

A dark, atmospheric photograph of a street at night. In the foreground, a car's headlights are on, illuminating the road ahead. To the right, a street lamp with a decorative metal arm is lit, casting a warm glow. The background is mostly black, with a few distant lights. The overall mood is mysterious and noir.

ACE
ATKINS
DARK
END

of the

STREET

 A NOVEL

Dark End of the Street

A C E A T K I N S

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WILLIAM MORROW • *An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers*

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FIRST EDITION

Printed on acid-free paper

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Atkins, Ace.

Dark end of the street / Ace Atkins.—1st ed.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-06-000460-6 (alk. paper)

1. Travers, Nick (Fictitious character)—Fiction. 2. Private investigators—Tennessee—Memphis—Fiction. 3. African American singers—Fiction. 4. Missing persons—Fiction. 5. Memphis (Tenn.)—Fiction. 6. Soul musicians—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3551.T49D37 2002

813'.54—dc21

2001058332

02 03 04 05 06 WBC/RRD 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

for Angela

*At the dark end of the street,
that's where we always meet.
Hiding in shadows where we don't belong.
Livin' in darkness to hide our wrong.*

—DAN PENN AND CHIPS MOMAN,
“The Dark End of the Street”



*I've been scarred and battered.
My hopes the wind done scattered.
Snow has friz me, sun has baked me.
Looks like between 'em
They done tried to make me
Stop laughin', stop lovin', stop livin'—
But I don't care!
I'm still here!*

—LANGSTON HUGHES, “Still Here”

Acknowledgments

TO MEMPHIS AND BACK, the following provided needed help, inspiration, or some top-notch grub: my family, Michael Baker, B. F. Vandervoort, Gayle Dean Wardlow, Jim Kennedy, Harry Smith, Debbi Eisenstadt, Bogie “Raven” Miller, Joe Durkin, Darryl Wimberley, Burnis Morris, Elvis (my canine companion), the gang at Square Books, and the staff at Ajax Diner, Taylor Grocery, and the Bottletree.

Much thanks to Richard and Carolyn for their continued direction, support, and for being great friends to Loretta. I’m looking forward to many more adventures.

Without a doubt, Peter Guralnick’s *Sweet Soul Music* transported me to Memphis 1968, and Edward Humes’s *Mississippi Mud* took me into the core of the Dixie Mafia. Shangri-La Records’s *Lowlife Guide to Memphis* and Tad Pierson provided invaluable information and true “grit” away from Beale.

Special thanks to Robert Gordon, whose article, “Way Out on a Voyage,” gave voice to Clyde James and Paul Bergin, who heard of an evil woman that I had to meet.

While writing this book, the world lost three soul legends: Johnnie Taylor, James Carr, and Rufus Thomas. Without them and their inspiration, this book wouldn’t be in your hands.

Dark End of the Street

Prologue

*December 17, 1968
Memphis, Tennessee*

THE DREAM OF SOUTHERN soul music was dead. It died last year when Otis Redding's twin-engine plane crashed into an icy Wisconsin lake, killing him and the Bar-Kays, a bunch of kid musicians from the old neighborhood. It died a few months later, too, back in April, when some peckerwood sighted a rifle from a run-down rooming house near the Lorraine Motel, taking out a man who only wanted to see some garbage workers get their due. It died again every night that summer, when hate filled the neighborhoods of south Memphis. But for Eddie Porter, it died most when black musicians raised on gospel and white musicians weaned on country and blues quit working on a style of music that was the sweetest he'd ever known.

Porter could still remember that day in June when he was helping the bass player in his band carry milk crates full of guitar cords and microphones from the Bluff City studio. A cop car filled with two white men had stopped, the doors popped open, and the men aimed their pistols at Porter. Tate, shaking like an ole woman, spoke to them in this tone that kind of broke Porter's heart. Kind of like he was embarrassed for his race. Tate, that bucktoothed country boy, had stared at the cops as they slid their guns back into their leather holsters, as if in some way he was responsible for all the shit that was happenin'.

