

Sonny stares. It's always been a joke among the rest of the guys in the band that Sonny's always staring out the side window of the car, even when he's driving. Looking at all the billboards and road signs like a dog. Or a toddler. "I swear, Sonny," Jim the guitarist would say, "if it weren't so cold, you'd have the window down with your head sticking out and your ears flapping."

Sonny smiles.

Sonny always looks at the trees, staring at the cows slowly munching behind barbed wire at the edge of the road. Watching them whizz by like telephone poles always makes him laugh.

"Sonny!" Sonny comes back to earth and looks at Rick sitting in the front passenger seat while Duck, the band's drummer drives. It was Duck's shift at the wheel. They don't let Sonny drive anymore. Not after what happened last summer.

"Sonny!" Rick hollers again without turning his head. There's your sign, buddy." Sonny searches the side of the road. Standing alone in the middle of a freshly harvested cotton field is a small, wooden church with a sadly tilted steeple on the roof. At the edge of the highway, where a red dirt road leads to the lonely building, a whitewashed board with the words "Jesus Saves" scrawled in black paint stands sentinel like a scarecrow.

Jesus saves what? That's what he always asked the guys when he saw those signs, which were as common as NeHi Soda billboards out in this Deep South countryside. It was a running joke. Jesus saves people? Jesus saves the world? Why just "Jesus Saves?"

And they were always ready with the punchline:

"Jesus keeps his money in the Chase Manhattan bank! Jesus keeps his money in the Chase

Manhattan bank!" Rick belts out the words in his rough Robert Plant tenor, the cigarette-stained voice that melts the hearts of all those small town southern girls who swoon to see a long hair in their local bar, just like the ones they see on TV. The rest of the band joins in:

"Jesus keeps his money in the Chase Manhattan Bank. Jesus saves, Jesus saves, Jesus saaaaaaves!"

Duck, Rick and Jim, who's as usual next to Sonny in the back of the station wagon all chuckle.

"There's your song, Sonny."

"Yeah, right. My song." Sonny sounds annoyed but he isn't. He's used to all the teasing and picking. He never takes it personal. It's a compliment. Being the goofy Ringo, the punchline Monkee of the band is a hell of a lot better than not being in the band at all. Sonny loves the attention. The Kords are and will forever be his family since his real one disappeared long ago. Sometimes Sonny feels as if he disappeared with them. Until he jumps into the band's beat up Chevy. Then he's with family again. They may not be the Stones but they might as well be to these podunk back towns spread across Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana. You'd think they were regulars on the Ed Sullivan show the way the kids react to them. The reaction from the rednecks is something different but that doesn't bother Sonny.

It takes hours to get to a gig on the two lane Alabama roads but they finally made it to the club. The Stoned Toad. The place was out of place in the middle of all the churches and Crimson Tide signs but it's a hit among the rural crowd who starve for something more than - well, going to church and Alabama games.

Sonny carefully unpacks his weapon of the night - the Squier Classic Jazz four string bass. Definitely. He loved his other Fender but this one was perfect for the small room they'd be playing in, plucky but soft tone, maroon-on-white

with the long neck. Sonny's ready to kill with his weapon du nuit.

The band played well that night. The crowd went wild during "Crossroads", the Cream version of course. Sonny played his heart out on the bass solo, a performance even Jack Bruce would have appreciated.

They packed up their equipment five hours later, everyone in the band except Rick who, as usual, flirts with the fawning southern girls while their redneck boyfriends stare in envy and hatred at the strangers in the long hair and girl pants. Two of the scrawniest hicks walk up to Jim and Duck while Sonny stands behind the open U Haul, making sure all the equipment is loaded properly. He always wished they would just leave it to him. Sonny's bigger than the other three Kords put together. He's the heavy lifter. So he doesn't mind. But by the time he got out to the back lot, it was done.

"You boys some kind of rock stars? You think you're Mick Jagger or somethin'?"
Jim and Duck stand silently. The hicks approach closer.

"It's bad enough you come to our town to play here. We don't like you messing with our women."

Sonny looms out from behind the U Haul and plants himself behind Jim and Duck. The rednecks freeze and slink back into the bar. Jim and Duck try to keep from laughing. It's always the same: The rednecks want trouble, Sonny shows up and it's over before it started.

"Thanks, Sonny, you fat ol' sonofabitch," Jim laughs.

Sonny grins. Duck hollers at Rick to get his ass in the car. And Sonny crawls into his space in the back without a word.

Sonny's eyes are closed in exhaustion while the rest of the band's voices drone through the night, ignoring Sonny while he dozes. Once in a while he

wakes when he hears his name, but they're talking about him, not to him, cracking up at his hilariously loud snoring, his creepy way he talks in his sleep, thinking he's passed out. Sonny smiles. Their soft conversation about tonight's performance and their dreams for the future of the Kords lulls him back to sleep.

Sonny wakes up with the sound of the station wagon downshifting and slowing down. He looks out the side window and watches a whitewashed sign pass by at a crawl, the crunch of gravel under the tires, the ominous shake of the U Haul full of equipment groaning onto the shoulder. The makeshift train stops.

Someone cuts the engine. Silence.

In the darkness, across a shaved cotton field full of bare branches with tufts of leftover cotton fibers, stands the lonely church they passed earlier in the dawn, its crooked steeple silhouetted against an almost full Alabama moon. Jesus Saves.

The guys open their doors and get out to stretch their legs, not asking Sonny if he wants to join them. He's not offended. Sonny's eyes remain closed as he overhears their words, their laughter, an occasional hiss as someone inhales a toke of a fat joint.

"Sonny! Thank you, man!"

"God bless you, Sonny, you sonofabitch."

Sonny smiles.

"Yep!"

They do love him. Sonny can't resist. Giggling, he opens the door to join the guys in the cold autumn Alabama air.

Sonny stands next to the car in the pitch black night. The voices have stopped. It's totally, solemnly silent. Miles and an eternity away, the distant bark of a dog.

The band members' backs are to him. They ignore him as they stare down at their feet, as if they're gazing into an open grave. Sonny walks next to Rick and stands in the darkness. A soft sob, as soft as one of the tufts of cotton hanging on the barbed wire in the darkness caresses the silence.

A cross, the kind they've zipped past countless times on the shoulders of those nameless Alabama two lane highways stands crooked in the grass like a tomato stake.

Duck crouches down and gently lays the half-smoked joint in front of it, its thread of smoke lifting into the air like incense. The cross's arm is festooned with notes taped and tied onto it, its base surrounded by faded plastic flowers. And a teddy bear holding a toy guitar. It's not a Squier Classic Jazz four string but the sentiment is still there.

Sonny weeps.

A soft voice barely breaks the silence, Sonny can't tell who but it doesn't matter. It's like a song.

"Sonny saves, Sonny saves, Sonny saves."