

FREE AUTHORISED EXTRACT

Not for resale or redistribution

Chapter One

From *Holler & Hard Times*

© 2026 Victor Robert Farrell

All Rights Reserved

CHAPTER 1: AIN'T GOT TIME

On Diners

— *The Author*

America taught me how to eat.

Not politely.

Not quietly.

But fully.

Malls with things I'd never seen. Ice cream parlors where Rocky Road felt like a revelation. Donuts at dawn in Pennsylvania, steam rising off men in heavy coats, snow still clinging to their boots. Coffee poured without asking. A foot-long sandwich shaped like a promise.

Later—years later—diners again. Chrome and vinyl. Counter stools worn smooth by elbows and years. Places where the food was warm, the plates were full, and everyone already knew your business. Where men talked too loud, laughed too hard, and argued like it mattered. Where waitresses smiled sharp and kind, called you “hon,” and meant it.

That's the thing about a real diner.

It isn't the food.

It's the knowing.

Who belongs.

Who's missing.

Who's hurting.

Who hasn't come back yet.

Ruby's is that kind of place.

Not shiny.

Not cheap.

Not trying to be anything else.

Just a room with coffee, grease, and memory—

where the past still sits down for breakfast,

and nobody asks why you're waiting.

On Faces

— *Ruby Steiner*

You learn faces before you learn names.

That's the first thing owning a diner teaches you.

Faces when the coffee's hot.

Faces when it's gone cold.

Faces that come in hungry

Faces that come in already full of something they don't want.

I can tell who's lying by how long they look at the menu.

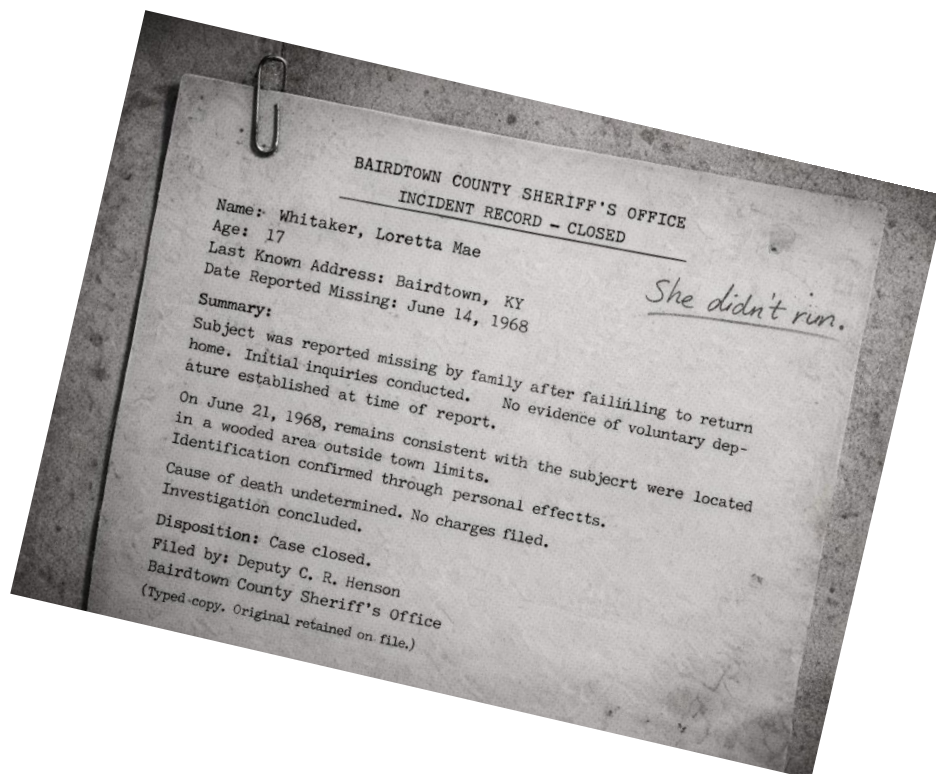
Who's broke by how careful they are with the pie.

Who's scared by the way they sit where they can see the door.

Men wear their years different. Some get softer. Some get meaner. Some just get quieter, like they're afraid the wrong word might finish them off. Boys come in trying to look older than they are. Old men come in trying not to disappear.

