

The Road to Carville

Pat Tompkins

The back of his shirt was stuck to the car seat, and it wasn't noon yet. When the road plowed through forest, Garlan Hamilton slowed during the stretches of shade. A ball game crackled on the radio. "Strike," said Gar, trying to predict the next pitch. But it was ball three. "Aw, he's gonna walk him." He favored the Sox because he'd seen them in Chicago once during the war. A fine city. But maybe he wouldn't enjoy Chicago now. He hadn't liked much since the Army.

Gar didn't particularly like his job—"Hell, that's why they call it work," he'd say—but he didn't hate it the way some people did. His job had some pluses. He traveled some, at government expense, and nobody bothered him. He listened to whatever he wanted on the radio as he guided the four-door DeSoto down dirt roads, trailing rust-colored clouds. He wanted to be left alone.

Gar rarely passed another car, and the few houses he saw were little better than tin-roof shacks. He was thinking about lunch when he saw the dead armadillo on the side of the road. Poor guy. They came out at night and had bad eyesight. To fend off predators, they could roll into a ball, but such tactics would not save them from barreling trucks. Gar sympathized with the odd-looking creatures. In his teens, during the Depression, his family had eaten armadillo for dinner a couple times a month. His father called them "Hoover hogs." They did taste like lean pork, but without their shell, they looked defenseless, more possum than pig. Gar had since learned that people could get leprosy from eating armadillo meat. Had his parents known that? You could get sick from undercooked pork, too; it just wasn't something you thought about when you were hungry.

During the third inning, he stopped for gas. Gar plucked a Coca-Cola from watery ice in a red metal locker, handed a nickel to a teenage boy, and flipped off the cap. "Yes, sir," he said after he drained half the bottle. He held the Coke against his neck, while plucking at his damp shirt with his free hand. "How far's it to Youngerton?" he asked the boy.

"Twelve miles."

Maybe it was a lingering thought of bad meat, but Gar decided not to stop at the barbecue stand he'd had in mind earlier. He bought a bag of shelled peanuts instead and chewed them as he drove, one elbow on the windowsill. A heron in a patch of swamp near the road lifted a twiglike leg and tested the water with its foot. A thick canopy of branches—sweetgum, box elder, tupelo—filtered the

heat of the sun. Yes, this surely beat his last job working at the post office: two years fiddling around with stamps and small change in a dim, stuffy room. But even that job had a plus: you never took it home in your head. You might be numb from the routine, but you didn't worry about the mail that passed through your hands. Delivering the post as a mailman would have been ideal, but all that walking would have killed his feet, his left foot anyway.

At a massive oak bearded with gray moss, the road forked. A wooden sign shaped like an arrow pointed left: Youngerton. The one facing right said Rocheau. Gar considered going right, as he did at some point on every trip lately—just keep driving and never return. But he dutifully headed left and when he reached the outskirts of the town, he gripped the wheel with both hands and stopped whistling. He began looking for the McPhersons' house, 161 Cypress.

This was the hard part. No one was ever glad to see him arrive. Gar stumbled getting out of the car, partly from sitting so long, partly because of his bad foot. He stumbled more lately, it seemed, or maybe he just noticed it more. He'd lost three toes during the war. No heroic action, though. Some idiot dogface had run over his left foot with a forklift two weeks before V-E Day. The damage—a hangnail compared to injuries he'd seen—left a dull, constant ache. On the McPhersons' doorstep, he passed his hands over his wavy brown hair, then wiped his palms on his pants before ringing the bell.

A stout woman wearing an apron over her dress opened the door and stood behind the screen door. "Yes?" she whispered. He detected the fear in her one word.

"Afternoon, ma'am. I'm from the government, here to pick up your daughter." Through the dark screen, he saw her eyes shine with tears.

"Yes," she whispered again and pushed the screen door open so he could step inside.

Gar had seen many cases, so he was prepared not to flinch when he met this girl. Yet he had to check himself from reacting as the mother led her daughter forward. Eldonna was 15, with copper-colored hair and the greenest eyes he'd ever seen. Her skin was clear aside from a sprinkle of freckles.