For Otis and Dr. King. For the burning buildings. And maybe he even took the blame for the white politicians Porter watched on television in the apartment he shared with his mutt dogs and wife he didn't love.

For a few weeks after the cops came, Porter tried to fill the silences

between Tate and Cleve, his rhythm guitar man, with all the soul he could stand from his battered Hammond B-3 organ. The music soaked into red shag carpet walls of the old movie theater that served as their studio and out through the newly barred windows and into an emerging ghetto. He played as if somehow dance music could solve Memphis's problems.

But Memphis kept boiling. Soul kept dying. Their horn section broke up. Porter's drummer quit. His organ broke. And he knew he couldn't stop any of it.

Wasn't till June that the idea came to him.

When it did, he was at the Holiday Inn by the airport, caressing the soft face of a woman who was carrying another man's baby. He remembered the stiff mustard-colored curtains were slightly drawn and the room smelled of chlorine, gin breath, and cigarettes.

He sat there smoothing the curly black hair away from her brown eyes and feeling the child kicking in her stomach and thought about the future for the first time in his life. He knew he didn't have anything more for Memphis. And Memphis owed him something.

The owner of Bluff City Records—that sold nothing but black music—was a potbellied white man who spent his time sweet-talking teenaged girls in his second-floor office decorated in cheetah print and velvet paintings of naked Mexican women.

Porter never could figure out what the man did. He had Porter run the sessions, deposit the checks from distributors, and pay out the other musicians. Most of the profits came from one man. Their holy God almighty, soul sensation Clyde James.

That night at the Holiday Inn, Porter found the answers with James's wife in his lap as he watched the swirl of blues, reds, and yellows play on the stones and plastic flowers near the swimming pool. He knew he couldn't see anything beyond tonight and that scared him like nothin' ever could.

He could hold back a little cash with each deposit and by December he'd be free. So that's what he did. And man, he was so cool about the whole thing. For every five checks, he'd only deposit one in his account down at the First National. It worked so good that he had more than he needed by September. And by Thanksgiving, shit, he had more than he could ever

spend. Two hundred and seventy-one thousand dollars and some change. He tried like hell to get Mary to leave with him. But by that time she was fixing to have Clyde's baby and the whole thing had turned to shit.

So, tonight, he'd packed his alligator briefcase with bundles of hundreds and covered them with paperback Westerns.

As Porter packed, he watched himself in a mirror spotted with rust. He tucked a ticket for a midnight flight to Buffalo into his corduroy jacket and smoothed his goatee.

He felt light and hard in his yellow turtleneck and brown bellbottoms. He had a Smith and Wesson tucked into a wide leather belt at his spine and almost shook with its power. Felt like the first time he'd ever been moved by a woman.

Porter was a goddamned man who was about to take what he deserved. Besides, who was going to miss that cash but fat boy Bobby Lee Cook and those hoodlums he hung around?

It was night. The moon looked like the cut edge of a fingernail and a brittle cold wind made his skin feel like paper.

He slid into his white Toranado with gray interior, cranked up WDIA, and listened to his competitors at Stax, Booker T. & the MGs, play out some soulful take on the Beatles. He could do anything. He could go anywhere and be anybody.

Porter knew he should wait it out at the airport. But he guessed he wanted to shove his deceit in Cook's face. He circled his car to downtown and on to Germantown, where rich white people played golf and held parties under candy-striped awnings, and where the only blacks held silver trays of chilled pink shrimp.

Porter parked on Bobby Lee Cook's lawn, nearly tripping over one of those little iron black men holding a lantern, and strutted out of the bright, cold night and into a Christmas party filled with politicians and pimps, musicians and wannabes of every kind. Some were black. Most were white. He even saw a Chinese girl wrestling with another woman in a dark room filled with a pile of mink coats.

