

"After a month's sobriety my faculties became unbearably acute and I found myself unhealthily clairvoyant, having insights into places I'd as soon not journey to. Unlike some men, I had never drunk for boldness or charm or wit; I had used alcohol for precisely what it was, a depressant to check the mental exhilaration produced by extended sobriety."

- Frederick Exley, *A Fan's Notes*

WRONG'S WHAT HE DID BEST

The first person to be overwhelmed by *The Voice* was George Jones himself. It warned him not to grab the mic and bow his legs suggestively, cautioned strongly against too much sashay & swivel. By the end he would have more records than the KGB—165 in the Top Ten alone—but not by channeling Elvis. Drunker than a Mohican on payday and sweatin' benzedrine bullets to boot, Jones was near tempted to count coup on his entire entourage—publicist, promoter, producer, record label (*Shee-it! even my roadies!*)—the whole dang lot of boulevard pimps and toxic enablers forcing *him*, George Jones—aka *The Possum*, aka *No Show Jones*, aka *The Greatest Country Singer Of All Time*—night in and night out, to dry hump the nearest available hay-bale, when—*SHAZAAM!*—he felt that slow familiar creep of a gaudy homunculus on his back, a chiropractic insurgency of simian mischief and bad decision-making. His dark passenger along for another ride. “The itch.” Elvis was sure he saw Joseph Stalin in the clouds (*Look! What is he doing up there?*), tinnital static pinging in his ears courtesy of Dr. Nick’s prescription pill-popping roller-coaster, but that weren’t but one delirious night in the desert.

All rouged up in his best nudie-suit, a sateen peach onesie, you had to admit that Jones—last of the bona fide honey-dripping troubadours—made for a convincing hula-popper angling for a gullible fish; a court-martialed Captain Kangaroo about to get his swerve on. It was nothing that a shot of B-12 wouldn't fix, but still. Brother, if it came in a can or a bottle or a jelly-jar or a bucket; if it was clear, amber, chartreuse, canary yellow or candy-striped; if there was a worm at the bottom or a cherry floating around on top; if it was infused with bubblegum or bacon or hailed from wintry White Russia, Jones had—as recently as twenty minutes ago—greedily sucked it down backstage.

FUNDAMENTALLY FUCKED FROM GO

Nothing had changed in the *New World* except our awareness of it. The great American institution of criminalizing the poor had yet to begin its jubilee, though a mood of overweening optimism starkly undercut by countervailing evidence was right this minute being systematically compacted into gravel and laid out in great gray distances of macadam festooned with a single yellow strip—sometimes two—leading to this big reveal: that distance itself was only an ideological construct designed to protect you from the nearness of all things. The abyss had no precipice; it did not loom. Objects in mirror really *were* closer than they appeared. There was a profound empirical basis for suggesting that all life was an avalanche that calmed itself with little slides.

Have you ever flipped a golf cart high on paint thinner? Summoned the necessary G-force cruising along at 5 mph? Found yourself involved in a high speed car chase with the police, redlining your lawn-mower over rural routes and switchbacks just to pick up a six-pack at 7-Eleven? Or been in a relationship where one minute you were in the driver's seat and it suddenly became the ejector seat? Jones had. Even Charlie Brown got

wise after Lucy snatched the football away one too many times. Jones would toss a 24-inch Zenith off the 4th floor balcony of the Holiday Inn on a regular basis and pray its insides were born again as festive pom-poms. What *was* the effective stress envelope for a mid-century American consumer electronic, anyway? In the moment, it seemed not inappropriate for him to ask.

Born a burlesque busker of absolutely no means on September 12th, 1931 in Vidor, Texas, George Glenn Jones had—for most of his adult life until his passing at age 81 from hypoxic respiratory failure in Nashville, Tennessee—just two slots in his daily schedule: happy hour and his haircut. Still, in the notoriety sweepstakes exhaustively retailed in his autobiography *I Lived to Tell It All*, he easily earned the nicknames “The Possum” and “No Show Jones”—the first, for his pointy nose, close-set eyes and miraculous ability to feign death when convenience or necessity dictated; the latter, for his habitual absenteeism from his own scheduled performances due to excessive drink.

