

The Sixth Swamper

We sat at a tiny table for two, too close to the front door, at a trendy French café in Florence, Alabama. The clanking of glasses and din of conversation from the bar behind us was distracting. Every few minutes, the door opened, inviting a dank breeze to our table. But it was under a heat vent by the window, and we were chilled to the bone.

Outside, a torrent of rain scattered the colorful mix of artsy types, rednecks, students, and professionals—all millennials and younger. The late September wind off the Tennessee River hastened their retreats into upscale townhomes, local craft beer halls, and dive bars.

My wife, Emma, pointed to the tall, gaunt figure sitting on a wrought iron bench in front of the restaurant under the worsening downpour. "Check this guy out. Looks like he doesn't have a care in the world."

By the time our deep-fried bourbon bread puddings were served, the street had emptied except for that one soaked old man. Under a veil of white stubble, a roadmap of deep lines told of a lifetime of tough breaks and bad choices.

He removed an empty one-quart mason jar from a beat-up leather rucksack, placed it on the sidewalk, shoved the bag under the bench, and retrieved a ragged instrument case. We watched with curiosity as he took out his saxophone and began to play. Although we could barely hear him, the sway of his body and the upward tilt of his head conveyed the passion of an artist oblivious to the elements.

I reluctantly pushed aside my sinfully sweet, heart-clogging dessert and paid our check. Emma knew what I was up to and followed me out the door into the rain. As we stood before the vintage musician, he stopped what he was playing and eyed us up. Then came the velvety notes of *When a Man Loves a Woman*, dripping with longing and passion. That hauntingly beautiful melody poured from his tenor sax as if channeled straight from his heart. The horn's sighs and cries told of the joys and pain of love.

Emma took my hand and slowly spun under my arm. The old timer winked, and we danced as if in a warm, dry ballroom. His bluesy improvisations took us through a journey of sorrows, suggesting that maybe he'd lost the love of his life. His eyes closed as the final notes echoed through the buildings and faded.

The melody hung in my head as I looked up at the falling raindrops, twisting and twirling as they captured the shimmer of the streetlights. A vision flashed before me. I was ten again and my mother, in her waitress uniform, slowly twirled me around our living room to that exact song. My heart ached to see her again. With no father around, I was her little man of the house.

Back on Court Street, I dropped a twenty into his wet tip jar and said, "Great choice. I'm a northern boy, but I grew up in a house full of southern rock, soul, and blues. My mother's favorite." He silently thanked us with a prayer gesture as we turned to walk back to our hotel.

The neon lights of bars reflecting in the slick streets and the throb of disembodied rock bass lines cast a sinister aura on the nearly deserted town. This was no place to leave the old timer.

Emma must have read my mind when she elbowed me and said, "He looks like he's freezing. Let's invite him back to the hotel for some coffee." Arm in arm, we changed direction again.

He was putting his sax back into its case, water running off the tip of his nose. I said, "You're gonna get pneumonia out here. Our hotel's just down the street. Let's grab some coffee and dry off."

He flashed a gap-filled grin that wrinkled the corners of his faded blue eyes and drawled. "Sounds good to me, buddy. Just got into town. This weather's a bitch."

"Good. I'm David and this is Emma."

Emma extended her hand. He stared at her through watery eyes, cleared his throat and shook hands. "Benton...Benton Avery."

Benton gasped and wheezed as we negotiated the puddles on our ten-minute walk back to the hotel. I was sure that the earthy scent of the wet concrete bothered him. I offered to carry his bag, but he recoiled as if I was a bag snatcher. I tried slowing our pace, but he wouldn't ease up.

We entered our modest hotel's lobby through a foggy revolving door. I caught the front desk clerk giving Benton the side eye and muttering to himself. Ignoring that, we helped ourselves to the free coffee kiosk and proceeded to a breakfast room that doubled for guest entertainment. It featured a large-screen TV centered over a faux fireplace. The walls were decorated with framed photos of local studios and a collage of electric guitars.

Sitting in a well-worn tan leather seating group, facing the silenced TV, we dried our faces with paper napkins and sipped the bitter, overheated brew. Benton pointed at the guitars and spoke loudly enough for the clerk to hear, "Those are replicas of the ones used in the FAME studio by Jimmy Johnson of *The Swampers*."

He launched into a coughing fit, slowly recovering over the next few minutes.

I explained to give him some breathing room, "We're originally from Philly, but we moved to Huntsville a couple of months ago. Got jobs at the Space Center. I'm an engineer and Emma's a biologist. We're here for our fifth anniversary."