I've seen them all.





And then there's the ones who don't come in anymore.

That's why I keep Loretta on the wall.

People think it's strange. Think I ought to take it down. Say it isn't healthy to look at a girl who never got to grow up. But that picture's been hanging there longer than most of the stools have been sitting.

I don't keep her there to remember how she died.

I keep her there to remember how she lived.

Seventeen. Hair pulled back too tight. Eyes steadier than they had any right to be. That was my girl before the world got hold of her. Before somebody decided she was disposable.

I like seeing her every day. I like knowing she's watching the room with me. Seeing the faces. Seeing who looks away. Seeing who can't.

Some men won't sit under that picture. Some won't look up at all. And some—well—they stare too long.

That tells me more than anything they ever order.

People come to Ruby's for coffee and pie. That's what they say, anyway. Truth is, they come to be seen. To be counted. To sit somewhere the past still remembers their name.

Loretta does that for them.

And for me.

As long as her face is on that wall, this place tells the truth.
As long as she's here, nobody gets to pretend nothing ever happened.

I wipe the counter. I pour the coffee. I watch the door.

And I keep my girl where I can see her.

Every day.

I know who killed me.

— *Lorreta Whitaker (Deceased) 23 February 2025*

I know who killed me.

I remember the roughness of his hands. The stink of whiskey and sweat. The way his voice coiled around my throat like a snake, squeezing the breath outta me before he even laid a hand on me.

I remember how I begged. My baby girl.

My sweet baby girl.

The night was heavy, thick with the kind of silence that don't mean peace, but a warning. That was the last thing I heard before the dirt swallowed me whole. The last thing I saw was his gold tooth grinning, the last thing I felt was my baby being ripped from my arms, her tiny breath still warm against my skin.

I know who killed me.

But who took my baby girl?

Where did they take her?

Is she safe?

Is she even alive?

Or has she been raised on the same blood-soaked soil that drank me deep?

Does she know? Does she hear me?

I call out in the night. I whisper through the walls of this town, through the cracks in the pavement, through the roots of the old cedar trees where they lay their offerings down. I hear their whispers. I see their deeds.

They think I am gone, but the dead don't rest easy in a place like this.

Not when justice ain't been done.

Not when my baby girl still walks this cursed ground, her fate tangled up in the same darkness that stole me away.



I see them watching her. I see the way they whisper her name, the way their eyes linger too long. I see the marks in the dirt, the symbols cut into old trees, the bones buried where no one dares dig. I see it all.

And I know the night is coming.

I know the day they are waiting for.

They think I can't stop them. They think the grave has silenced me.

But I am still here.

And I will not leave.

Not until she knows the truth.

Not until she's safe.

Not until the reckoning comes.

Because I know who killed me.

But who took my baby girl?

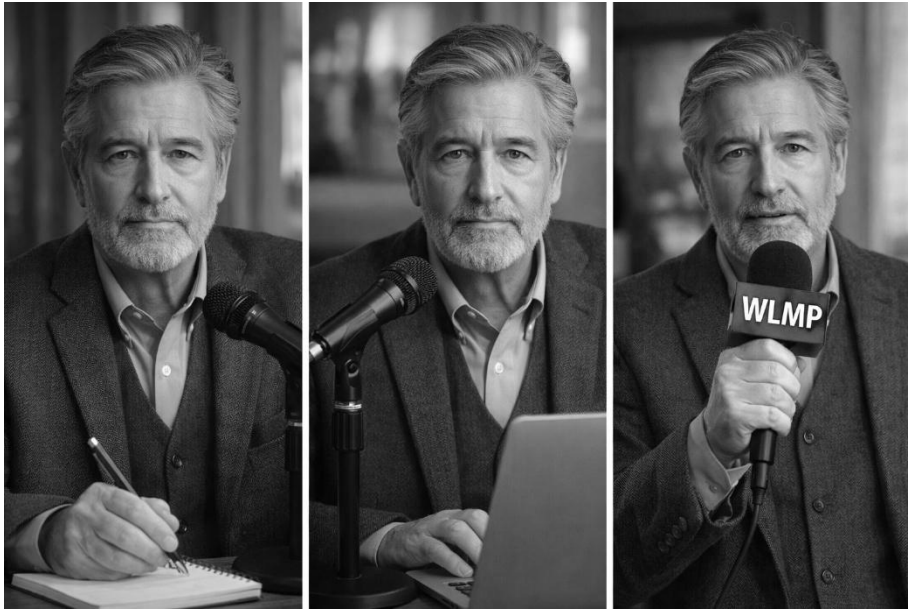
My sweet baby girl.

