

# **Son of God, Son of the Earth**

Excerpt of a Completed Novel

Henry stood at the prison camp stove, steam rising up and obscuring his face as he worked. One by one he placed the dishes on a tray and stepped back to examine his work. The pork, the salad, the fresh asparagus, the mixture of steaming rice – nothing could be improved, he decided, without creating some imbalance that would require a change in flavor or texture or color – so silently he pronounced the meal finished and covered it carefully with a red and white calico cloth.

When Simon the Cat called out from the doorway Henry paused then went out to the garden and plucked three petals from the yellow rose bush and placed them in the corner of the tray, only to remove them, pressing them into the pocket of his apron.

“I’ll be back,” Henry said to Luther, his assistant. “I want the morning dishes cleared and the floor swept by the time I get back.”

“Yes, Cook,” said Luther.

Henry passed Forty-Four in the corridor outside the kitchen and the men exchanged nods of greeting. Forty-Four, a short, round man whose philosophy, if he had one, could best be described as laughter: laughter to shame an evil done or laughter to shame a good deed left undone. For him there was almost nothing unworthy of a laugh. If a wrong was done him he was as likely to shake his head at the foolishness of the perpetrator as another man might reach for a knife or a pistol. Forty-Four had come to know both in his time, but he seemed the man most likely to wield either without anger though the absence of malice might bring a man no less to the end of his days.

“Cook seems in a mighty hurry,” he said after greeting Luther and Samuel, Cook’s youngest assistant.

“Man, he’s got it bad,” said Luther, tall and wiry with a pencil-thin moustache. “The man can’t be helped. His nose is wide open.”

Luther and Forty-Four shared a good-natured laugh as Forty-Four sat at the kitchen table.

“I thought there was something between him and Sappho,” said Forty-Four. “But then she hardly pays him any mind.”

At 15, Samuel was one of the youngest of the prisoners at Mississippi’s Parchman Farm. He listened as he washed the dishes from the morning mess. He was one of the unlucky few housed with men twice his age or more in the camps that dotted Parchman’s vast fields.

“It’s wasn’t always like that though,” said Luther as he began to sweep in keeping with Henry’s instructions. “Cook came in here angry, mad at the world. But he kept to himself, and he moved up, got his up and downs because of his time as a cook at the Stanhope Hotel in Jackson.

“You know how he came to be up in here, don’t you?”

Forty-Four shook his head.

“One day he leaves the hotel kitchen,” said Luther, “to see to some supplies. You know how he is: don’t trust nobody to do it right but him. This was when I worked as his assistant in the kitchen under him. Out the front door of the hotel he goes and who does he see walking down the street but his own sweet wife. He’s surprised and happy to see her and starts after her, her name on his lips, but then he takes his time watchin her walk down the road just ahead him, the way she moves, stoppin here and there in the street to look in some window or other. She’s walking and he’s walking right behind her, and just when he can’t take it anymore and he’s about to call her name she turns down this little alley so he turns too and sees her walk up these back stairs. So he waits, wanting to see the name of the shop, but he can’t see a name so he follows

her up the stairs and walks the row of doors the way she went and the curtain of one window is parted just enough for him to see, but he can't see anything at first.

“Then what does he see? It's some people in there and one of them is his wife with some fella. The fella has got some kind of tattoo on his hand. Cook steps back from the window then he steps back up and looks again. Finally, Cook just turns around and goes back down the stairs like he sleep walking, and eventually the boys find him sitting on the side of the road. Just sitting there.”

“His wife was with some young fella?” Forty-Four said.

“The wife of his early days too,” said Luther. “He loved that woman.

“Well, the boys took him back to the kitchen, but every Wednesday after that at three o'clock sharp he'd follow his wife down the road, watchin her stop in shops, doing her chores til she made that turn down the alley and up the stairs, and up he went behind her though he told himself not to do it. And every time he'd walk down them steps it was like he was a dead man and we always knew where to find him, and we'd carry him back to the kitchen.