More than 20 years before the war, the federal government had taken over Carville Hospital from the state of Louisiana. The only hospital in the country for leprosy patients was now officially named the Hansen Center, but everyone still called it Carville. If a boy in Shreveport got in trouble, his mother might say, "I'm going to send you to Carville if you don't behave."

No one who went to Carville ever left. Most of the patients Gar took to Carville lacked obvious signs of the disease. The horrible parts came later: amputations, blindness, disfigurement. He'd seen that mainly in photos, but it was enough for him.

Last week, Gar had collected another person newly diagnosed with leprosy, a 26-year-old farmer with a wife and two kids. The man's suitcase was packed, but when the time came to leave, he refused to go. Gar had to handcuff him and force him into the back of the station wagon. He'd used his handcuffs only once before. Usually he never had to touch the people he drove to Carville, although he'd convinced himself that he was unlikely to pick up the disease from them. The doctors who diagnosed them didn't catch it; the nuns who staffed the hospital in Carville stayed clean; a husband could have it and his wife would be healthy, like the couple last week. Most of his passengers were numb with dismay, numb like the patches of skin on their ear lobes or knees that first indicated something was wrong. They stared out the car window, memorizing the landscape.

It was a shame anyone had to go to Carville, a pity there was no cure, but Gar had been to war and knew how little fairness had to do with anything. Still, when he looked at Eldonna McPherson, he wanted to punch someone. Like the doctor who'd condemned her. Gar's job was part of the Public Health Service, but nobody thanked him for what he was doing. The farm woman last week had said, "What do they pay y'all to come steal my husband? You're no better than a bounty hunter."

"I'll take your grip," Gar said and picked up the girl's suitcase. He held out his other hand toward the round hatbox she held, but the girl shook her head and stepped back. "I'll be out by the car when you're ready," he said.

He leaned against a willow tree and smoked a cigarette, a habit he'd picked up in the Army. Gar glanced at the pack. Lucky Strike. What sort of name was that? Lucky. Huh. He wondered about the hatbox. What would she need a good hat for in Carville? For chapel. For funerals. Gar wanted a glass of ice water and needed a toilet, but he did not want to return to the house and ask for favors. He stepped behind the tree instead.

Gar was about to light up again when he heard the screen door open. The mother and daughter walked hand in hand to the dusty station wagon. Their chins quivered and pointed to the ground. They embraced and the woman had to force herself to release the girl. She stepped back and stared at Gar. "Don't worry, ma'am," he said. "I'll get her there safe and sound by this evening."

"Call me when you get there," the mother said.

"I'll call you tomorrow." Eldonna turned toward Gar. "I can do that, can't I?"

"Sure. You can call anytime," he said, although he wasn't certain this was true. Gar opened the back door and Eldonna got in. After waving good-bye until she could no longer see her mother, she wrapped her arms around the hatbox on her lap.

A few miles passed in silence before Gar said, "Mind if I turn on the radio?"

“No, sir. I don’t mind.”

“Anything you want to listen to?”

“It doesn’t matter to me.”

He tuned in a station of popular music, love songs, music to dance to. Years ago, he’d been a fair dancer. That’s how he’d met his girlfriends, at dances. It certainly wasn’t his handsome face—with its bulbous nose and acne-scarred cheeks—that won him dancers. But on the dance floor, his stocky figure turned almost graceful, moving with the music. When Nat King Cole started crooning “Mona Lisa,” Gar listened to a verse, then changed stations. He glanced occasionally at his passenger in the rear-view mirror. Eldonna was a helluva lot prettier than any Mona Lisa. Eldonna’s mouth had full lips, closed, not smiling or frowning. She’d probably never really been kissed by a man. Chances were, she never would. Patients at Carville weren’t allowed to date or marry; men and women didn’t even eat together in the dining hall. Not that there weren’t ways around the rules. But if a patient had a baby, she wasn’t allowed to keep it. He looked again in the mirror, noticing her breasts, then was immediately ashamed of himself.

