

The First Two Pages of “Temptation is a Gun” by James D.F. Hannah
From *Trouble No More: Crime Fiction Inspired by Southern Rock and the Blues*
edited by Mark Westmoreland (Down & Out Books)

An Essay by James D.F. Hannah

As with many things, Faulkner said it best: “The past is never dead. It's not even past.”

Southern fiction is rife with the concerns of our yesterdays, how sins are paid forward to the future, and the characters returning from long absences, determined to face down prior misdeeds—their own, or others. We are forever reworking, rediscovering, re-mythologizing, and re-conceptualizing the past, for both good and bad. But never is it simply “the past.”

This said, I won't pretend I had these lofty ideas in my head when I started “Temptation is a Gun.” As is usual with music-themed anthologies—this one inspired by Southern rock and the blues—the writers each selected a song title and ran with it in their own direction.

No, what I was thinking was that “Temptation is a Gun” is about as noir-sounding of a title as you can hope for, and opening things up in a middle-of-nowhere dive bar seemed a fine place to start. So I wrote this:

Twenty-two years, and the only thing changed since the first and last time Roy stepped into Murphy's Tavern are the posters. Concert flyers, filling every available inch of wall space, a chronology

of wannabes and never-weres that have graced Murphy's stamp-sized stage. Cover bands mechanically reciting seven-minute solos note-by-note with the same rote nature as a dog taught to play dead. Faded flyers, ripped edges, and torn corners revealing the previous generation underneath, the present literally plastered over the past. Roy knows none of the new bands that play Murphy's, nor the bands they're ripping off, and it's further proof to him how time marches inexorably the fuck on.

Roy, like many a noir protagonist, is a man lost. He's been away, and he's struggling to come to terms with the changes that have taken place in the years he was gone. Begging that next question: Where did Roy go, and why is he back?

So here's where I acknowledge my "writing process" is sketchier than convenience store sushi. It's typically me plowing through a draft in an effort to find the eventual story. There are multiple versions and endless agonizing over who the characters are and where everything is headed. By the time all is said and done, I have more drafts of a story saved than exist translations of the Bible.

This time around wasn't so bad, and part of it was because I painted a clear image in my head of Murphy's, and I decided early on that story would be set in rural Kentucky, where I spent the first half of my life. I also wanted a looser writing style. Not James Ellroy and his elliptical jazz-bop form exactly, but not always beholden to traditional sentence structure, either. If it feels like there are words occasionally missing, it's because the story should feel like a stone skimming across the water's surface. As things progress, the story becomes a memory, and those are fragmented at best, fractured at worst.

But we're not quite there yet. We're still discovering the world. The second paragraph is Roy still re-establishing himself in a place that feels both familiar and foreign.

Otherwise, Murphy's is as frozen in the past as those mosquitos caught in amber. The Confederate flag behind the bar looks new and crisp, Murphy's not a place to let a worn stars-and-bars hang long. It's Tuesday, no band tonight, a DJ in the corner knocking out song after song, all of them sounding the same after a while. It doesn't matter so long as it's loud, as long as it drowns out the conversations around you and the voices in your head.

I know bars like Murphy's—where the smell of last night's special and last week's cigarette smoke hang in the air, and the only thing that changes is the music. You can watch multiple generations bend elbows at the bar, separated by their drinks and their sorrows.

(Is all that a little heavy-handed? Yes. Welcome to the South.)

These bars serve a purpose other than booze and atmosphere; they're metaphors, reflecting the world around and the people within. Patrons find safety in their regular drinking holes; change comes there in creeping steps that would have evolution screaming to pick up the pace. A place like Murphy's is history in cinderblock form. It can be like studying the rings of a tree to discover its story, except you're looking at beer coasters and graffiti on the wall.

Roy carves out a section of bar all his own. The girl pulling taps busy on her cell, thumbs dancing across the screen. When she finally notices Roy, she sighs, sets the phone aside, cranks up a hundred-watt smile as insincere as a promise made in the dark.

"What can I get you?" she says.

"Bourbon," Roy says.

"Well, or from the shelf?"

"It's been a while, I'll treat myself. Off the shelf."

The bottle's dusty as she takes it off the shelf, wiping the years off with a rag. Murphy's, no one's concerned about the quality of bourbon, only the quantity. What the hell, though, might as well celebrate, right? You don't get out of prison every day, Roy thinks.

Noir bonafides are established quickly. An ex-con. An attractive young woman. A greasy bar somewhere in Kentucky. Bourbon. But there's no mournful saxophone wailing in the background at Murphy's. No, we're in the land of slide guitars and bluesy laments.

The burn from the first sip catches Roy off-guard. He breathes through it slowly, letting the tendrils of warmth stretch out through his chest. He sips at it again and sets the glass down, and that's when he notices the bartender watching him, smiling. She's a cute thing, a pile of blonde curls stuffed underneath a large knit cap, with dark green eyes and lots of jangly bracelets on slender wrists and junk jewelry rings on skinny fingers.

She nods toward Roy's drink. "Another?"

He reaches the glass toward her, and she tops it off. Sets the bottle aside and folds her arms across her chest. "Not to sound like that person or nothing, but you're not a regular. I'd know your face, and no one comes in here without a reason."

Another drink. The flush sensation hits him, as comforting as an embrace. Fuck it, Roy figures, and throws back the rest. Deep breath. Almost tears in his eyes. Good reason or bad, there he is.

"Looking for someone," he says, setting the glass down. "You know Lizzie Murphy?"

And there we have it: A woman. Is Roy there for love? For a second chance? For revenge? (Spoiler alert: The story is called "Temptation is a Gun.") But the pieces are set in place (I hope) for something suitably noir-ish. Because from here,

we start learning what brought Roy back to Murphy's Tavern after a twenty-two year wait.

#

James D.F. Hannah is the Shamus Award-winning author of the Henry Malone series; his most recent novel, *Behind the Wall of Sleep*, won the 2020 Shamus Award for Best Paperback Original. His short fiction has appeared in *Rock and a Hard Place*, *Crossed Genres*, *Shotgun Honey*, *The Anthology of Appalachian Writers*, *Trouble No More*, and *Only the Good Die Young: Crime Fiction Inspired by the Songs of Billy Joel*. He lives in Louisville, Kentucky.