



The Life of
WOODY GUTHRIE

**THERE
AIN'T
NOBODY
THAT
CAN SING
LIKE ME**

by
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chapter **ONE**

*Many a page of life has turned,
Many lessons I have learned,
I feel like in those hills I still
belong—*

—“OKLAHOMA HILLS”



*Children of
a migrant family
on Oklahoma's
Highway 1, 1938*

Another cyclone had ripped into the small town of Okemah, Oklahoma. Six-year-old Woody Guthrie remembered the winds “squealing like a hundred mad elephants.” Knots of hay had been hurled onto the locust trees along Ninth Street, now hanging in wild, feathery gnarls from the branches. Roof shingles lay on the grass, spotted with manure from the barns. Doors had burst open and banged shut, splintering into pieces that flew over the pond along with dust, gravel, and uprooted weeds.

This latest windstorm caused nightmares in many Okemah children, scarier to Woody than the goose-bump tales told to him by workers and drifters at the train yard. Yet on this May morning of 1919, two



Woody's parents,
Nora and Charley
Guthrie, circa 1908

days after the cyclone, calm had returned. Woody's mother, Nora, sat at the piano on the stone floor of their house, playing and singing Irish and English ballads. His father, Charley, and his older sister and two brothers—fourteen-year-old Clara, twelve-year-old Roy, and one-year-old George—were gathered at the piano.

How Woody loved music! His parents sang songs while they planted crops, fed the cows, or scrubbed the floors—old songs, they said, born in other lands or sprouting up among American rodeos, campfires, churches, and even prisons. Work songs, ballads, gospel tunes, cowboy verses. Nora Guthrie's bedtime lullabies were like a "nice ripe and juicy [*sic*] strawberry" to Woody, and he could find music anywhere. "There never was a sound," he would say, "that was not music—the splash of an alligator . . . the whistle of a train . . . a truck horn blowing . . . kids squawling [*sic*] along the streets." Music made everything "all plainer" to understand, even a scary cyclone.

When cyclones came, Woody's mother worried about the family's safety. But his father, who negotiated land deals between the white settlers and the local Native Americans (Choctaw, Cherokee, Chickasaw, Creeks, and Seminoles), was known as a tough fist-fighter and refused to be scared. "Let the wind get harder," he'd shout to Woody. "Let the straw and feathers fly! Let the old wind go crazy and pound us over the head! And when the straight winds pass over and the twisting winds crawl in the air like a rattlesnake in boiling water, let's you and me holler back at it and laugh it back to where it come from!"

Now Nora Guthrie rose from the piano, shooing Roy off to school, taking George in her arms, and sending Woody to collect



eggs from the hens. But Clara, a headstrong girl with light brown ringlets of hair, was told to stay home from school to do chores because she'd been unruly. Clara loudly objected, reminding her mother of a final exam required for graduation. Nora, however, would not relent. She'd been moody ever since her yellow dream house, built for the family by Charley's father, had suddenly burned down a month after it was finished. Although Charley served proudly as district court clerk for Okfuskee County (where Okemah lay), and successfully sold tenant farms and taught penmanship, Nora seemed fitful. Usually quiet, she'd started yelling at Charley about his fistfights with land sharks and politicians on the muddy, unpaved streets. Charley was popular with Okemah citizens, which had once pleased Nora, but now she resented his holding court each morning in Parsons' Drugstore. She preferred him to be home, talking to her or reading the law books and leather-bound classics he collected.

Several hours after Nora and Clara's argument, Woody was playing along Ninth Street when he heard the fire whistle blow. Its "song" always sounded sad to him, like some of his mother's ballads. With all the spooky talk between his parents about fire after the yellow house had turned to ashes, Woody ran home as fast as he could. Fire was worse than cyclones! In his yard he found tear-soaked neighbors and relatives; in his house a darkness made him shiver.