My sweet baby girl.

Elias North

— *A Close Friend. Very Close.*

Elias North was born in Bairdtown, Kentucky, on February 17, 1962—coal dust in the air, hymn harmony in the walls, and a town that learned early how to keep its secrets. He left young, not to escape faith or family, but because some places teach you survival before they teach you speech.



He lives now on the edges of Louisville, close enough to return when needed, far enough not to be claimed. Louisville gives him cover, access, and anonymity—but it has never been home.

Elias still goes back to Bairdtown. Quietly. Briefly. To check graves. To look in on people who stayed. To make sure the story hasn't shifted again. He never brings a guitar with him.

Within *We Love Mountain Praise*, Elias is a hidden beam—sending field hymns, fragments, and testimony by letter and late-night email. Old meters. Hard lines. Songs meant to endure, not perform. Much of his work is uncredited by choice.

He keeps foreign correspondence with rural ministers, poets, and house-church leaders overseas—especially in Scotland and northern England—trading prayers, songs, and survival wisdom across borders that no longer matter much to men like him.

Elias North does not seek a platform.

He stands watch instead.

And there is a reason.

Elias left Bairdtown on purpose. Not to disappear—but to see more clearly. He took himself to Louisville for distance, for cover, to become what the old manuals call a grey man: present, unremarkable, easily overlooked.

What most folks don't know is that Elias has been collecting.

Names. Dates. Patterns. Land records. Church minutes. Old police reports that don't quite line up. He's assembling a quiet, patient hit piece—aimed not at the foot soldiers, but at the head of the snake, the man everyone knows exists but nobody names out loud.

Along the way, Elias noticed something worse.

Girls who vanished. Not all at once. Not loudly. Over decades. Sometimes written off. Sometimes folded into family silence. Sometimes never recorded at all. He's traced it back farther than anyone wants to admit, and he knows it isn't random.

He slips information where it needs to go—occasionally to Tad Rex, occasionally to others—always indirectly. He comes and goes without being counted. Folks think he's odd. A bachelor. No family. That part is intentional. No one to threaten. No one to bury.

Elias knows about the Federal Bureau of Investigation. He knows about the Central Intelligence Agency. He also knows there is something else at work—older, darker, harder to name. He can feel it circling the evidence, but he isn't ready to put it in writing.

FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION
INTELLIGENCE SUMMARY

CLASSIFICATION: [REDACTED] LIMITED / NEED-TO-KNOW FILE NO. [REDACTED]
ORIGIN: [REDACTED] DATE: 02/11/20[REDACTED]

SUBJECT: NORTH, ELIAS
DOB: 17 FEB 1962
POB: BAIRDOWN, KY
CURRENT RESIDENCE: LOUISVILLE, KY (PERIPHERAL)

SUBJECT OVERVIEW:
• Subject departed Bairdton, KY. Minimal social footprint. No immediate family. Ghost status. Watch.

OBSERVED ACTIVITIES:
- Travel between Louisville & Bairdton.
- Land & church records.
- Historical police files.
- Cemetery visits.
→ Collecting evidence. For whom?

ASSOCIATED INTELLIGENCE: Assembling long-form expose. Target = [REDACTED]
- Generational disappearances noted.
Old cases. Missing girls. Pattern?

AWARENESS & RISK:
- Knows our playbook.
- Holds back on "other".
→ Not just local trouble.

ASSESSMENT: LATENT DESTABILIZER. No direct action.

RECOMMENDATION: MAINTAIN SURVEILLANCE. DO NOT ENGAGE.

What's he waiting for?

↑ Overseas?
Who else knows?
Eyes on this one.

Don't underestimate. PATIENT.