People were drinking martinis and whiskey on ice. There were trays of liver wrapped in bacon and fat olives and candies and little sandwiches dyed red and green for Christmas. The light was dim as hell and lamps

burned out green and yellow and red bulbs. Almost made you drunk to walk inside and feel the pulse of the music and see the couples rolling on the green shag or hear loud laughing in huddled circles.

Porter just wanted to see Cook, look him in the eye again, and be gone. Cook had made a point of calling him five times that day to make sure he came. At first he thought Cook was onto the scam, but then Porter figured he'd be on his doorstep if he knew.

Porter first saw Cook out of the corner of his eye in one of those silly Nehru jackets with slim black pants and Italian boots. He looked ridiculous. A fat white boy trying to be hip.

Cook ushered him into a closed office by the dining room where the muted sounds of Eddie Floyd singing "Blood Is Thicker than Water" played low on his Fisher Hi-Fi. That upbeat song really gave Porter a headache as Cook walked over to the little bar covered in zebra print.

He made a big deal out of feeling the skin on the bar, pulling out a gin bottle, and examining the damned thing like it was a newborn child. He poured himself another drink over crushed ice.

"Eddie," he began, "I want you to quit messin' with Clyde's wife. You know more 'an anyone his head ain't right. I need that boy. If he falls again, we all do. Comprende, podna?"

"Ah, fuck you, Cook. Ain't none of your concern what goes on in my world."

Porter caught a glimpse of his reflection in the mirror behind the bar and he somehow looked smaller than he felt.

"Just stay away from there tonight," Cook said, feeling for one of his silly cheetah-print chairs like a blind man. He sat down with a sigh and closed his eyes. "Just stay away from there tonight."

"I'm quitting," Porter said, walking away. "Find someone else to shovel your shit."

"Eddie?"

He turned back.

"How long we knowed each other?"

Porter shrugged.

"I consider you a friend."

"You're drunk."

“Do what you need to do. But do it tonight. Stay away from Clyde’s wife.”

Porter gave a short laugh with his exhaling breath.

“You ain’t listenin’,” Cook said again. “Do what you need to do. But keep away from there tonight.”

“Sweet Jesus,” Porter said. “You motherfucker.”

He picked up a fat gold statue of Buddha and threw it into the glasses and whiskey and flickering red cocktail candles. The mirror broke into jagged knives knocking over the candles and liquor bottles. The glass sounded like tiny bells in the wind.

“You motherfucker,” he said again. It wasn’t a yell. Porter said it more to himself than anything as he headed back to his car.

Twenty minutes later, he sped across Lamar Avenue as slatted light played over his face and prized fingers. Somehow he knew they’d catch up. It just happened a whole mess sooner than he thought.

He mashed the pedal of his Toranado and the cold wind howled through the ripped holes in its canvas top.

Mary lived down in south Memphis, in a house built from her husband’s million-seller, “Dark End of the Street.” A song about a cheating man who can’t face his lover in the light of day. Clyde didn’t write it, two white boys did, but he sang it like it was his damned life story. Porter had heard it so many times he wanted to throw up, he thought, while pulling into the circular drive.

The house was one of those places designed in weird geometrical patterns and shapes. Huge plate glass windows, doors made out of circles of brass, and sharp triangle edges at every corner. He could see a white-frosted artificial tree in the window decorated with red balls and green blinking lights.

Clyde would be in there somewhere passed out. A ghost in his own home wearing that mind sickness like a cape.

Sometimes Porter didn’t know why he and Mary even bothered.

As Porter rounded the corner, he could see someone sunk down into the seat of Clyde’s old Lincoln Continental. The black one he drove into a lake in Mississippi about three years ago. Man had it pulled from the scum and mud of the lake, fish flopping off his seats, to have it rot in his front yard.