“Come Wednesday he'd be back at it just the same and we was steady collecting him. One day it's hot out and Cook was happy, cheerful, we thought well, he's happy again, and things are alright with him finally; he's back to his old self. Then out he goes: down the street, down that little alley, and up the stairs. And this time wasn't that door unlocked like he was an invited guest? He goes in, walks through one room to the next and there they are – his wife and that fella. Cook dropped his coat – big ole heavy coat in the middle of summer – and he's got every knife we ever had in that kitchen strapped to him – ten, fifteen knives. His wife and this fella start yelling and hollering, but Cook don't say a word, just standing there in his apron like its hog killin time.

“The young fella was up and out; ran right by Cook naked as a jaybird, hollering and carrying on, screaming bloody murder. Well, Cook gave him somethin to remember him by without even turning to see him go. The police came, and there’s Cook standing on the second floor with a knife at his wife’s throat saying he was gonna cut from stem to stern. The police were trying to get him to come down and let his wife go. A crowd of people gathered in the alley waiting to see what he was gonna do. So Cook drags her back into the room and slams the door.

“Next thing you know somebody’s screaming, and Cook’s wife came running out the room looking like she saw a ghost and then here comes Cook. He’s got a knife in each leg and one in his arm. He never did say whether it was his wife that stuck him, but he came to Parchman on account of the remembrance he gave to that fella.”

“He cut him?”

“Yes, sir, he cut him, but anybody who knew Cook knew he just meant to give him something to remember him by, nothing more. If he meant serious business he’d a split that fella head to toe before he hit the door.

“Well, who nursed him when he got to the Farm but Anna. Day and night she was right there. And Cook just laying there, angry. Anger filling him up. But something opened up in the nighttime of nursing him because by the time he was well enough to come in amongst us in the Cage, Sappo (the name most folks know Anna by) had taken him as her man. And all Cook could talk about was the fella with the tattoo hands he first saw through the glass that took his wife from him. He was steady hunting Parchman Farm for that fella with the tattoo hands that took his wife, Callie, from him.

“Meantime Sappo’s opened up every room and every window she got, as if she was a house, saying, ‘Come in; walk right in and stay a while.’ Well, Cook came in alright, but he

hadn't heard a thing she said and every Wednesday they were up in the vegetable pantry together, Sappo saying, 'Come in,' inviting him to her, but he was putting all his hurt and anger into it and keeping his heart to himself, locked up tight. And Sappo knew it. She knew it. But she thought after the hurt ran out his heart would flow out too like good water after bad; had to. But that's not what happened. Cook was steady giving her all he had of anger, filling her up, steady at it like clockwork every Wednesday at three o'clock. Till one day he goes to the pantry and she's gone. You hear me? She was standing right there, but she was gone, and he knew it. Every door and window was locked and closed against him. Though she's cordial and will speak and sometimes even stop and ask after him. But that's about it.

"Cook came to the end of his anger or at least the anger he wanted to give her and started to see who she was and how good she was to him. But it came too late. In the end, he wanted to give her something sweet and tender but she had moved on.

"Ever since then Cook's a mouse trying to get Sappo to look at him the way she used to, like a boy waiting on Christmas. He's been trying to get her back, looking for the sound in her voice that tells a man somebody loves him. He's ready to give her everything he's got.

"You know once a week he cooks a meal just for her?" Luther said, shaking his head. "He sets it down outside her door. And every week he goes back and collects it cold cause she won't have it. But that don't stop him. He's steady at it. Achilles, as the Cageboss, thinks he can get what he wants from her now, but she seems to see nary one of em though they're both steady at it."

There were rapid footsteps in the corridor. Luther and Forty-Four knew it was Henry hurrying along the passage.

"Afternoon, Cook," said Forty-Four, standing.