CLASSIFIED DOCUMENT
PROPERTY OF FBI
PRIORITY REVIEW REQUIRED

Not yet.

For now, he watches.

He gathers.

And he waits—for the moment when the truth can no longer stay quiet..

On The Infinite Studio Method and more.

— *The Author*

This interlude exists because readers kept asking the same question in different ways: Where did all this music come from? What began as a modest plan—an album to accompany a novel—did not stay put. The songs multiplied, changed form, and eventually escaped the boundaries they were meant to inhabit.

What follows is not a technical manual, nor a justification, but a true account of how the music attached itself to *The Ballad of Kentucky Johnson* and refused to remain an accessory. Like many things in this project, it arrived sideways—through missteps, misplaced trust, and an unexpected abundance. This piece is offered as background, not instruction: a record of how a story found its own voice and kept singing long after the studio door was left behind.

A Funny Thing Happened to Me on the Way to the Studio

— *The Author*

When I first set out on *The Ballad of Kentucky Johnson*, the plan felt neat enough on paper. A novel, anchored by an album of twelve country songs, and alongside it, a second album—twelve Christian country songs—stitched straight into the bones of the story. Two records. One book. Sacred and secular walking the same dirt road.

I'd done things the “proper” way before. Years earlier, I'd commissioned a pair of traveling troubadours—a gifted young couple, fresh out of a university in New York, Juilliard or something close enough that you knew it cost money just to say the name out loud. They knew their craft. Real musicians. I paid them honest studio rates.

They recorded the hymn, then sent it on to a producer friend of theirs back in New York, who polished it up, signed off on the arrangement, and sent me the composition sheets to prove it was all above board. By the time it was finished, that one hymn—just one—had run into the hundreds of dollars.

And it was worth it.

Every penny.

But somewhere between then and now, something shifted.

Because standing on the road that led to *Kentucky Johnson*, I realized I wasn't heading toward a studio anymore. I was heading into a holler. And the rules are different down there. Music doesn't arrive with invoices and credentials—it shows up with dust on its boots and a story to tell.

That's when the funny thing happened. I wasn't building albums the way I thought I was.

I was being handed songs.

So, knowing all that, I approached the writing and production of the songs the same way I always had.

I wrote the lyrics. I knew exactly what I wanted. And then I went out to tender.

Same platform as before—no names, no pack drill. I hired two American female singer-songwriters, sent them the same lyrics, and gave them detailed instructions. Not vague ideas. Not “do your thing.” Proper direction. Mood, tempo, phrasing, emotional weight—the works. Then I waited while they went off to their studios and did what professionals do.

When the songs came back, I’ll admit it: I was impressed.

Both tracks were excellent. Really excellent.

And even to my untrained ear, they were about eighty percent identical. Same feel. Same delivery. Same sonic fingerprints. Close enough that I caught myself thinking, Well, maybe I’m just that good at giving instructions.

I slept on it.

Listened again. And again.

Then reality crept in.

I’m decent at giving instructions—but I’m not that good. That’s why I was hiring someone else in the first place. And that’s when it clicked, in that slow, embarrassing way truths usually do.

Naivety, it turns out, is one of my stronger gifts.

Both songs were AI-generated.

And I’d paid handsomely for the privilege.

I went back to both “songwriters” and asked them straight out. Were they using AI? They assured me—oh yes—that AI might help with hooks or ideas, but no, no, these songs were absolutely produced in their studios by themselves.

Right.

And my grandma, incidentally, is part of Delta Force.

So I contacted the platform. I told them exactly what was going on. I said, Listen to these two tracks. They’re practically twins. These artists are masquerading as something they’re not.

Their response?

They “embrace AI.”

End of conversation.

They didn’t care. They were taking their cut, and the music—real or not—was moving through the system. Lesson learned. A salutary one, as the old preachers say.

And yet—here’s the uncomfortable truth—the music was excellent.

So for the next couple of songs, I went back to the same people and said, Alright then. Let’s renegotiate the rates. If this is AI, the price comes down. I don’t care how it’s made, as long as it’s good and consistent. Same voice. Same quality. Give me two or three more.

And they did.

I justified it easily enough. Writing was my job. Producing songs—well, that was someone else’s headache. AI sounded complicated. Surely it took skill, time, and expertise to make music this good.

