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I Think I'm Buddy Holly

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I THINK I'M BUDDY HOLLY

I had a couple of hours in St. Louis before the bus left for Oklahoma, so I decided to go see the Arch. I was standing in line for what I thought was an elevator to the top when I noticed this guy standing in front of me. He was the same guy I'd seen on the bus from Indianapolis, asleep next to his guitar, taking up the whole seat. It didn't matter since other seats were empty. You'd expect the bus to be full at Christmas, but it wasn't a good year.

"So are you going up?" I asked him.

"I suppose I am," he said.

"You know, I saw you on the bus back there. I'm Calvin Dee, from Caldwell, Caldwell, Indiana." He seemed a little reluctant to shake my hand. "What'd you do with your guitar?"

"Locked her up. Sure as hell don't want anything to happen to Sarah."

He looked something like Abe Lincoln. He was just as lanky, and the face was the same, with dark circles under the eyes and dark hollows under the cheekbones. A chewed-up face. The beard was too scraggly, though.

"My name's J.B. Scanlon," he said, "but you can call me Buzz. I haven't outgrown it yet."

"Okay, Buzz," I said.

"You ever heard of Mel Bay?"

Well, the thing is, I had. I had heard of Mel Bay, but I hadn't heard of Mel Bay in maybe ten years. When I was eleven I took electric guitar lessons with this guy in Caldwell who taught the Mel Bay Method. It was on all the books and all the chord charts and everything. Mel Bay. The picture of this smiling, middle-aged guy stared out at you every time you sat down to play. It wasn't what I had in mind. I didn't want to sit there like some ukelele-playing fool. I wanted to rip it up with that electric guitar.

"He's the guy on all those music books," I said.

"Yep, that's the one, and he lives right here in St. Louis," Buzz said. "If I only had another hour or so I'd go out and shake the man's hand. He's part of American music. Think of all the people who play guitar because of Mel Bay. The man's a legend, an American legend."

"You really think so?" I asked.

Before Buzz could answer, five or six sliding doors opened up at once. I thought we'd be getting in an elevator, even though I'd been trying to figure out how an elevator could curve to the top of the Arch. It wasn't an elevator at all. The sliding doors opened to little tram cars. They stuffed two girls in with Buzz and me. He was the tallest, and he had to bend his neck and lean his head forward, putting his chin on his fist.

"Help, I need air," I joked as the doors closed.

The two girls started to giggle as the tram car made its jerky little start.

"I hope it's worth it," I said. Then the ride smoothed out and I got my bearings. "So how are you ladies today?"

Buzz looked uncomfortable around them, being so close, the way Abe Lincoln probably wasn't a ladies' man, but I thought the one was too pretty to ignore. The other, she was the wallflower type. The kind who never gets to dance to rock-and-roll music and has to tap her toe inside a world of her own.

"You tourists?" the pretty one laughed.

"You might say that," I said, "or you might say we're just people."

"I can always spot tourists," she said. "Anyhow, it's not too hard. Almost everybody who comes to the Arch is a tourist, but I come here anyway. It makes me proud to live in St. Louis."

"It's huge," I said.

"Wait'll you see the view."

The little car climbed real smooth, and the pretty one, and the not-so-pretty one, and especially Buzz remained quiet. You could feel the cable pulling us up the big curve inside the Arch. It beat hell out of roller coasters because it was something new.

"Get ready," the pretty one said. "We're coming to a stop."

"I don't think I'm going to like this," her friend said, and the pretty girl took her hand.

Buzz looked green. His head was flat against the top of the cage, and he must have felt every vibration.

"You okay, buddy?" I said.

"Wish I'd gone to see Mel Bay."

The car rocked to a stop. The sliding doors opened, and the girls got out first. I followed, and then Buzz managed to untangle himself. We climbed a short flight of stairs. At the top was a long, narrow room with a curved floor—the very top of the Arch—and on each side were little airplane windows. We followed the girls over the curved floor to the far end of the room.

I almost felt sick. You could feel the Arch swaying in the wind, and if you thought about it you knew you were suspended right up in the middle of nothing, with nothing underneath you but air. I never felt good about flying, either. The Arch was bad enough, but at least you could see something besides clouds, so you could get your balance if you didn't panic.

To the east, you could see across the Mississippi River to where the bus came in, East St. Louis. When the bus went through in broad daylight, there wasn't anybody on the street. Caldwell was like that, too—the jobs had dried up. Maybe there was work in Oklahoma. That was the rumor. Every man could find a job out in the gas fields or oil fields, and then maybe a year or two later you could land on a ranch.

"Well, what do you think?" I asked Buzz.

"Whoo-ee," he said. "Makes you proud." He pointed toward some rolling hills to the southeast. "That's a big country out there, Cal."

"I didn't know they still had steamboats," I said, finally getting the courage to look straight down at the river. The boats had Christmas lights that twinkled even in the daytime.

"Those steamboats are for tourists," the pretty girl said. "Come on, you guys should look out the other side."

We walked across the narrow room and looked down at the city. There was St. Louis as far as you could see. It made you wonder what New York was like.

"Did you guys ever see 'Meet Me in St. Louis'?" she said. "That's my favorite movie. Judy Garland sings about the World's Fair in St. Louis and how much she loves the city. You know, it's still a good place to be from, even if there is more violence."