Clara, Woody learned, lay in bed—horribly burned. After the argument she'd poured coal oil on her dress and lit a match to frighten her mother. The oil had exploded, covering Clara in flames. Aghast, Nora watched her daughter stumble into the yard, screaming and crying. A neighbor wrapped Clara in blankets, smothering the flames, and carried her into the house. The doctor had come; Charley, Roy, and others had gathered. Clara's skin, Woody heard, was hanging off her body.

chapter **FOUR**

*I never did make up many songs about
the cow trails or the moon skipping
through the sky, but at first it was
funny songs of what's all wrong, and
how it turned out good or bad.
Then I got a little braver and made up
songs telling what I thought was wrong
and how to make it right.*

—BOUND FOR GLORY



*Migrant child
in front of
“tent” in
Harlingen,
Texas, 1939*

Woody called himself itchy footed. In other towns, other cities, he came upon those who'd been pushed down, knocked down, shoved down, and he saw their grit and courage. They might be dirt poor, they might not own much, the way rich people did, but they worked hard for what they did have. Hard was a word biting at the blisters on their feet. Hard traveling. Hard times.

The more Woody hitched rides, his paintbrushes in his pocket, his guitar strapped on his back, the longer Mary had to fend for herself and Teeny. He kept coming back to her, kept reviving the Corncob Trio, but there was no guarantee he'd show up. He would hoist Teeny onto his shoulders, but his spirit



Field worker picking cotton in San Joaquin, California, 1938

seemed left on the road. One day when Jeff and Allene were visiting, and he and Jeff were harmonizing on their guitars while Mary and her mother were cooking, Woody suddenly stood up and said, “Well, I’m going.”

“Going,” Jeff replied. “Where?”

“California,” Woody said—and he meant right then and there. No one in the house could change his mind, and he was gone with a wave.

California would teach Woody more about the differences between the rich and poor, about hardship and survival, about politicians, law enforcers, and tycoons. In California, where fields and orchards were “such a thick green garden of fruits and vegetables that I didn’t know if I was dreaming or not,” he and the five hundred thousand migrant workers who’d poured into the state during the depression were scathingly called “Okies” or “poor white trash.” Living under any sort of covering—paper

bags, junkyard metal, leaves—the migrants, if they were lucky enough to find work, were exploited by landowners who hired them to pick crops.

Woody drifted from town to town, hopping freights. He’d drop down from the top of an open boxcar onto the machinery or bags of cement inside. He rode with as many as sixty ragged, out-of-work men—some crippled from heatstroke or injury, some old, some young—everyone cramped together like decaying sardines. Often he’d be asked to play something “good an’ hot” on his guitar.

In Bakersfield he slept under railroad bridges and in doorways. In Sonoma he picked up loose change by painting signs for a store owner, sent postcards to Mary, and rented a flophouse cot for twenty-five cents. “If it had cockroaches, alligators, or snapping turtles in it,” he said, “I was too sleepy to stay awake and argue with them.” The police might run him out of town or jail him for the night. They sneered if he said he was looking for work. “Git on outta town!” they’d yell. “Keep travelin’! Don’t you ever look back!”

When he first approached the California border, his greatest shock had been to see Los Angeles police forming an illegal roadblock and using billy clubs to stop migrants from entering the state. Even children were treated like vermin. Woody had written songs on the road, and his plain language gave a voice to the migrants’ misery and blew the whistle on what had been done to them:

DO RE MI

Lots of folks back east, they say,
Leavin’ home every day,
Beatin’ the hot old dusty way
To the California line.

Hunched over his typewriter or scribbling in notebooks, Woody wrote twenty-six songs in about the same number of days. Haunting, lyrical, poetic, and sometimes funny, the songs would become a permanent part of folk Americana. Their range of style and tempo was astounding. Sung by him through loudspeakers in the BPA offices, they expressed all the pride of the power project and were soon on everyone's lips.