Tested with an IQ of 70 after crashing in various rubber rooms at the Watson Clinic in Lakeland, Florida and the Hillcrest Psychiatric Facility in Birmingham, Alabama, George Jones could scarcely tell you the difference between an I.E.D. and an I.U.D—though he might, if pressed, wonder aloud if it was a rhetorical question. Spit out through the complicated assembly of the music industry, an apparatus whose faulty, rusting gears would not have looked out of place next to a butcher block, the best you could do, Jones figured, was to offer the soft meat of your palm to the hydraulic talons anxious to pump your grip, all the while fellating the bone in the birch for a single note that would mummify your hurt, beckon you like birdcall into its bosomy center where, come to think of it, you’d already been standing.

I can't hold out much longer

The way that I feel

With the blood from my body

I could start my own still

And if drinking don't kill me

her memory will.

10,000 hours drinkin' & druggin' & pickin' & singin' in a wheezing 40s Packard with your name and number enameled on the side, fueled by the intimate camaraderie of your ragamuffin sidekicks Poppy, Spooner, Peanut, and Shug, doubtless made you the *High Lonesome's* most masterful outlier; but 10,000 hours touring Bakersfield's "blood circuit" of juke joints as you absorbed the radioactive road's interminable arterial half-life, while kickin' out your quota of tears & beers on a steady diet of Mayor McCheese's table scraps, eventually mutated Jones's dwindling reptile brain, prompting him to develop what one might term *The Leprechaun Theory of Capitalism*, whereby various producers from Starday, Mercury, United Artists, RCA and EPIC, reputedly teleported from rainbow to rainbow effecting a smash & grab on all of his pots. For over fifty years Jones was just burnin' doing this neutron dance: at times he was so flush he could buy a Garage Mahal on the Redneck Riviera with the change in his dryer; at others, he stared dolefully at the same machine, inserting one coin after another.

Caught up in the vortex of his growing lunacy, alcohol revealed itself over time to be the metonym of despair and despair itself; Jones simply closed the circuit and tightened up the loop. Extraterrestrials, sensing his fading heat-signature, routinely passed on his abduction. It was across this painted median that the Ark took on water.

LING LING @ SING SING

Jones clocked the who's who at the zoo loitering beneath the corrugated tin in this 80s roadhouse relic, just spitting distance from the chicken-wire Panda cage. Mud and river folk. Swampers. Hee-haw honeys. Girgoyles. Your standard broken-hearted messes wandering fields of stone lookin' for the gold tooth in God's crooked smile—the wretch, the prodigal, the outlaw. Lot lizards slinking around fetid stalls in fringed white boots. Pavement princesses tuggin' on acid-wash Daisy Dukes. A yuppie with a lariat ropin' a light breeze, guts spillin' out proudly over his ketchup-stained *Hasta La Vista, bin Laden!* t-shirt—bin Laden himself doing that whole *shabby-chic, nautical, cold chillin' like Gilligan on the Island* thing he does—*did?*—so well. *Hey Little Buddy!* was back from the dead but looking very much like lunch here, laid out in a delicious hot dog bun and showered in condiments by some camo-clad ectomorphic Snoopy eyeballin' the turbaned pig-in-a-blanket with toothy grin and slavering tongue. Scrrrrumptious!

McGruff, the intrepid lovable crime dog of yore, had apparently ditched the trenchcoated super-sleuth look a while back having now elected to go full-on rogue. *That's a rog. That's a definite.* The K-9 caped crusader had joined the 102nd Dalmatian Airborne Division, and—framed by a billowing, XXXL, 100% cotton, *Hanes Beefy Stars & Stripes* in faded red white & blue—was about to get all *Zero Dark Thirty* up in this joint, pretty much shouting *Who's laughin' now, Osama?* to the luckless fist-kissed orphans maimed and crippled by the *SNAP! CRACKLE! & POP!* of the credit crunch—and a few with actual stumps. Ain't nothing but a comfy cowboy thang!

Up and down the bar, jack-of-all-scams on parole, mercilessly stalking transcendence on any given Saturday night deep in the hollows of the big thicket, the crosses on pitched roofs resembling the crosses in the ground—Shaker in their white-washed simplicity, waving like timid children. Too big to fail in their dreams but small enough to jail in real

life, there was no crime of which they could not conceive of themselves as guilty. *The reduced*. IRA's were not much of an issue here. Nobody had a library card. Their spirit guide animals resembled three-day-old roadkill. It was like trying to explain to your mother the exact motivation behind that Maori face tattoo—it wasn't so much a question of *why?* but more along the lines of, *what happened?* If you had just fled a tragic hot-plate related incident back at the double-wide and been spared a fiery death, this was the place for you to be.