“Forty, I ain’t got time today,” said Henry. He breezed by with a long sheet of paper in one hand and a tray covered by a red and white calico cloth in the other. “We only got a month til the governor’s visit, and we got two month’s work to do.” He raised an eyebrow and looked toward Luther and Samuel. “And I only got boys to get it done.”

“Don’t worry, Henry,” said Forty-Four, rising and stretching his round body. “I let Luther work the row.”

“That’s Luther’s speciality: talking. You know that. You don’t watch out he’ll put you out of business.”

“Cook knows I get the job done,” said Luther, leaning the broom against the wall.

Luther and Forty-Four nodded their goodbyes and headed to the mess hall where they were expected by the camp sergeant.

Henry seemed not to notice their leaving. Instead, he tacked the list on the corkboard that hung on the wall above the sink, then carefully examined it, his finger running down the list of items as he spoke the names of the ingredients he would need to prepare the evening meal.

Not one of the gunmen could say exactly what Henry’s meals meant to him. Most of the men and women who served as cooks at Parchman’s ten camps had little kitchen experience. Those convicts – called “gunmen” because they worked the fields beneath the watchful eyes of guards wielding rifles – those convicts who rose through the ranks, like Sappo, did so because they allied themselves with a powerful field driver or sergeant. Sometimes a powerful Cageboss like Achilles could get a man his up-and-downs, the uniforms that marked the senior convicts or trustees. But making such alliances at Parchman Farm involved the more powerful man subsuming the less powerful man the way a river feeds on its tributaries. So, for instance, the men under Achilles, like Old Love and Creeping Jesus, while powerful unto themselves always

gave over the greater part of themselves to the will of Achilles: their hands were his hands, and their voices his voice. Old Love and Creeping Jesus spoke differently around him; carried themselves differently, seeking always to orient their thoughts and actions to his. Thus, they were able to leave the ranks of the common prisoners, and grasp the power and privileges that came their way as trustees.

Not so with Henry. He achieved his privileges not only despite his refusal to curb his tongue or to fashion its movements to any thoughts but his own, but precisely because he spoke his mind.

When the superintendent, making the rounds of the camps, asked what the men thought of the food, Henry alone among the men in the ten camps spoke the truth.

“Fit for nary man nor dog,” he said, and returned to his meal.

“But you seem intent enough on your meal, inmate—“

“Tolliver. Henry Tolliver, sir.”

“Well, Henry, you seem intent on your meal all the same.”

“Well, sir, I look at it like this,” Henry said, wiping his mouth with his kerchief, “if I go down to the cathouse and the only pussy purring is a toothless cock-eyed heifer with whiskers as rough as mine I’m gonna be up in it regardless. I ain’t come to court; I come to lay my body down. Now this here,” he said, eyeing his plate, “this some stank ass grub, but I’m gonna eat it regardless. When in Rome you gotta take Rome’s fare.”

The trustee shooters looked around nervously. Achilles and his men just smiled and shook their heads: they knew what Henry had coming.

But the superintendent just laughed and asked what Henry did in the free world for work.

Henry told him.



“Whereabouts?”

Henry named two of the finest establishments in Jackson which caused a broad smile to overtake the superintendent face, thinking the gunman was mocking him.

“My people were from Memphis before my mama took me to Jackson when I was a boy,” the superintendent said. “So how would you prepare grits?”

“You want em Memphis-style or how they make ‘em down in Leland,” he asked, naming the county in which Jackson was located.

“Leland for my home country.”

“One quart of milk, one-half cup of butter, one cup of coarse grits, one teaspoon of salt, one teaspoon of white pepper, another one-third cup of butter, five ounces of Gruyere cheese, and three-fourths cup of grated Parmesan.”

Henry had spoken as if reading from an invisible list.

“Shall I tell you how to prepare it?”

“Yes, sir. Please, do.”

With a movement of his arm, Henry swept the plate and fork to the side and placed both palms on the table and shut his eyes.