Porter glanced down in the car and saw Clyde huddled on the floorboard like a child, a bottle of cheap rum in the driver's seat. His face was wet and his eyes red and he was making sounds like that time he had to be pulled off stage at the Apollo. Sounded like he was going to choke on his own tongue.

Porter reached through the window of the tarnished car for his hand but Clyde crawled deeper in the floorboard and closed his eyes. It was almost as if he was willing Porter to disappear. Porter could feel him slipping through the small space and into the cloudy lake bottom where they'd found the car.

He walked away.

The door to the house was open. Yellow light spilled out onto the gray steps and dead lawn. As Porter approached the door, he kept hearing Clyde. That perfect voice singing the song like his whole life depended on the story he was going to tell.

*If we should meet, just walk on by.
Oh, darlin', please don't cry.*

A gentle smile crossed his lips as his mind exploded in black light flickering with violent white swirls.

Someone had hit him across the back of his head as soon as he stepped over the landing. He fell into a macramé rug and rolled onto the brown tile floor and felt boots kicking at him. Blood rushed through his ears and he covered his head with his hands. He saw there were two of them in leather and black, ski masks covering their faces.

One jerked Porter to his feet, his head still reeling with Clyde's song.

*Tonight we meet
At the dark end of the street.*

The kitchen was bright and obscenely yellow and covered with thick smears of maroon blood. Porter tried as hard as hell to get loose, but the man just shoved his face into a Formica breakfast table and laughed. He felt his teeth in the back of his throat.

And then he saw her.

Mary, clutching her fat stomach in her hands, blood across her thin yellow top. Blousy sleeves, daisy edges.

Goddamn.

They're gonna to find us.

They're gonna find us, Lord, someday.

A man, smelling of onions and cigarette butts, tied Porter to the chair facing her. He felt the cold cylinder sink into the soft spot at the base of his skull.

"Where is it?" the man asked.

Porter leaned forward and vomited onto his shoes. The ticket to Buffalo twirled down to the floor catching into the sticky mess. Through blurred eyes he stared into Mary's face. She bit her lip, and her eyes went soft, and he heard her praying like a child, like a twelve year old. It was something simple and quiet and for a moment Porter felt more like her father than her lover.

But tonight we'll meet

At the dark end of the street.

He mouthed the words that he loved her.

She smiled. Weakly.

Then he heard the click.

"My trunk," Porter said. Praying, too.

You and me, he heard Clyde sing in his mind.

And with the blast, came silence.

Chapter 1

Saturday night

New Orleans, Louisiana

WHEN I WAS A KID I used to keep one eye open while I prayed. It wasn't that I lacked faith in God or wanted to show any disrespect to the folks in church, it was just that I was curious about human nature. In that one silent moment, when everyone's power was turned to their deepest wishes and desires, I tried to imagine what everyone around me wanted. The more I watched and later learned about death, the more I believed all those desires were fleeting. And really kind of sad. In the end, everyone just wants some kind of miracle. His own private resurrection.

I kept thinking about those weird life patterns as I walked behind the old scarred mahogany bar of JoJo's place in the French Quarter, and reached deep into the brittle frost of a dented Coca-Cola cooler. I searched for my fourth Dixie.

JoJo's Blues Bar had closed about thirty minutes ago. It was late. Or early. Dark as hell. Tables had been cleared and stacked with inverted chairs. Stage lights cast red beams on microphones and a lone upright piano. Over by the twin Creole doors, beaten and weathered with time, only the faintest orange glow came from the old jukebox pumping out Otis Redding's "Cigarettes and Coffee."

All that remained were four of my closest buddies in a back corner booth, underneath a poster of the American Folk and Blues Festival 1965, celebrating with one of my *former* friends.

Well, I guess Rolande was still a friend. But he was dead. So did that mean we weren't friends anymore?