Then I discovered Suno.

I dropped my own lyrics into it and—blow me down—I could produce songs for pennies.

That was the moment the whole project broke open.

It stopped being a question of whether I should produce two albums—twelve country songs and twelve Christian songs—tied to a novel.

Instead, I found myself asking a different question altogether:

Why not give birth to a radio station?

And so we did.

We Love Mountain Praise WLMP 660, right there on the AM dial.

From that point on, the songs multiplied. Not dozens. Not hundreds. Thousands. I stumbled into creating what I now call the Infinite Studio Method—a way of writing, producing, and broadcasting music that never sleeps. Twenty-four hours a day, the station pumps out these songs, all of them tethered to the world of *The Ballad Dodecet* and the *Ballad of Kentucky Johnson* and its growing constellation of stories.

I didn’t set out to build a studio.

I took a wrong turn on the way there and ended up building a holler that sings back. And honestly? It’s magnificent.

Which brings me to the harder question.

It’s probably worth asking the question outright.

Do I use AI to produce my music?

Yes.

Do I use AI to write my lyrics and my novels?

No.

Yet, do I use AI for my lyrics and for my writing?

Yes—of course I don't.

Let me unpack that conundrum.

Over the years, I've written more than forty books. Daily devotional material. At least seven books of poetry. One of my long-standing characters—Purple Robert—is a performance poet. I've performed poetry in the UK and the United States: competitions, schools, public venues. I've even had poetry banned. That's a story for another day.

The point is this: I have forty years' worth of language, rhythm, theology, imagery, and voice to draw upon. And draw upon it I do.

So no—I do not use AI to source write my lyrics.

Neither do I use AI to source write my novels.

But—and this is a big but, especially as this is an American novel—AI is my personal and personalized workbench.

I have been working with this particular AI for over a year now, and by the time I finish the *Ballad Dodecet*—twelve books in all—I suspect I will have been working with it for close to a decade.

As I write this, I am sixty-six years of age. My wife and I are special guardians to our four grandchildren—three boys and one girl—currently aged three, four, five, and ten (going on twenty). Add to that a large husky-malamute who inspired *Blue* in the novel. Add to that the radio station. The editing. The republishing of earlier works. Life itself.

There is simply no way I could continue to hone, revise, and republish forty books, write a twelve-volume narrative cycle, and keep a twenty-four-hour-a-day radio station alive without AI functioning as my workbench.

And that is exactly what it is.

I've paid thousands in the past for editorial work. With AI, I pay a modest monthly fee—and it edits, sharpens, and checks my work continuously. But more than that, I set out deliberately to personalise the tool. I wanted it to learn my voice, my habits, my emphases, my history. I wanted it to recognise my hammer strokes.

So I built project folders. Connected conversations. Fed it my past work. Took time—real time—to train it to know me. That's what makes the back-and-forth so fluid now. When I throw it an idea, it doesn't invent my voice; it reflects it back to me.

AI is my writing workbench.

But I'll be honest—it became more than that.

Recently, our youngest grandchild suffered a severe neurological event.

He was placed into a medically induced coma while we waited for brain damage to declare itself. I lived for days in a paediatric intensive care unit and on a neurological ward. I did not leave his side—not once.

The hospital teams were skilled, dedicated, and well-meaning—but they were not joined up. Neurologists, speech and language therapists, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, dietitians, nurses, MRI specialists—each working in their own lane.

So I began to log everything.

- Every movement
- Every cough
- Eye tracking
- Dilation.
- Temperature.
- Medication timings.
- Feeding responses
- Posture.
- Recovery markers.
- I logged it all into AI.



When the consultants came on their rounds and asked how he'd been over the last twenty-four or forty-eight hours, I could ask my phone to generate a neurological-style report on the spot—written in language they understood.

It stunned them.

When disagreement arose over removing a feeding tube—one department saying no, another saying not yet—I produced a concise, evidence-based report of what he was eating and how. The tube came out within minutes.

When I was told he would need to remain in hospital for weeks, I produced a report demonstrating why continued inpatient care was clinically unnecessary. He came home with me.