He was back in the kitchen again.

“Make sure the oven’s good and hot. Bring your milk to a smooth boil, like the breath of the Lord on the face of the water. A smooth boil now. Not too high. Too high and you’ll ruin it. One-half butter goes in like your burnt offering. Add your grits. That’s your manna from heaven falling for your Israelites. Stir five minutes for the time it took for them to forget their God once Moses went up to the mountain top. Remove the pot from the heat cause no man’s life is pure suffering. Add salt and pepper to taste. Beat thoroughly for soon after we taste the spice of life

comes a beating to make us appreciate the good times. Once more in goes your butter as sacrifice to the Lord and your Gruyere cheese. Pour into a greased two-quart casserole and bake for half an hour for always is man cast out from one place to next so that he may ask of himself: What is the Will of the Lord? What shall He have me do? Then remove from the lion's den and sprinkle with Parmesan cheese. Cause ever and always is the grace of God nearby, ready for the taking. Bake for another thirty minutes cause just when you think you're done and walk with the Lord in the cool of the evening here comes another trial to bring you closer still to the bosom of God. Set down, and let it be and give thanks for the bounty that is this world and that, sir, empties the pot."

Henry had his kitchen the next day.

He would have been up and running by the end of the week, but Sappo, who ran her own kitchen in one of the women's camp, and who was not immune to the temptations of spite, had some of her girls empty his kitchen of the best utensils and pots and pans before he got there, and Henry had to beg, borrow, and steal from cooks from other camps. They both knew what Sappo had done, but neither spoke of it. Henry patiently put together all he needed from the surrounding camps. But once he was up and running? Well, then he labored, not for the superintendent, not the State of Mississippi though it was the State through the superintendent that had provided the tools that Henry put to his use; no, Henry worked for himself and for the feeling that cooking gave him.

And although the camp gunmen hurried to his table in the mornings and the evenings, most, if asked, would be at a loss to explain why they felt so compelled to do so. The reasons themselves seem to change almost as much as the meals.

This can best be explained by describing something that once came into Henry's possession.

In southernmost Mexico, there is painted in the art of that country an unusual image of the Madonna and Child. Unlike those found all over the world, this mother feeds the child from the breast as he looks contentedly up at her. Henry first saw this image one afternoon in Jackson when the rain fell lightly beneath a summer sun. In the folklore of old guard Jacksonians, this confluence of sun and shower was said to signify that the devil was beating his wife – it was an inauspicious omen. But to Henry ever since he was a boy, such a confluence was invariably a sign that something special was about to come his way. A vendor who sold charms along Bardman Avenue had placed the little painting on an easel beside his other wares. Henry had stopped and was admiring one of the man's other charms when he noticed it. The vendor, in turn, admired one of the knives that Henry carried always on his belt. A bargain was struck, and Henry carried the little painting – no larger than a small cutting board – back to the hotel kitchen and hung it above the stove.

As he worked, Henry's eyes would wander up to the image. He'd admire the satisfaction in the child's eyes and the intense focus in the eyes of the mother. One day, he paused and thought, She sure is putting in work. Mary's working. She knows her baby boy is good and hungry. He's eating well. And if he eats, the thought came, well, then he's just like a natural man.

The idea came from nowhere and surprised and, in a way he did not understand, comforted him. Whenever he gazed up at the painting, he ceased to worry about the responsibility of taking care of his aging parents, or the nagging sense that there was something

in his life that he had once known, something precious that he had somehow forgotten, that had been important to him way back in his childhood.

Months later as he was making a vegetable soup for the Jackson Women's Rotary, an idea came to him:

“Cause it's me! Me at my mama's breast! It's me eating!”