Known as the *Columbia River Collection*, the songs included ballads (light, simple songs), work songs (songs sung to accompany tasks or labors), talking blues (songs of melancholy, originating among black Americans), and anthems (songs of praise, devotion, or patriotism). Woody often used tunes from existing songs that weren't his own, a common practice among folk writers, making them easy for listeners to remember. The tune to Leadbelly's "Goodnight Irene" became the tune to Woody's "Roll On, Columbia" (designated in 1987 as the official Washington State folk song). The tune to the ballad "Pretty Polly" became Woody's "Pastures of Plenty," which he wrote after visiting government-funded migrant camps outside Portland that actually had tents, running water, and medical care.

In addition to the tunes he borrowed, he created many of his own melodies. Some of the Columbia River songs were majestic and melodramatic:

THE GRAND COULEE DAM

She winds down the granite canyon, and she bends across the lea,
Like a prancing dancing stallion down her seaway to the sea;
Cast your eyes upon the biggest thing yet built by human
 hands,
On the King Columbia River, it's the big Grand Coulee Dam.
In the misty crystal glitter of the wild and windward spray,
Men have fought the pounding waters, and met a watr'y grave,

Well she tore their boats to splinters and she gave men
 dreams to dream,
Of the day the Coulee Dam would cross that wild and wasted
 stream.

ROLL ON, COLUMBIA

Green Douglas firs where the waters cut through,
Down her wild mountains and canyons she flew.
Canadian Northwest to the ocean so blue,
Roll on, Columbia, roll on!

[Refrain]

Roll on, Columbia, roll on,
Roll on, Columbia, roll on.
Your power is turning our darkness to dawn,
So, roll on, Columbia, roll on!

Some of the songs suggested the pulsing beat of the machines used to build the Grand Coulee and Bonneville Dams:

JACKHAMMER JOHN

I'm a jackhammer man from a jackhammer town,
I can hammer on a hammer till the sun goes down.
I hammered on the Boulder, hammered on the Butte,
Columbia River on the Five Mile Schute.

And some of the songs were ironic and humorous:

IT TAKES A MARRIED MAN TO SING A WORRIED SONG

Well you single boys can ramble,
you single boys can roam,
But it takes a married man, boys,
to sing a worried song.

before reporting to the Nevada base. He hitched rides into New York City, and since both their divorces had finally been issued, he and Marjorie got married at City Hall. He hoped he could be a good husband to her. “I would quit anything,” he told her, “to build up my days around yours.”

When he was discharged, he joined Marjorie and Cathy on Coney Island in a tiny, three-room apartment at 3520 Mermaid Avenue. Fewer than ten miles from Manhattan, Coney Island jutted out into the paper-littered water, its boardwalk lined with amusement park rides and hot-dog stands. Woody was happy with his little family and chronicled all of Cathy’s activities in journals—toys she played with, rhymes she learned, questions she asked. Dark-haired like Woody, she had an exuberance that glowed in her face.

Pete Seeger, too, had married, and Woody met up with him again at the New York home of Seeger’s in-laws. “[He] saw my guitar,” Woody said, “unslung his banjo, and before we could shake hands or pass many blessings, we had played, ‘Sally Goodin,’ ‘Doggy Spit a Rye Straw,’ ‘Going Down This Road Feeling Bad,’ ‘Worried Man Blues,’ and ‘Fifteen Miles from Birmingham.’” People’s Songs had formed a branch division, People’s Artists, which booked singers and speakers for left-wing rallies. Soon Woody appeared at postwar events with Pete, Leadbelly, Cisco Houston, and singers Earl Robinson and Burl Ives.

Woody met a man named Moses (Moe) Asch, who loved American folk music and owned a pint-size record company on West Forty-sixth Street. Woody dropped in unannounced and sat on the floor while Asch peered down at him from a desk chair. “I want to make some records,” Woody said. “So,” countered the heavysset Asch, “when do you want to start?”

With a beer or two under his belt, an unshaven Woody came evenings to the studio and stood before a microphone in a closet-like room, strumming his guitar and singing his heart out. Some-

times he brought Sonny Terry and Cisco Houston to record with him. Asch, he said, “took us in, cranked up his machinery and told us to fire away with everything that we had. We yelled and whooped and beat and pounded till Asch had taken down One Hundred and Twenty Some Odd Master [*sic*] sides.”

