

Not Quite the Crossroads

By William Jody Ebert

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Where I am from: Maplewood, NJ

Bio: Under the name Jody Ebert he has been a professional actor for nearly four decades, most well-known for commercials and as the FU Guy on Letterman for over six years. Recently he has become an award-winning screenwriter both in short form and feature. Though he has acted in many a play this is his first crack at writing one. He is thankful for the opportunity.

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What is keeping me positive: Music, writing and family

You may publish this

Characters

ELMER - A 17-year-old boy. Dressed casually. He can be played by any race. Not particularly special in any way.

BETTY- Elmer's mom. Also, can be played by any race. She loves her son strongly even when he is annoying her. She is 42

ROBERT- A hundred-year-old African American bluesman. It is possible he is Robert Johnson. Despite his age he is in decent shape.

THE DEVIL – Well, he is the Devil.

Time

The present

Place

Rural Mississippi

Scene 1

Elmer (17) sits on the front porch of his family's house in rural Mississippi playing an old dented trumpet. The trumpet is old enough that it no longer has the golden shine that brass instruments usually do. It is as dull as the sound that is coming out of it. Elmer looks his trumpet with both love and longing. Like it's the head cheerleader that he has no chance of getting a date with, but he has to try anyway. He gives the trumpet another blow. The sound could best be described as "not great". Elmer's mother BETTY (42) glides on to the porch with her hair in a bun, apron on and a dusting of flour on her arms and cheeks. She looks at her son with a small, sly smile on her face.

BETTY:

Oh, thank God it's just you.

ELMER:

Who else would it be mama?

BETTY:

Well from the sounds that I was hearing in the kitchen I could have sworn that someone wearing armor was beating a duck to death out here.

ELMER:

Haha. You are so funny I wet myself a little. No wait... bone dry.

BETTY:

Your playing doesn't seem to be improving very much. Seriously son, you are scaring the neighbor's chickens. Sara tells me that they haven't had eggs in days.

ELMER:

Sorry mama I love playing so much and I keep trying so hard I figure that one of these days' things are going to get better.

BETTY pauses a moment and gets a faraway look in her eyes. She is trying to remember something from a long time ago. It slowly drifts to her from the ether.

BETTY:

You know when I was younger than you, your grandmother used to tell me a story about a man who lived down on Elm when she was a girl, actually I think he still lives there now. A nice old fella, last name starts with a J, maybe Johnston or Jameston. Anyway, the name isn't as important as the story. She says he used play his guitar on his front porch just like you are doing with your trumpet. Similarly,

to you my boy, he had the love but not the skill. People walked by just to laugh at him for years. From what I understand he got fed up with what was happening and how he was being treated. He told people he was leaving town and wouldn't be coming back until he was the best guitarist in Mississippi. People wished him well as he left but they all thought it was a fool's errand. From what your grandmother said he was gone for about 8 months and when he came back, he was a different man. He was dressed like a real bluesman. Suit and tie. Hat and shoes were all stylish as if he had come into some unexpected money. Even more important he could make that guitar sing like nothing anyone had heard before. He was so different that many people began to say that he had used magic to become what he had become. Well your grandmother didn't believe in magic and neither do I but the reason I tell you the story is that while he is still alive perhaps you can go talk to him. Perhaps he will be willing to tell you how he was able to change his playing so drastically.

ELMER:

I don't know, I guess it couldn't hurt. Should I be scared of him?

BETTY:

From what I understand he was a nice man back in the day. Even if he isn't, he has got to be about a hundred by now. So I am not sure how much trouble he could make for you. You have your phone if anything comes up.

ELMER:

Cool. Seems as if this is as good a time as any to go speak with him. I'll bring my horn.

BETTY:

It will be nice to have it out of the house for a while. Can't wait for my sanity to return. Just don't scare him like the chickens.

Lights down.

Scene 2:

Lights slowly raise up again.