RIMBAUD'S JUKEBOX

Jones did not drink seeking ecstasy of mind, nor for the metaphysical derangement of his senses and the mystical rewards of a chancey, bogus martyrdom. Jones did not drink to “get off the grid,” go wildcat, or temporarily exile himself from this mortal coil in order to heroically puncture an alleged distortion field hiding behind a veil of big nature. Drinking, for George Jones, was not the modest privileging of the “true mirror” where you looked—in an act of sublime revelation forged in pure humility—*for yourself*; but rather, a nitty-gritty, grease-stained oval compact bought on a whim at the checkout stand in Wal-Mart, where—daily—he found himself perpetually grabbing at its clamshell hinges and clasps to look *at himself*, in quotidian, whiskey-drenched affirmation. The definition of the *Picture of Dorian Gray*. There was no effacement of the self about it.

Jones drank because Jones was programmed to drink at some early embryonic stage and for the mere pressing fact that he was thirsty. That was the extent of his operating system; to trick his dread of quiet by producing voices in his own head. If the world was going in 2012, as the Mayans were certain it would, then so too, would Jones croon unto ruin starve-hearted ballads of stalled cars and canine death from a shoeshine stand on

the streets of Beaumont or in this One Horse Honky Tonk shit-shack if that's what it took. Thus, proper self-motivation of the incantatory variety was key—part exorcism, part wishful snake-charming, where Jones was the drowsy snake in need of being charmed.

His panicky wet hands grabbed fiercely at the chain-stitched conestoga wagon ringed in a swirl of jaunty, rhinestone cleft-notes embroidered in mauve brocade across his chest. Jones knew his tribe; held in sway by worlds that never were, nor would be in their lifetimes. Fellow flamingos striking poses on passing ice floes, viewing the cock-eyed world from the busted rearview as it cheerfully bounded forward at Mach 1 into a giddy, unknowable future—earth-toned, sepulchral, flush with the long green. Forbidding from the other side of the moat. *Dumped In The Delivery Room! Hurt & Acting Out! Her Secret Shame! His Worst Nightmare!* Breast-fed six year olds. Homeless. *House-less.* Will A Baby Save The Marriage? *CATFIGHT!* Angry dobermans at the garden party gradually winnowed over time by the soft bigotry of low expectations into frightening totems of suffering and humiliation and rage; unrepentant in their penance, yet confused as to the duration of the sentencing guidelines.

Bumpkins that were plugged in and other assorted high-tech rednecks and Buckaroo Banzais whose gadget fetishism would not have impressed Barney Rubble. *They weren't into hip-hop, they weren't into rap. They liked to rattle them speakers with Ronnie Milsap.* Lurkers. Lifers. You just wanted to go on a boat with them. Given the choice between grief and nothing, they chose grief—nine times out of ten; it wasn't even close. *Probable Cause* simply meant Mr. Mayhem was probably going to cause you imminent bodily harm, inflict an unforgettably grievous tort on your person. Could you hold out till your horse came in? Was there a horse? A gryphon maybe? Did it really have wings? Why did your unicorn always lose by a nose?

Jones began to chant his settling prayer to conjure up the boom boom, ward off any jitters. *Don't hedge. Bet your stack. Pray for the Suicide King. Throw it all on black.* He spun this hard-bitten lullaby from the scraped out voids of his own terminal restlessness, dreaming of Exodus from recurring Babylons in the language of the double down. A blind date with Helen Keller in the future future, the intensest rendezvous with the woodpecker's castanets. A quantum yodel—blue/not blue—(it depended on how you looked at it and for how long), to counter the insistent bongo backbeat of failure that miraculously turned, Jones knew, on a dime-bag of shitty park weed or a stepped on 8-ball of baby lax or a gallon jug of sterno marked with cartoon XXX's, into a full-blown hostage situation. It was the “voodoo” in Voodoo Economics, the pin that Ronald Reagan stuck in the doll way back in the day, and the bodies were just now starting to fall.