One of Woody’s recordings, “This Land Is Your Land,” would become his most famous song. He’d created it in answer to Irving Berlin’s “God Bless America,” a popular anthem that annoyed him because it made America seem too sticky sweet. Moe Asch said that he knew at once the song was special:

THIS LAND IS YOUR LAND

[Chorus]

This land is your land, this land is my land,
 From California to the New York island;
 From the redwood forest to the Gulf Stream waters,
 This land was made for you and me.

As I was walking that ribbon of highway,
 I saw above me that endless skyway;
 I saw below me that golden valley;
 This land was made for you and me.

.....
 On a bright and sunny morning,
 In the shadow of the steeple,
 By the relief office I seen my people;
 As they stood there hungry, I stood there wondering,
 Is this land made for you and me?

.....
[Chorus]

Nobody living can ever stop me,
 As I go walking that freedom highway;

Nobody living can ever make me turn back;
This land was made for you and me.

On subway rides between Coney Island and Asch Record Company, Woody began hearing a surge of anti-Communist talk. A postwar alliance between Russia and the U.S. unraveled, and Joseph Stalin, the Soviet Union's leader, was hurling criticisms at America. The animosity between the two countries would soon be referred to as the Cold War. Woody was still grateful for the support given by Communists to the plight of American workers. "Everything," he

insisted, "is a part of the conflict between the boss man and the work hand." He believed in any political system that closed the gap between rich and poor and would never "make hoboes nor bums nor dirty backdoor tramps out of any of us."

Telling this story in song became the thrust of New York hootenannies in 1946. Woody saw his messages inspiring workers "to band together and to talk, think, plan, and fight together." Authentic folk music, performed with pride by the artists of People's Songs, had been making inroads in urban cities beyond New York, such as Chicago and San Francisco; its artists were now hired to perform in nightclubs and hotels.

In the apartment on Coney Island,

Woody was writing up a storm. He sent letters to politicians, labor leaders, and people in the news. He mailed off notes to his brothers Roy and George, sister Mary Jo, and his father. He wrote a column in the left-wing *Sunday Worker* newspaper and jotted down his



Cathy Ann Guthrie

thoughts—which he called "Coney Island Short Hauls"—in notebooks. A pencil usually stuck out of his back pocket or protruded from behind one ear.

What he wasn't writing, however, was his second book (which he'd named *Ship Story*) for E. P. Dutton. He'd produce three or four pages, then crumple them up. His thoughts seemed to spin out of his head, and he had trouble concentrating. Maybe it was the fault of his daily beer or wine, he told himself.

He was most relaxed when he and Marjorie took Cathy, perched piggyback on his shoulders, to the beach or the shops. He'd beam as Cathy greeted passersby in her lilting voice, and he wrote down her conversations. "Daddy," she'd say, "why doesn't Mr. Sun Shine shine [*sic*] all the time?" or "Mommy, will my teacher bring Mister Sun Shine into my school room?"

When Marjorie was dancing in New York City, Woody babysat for Cathy while trying, without success, to begin his book. Instead of writing, he and Cathy played marbles or made music by beating with spoons on tin cans, oatmeal boxes, or tambourines. He composed children's songs for his daughter, flabbergasted at how she memorized and sang them over and over to herself:

WHY, OH WHY

Why can't a bird eat an elephant?
Why, oh why, oh why?
'Cause an elephant's got a pretty hard skin.
Goodbye, goodbye, goodbye.



Woody and Marjorie in a publicity shot for their children's hootenannies

*People will listen if you have
something to say,
but people will remember
if you sing it.*

—HANSEN PUBLICATIONS

*You find God in the church of your choice
You find Woody Guthrie in Brooklyn State Hospital
And though it's only my opinion
I may be right or wrong
You'll find them both
In Grand Canyon
Sundown*

—BOB DYLAN

“LAST THOUGHTS ON WOODY GUTHRIE,” 1963

FAMILY TREE