Elmer stands by the front door of what used to be a big, beautiful house. Now it is a bit worse for wear. Paint peeling and the roof needs replacing. Everything is stable, the only question is how long. This house was once loved, it has been a long time since it was shown that love. Elmer stands motionless by the front door. He has knocked more than once in hope that someone will answer. He gives it one more hearty knock and then turns away and starts to walk away. From deep in the house there comes a voice.

VOICE:

Stop banging on my door. Whatever it is I don't want to buy it. If you hit my door one more time I am calling the police.

ELMER:

I am not selling anything sir. I just wanted to speak with you. I'm sorry I will go away. Please don't call the police.

Elmer starts to walk away again, his horn in hand. The door swings open and there stands an African American gentleman dressed in a dark suit and tie with a white shirt. While he is clearly older than some of the trees in his yard he seems to be getting around all right.

VOICE:

It's ok young man. You don't have to run away. I didn't mean to scare you, but I don't get many visitors nowadays.

ELMER:

No, sir, it's my fault for banging so much.

VOICE:

Well let's stop saying sorry to each other and get around to the real reason that you stopped by for a visit. Also, you look a couple of months away from being a man, so why don't you call me Robert. What can I call you?

ELMER:

Ah... Elmer sir. Sorry, I mean Robert.

Robert: So, what can I do for you Elmer?

ELMER:

Well for a year or so now I have been playing this horn.

Elmer holds up his trumpet.

ELMER:

It seems no matter how long and hard I practice I don't seem to be getting any better. My parents are just about to disown me and I think I caught one of the neighbors pointing a shotgun in my direction the other day. The problem is that I love this damn thing and all I can think of is becoming greater than Louis Armstrong or Miles. Sometimes I want it so bad that I can't sleep at night. There is a rumor out there that you had the same problem at one time with your guitar. Then one day you were the best there ever was. I was wondering what your secret was and if you would be willing share it with me.

ROBERT:

Oh no boy, seems you have the fever. Let me see that horn.

Elmer hands him the trumpet. Robert sits down in a chair and gestures for Elmer to do the same. Robert takes a long, hard look at the trumpet. Then strokes it gently as if it was a lover. He hands it back to Elmer. He then gestures for Elmer to play it. Elmer does and it continues to be at best mediocre. Quickly Robert waves at him to cease. Suddenly Robert's face is all business. It looks as if he is arguing with himself in his own mind. After a few moments one side appears to win.

ROBERT:

I was hoping you would be good enough that I could just send you on your way, but I think you do need my secret. I haven't ever told anyone this and soon I will be gone so I might as well share with you. The truth is it wasn't practice or a new teacher but some magic that helped me with my guitar playing. I did travel all around looking for some help but in the end, I found my help just two towns away in Rollins. I met a Hoodoo practitioner who said that she could help me. She used her considerable powers to help connect me to who would be able to make me into the greatest blues guitarist of all time. I brought her a chicken and tens dollars and she made the introduction for me. After what seemed like hours of praying, she told me "Robert, you go down to the Crossroads at the end of town. Bring with you that guitar of yours. When you get there kneel and say these words. My gift for your gift my lord." Then she sent me on my way saying that I should remember that things come to this world from elsewhere must live by the rules of our world. After it became dark I did just what she said. As soon as I said those words a beautifully attired man appeared and told me to get up off my knees. He told me there was no need to pray to him. He touched my chest above my heart and said he would trade this for my greatest desire. I knew somehow, he was speaking of my soul. I was young and crazy, so I agreed. I told him that I wished to be the greatest blues guitarist ever. Then he touched my chest again and then rubbed the guitar. The guitar shone with a new fire and when he handed it back to me, I could play like no man has before or since. The man said, "when you die I will return to collect this". He pointed at my chest then disappeared as if he had never been there. Since that day I have known I owed my soul to The Devil. I have had a great life since then and it was only when my arthritis got so bad that I couldn't play anymore that I even wondered if the deal I struck was the right one. So, you see Elmer this is not something that I can teach you. You have come here for nothing.