Maybe it was better to go in young and not know what you were missing. This girl would always sleep alone, with no one to stroke her long, shiny hair or her slender neck or her soft thighs or—Jesus, man, get a hold of yourself. She was a leper; that smooth skin would become scaly, with ulcers and sores. He shrugged his tense shoulders and searched the radio for another baseball game, then switched it off.

The woods gave way to high, bright fields of sugar cane. When he’d come home on leave, Gar had seen German prisoners of war in the fields, cutting cane. Hot work; it made your back sore and your arms ache. He’d been surprised, then glad to see that the damn jerries weren’t sitting on their duffs. Shit, he thought now, the cane cutters had been on vacation compared to what they did to our POWs. Helluva way to treat people. Had Eldonna seen the Germans in the cane fields when she was younger? What could they talk about? The war probably wasn’t a good subject.

Gar spotted a dark, furry lump in the center of the road and swerved to avoid it.

“Mister, would you stop the car? Please?”

He glanced in the mirror. Was she carsick? He pulled over on the gravel shoulder. “What’s wrong?” He turned to face her, but she was peering out the rear windshield. In a flash she was out the door and hurrying down the road. She covered 50 yards before Gar shouted, “Hey.” He trotted after her. He couldn’t run worth a damn anymore. That girl could outrace him easy. Was she trying to escape, hide in the forest of sugar cane?

When he caught up with her, she was bent over gray fur, a raccoon. Eldonna held her hand close to its snout. "He's still alive."

Gar crouched down. Sure enough. No blood on the road. Good thing he'd swerved.

"Maybe he's just stunned." Eldonna moved to pick it up.

"Hold on now. You don't want to be handling that. It could be rabid."

He pulled Eldonna over to the shoulder although no other cars were in sight.

"We can't leave him there," she said.

"Let me check the car. I might have some gloves."

"I know what." Eldonna ran back to the car and removed a wide-brimmed yellow hat from its box. She brought the empty hatbox back to the raccoon before Gar had even reached the car. He returned flexing his fingers in thick canvas gloves. With his hands, he scooped up the warm body.

"Be careful," Eldonna said. He meant to move it to the side of the road, but she held out the box. "Put him in here."

The animal felt lopsided. "I think one of its rear legs is broke."

"The doctors at Carville can fix that." She took the box from him and studied the raccoon, wrapped in its bushy tail. "He looks scared."

Gar saw the restless button eyes and nodded. "Probably his first time in a lady's hatbox."

Her smile—the first time he'd seen it—pierced Gar. Had he been fully awake before?

He shook his head as they headed back to the car. "I don't think they'll be wanting you to bring a pet to Carville."

"I won't keep him. When he's better, I'll let him go." Eldonna embraced the box. "He must be thirsty."

"We'll stop at the next gas station and get some water."

"Thank you."

Gar wiped his face with his handkerchief before starting the car. How was this girl going to survive in Carville?

They stopped at a Mobil station near a crossroads. While a boy pumped gas, they discussed how to get the animal to drink. He should stay in the box but a bowl wouldn't fit in it. "We need a baby bottle," Eldonna said.

Gar explained the problem to the boy who was cleaning the windshield. "Anywhere around here we can get one?"

"How about an eye dropper?" the boy said. "My mom used that with a baby bunny she found last spring."

"That sounds fine. But do y'all have one?"

The boy, Alan Hargitty, offered to phone his mother. "We live nearby. You could stop and pick it up."

While he called, Gar fetched two Cokes. He and Eldonna drank the sodas as they stood in the shadow cast by the tall sign advertising the gas station, a large red winged horse on a white background. "My Uncle Jason has horses," she said. "He lets me ride them."

Gar nodded. He'd heard lots of things about Carville, but nothing about there being any horses. It wasn't a resort. Somehow the patients filled up their days. Or got through the days. Empty days. Empty years. He stared at the Mobil sign; he'd seen it at countless stations throughout the state. But he noticed the horse's wings as though for the first time. And he began to think that he would not drive Eldonna to Carville after all.

Alan gave them directions to his house. Gar shook his hand and slipped a dollar in his shirt pocket.

"Thank you so much," Eldonna said. She started to offer her hand and then stopped.