“MEGADEATH FROM ABOVE” SCHOOL OF ROMANCE

Chicks dug wizened Santas in threadbare togas perched atop craggy bluffs ringed in crackling, electromagnetic nimbuses whilst palming the knotty burls of their Gaelic walking sticks, gettin' jiggy with the twinkle-toed, light-footed grace of the FAT MAN channeling Fred Astaire—the arcade game avatar, the t-shirt with the zippy graphic, the spring-loaded bobblehead, the inflatable punching-bag weighted with sand whose abdominal strike zone practically begged you for a hug. They couldn't get enough and for no discernible reason. As the incontrovertible truth of this processional formation gradually expanded outward into three dimensions, you began to feel that perhaps you were not alone in having recently discovered that the mere fact of something existing—of insisting on its structural integrity—compelled you to smash it to the floor. When the *Attention Deficit* crashed into the *Novelty Surplus* leaving you inconveniently stranded somewhere on *The Spectrum's* fatal shoals, opportunistic proximity whores would steal

your location and sell it back to you just to be near the action—quick bucks for guiltless fucks. *Welcome to Gluetopia! Stick thing together! Start make connection! Polish holster for taser on eve of big night! Lob much ordnance on would-be sweetheart!*

Lightning struck the rock creating the RNA which gave the first protozoa its genetic imprint, allowing this single-celled organism to replicate itself millions and millions of times over, thus creating the puddle of primordial goo out of which crawled the gator-bait that would one day finally stride across the African veldt erect as Bob Dole pitchin' a tent on Cialis. We were all descendants of this spark, this sparkle, this ... sparkler. It was as inevitable as if it had been written on the back of a cereal box. To argue the contrary was to present yourself as a sock-puppet stigmata with a Promise Keepers button wielding a light saber for the Tribulation Force.

More and more, in this culture of physical predation where the big ones ate the little ones and repo men in fingerless *grimy bandito* gloves sewer-served robo-signed judgments on unsuspecting innocents, there were the winners ... , and then there was a ditch behind the Der Weinersnitzel parking lot with a sputtering fluorescent light and the smell of rotting cheese. You had only to reverse-zoom Spielberg-*Lost Ark* style away from the pit of bodies comfortably enveloped in the climate-controlled warmth and rich, Italian-leather interior of your alpine green XJ6. That was the thing about capital over-accumulation after you botoxed the balance sheets—you needed to dump the bags *somewhere*.

8,805 pills, tablets, vials and injectables in the seven months leading up to the tragic summer of '77, to the *Summer of Sam*, to the doomed, fateful summer when the hunk of burnin' love himself sunk into 260 pounds of soft Cadbury churn, his gold lame dreams never to achieve escape velocity from the quicksand of his own flesh. Onstage, *Elvis the Pelvis* could break a concrete block with a single chop-socky stroke of his bare hand but

he went out clutchin' a pogo-stick, bouncin' off the bedroom walls, livin' in a mood ring – Dr. Nichopolous, his Prince of Darkness with a prescription pad, controlling that mood. Whatever barbed hook subsequent History had seemed to hang Elvis on, Jones wanted to let him down gently from it, shield his King from *Enquiring* minds, blanket his inadequacies in compensatory Lancelot Love with his finest populist anthem for collective weeping:

These days I barely get by

I want to give up, lay down and die

Worst of all is when she told me goodbye

Oh these days I barely get by

Oh these days, one barely gets by.

But these days the winners weren't just getting by, they were getting over; nonchalantly enumerating the numerics of their elaborate point-shaving schemes on CNN—13% ... 17%—the gig & grift of how they had just gamed you. From the auction block to the Venus Hottentot, one singular feline jazz-handing sensation fingering their grease-painted whiskers in the Green Room, limbering up and stretching out to dazzle-dance you into a network of shadowy, far-reaching implications way beyond your ken. (*And you, too, could be on the original cast album!*)

Sure, Jesus, that celibate gangster without a moll, The Last Don and the Don Magic Juan himself—our tender Nostradamus predicting events outside of time—could take a break from washing his bleached, straw hair in dead champagne to absolve you of your mediocrity with a single touch of his toy scepter, turning to the invisible crowd to doff his

crown of thorns as if he had just birdied the 9th at Augusta, giving you a flickering glimpse of the coveted world of fact and grace and poreless shimmer, Delphic with meaning and oracular with feeling, but then—*POW!*—the alimony check came due, and then—*WHAM!*—your transmission went out, and so—*BOOM!*—you were waitlisted at the Barbizon School of Modeling.