So startled was he by the thought that he dropped the ladle he had been holding into the red sauce so that he had to retrieve it with tongs. As he stood staring up at the painting, he thought, That's me happy in my mama's arms. Though what this meant he could not say, but he knew it felt right and true and from that day forward he worked as if he were preparing his meals not for the guests who sat with cigars and laughter around the tables of the Stanhope's luxuriously appointed rooms, but for that little child in the painting and the strangely serene feeling that the painting gave him.

While he prepared the meals in the many months that followed, Henry thought about the mother and child to try and tease out the meaning behind the feeling the painting evoked in him. As he ordered and managed the movements of his kitchen men, Henry meditated on the painting.

One Sunday morning between poking his hardheaded charges and chastising them concerning the preparation of various dishes, Henry posed questions to himself to tease out the meaning of the painting.

Who is that baby boy sitting so happy in his mama's lap? (“Look sharp, Travis! You wanna cook or you wanna burn?”) Why it's me! (“Lower that fire, Beelzebub! You plan on burnin us all up with those flames?”) And who is the mama? (“Pay attention, professor! That soup's boiling over!)

Why, the mama is Jackson and Memphis and all of God's green earth! (“Boy, does that look like steak to you? I want the flank!)

But here's the question, Mr. Tolliver:

where's the baby's daddy? ("More fire, Solomon. I wanna see smoke?!") Why the daddy's the spirit of God himself, and a man is born of earth and spirit!

In that moment, the painting revealed exactly what Henry has always understood somewhere in the recesses of his soul about what it meant to be human, but had somehow forgotten in the long years since his boyhood. It meant that he was both the child of the living god and the child of the living earth. He laughed with pleasure, and his assistants who were no more than boys, looked at him with curious eyes as he cooked and chuckled in the midst of the kitchen's flames, scents, and steam.

At first, Henry wondered what to do with such a revelation. And so he asked one of the waiters, a man by the name of Gustafson, from the hill country, if he had ever thought much about the mother of god and the child. Gustafson scratched the stubble of his beard and said he wondered what it must have feel like to carry a god around in your belly then rubbed his stomach as if he were hungry. Henry knew not to try again.

No, I can't tell anybody, he thought. At least nobody at the hotel. His friends would not understand either, neither would his family, not even his own sweet wife who seemed to be so distracted of late. Night time, just before surrendering to sleep, had always been Henry and Callie Tolliver's time to open up their hearts to one another. Things they could not say in the light of day they expressed to one another in the darkness of the evenings, but when he had tried he couldn't find the words, and she had merely squeezed his hand and turned over to sleep. Still Henry thought he must do something new, be something new. Maybe he would leave the kitchen, set out on the preacher circuit, maybe go by a new name.

One Easter morning he went down to Bethel New Kingdom Baptist on Mithern Road and sat in the back of the church, rocking and weeping with the terrible knowledge that he was the

son of god and the son of the earth. But when the pastor noticed Henry at the conclusion of the service and went to comfort a suffering soul the preacher offered up such thin and watery wisdom that even a child would not be comforted by it, and Henry left without saying a word.

The preacher circuit was not for him.

No, he would remain in the kitchen, surrounded by his pots and pans and the boys destined to drive him near madness with their slapdash ways and their rough and tender talk of the women they fought with and adored. One afternoon, Henry learned exactly how he might live with this terrible truth. Once again he had been staring up at the little painting. That Saturday morning, he had come in early to prepare potato salad and tomato pie for an outing down by the river some of the boys had planned with their sweethearts when suddenly he was no longer in the kitchen even as he stood before the steaming tomato pie, a knife suspended above the crust. Instead, a dizzy dreamy feeling came over him as if heaven itself had descended upon him, and he stood on the highest peak of the world and all roads led to Jackson, and all roads led away from Jackson. He could feel all the lands and their peoples surrounding him and feel the hum of their many voices, and he knew he was a part of them the way the hub of a wheel is part of its spokes. A feeling of great joy and well-being welled up in him, and a truth reached him as if it ascended to the surface of a calm and sapphire sea: You are greater than no man and no man is greater than you and you are a part of all things, and all things are love.