The boy looked puzzled but said, "Good luck."

On her front porch, Mrs. Hargitty showed Eldonna how to feed the raccoon. "Just give him a dropper or two at a time. He might be hurt inside." She gave them the glass dropper with its small bottle.

"Where y'all headed?" she asked.

"Baton Rouge," Gar said.

"That's a ways. I'll get some more water."

In the car, Eldonna finished feeding the raccoon. "Why'd you say Baton Rouge?"

"It's none of her business where we're going."

"She was very nice."

"Yes, she was." She wouldn't accept any money and had offered them lemonade. She might not have been so friendly if he'd said Carville. "Has that water perked up your patient?"

"I think so."

Baton Rouge wasn't far from Carville. What if he drove there—or somewhere else? He considered the possibilities, shimmering before him like the mirages on the parched roadway. They could go to New Orleans. He could leave her to the big city; New Orleans was full of lost souls and shadowy places. But what would a country girl do there except get taken advantage of? He didn't have enough money with him to get her settled in a boarding house. He could turn around and take her back to her mother and quit this job. That would get him off the hook, but not her. The government would send someone else to take Eldonna to Carville. Perhaps she had relatives somewhere who would help her.

"Have you always lived in Youngerton?" He stretched his arm across the top of the seat and glanced back at her.

“Yes, sir.”

“Ever travel any? Visit relatives?”

“I went to Mardi Gras when I was ten. And we went to the state capitol building on a field trip last year.” He found out that she had an aunt and cousins near Lake Charles whom she’d visited years ago, when a cousin married.

As though confirming something he already knew, Gar nodded. Damn. There wasn’t going to be an easy solution. “Do you have brothers and sisters?” He looked at her in the rear-view mirror.

“Two sisters; one’s married and one’s younger than me. My brother died in the war. On Guam.”

Gar nodded again. “I was in the Army. Volunteered. Sent to France.” Now he was thinking about going AWOL. Did soldiers plan that or was it a sudden decision? Maybe you couldn’t do it if you thought too much about it. Gar remembered that one of his Army buddies was from Baton Rouge. Andy Fontaine. Guys called him Ace because he could bluff his way through any poker hand. They hadn’t kept in touch, but Andy was someone Gar felt he could rely on. Maybe Ace would have an idea. He could call him. Stop somewhere for dinner. Yes, he’d phone Andy.

The sun would not set for another hour at least, but the June heat was finally simmering down. Gar turned on the radio again. Patti Page zipping through some happy-go-lucky love song. Usually, he didn’t do more than stop at gas stations with his passengers. He ate after delivering them to Carville. Turning down the music, Gar announced, “We’ll stop for dinner soon.” He glanced in the mirror; Eldonna was focused on the hatbox in her lap. He swatted at a butterfly that had blown into the car. Jesus, this heat. I’m not much hungry, he thought, but it’ll give me a chance to call Andy.

“He needs something to eat, too,” Eldonna said.

“Raccoons’ll eat near anything.” He remembered the bag of peanuts from the morning. Still in the glove box. “Here, try these.” He passed the bag to the girl.

She poured a handful in the box; the raccoon only sniffed them. He pulled into a dirt lot alongside the Ice Box, which looked more like a juke joint than a cafe. “They sure know how to fix crawfish here,” Gar said. Eldonna didn’t move, so he opened the car door for her. “All the iced tea you can drink, too,” he said, hoping to coax a grin from the girl.

Inside, the cafe was cool and dim, as though the shade of the oaks penetrated the roof. They sat in a booth and Gar told her to order whatever she wanted—“It’s on the government,” which was true only because it paid his salary. Then he excused himself to make a phone call. The phone was near the bar, around a corner from the cafe. It took several minutes for the operator to

find Andy's number in Baton Rouge. Gar rehearsed what he would say. He had thought to tell the straight story; that would be easiest, but that idea seemed less easy as he imagined Andy's surprise at hearing from him.

Gar, you sonofagun. Where are you? What are you doing?

I'm driving a leper to Carville.