Emma raised her eyebrows as his rancid body odor filled the room. I glanced at her and said, "How 'bout we let Benton dry off with some real towels upstairs?"

The dampness-boosted stench slowed our three-floor elevator ride. Everyone was silent, Emma and I conserving breaths. Walking down the narrow hallway to our room, I asked, "So, you just got into Florence. Where from?"

The old guy's eyes narrowed, his mouth fighting a grimace. "I've been in Nashville for almost forty years, but now I'm back. Don't recognize this town anymore, though."

I opened our room door. The separate living room had open luggage and our keepsakes from the day's tours strewn over the sofa and coffee table. Emma pushed the suitcases into our bedroom

and closed the door. She apologized, "Sorry. The room's kind of a mess." He laughed. This was probably the fanciest digs he's seen in years.

"So, how'd you know about those guitars? You're a Florence boy?" I watched the water seep from his bag into our carpet.

His frown softened. "Learned to play right here. Born and raised."

Emma stood at the bathroom door and handed him a towel and bathrobe. "You must be freezing. Help yourself to a hot shower and we'll order a pizza."

Benton moved his rucksack into the bathroom and nodded before he shut the door. After fifteen minutes, he came out smiling in dry clothes.

We sat around a small coffee table as he devoured the pizza. I took a slice to be polite. "This morning we toured some recording studios. The Shoals has quite a musical history."

He swallowed his mouthful, chugged his soda, and gazed into the distance. "The real draw was us local musicians. We called ourselves *The Muscle Shoals Rhythm Section*. Played back-up for the likes of Wilson Pickett, Willie Nelson, Lynyrd Skynyrd, and Joe Cocker, just to mention a few." He became more animated by the minute. "At first, everyone was amazed to see a bunch of redneck white boys show up to play. But we found our own groove. Everyone loved it, and word spread. It became a standing joke. They called us *The Swampers*, and the name stuck."

We delighted in Benton's dredged-up memories for the next hour until he closed his eyes and shook his head. "I was gone before the real fame came. Nobody talks much about the sixth Swamper. I fucked it up. Too many drunken nights, sex, and drugs." He broke into another coughing fit. "I had more money than sense back then. Moved to Nashville to find myself and play the dives. Things went downhill fast from there."

Trying to cheer him up, I handed him the brochure from our tour of The Muscle Shoals Sound Studios.

"That's one of the places where it all started." His eyes lit as he searched his leather bag, producing a faded sepia Polaroid photo of six men in their early twenties, one with his arm around a young girl in a long, flowing hippie gown. Their haircuts and bellbottoms were from the sixties.

They posed proudly in front of a modest building whose identity was a giant blue banner on the front wall declaring its address: *3614 Jackson Highway*. "That's us in front of The Muscle Shoals Sound Studio. I'm the one on the end with that honey." He stroked his beard and winked. "I'll never forget that one. Said her name was Nancy. Came down from somewhere up north with two girlfriends, hoping to get a piece of Boz Scaggs. Poor thing had lots of groupie competition. Never did get to Boz. After he left, we got together."

Emma and I leaned in for a closer look. Before I realized what I was doing, I pulled the photo from his hand and examined it under the floor lamp. *Nancy? It couldn't be.* My mouth went dry as I pulled a photo from my wallet taken long before cell phones. My mom was in her graduation

gown, but the match was unmistakable. My hands shook as I held the pictures together and forced the words past the lump in my throat. "That honey was my mom."

Benton's color drained like he'd just seen a ghost. He gasped, "My God. How is she?"

My heart contorted with hatred and possible love for this guy as my mind flooded with questions. If he was my father, it was only in the most irresponsible meaning of the word. I spit out, "She's *dead*."

Staring at those two photos, I remembered a picture my mom kept on her nightstand. It was of poor quality; the type you get from an arcade photo booth, but it could have been a young Benton sitting on a stool with her on his lap. The guy had the same thick blonde mustache I saw in the Polaroid.

"She told me my father died in Vietnam, but you were in a picture she kept by her bed."

He dug through his bag again and retrieved a strip of three photos. "These are the others from that night." He hung his head and continued, "Listen, things were crazy back then, especially in the music business. We had a one-night fling and I never heard from her again."

So, he screwed my mom, but that doesn't make him my father. I felt a little sorry for the guy. He seemed too fragile to face yet another consequence of his reckless days and deserved more of an answer. My tone softened. "She was single all my life. There was a long struggle with cancer. I buried her in Philadelphia last year."