Henry looked around the kitchen from within the cocoon of this heaven: at the stove, the spoons hanging from the wall, the red calico napkins above the ice box, all of it was alive, all of it pulsating with life.

Henry sliced the tomato pie into four precise quarters, and rested the blade on the countertop. To test this heaven, to see if it would move as he moved, he walked slowly through

the kitchen, through the early morning hush of the dining room, until he stood calmly on the steps of the hotel, where a cool and companionable breeze caressed his face. An unlit cigarette in his mouth and his body full of great wisdom and peace, Henry watched the great jangling beauty of the world pass before him from the steps of the Stanhope Hotel, and from among the many figures and sounds of this one beauty stepped a woman. The woman stopped here and there as she walked along the avenue, and Henry watched the rhythms of her gait and thought: I bet she's been walking all her life: and he laughed at the foolish pleasure he took in the thought, and without deciding to, he dropped the cigarette, and stepped into the street drawn by the loveliness of his wife, Callie.

What did Henry's food mean to the men of the camp? It meant that they shared some small part of the peace and understanding that Henry knew. The men could not name what they felt as they ate; most wouldn't think to try. They only knew that they'd rather do almost anything than miss one of his meals: if they were tired before they sat down they were stronger after they rose up; if they were dark and needed to go deeper down into that darkness, it would point the way. Men who burned with the heat of the fields in heart and body were made ready for the cooler climes of evening and of rest. To some it was home, to others escape, to others still the absence of any feeling at all. His food provided a respite for the men; a place where they owed no one and no one owed them, a thing of incalculable value at a place like Parchman Farm.

There was a light in Henry's eyes as his finger ran down the list of provisions for the governor's visit. He knew that if during most of the year he saw Sappo once or twice a month, now he would see her twice that or more for soon it would be spring, and spring meant that all the camp's cooks would vie to see who could prepare the meal for the governor's annual visit.

There was a tradition at Parchman that went back to its earliest days: the camp that prepared the finest meal would serve as base camp for the governor's hunt, an all-day affair for which the administration took months to prepare. Henry knew that Sappo would visit Camp 26 to check on his preparations. She was in charge of her own kitchen as well as the five other camps in her quadrant. Henry's eyes glowed, already seeing himself and Sappo conferring together, discussing what vegetables would pair well with certain entrees, checking on storage and the condition of the mess. It was late February, but Henry moved with a quiet energy, spring already in his voice.

"She's got no idea what I want to do for her, Sam," he said softly.

The words were spoken more to himself than to Samuel, and Samuel looked up surprised. To the men of Camp 26, Henry was known as the King of Silence. He treated any breach of the tranquility of his kitchen as a threat to his sovereignty. He could go an entire day without speaking more than a few words and here he was opening a corner of his heart to the boy.

"The man who wants to give, who's got a hunger to give, that man suffers," Henry said. He broke a fistful of pasta stalks in two and placed them in a large pot of water that he had set to boiling. "But he suffers happy; the pitcher's full and he's ready to fill her cup till it's overflowing. For the pleasure in it, Sam. The pouring out. A man comes to a woman like a pitcher to a glass and says, 'Let me fill you up. It's my pleasure to do so; it pleases me to please you. To do for you.'" He broke another clutch of thick stalks, and placed it beneath the surface of the roiling water, his fingers inured to the heat. "Of course, a woman has got herself, and that's more than plenty. But a time comes when giving is getting. That's the one secret they don't tell you, Sam. That's love deluxe, son. That's the best love they got."



Henry stirred the pot and thought of his kitchen at the Stanhope and the little painting on the wall.

“It’s the same pleasure God’s got in giving himself. Some folks talk about suffering like it’s the first and last of the cross. But they’re missing the most important thing. The Father says, ‘Take what is most precious to me: my only son.’ And I know what I’m talkin about, Sam. Cookin taught me this. It taught me the pleasure in givin.” He smiled and raised a stalk of celery in his hand, and made the sign of the cross above the roiling water before dropping it into the pot.