Nonchalant. It sounded like a resort town in Belize; it sounded like an inert gas trapped underneath the bezel of a rose gold watch; it sounded, to be honest, like a Kool & the Gang cover band on a reunion tour. It sounded, finally, at its hollow core, expensive and tacky and disdainful and oh so boxing clever—so vague as to be utterly nebulous; so vague as to be happening somewhere far away in the Crab Nebula.

Lives that were mere nodal points inserted like punch-cards into a self-reinforcing network of quantitative information designed to smooth over the speed bumps of murmuring dissent; lives punched in the groin with high-frequency trump cards one soft body blow after another, in order to grease a consensual house of cards hallucination administered from a tower of foil by some dapper Don Ho casually strumming his ukulele. He preyed on aggressive fantasists who found their most profound joy being coaxed into a lie. (*Didn't they always gravitate toward the truth-tellers?*) Nothing was self-evident in this world, certainly not the truth, and thankfully there were no lies just the *fabric of reality* cooked up by Betsy Ross and those nice ladies from Gee's Bend; a quivering Jello-like substance with which you molded the dark matter of the universe into gelatinous absinthe-colored bricks, as one would build the imagined homestead of their dreams with a fistful of Lincoln Logs. In the *New World* we all sought the shoddy instruments by which we might redeem even our most miniscule exaggerations.

DEFIBRILLATING THE HEART OF DARKNESS

Outside, the sky was an indecisive tie-dye bruise swaddled in poetic indeterminacy and poised to slough the skin of your failure into blessed motes; or the sky was a black felt pelt, or flat black, or had faded to black; or *The Sky* was simply sitting on his girlfriend's futon playing Madden Football blithely thumbing his way across the scrimmage line as you got sacked for a ten yard loss. Every scenario was possible, probable, likely, had happened, already exceeded its expiration date, was ready for a re-launch. Under these shaky conditions, Master Kwon—the great primate herald of chaos and self-sabotage—could materialize at any moment, flashing a badge or a bouquet of white roses, often dressed like Douglas Fairbanks Jr. in a shawl-collar tuxedo bearing a sterling silver chafing dish of steaming lobster thermidor. But with a little hat. Official? Unofficial? In the past he had found Jones spiraling down a K-hole in a Hobbit Disco or doin' the Humpty Dance in a Ho Chi Minh tunnel—you couldn't know; *you never knew*.

Jones spat, then turned to the side lowering his head, searching for the shroud in his sputum, searching for the *unknown known* in that shroud—the thing that he thought he knew, but after further rumination and upon closer inspection, he did not know at all. Or something along those lines; he couldn't really remember, or understand the difference between the two, or grasp the significance of that difference, and so concluded meaningfully, as he often did, that *the absence of evidence was not evidence of absence*. Hadn't Sinatra called him "the second best singer in America"? Dadgum it, no less a mustachioed authority than Burt Reynolds had generously averred: "George Jones is to country music what Spencer Tracy is to movies." So why was he red-eyed and staggering, a cats-in-sacks jangle of nerves? His people were here. They came as they always did, as he knew they would—show or no show, drunk or sober, lucid or in a private world of

oblivion—two by two, arm in arm, in 4x4's, hungering for a glimpse of their corn-bred Cyrano calling cadence to his mythical Roxanne.

Lucidity and Oblivion. Jones took the measure of their parasitical fellowship: ah yes, in the end we were all plankton hailing whales, but who was the barnacle, and who the big fish? The filter feeder and the errant drifter? He summoned the hillbilly boogie-woogie from over the chalk-pocked cliffs of Dover, his warbling glissando growing ever more candid and mournful. Distant Emerald ancestor of the bagpipe's first bleat, the shamrock shake & bake had long been a slumbering, formless absolute seeking the perfect pitch with which to express it.

The Voice—his voice—nimble cascaded over hill & dale luxuriating in its own viscous resonance: a rusticated lamentation born of rocks and dirt and dirt and rocks. But no loam. Jones had dug a hole in this life and having climbed into it, found that all you were left with was this arid, gorgeous echo. It hardened you. That were the true essence of the *High Lonesome*: last chances in The Vale of Tears. You felt or heard nuts loosed from bolts, glass pipes shattering, a master class in the liquidation of the master class. Cured in the desert and branded by the Buddha, George Jones's voice would come in a Dixie cup or a Baccarat crystal punch bowl, but it would own you.

Now, were you falling short of cultural imperatives, or were cultural imperatives falling short of you?

David C. Hunt

October, 2014