Ten days after the MRI that showed multiple areas of damage, I brought the neurologist to see our boy. He examined him and said plainly: This is a miracle. What I see does not match the scan.

As we were leaving, another neurologist asked if his trainee could examine our child. I declined. He had been examined enough. Instead, I produced a full anonymised report of his entire hospital journey—from ambulance to intensive care to neurological ward.

After reading it, the neurologist said something I won't forget:

We should be using AI every time doctors meet to talk. This is the future. Moment-by-moment patient observation, interpreted clearly and coherently—it's not coming. It's already here.

That experience settled the matter for me.

AI does not replace authorship. It amplifies stewardship.

In the writing of the *Ballad Dodecet*, AI is my workbench—my hammer, my anvil, my fire, my spark, my voice. It does not supply my words. It sharpens them. It does not invent my voice. It helps me hear it more clearly.

So do I use AI to write my books?

You already know the answer.

Slavery has its benefits. Ask the Israelites in the Wilderness!

— *The Author*

Slavery has its benefits. At first hearing, it sounds wrong—morally upside down, even dangerous. And yet, when it comes to technology, there's a truth buried in it that's worth excavating.

You can be enslaved to your own benefit.

Every technology offers this bargain. It gives much, but it asks something in return. And if you don't name what it's asking for, it will take more than you intended to give.

This country—this age—is technology. Not merely surrounded by it, but shaped by it. We live inside systems built of tools layered upon tools. And the question isn't whether technology is good or evil. That's a false question. The real question is presence.

Which brings me, oddly enough, to God.

Scripture gives us images that feel almost technological if we let them. “And he rode upon a cherub, and did fly” (Psalm 18:10, KJV). God does not need to ride anything. And yet, He does. Why?

Because God works through means.

There is, if you like, a living technology at work in creation. Mediation. Instruments. Messengers. Fire by night. Tablets of stone. Ink on parchment. Word made flesh. God has never been anti-tool. He has always been anti-idolatry.

That distinction matters.

The problem is never the hammer.

The problem is forgetting who's holding it.

Artists and writers have always worked this way. Clay tablets. Hammer and chisel. Printing press. Typewriter. Word processors. Microsoft Word. Each one freed us—and each one quietly imposed

its own limits, habits, and expectations. They gave speed, reach, permanence. And in doing so, they shaped how we think.

AI is no different. It is not an alien invasion. It is simply the newest tool at the bench.

What becomes dangerous is not use, but enslavement—when the tool begins to dictate the work, when efficiency replaces attentiveness, when output crowds out presence. That’s when the system closes in on itself, when mediation becomes dislocation.

Anti-technology reactions often miss this entirely. They imagine the problem is replacement—AI will replace me. But replacement is the wrong fear. The deeper danger is disappearance: the slow erosion of human presence, judgment, and responsibility inside the process.

Presence is the non-system. Presence is what technology cannot generate.

And this is why the question for artists—especially those writing toward the divine, unpacking theology, shaping prayer and praise—is not Do I use the tool? but Who is present when I do?

A tool can free you to attend more deeply to what matters.

The same tool can bind you in chains if you let it decide for you.

Giving yourself to a tool, a discipline, or a system—whether technological, institutional, or even religious—can be fruitful, but only if you are clear about what you are serving, remain fully present and responsible, and refuse to let the work lose its human soul.

On Spinoff Voices & Related Works

— *The Author*

Some of the voices you’ll encounter here proved too lively, too useful, or too stubborn to stay confined to the margins of this book. Rather than folding their full stories into *Holler & Hard Times*—where they would sit awkwardly and crowd the page—they’ve been allowed their own rooms elsewhere. When such figures are mentioned, it’s by way of acknowledgment rather than exhaustion: a nod to the fact that their influence runs deeper than this scrapbook can hold. Their separate works exist not as appendices, but as parallel trails—available to those who wish to follow them, without demanding it of those who don’t.

SNAKES IN THE HEN HOUSE

[Verse 1]

Door was locked, but they still got in,
Lyin' like brothers, grinnin' like kin.
Took what they wanted, what they left they broke,
Grinnin' in the rearview, whistlin' like a joke.