“As it is in heaven, same thing down here on earth, Sam. Ask a mother or a father and see if they don’t tell you the same thing about why they want a son or a daughter. They’ll tell you this: for the pleasure of loving ‘em despite the pain in loving ‘em.”

“Most ain’t got ears to hear, Sam,” he said. “They’re the same folks can’t see joy in the blues. If you can’t see joy in the blues you can’t see joy in Christ up on the cross. Here,” he said, “help me with this ice.” Samuel took one edge of a large block of ice and together they carefully moved it from a cart to the counter. “You watch out for anybody who gets no joy in giving; that man’s hiding something. God got joy in giving his only son. Joy, I’m telling you, Sam.” He lowered the stove’s flame and as the surface of the water smoothed the light in his eyes dimmed. He took up the ladle once again, and with two quick twists of his wrist stirred the water into a swirling motion that held for a moment then slowed, the vortex of the pasta dissolving in the pot.

“It’s easy enough to forget though, Sam, this joy. It’s easy enough to forget.” Henry looked down at his own hands. “And so many folks seem to forget that after a while it seems like forgetting is a part of remembering.”

“I don’t understand,” said Samuel.

It was something that had begun slowly, this comfort that Samuel had begun to feel in Henry's presence. Samuel would hurry to the kitchen as quickly as he could after morning mess. After a while, he allowed himself to ask the questions that came to him as he and Henry worked together. For his part, Henry usually maintained a cool demeanor although he could be irritable or angry, especially if he thought Luther or Samuel were not working to their capacities. But he also seemed to welcome the questions that came when he and Samuel were alone, preparing for the next day's meal or clearing the dishes from the last meal. So when Samuel asked about this forgetting and remembering, Henry opened up his thoughts, as if he were opening a pantry and displaying its richly ordered contents.

"I used to have a friend who played the guitar," he said. "Carried it all over the county. Played this nervous kind of guitar. You know, like it's singing and gets to trembling? He'd set up near the depot and folks'd listen to him play right there at the train station. Well, he had this song that came to him one night when he had gone to bed feelin lonesome, and he woke up and played it just like he heard it in his dream. He started playing it while he was waiting at the station at Panther Burn. Well, folks went crazy for it. They wouldn't even let him leave until he played it again – his guitar was trembling and crying out and him singing. Aw, he made that guitar ring out it liked to make a grown man cry.

"Well, after that everywhere he went folks was a fiend to hear him play that song. At one of the railroad stops this fella from Greenville heard him play it, and he liked it so much he took it up himself. Turns out this fella landed with one of them New Orleans outfits, and the next thing you know he had it playing all over the state. He wasn't a guitar player; couldn't make it sing like Little Boy could, but the recipe was so good almost anybody could pick it up and make it sound sweet.

“The next summer I was in Vicksburg visiting my people, and Little Boy came through. We’re down by the river and I said, ‘LB, pick up that guitar and play me that song.’ He said, ‘What song’ I said, ‘You know the one.’ So he picks up his guitar and you know what? He played that song just like that Greenville fella played it – hopped up like his pants on fire. LB had heard his own song played by that other fella for so long he forgot it himself. You hear me? He forgot how to play his own song. Guitar wasn’t tremblin; just steady getting up like anybody’d do it. I said, ‘LB, you playing it like that other fella play it; play it like you play it.’ He stopped and looked at me like he didn’t know what I was talking about. Then he started picking. Now, didn’t he play it like he used to? Man, we had a ball sitting there under that tree just playing and talking.

“Now, if a fella like LB can forget his own song, then who can’t? And if we all can, then it seems to me that’s how it’s meant to be somehow – remembering and forgetting and remembering again. Even when the thing we’re forgetting is love.”