Didn't seem to matter to JoJo. We guessed Rolande had died about an hour ago, collapsed into his Jack and Coke with a thin smile on his lips. He was a wiry scruffy man who'd worn a scrunched Jack Daniels baseball cap for at least the last decade I'd known him. Rolande still wore it in death, just drooped a little farther down in his eyes.

"Bring the bottle, Nick," JoJo said. "Shit, son. Don't you learn nothin'?"

I swung back behind the bar, a Marlboro drooping lazily from my lips, and grabbed a half-empty bottle of Jack. I plunked it before JoJo and settled into the booth crossing my worn Tony Lamas at the ankles.

Joseph Jose Jackson—a.k.a. JoJo—had to be in his late sixties by now. Black man with white hair and neatly trimmed mustache. Black creased trousers, white button-down shirt rolled to his elbows. Hard to explain the completeness of my relationship with JoJo. To begin with, he was a surrogate father, harmonica teacher, and all-around Zen master on life.

I asked, "On the house?"

JoJo pulled out a well-worn wallet from Rolande's coat pocket and said, "Ain't no such thing."

The men laughed like tomorrow held more promise than today, all was right in the world, and God was watching down from heaven with a smile on His bearded face.

On JoJo's left sat Randy Sexton, my colleague and head of the Tulane University Jazz and Blues Archives. I'd known Randy since my early retirement from the Saints when I returned to Tulane for a Masters in music history.

Randy was usually physically out of step with his subjects—a white man with a big head of curly brown hair—but always spiritually in tune. He was the author of about a million books on early New Orleans jazz players and had been featured in Ken Burns's *Jazz* documentary series.

Always cracked me up when Randy got drunk. This man was one of the most respected music historians in the country, but sometimes I swear he acted about thirteen.

"Fuck, man," Randy said. "I'm wasted."

I was sandwiched by a three-hundred-pound black man named Sun on the one side, and a transsexual tattoo artist named Oz on the other. Sun was crying for his lost friend, his straw hat shredded to bits in his almost-ham-sized hands. Eyes red, damn near sobbing.

“Rolande always love you, Nick,” he said, kind of blubbering. “Remember that night when you dumped that Gatorade on your coach’s head?”

“Yep.”

“Well, he love you for that. Love you for tellin’ the man to go fuck hisself.”

I smiled and said, “Oh, I try.”

Oz didn’t seem to be listening. He was just singing along to Otis’s ballad to a late-night love. He had on his standard black lingerie with thigh-high stockings. On his face he wore white pancake makeup and black lipstick.

He’d strolled into the bar just minutes after a midnight showing of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. The movie was his obsession. His life. Based every decision on what Dr. Frank-N-Furter would do.

“Good Lord, pour the man another drink,” Oz said in a recently acquired British accent. “Death is so hard for some people to get over. Isn’t that right . . . What was his name again?”

“Rolande,” JoJo said with a slight edge. “Rolande *Goodine*. You sure remembered it when you need him to rewire that piece-of-shit tattoo parlor.”

“It is, first off, a house of medicinal cures and potions.”

JoJo raised his eyebrows and looked over at me.

“Goddamn, Nick, I don’t mess around with none of them hoodoo fuckers. I don’t care about the way he dresses, ’cause whatever gets you through the night and all that, but I *will not* mess with any of that hoodoo shit. You hear me?”

“It’s cool,” I said. “It’s cool. Let’s just drink. This is Rolande’s last party. He wouldn’t want us fighting.”

I reached across the table and filled everyone’s glass to the rim. JoJo looked away from Oz, over at Randy still grinning like a fool, and then over at sobbing Sun.

JoJo shook his head. “Goddamn, no wonder he wanted to leave this world. Look at y’all. Like a fuckin’ freak show in here.”

“I know a man who can drive a railroad spike through his nose,” I announced. “You want me to call him?”

“I know a man in Algiers who’ll bring back your friend for fifty bucks,” Oz said with pursed lips. “But then Rolando would be a zombie and kind of a grumpy pain in the ass. You know how zombies get.”