

## Fatal Assumptions: The Valley Road

Sometimes I lead, sometimes I follow  
This time I'll go where she wants me to go  
She said maybe today, maybe tomorrow  
Deep in the woods down the low valley road

While no one was lookin' on the old plantation  
He took her all the way down the long valley road  
They sent her away not too much later  
And left him walking down the old valley road  
Walk on  
Walk on, walk on alone  
Walk on, walk on  
Walk on alone, alone

Out in the hall, they were talking in a whisper  
Everybody noticed she was gone awhile  
Somebody said she's gone to her sister's  
Everybody knew what they were talking about

Whoa, while no one was lookin' on the old plantation  
He showed her what they do down the long valley road  
She came back around like nothing really happened  
And left him standing on the old valley road  
Walk on  
Walk on, walk on alone  
Walk on, walk on  
Walk on, walk on, on the valley road

Standing like a stone on the old plantation  
The rich old man would have never let him in  
Good enough to hire, not good enough to marry  
When it all happens, nobody wins  
Walk on  
Walk on, walk on alone  
Walk on, walk on  
Walk on, walk on alone, alone  
-Bruce and John Hornsby

This song was quite popular as I started college. It made #1 on the Adult Contemporary Chart in June 1988 and peaked at #5 on the Billboard Hot 100 in July. The following year, Bruce Hornsby collaborated with The Nitty Gritty Dirt Band to do a bluegrass version of the song on the album *Will the Circle Be Unbroken: Volume II*. In an interview, Bruce Hornsby had this to say: "Every year, some rich girl would get involved with some country guy, and they would act irresponsibly and have to deal with the ramifications." When asked why many of his band's songs dealt with socio-political issues, Hornsby replied that "there are some issues that we feel are important, so we write about them... we also like to tell a story, like in "The Valley Road", or paint a picture." (Hyatt, Wesley (1999). *The*

The music to the song is a strange mixture of upbeat and dragging notes, giving an excellent aura of the bitter-sweet feelings that can happen when one reminisces. But nothing in the lyrics suggests anything happy. Thanks to Bruce's interview, we don't have to speculate as to the meaning of the imagery or the intended meaning of the song. A grave injustice has been done because of sociological and political unfairness. But exactly what this injustice is, or who the victim is, I don't think is so clear. I do believe, however, that many people will be quite wrong in assuming what this injustice is. Of course, time and lyric restrictions mean the song is greatly deficient in detail and much is left to the imagination. But it's this imagination that can get us in trouble, as we might think this song says things that it really doesn't. This, in turn, makes us very susceptible to forming opinions not based on facts, and these opinions can be manipulated against our better good. So, let us examine what we know. I do not need Bruce's quote for anything that follows, it merely proved that this song was written to promote public awareness for some type of social injustice.

First of all, we have what appears to be three main characters plus a supporting cast of a sister and whoever is in the hall (presumably high school classmates of at least one main character). We have the Old Man, his daughter (presumably in high school, as she would likely be off to a big college if she were older) and a boy who is hired by the Old Man and later gets the daughter pregnant. So let's take them one by one.

The Old Man is certainly not portrayed as the victim. The lines "The rich old man would have never let him in/Good enough to hire, not good enough to marry" shows that he was in charge the whole time. After all, people in charge of society and politics cannot be victims, can they? And if he is not the victim, then by default he must be the villain. Right? Well, he gave this boy a job. Nothing in the song suggests the work was inappropriate or the wages were substandard, so we have to assume it was a decent job at fair pay. That is not the work of a villain, that is the work of a benefactor. And in return for this opportunity, the boy gets the Old Man's daughter pregnant. That is betrayal.

Moving on to the daughter. One can hope, that as a presumed high-schooler, she was at least the age of consent. But since there is no mention of the boy having to go to jail for this, it is safe to assume that she was. Is she the victim? After all, she was forced by the Old Man to move away for some period of time (the lines "Everybody noticed she was gone awhile/Somebody said she's gone to her sister's/Everybody knew what they were talking about"). It is reasonable to assume she stayed away until she bore the baby and then gave it up for adoption. Having an abortion would have been quick enough no one would notice her being gone. She was not allowed to marry the boy. But, like the Old Man, she also was very much in control. The lyrics "She said maybe today, maybe tomorrow/Deep in the woods down the low valley road" show us that it was her who planned the event that got her pregnant. Furthermore, the lines "While no one was lookin' on the old plantation/He took her all the way down the long valley road" makes it clear that this plan involved deceiving her father. So, we have a major violation of the 5th Commandment (for Catholics, most Protestants would call it the 4th). Finally, she chose the lifestyle the Old Man gave her over the "love" of the boy (lyrics "She came back around like nothing really happened/And left him standing on the old valley road"). I suppose one could claim that she should not have had to give up her life to marry the boy, but this is not an argument, it is a distraction. Regardless of what should or shouldn't have happened, it doesn't change the fact that she valued her lifestyle over the boy.

So, we now come to the boy. Despite the first verse being in the first person, we know almost nothing about him except that he apparently was willing to marry the daughter: "Good enough to hire,

not good enough to marry." Perhaps he could be the victim? He fell prey to the machinations of the daughter (albeit quite willingly) and began to hope for things the Old Man ultimately denied? But this is a case where others only had control over him because he let them. He certainly did not have to agree to meeting the daughter. Did the boy really think the Old Man would agree to letting him become a son in law after betraying the trust shown by hiring him? Let's not forget that, by being the son-in-law, the boy would stand to inherit the Old Man's wealth through the daughter. Is the Old Man wrong for wanting his wealth to go to someone who is trustworthy? Did the boy think the daughter would leave the Old Man? If so, how would the boy provide for the lifestyle the daughter was used to? While I cannot say for certain whether or not the boy is a victim, it is hard to find a reason to pity him.

But there is a fourth cast member so obvious he or she is overlooked. The child. The child is completely helpless and dependent on the good will of others. The grandfather ostracized it. The mother was presumably unwilling to give up her lifestyle to keep it. The father, by acting nothing like a man, forfeited it.

I agree with Bruce Hornsby that this song addresses a socio-political issue, but I can't help but think that too many people don't really understand what the real issue is. The real issue is a selfishness that spans all social, economic and political spectrums. Now let us consider the final line, "When it all happens, nobody wins." This may be true in the literal sense that nothing was won, but only one character lost and that person lost everything through no fault of his or her own. The rest were all too selfish to risk losing anything of importance and ended this song a little sadder but otherwise just as they started.

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