ELMER:

Thanks for your time and your story. I wish there was something that could be done. As crazy as it might seem I would make that same deal. Oh, well some dreams are not meant to be fulfilled. I probably should be going home soon.

ROBERT:

I am sorry. I can see the fever in your eyes. Even if you wanted to do this the Hoodoo woman has been gone for years.

ELMER:

So, no hope.

Elmer gently shakes Robert's hand and gets up leave.

ROBERT:

Wait, before you go I have a thought. I remember the prayers the Hoodoo woman said, like she said them yesterday. Maybe I can try to make the introduction for you. Do you have something to pay me with?

ELMER:

I have ten dollars and a half bottle of Tylenol you can use for your arthritis. Would that work?

ROBERT:

No reason to believe that it wouldn't.

ELMER:

Here you go.

He hands Robert his payment.

ROBERT:

I can't promise anything but let's get started.

Robert starts chanting prayers that are a mixture of English and some type of Gullah prayers. The lights quickly fade to darkness.

Scene 3:

The lights come up on Robert and Elmer in a closed Texaco parking lot. It is dark. The only light comes from a streetlamp overhead. Robert is shaking his head. Nobody has met them here.

ROBERT:

So sorry Elmer I guess I did too many things wrong. After all there is not a real crossroads here anymore, just this parking lot. I thought I got the prayers right but who knows and of course I forgot to say that things that come to our world from other places have to live by the rules of our world. I messed this all up, let's go home.

ELMER:

It's fine. I actually had fun and it was nice to meet you. To be honest I never believed it was true. I just thought it would be a good way to spend some time.

Then out of nowhere an immaculately dressed man who looks to be in his 40's appears. His face could almost be described as beautiful and he has a pointed goatee.

THE DEVIL:

Oh yea of little faith. Leaving so soon. Man is so impatient. Do you think meeting you is all I have to do?

ELMER:

Oh, God.

THE DEVIL:

Wrong but close. Nice to see you again Robert and thanks for bringing a friend. Now Elmer I am guessing Robert told you what you need to say to make things work.

Elmer nods his head. Shaking a little he gets on his knees and speaks.

ELMER:

My gift for your gift my lord.

THE DEVIL:

Well now that we have that out of the way what can I do for you?

ELMER:

I want to be able to play this trumpet better than anybody else in the world. In fact I want to be able to play it so well that no matter who hears it they can't help themselves but dance.

THE DEVIL:

Done!

The Devil grabs the trumpet and strokes it until the golden polish comes back to it. He then hands it back to Elmer.

THE DEVIL:

There you go. Enjoy my gift. I must go now. Robert I will be seeing you again soon but until then...

ELMER:

Wait, before you go I want to make sure it worked.

THE DEVIL:

(Sigh) Humans. Go on.

Elmer starts playing the trumpet in a way that is slow and beautiful. Robert and The Devil start to sway back and forth to the music in a way that suggests the music controls them. He speeds up a bit and then Robert and The Devil are forced to go faster. Elmer realizes he's has full control of even The Devil that he starts playing an incredibly fast Bebop jazz to the point where they are none stop whirling and smoke starts to rise from the floor. When it seems that it couldn't get any faster The Devil grabs Robert and they both disappear in a cloud of smoke. When this happens Elmer stops playing looks around for the moment. The lights go black.

Scene 4:

An older looking Elmer stands center stage lit only by a spotlight.

ELMER:

That's the last I ever saw of either of them. I have no idea what happened for sure. Did I whirl The Devil away from the almost crossroads and stop him from taking souls? Or will he come someday for his price. I have played music all over the world for adoring crowds. However, as I am walking home at night I can't help but look over my shoulder hoping to see nothing there.

Elmer looks over his right shoulder. Just as he does this a hand comes out of the dark and grabs his left shoulder. The stage goes black and there is long loud scream that gets cut off.

The End