Did they take it?”

“They took everything. Let’s stop talking about it,” he said. “Let’s stop talking.” He leaned back and closed his eyes.

Charles folded his arms and stared ahead through the window. The snow was slowing down. It was collecting onto his truck again, and onto everything else like a white dust. It swirled in the wind and stray flakes melted on the window.

Jim came out of the bathroom and cleared his throat. “How about we go to McDonald’s and have us some breakfast? Get our minds off this mess.” He looked at them and tried to laugh. “Or we can go back to the house for lunch. Imo’s fixing a big supper. How about it?”

“I’ve got bologna in the freezer,” said Wade. “He didn’t take that.”

“That’s all you ever eat anymore. You’re going to get scurvy,” said Charles.

“Nobody’s going to eat bologna this morning,” said Jim. “I’ll pay for breakfast.” He got out his wallet and looked inside. “It won’t be a big breakfast.”

“Fine,” said Wade. “Let’s go.”

They left in a huddle and Wade locked the door behind him. He got into the truck with Charles and they backed out of the driveway, both watching Jim crawl into his jeep while fixing his comb over from the wind. “I didn’t want to ask in front of him,” said Wade.

“You need a place to stay?”

He nodded.

They drove slowly through the snow. The roads weren’t packed down yet, but Charles still had trouble getting over the hills. “I’ve got a record wrapped up at home for you,” he said. “It has some of Mom’s favorites.”

“There’s no point in it,” said Wade. “I don’t have a collection anymore.”

Charles shifted gears and the engine hummed. The truck slid until the wheels bit into the ice and they swerved back onto the right side of the road. “You can always start a new one,” he said.

Bob Skoggins is a creative writing graduate from the University of Arkansas, where he worked as the political cartoonist for *The Arkansas Traveler and Weekly Blues DJ* for KXUA. His short fiction and poetry has been published in *The Story Shack*, *Linguistic Erosion*, *Leaves of Ink*, *Yesteryear Fiction*, and more. His passion is music, which can be found at www.tomandhebron.com. Tom & Hebron’s debut album, *Ridge Runner*, reached the *iTunes Top Rock Charts* upon release in 2012.

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