No, it sounded like a bad joke. How could he ask Andy what to do about Eldonna? The phone rang again and again, each brrring sounding like a bleat for *Aaaaaace*. After more than a dozen rings, he hung up. Gar passed a hand through his hair and stared at the dial as though he didn't recognize the letters and numbers.

Back at the booth was a pitcher of iced tea and two tall glasses, but no Eldonna. He glanced around the room; he didn't see her. His first thought was that she'd run away. Gar poured a glass of tea and stirred in sugar. It probably meant his job; you weren't supposed to lose lepers. What was a job anyway, except something you wouldn't do unless you were paid to? The glass wet against his palm, he gulped the iced tea, as strong and sweet as dark rum. Then he played with the long-handled spoon, turning it end over end. Run, Eldonna.

His eyes were closed when he heard the whoosh of the seat cushion as Eldonna sat down across from him. Gar dropped the spoon. "Where'd you go?"

"I had to use the ladies' room," she said and filled her glass with iced tea.

He nodded as if to say, I knew that. He almost said, "What's taking them so long?" but stopped himself. They were in no hurry, but he couldn't think of anything to say to the girl with the shiny copper hair. It hung in soft waves to her collarbones. She'd only taken a sip of the tea.

"Would you rather have a Coke?"

She shook her head. "This is fine, it's just too strong."

He asked the waitress for some lemon. "Thank you," Eldonna said as she picked up a wedge from the small bowl.

"Speak up if there's anything else you want."

She squeezed the lemon over the tea. A squirt of juice hit his nose.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"It's a big target." She smiled and he smiled back. "I like mint in my tea," he added.

"Me too. We've got a big patch of spearmint by the garage."

"I put in a whole sprig and then mash the leaves with my spoon." He stopped, abashed, as he noticed the waitress approaching. What was he doing, talking about fresh mint? At Carville, you were probably lucky to get ice in your iced tea.

They ate dinner without talking, surrounded by the buzz of others in the restaurant, their utensils clinking against plates and cups. He insisted she order dessert. “Never known a girl who didn’t like dessert,” he said.

While she dragged her spoon around the sherbet as though peeling an orange, Gar telephoned Andy again. Maybe they could stay with Andy a few days until he figured out how to rescue Eldonna. No answer. Sure, get charged with kidnapping. As he counted the rings, a band started playing in a corner of the bar. Several couples danced to a swing tune where tables and chairs had been cleared. What was he thinking? Andy wouldn’t be home on a Friday night.

When Gar returned to the booth, he noticed that most of the sherbet had melted. The girl’s fingers tapped on the tabletop. “Pretty good band,” he said. Except for a booth with two men who resembled bullfrogs, Gar and Eldonna were the only customers still sitting. He thought of asking her to dance. He hadn’t danced in years.

He lit a cigarette and closed his eyes, picturing himself and the girl dancing. Instead, Gene Kelly intruded in a scene from “On the Town.” What a dancer. Did they show movies at Carville? Would lepers want to see a musical? Gar sighed and ground out the spark in the cigarette.

Eldonna’s fingers weren’t moving to the rhythm of the song.

“Nervous?” he asked.

“I guess.” She stood up. “We’d better be going.”

Outside, the crickets shrieked. On their way to the car, Gar thought of what he’d like to say. I’m sorry. I don’t want to take you to Carville. It’s my job, but I’m quitting. It’s a lousy job. You’re the last person I’m ever taking to Carville. Another voice said, And what good will that do her? You’ll feel better and she’ll still be in Carville.

He opened the back door for Eldonna and circled the car, once, then twice. He slapped the roof with his palm. “Damnation.” Then Gar got behind the driver’s wheel. “How’s that raccoon?”

“He’s asleep. But the peanuts are gone.”

“That’s a good sign.”

Soon it would be dark, with the tall cypress and pines blocking the quarter moon. This stretch of road resembled a tunnel. A blaze of headlights would bring the only light, abrupt and bright. Armadillos would wander out, awkward and nearsighted. Their armor plating wouldn’t protect them from a moving car. A sudden death. Maybe they were lucky that way. Garlan Hamilton drove to Carville for the final time. ☪