He stared at the photos, bit his lip and slowly shook his head. "I'm so sorry to hear that. I'd always hope to run into her again."

It was getting late, and we all needed time for things to sink in. We gave him a blanket and insisted he spend the night on the couch, so we could continue in the morning with clear minds. Within minutes, he was sound asleep.

Alone in our bedroom, Emma hugged me and said, "I can't even imagine how you're feeling. What if the guy's your father? You do have his eyes. He's hurting with nowhere to go. What would your mother want you to do?"

My mind was churning. "Mom obviously didn't make the best choices, but maybe we could bring him back home. I could get a DNA test and if we're related, we'll celebrate and spend lots of time getting to know each other. If not, hell we still can be friends. Either way, I could learn a lot from him and nurse him back into shape."

Emma kissed my cheek. "Spoken like the guy I love. It would be great if he could hook up with his Swamper buddies again. Let's run the idea by him in the morning."

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Benton's coughing kept me up most of the night. I woke up at six a.m. All was quiet, and I went out to check on him. The couch was empty, except for the neatly folded blanket and a note scribbled on hotel stationery sitting next to the strip of arcade photos.

I held the note up to the light. It was written in surprisingly perfect script:

David

Thanks for your kindness. You and Emma are good folks. Your mom must have wanted us to meet. I've fucked up my life but I'm proud to have met you. I returned hoping for the old times, but I don't fit in here anymore.

Benton

Hoping I might still catch him, I ran down five flights of steps and into the lobby. Outside the hotel's front doors, the red lights of a police car and an ambulance flashed in the pale dawn. Two cops were talking to a managerial type at the front desk. I edged closer and heard them say, "OD'd" and "stew bum laying by the dumpster." I prayed it wasn't Benton but a chill rose up my spine. In one night, I could have found, then lost a father.

I offered to identify him and fifteen minutes later, the two young cops were milling around my room. The taller of the two asked questions and took notes on an iPad. His eyes opened wide when I mentioned that Benton claimed to be the sixth Swamper.

He stopped typing and said, "I'd heard stories about that guy but thought they were myths." He gave me a business card and a sympathetic smile. "I'm sorry your act of kindness ended like this. I'll call once we confirm the cause of death. If there's no other next of kin, we'll get you his stuff.

Later that afternoon, I went off to be alone. Emma understood. I drove around on autopilot until I found myself back at the Jackson Highway studio, in time for the day's last tour. I was the only visitor.

The old timer who'd led our tour yesterday stood in the vintage lobby, tapping his toe on the polished wooden floor to the Stone's *Give Me Shelter*. He was not one of the Swampers but knew all the stories.

Although he offered another tour, I asked if I could wander alone until they closed. I just wanted to reflect on my situation in a place where the spirit of my maybe-father would be hanging out.

I lost myself in that time capsule of humming analog gear, reel-to-reel recorders, and carefully positioned condenser mics hanging on adjustable booms. I drifted past isolated recording booths ready to capture individual performances and wondered if Benton gave my mother this kind of insider tour.

A sense of history overtook me as I touched the hickory paneled walls in the secret "kitchen" where musicians like the Rolling Stones would discreetly drink in what was then a dry town. It was hidden behind a false bookcase and looked like something from my grandparent's house. A

wave of pain and sorrow ripped through my body as I ran my hand over the red vinyl upholstered bench trimmed in ridged aluminum. I was sure Mom had been here for a drink or three.

I wandered into *Studio A*, where the most famous recordings were made. The musty, acoustic-tiled room was crammed with pianos of every type, each a vintage collector's item. A set of monitor speakers played a medley of famous cuts recorded here. The one playing was, of all songs, *Loan Me a Dime* by Boz Scaggs, the guy my mother came to Muscle Shoals to see so long ago. I closed my eyes and pictured her dancing around our living room to this song in her housecoat, her eyes cast upward, adoring a phantom partner.

When I returned to the studio, I gazed through a large glass window at a curtained stage and pictured the horn section playing their soulful background. There, in dim light of overhead incandescent bulbs, the musicians stood in a semicircle, nodding to each other as their lush tones filled the studio. In the middle of the group, was a young Benton, swaying like he did in the rain last night. I focused on his face, and he morphed into that decrepit husk of a man who left me with nothing but a note last night.

I shed a tear. Might have been my father. Didn't matter if it was what *he* believed.