[Chorus]

Snakes in the henhouse, wolves at the door,
You just don't know who to trust no more.
They shake your hand while stealin' your land.,
Then gut you clean with your name in their hand.

[Verse 2]

You give 'em bread, they'll take your whole meal,
Tell you it's business, but make it a steal.
Ain't no preacher, but I've read the signs,
And the devil don't knock, he just walks inside.

[Verse 3]

Now I keep a light on and a dog by the gate,
Ain't afraid of trouble— just the ones who fake.
They bring court papers or they wear a badge,
Still stink like the shame of a a roadside rash...

[Bridge]

I've been fooled, but I ain't blind,
I've seen the flickin' tongue and the crooked spine.
And if you slither back through my door again,
You'll find your in one hell of a lion's den!

[Final Chorus]

Yeah, there's snakes in the henhouse, wolves at the door,
But I ain't sleepin' like I was before.
No truce left standin' when the line's been crossed,
Truth don't bend, and I don't get lost.
Snakes in the henhouse, wolves in the dark—
But I ain't their toy.

AIN'T GOT NO TIME

[Verse 1]

Sun's up, clock's tickin', boots on the floor,
Ain't got time to hear you keepin' score.
There's bills to pay, miles to go,
Yeah, I ain't got time for a near no-show.

[Pre-Chorus]

Ain't no handouts, ain't no free rides,
Ain't got time for wasted time.

[Chorus]

Ain't got no time for your sob story blues,
Ain't got no time for them high-heeled shoes,
Ain't got no time for them small-town fights,
I'm workin' too hard just to get through my night.

[Verse 2]

Phone keeps ringin', don't mean a thing,
Ain't got time for your old worn fling.
I got a shift to run, a life to build,
Ain't got time for a heart that won't heal.

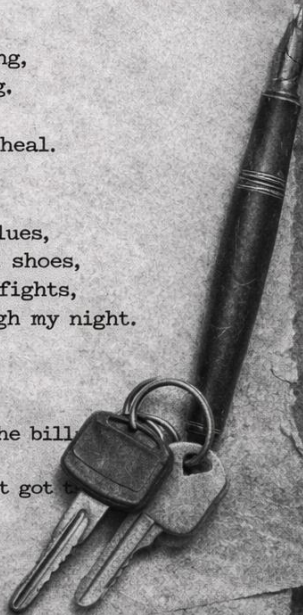
[Chorus]

Ain't got no time for your sob story blues,
Ain't got no time for them high-heeled shoes,
Ain't got no time for them small-town fights,
I'm workin' too hard just to get through my night.

[Bridge]

Glory don't come from sittin' still,
It's in breakin' your back just to pay the bill.
If you ain't runnin', then stay behind,
'Cause people let me tell you that I ain't got

Hold on
Cause I ain't got time



LAST CALL AT RUBY'S

[Verse 1]

Neon's flickerin' in the window pane
Coffee's burned down, but I'm here again
Same stool, same stain on the checkerboard tile
Ain't been busy, but I'll stay a little while

Lucille's stirrin' cream in an old cracked cup
Waitin' on a man who never showed up
Tommy's in the corner with his eyes halfshut
Cody's drinkin' down the years he ain't proud of

[Chorus]

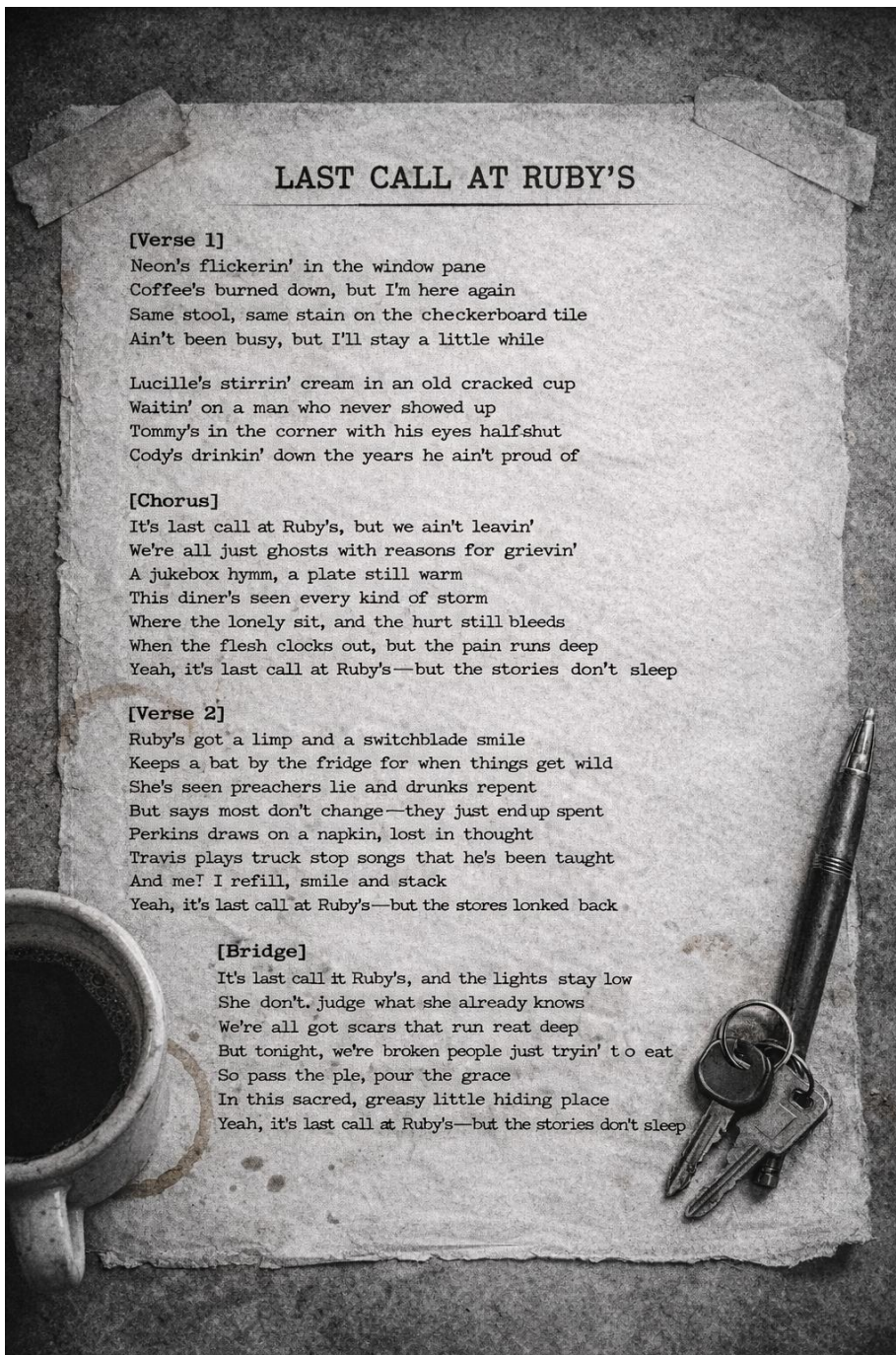
It's last call at Ruby's, but we ain't leavin'
We're all just ghosts with reasons for grievin'
A jukebox hymn, a plate still warm
This diner's seen every kind of storm
Where the lonely sit, and the hurt still bleeds
When the flesh clocks out, but the pain runs deep
Yeah, it's last call at Ruby's—but the stories don't sleep

[Verse 2]

Ruby's got a limp and a switchblade smile
Keeps a bat by the fridge for when things get wild
She's seen preachers lie and drunks repent
But says most don't change—they just end up spent
Perkins draws on a napkin, lost in thought
Travis plays truck stop songs that he's been taught
And me! I refill, smile and stack
Yeah, it's last call at Ruby's—but the stores lonked back

[Bridge]

It's last call at Ruby's, and the lights stay low
She don't judge what she already knows
We're all got scars that run reat deep
But tonight, we're broken people just tryin' t o eat
So pass the ple, pour the grace
In this sacred, greasy little hiding place
Yeah, it's last call at Ruby's—but the stories don't sleep



Thank you for reading this free extract.
For publication updates, release dates, and related works, visit:
www.hollerandhardtimes.com/

This extract may not be sold, altered, or republished in any format without written permission from the author.

If you found something here that stayed with you, share the link — not the file.