Buzz said, "I hear America singing!" He raised his right forefinger in the air. "That's right, folks, I hear America singing." I thought he might start reciting the Gettysburg Address. "Being up here is like being in a radio tower. You can just feel all the songs flowing through you. Look out there to the east, that's where country music comes from. Down south you got the blues, and when you come over to this window you can see way past St. Louis. That's where cowboy songs come from. Man, I wish I had Sarah with me now so I could play a song right up here in the ol' St. Louis Arch."

"Who's Sarah?" the pretty girl said.

"You know, it's about time we introduced ourselves," I said. "I'm Calvin Dee, from Caldwell, Indiana, and this here's J.B. 'Buzz' Scanlon. Sarah's his guitar, and she's back at the Greyhound station."

"Where you from, J.B. 'Buzz'?" she said.

"Just Buzz, ma'am. From all over the place, but mostly from Gas City, North Carolina. I'm heading back that way."

"I'm going to Oklahoma," I said.

"That's where Woody Guthrie's from," Buzz said. "'This land is your land, this land is my land.'"

"I thought that was Will Rogers," I said.

"No, man, he's a fool. He's the one who said, 'I never met a man I didn't like.' Anybody who said that has got to be a fool."

"Oh," I said.

"Well, I'm Sylvie," the pretty girl said. "Come here, Ruth." She motioned to the girl who was still across the aisle, looking out the eastern windows. "She's a bit shy," Sylvie explained.

The plain girl walked over to us. She was too small for the camel-colored coat she wore, but it was the shiny red boots that made her look funny.

"This is my friend, Ruth Hatfield," Sylvie said. "She's just visiting from Tennessee. Knoxville, Tennessee."

"'The Beautiful Tennessee Waltz,'" Buzz said.

Ruth blushed.

"That's a song," he said.

"Why don't you girls join us for a coke?" I said. "There's a cafeteria downstairs."

"I know there is," Sylvie said. "I live here."

"I'm headed for Tennessee," Buzz said to Ruth. "Nashville, for the Grand Ol' Opry. I want to stand in the same place that Hank Williams stood. Sometimes I think I am Hank Williams, in fact. Other times I think I'm Jimmie Rodgers, or even Muddy Waters. I really want to go the Opry."

"That would be nice," Ruth said quietly.

"I went to Memphis once," I said, "to visit the King's grave. Graceland was really something."

"King who?" Ruth said.

"Tut," I said.

"He means Elvis," Sylvie said.

"That's right," I said. "How about that coke now?"

Buzz said to Ruth, "In fact, music is what makes America great. It's our only native art form—"

"If Ruth wants a coke," Sylvie said.

"I don't reckon it'll hurt anything," Ruth said.

The ride down through the long curve was not so bad as coming up. We walked away from the tram cars into a huge open space, an underground room beneath the Arch. It was like the inside of a pyramid. A twinkling Christmas tree stood near the doorway to the cafeteria. I was hungry enough to eat a horse.

"'Hallelujah, I'm a bum,'" Buzz said as he took a tray and started through the line. My stomach was grumbling as I followed Buzz. I took salisbury steak and mashed potatoes, a small dish of corn, and tapioca. I thought hard about the lemon meringue pie.

"Is that all you girls are having?" I said as I sat down. They had two cokes and an order of french fries between them.

"I didn't know you were going to have Christmas dinner a week early," Sylvie said.

"The Greyhound food gets pretty old," I said. "What do you mean you're a bum, Buzz?"

"That's a song," he said.

"Well, what do you do?" Sylvie said. "For a living?"

"I think of myself as a troubadour," Buzz said. "I like to ramble around and sing songs and remind people what a great country this used to be, back when Hank and Jimmie and Woody were on the road. When there were trains and people helped each other out—"

"But what do you do?" Sylvie said.

"Give him a chance," Ruth said.

"What I'm talking about is how America has lost its way," Buzz said. "It's still got mountains and rivers and—"

"Cities like St. Louis," Sylvie said.

"Sure, great cities," Buzz said, "but the spirit's been lost. We don't have people like Leadbelly anymore, or Sleepy John Estes, or Blind Lemon Jefferson—"

"What about Elvis?" I said.

"He's dead, too," Sylvie said.

"Yeah, but he just died a couple years ago."

"The electric guitar ruined America," Buzz said.

"I think he's right," Ruth said. "My momma played the dulcimer, my daddy played the banjo, but I don't play anything, and my brother doesn't play anything—"

"I like disco," Sylvie said. "But Elvis was okay."

The thing about Elvis, though, he never sang about anything you could relate to. He sang about hound dogs and crying in the chapel and things like that, but nothing you could relate to. That's why I think Buddy was the best. He knew what everybody was thinking. Like "True Love Ways," you can listen to that song over and over and you can relate it to any girl you ever cared about.

"Disco stinks," Buzz said. "I hate rock-and-roll. It's all for money."

"I like Fifties," I said. "I was born the same year Buddy Holly died in the plane crash, but he was still great. Did you ever hear 'Peggy Sue'?"

"I think so," Sylvie said.

I could hear the drums pounding away in my head. "That's when rock-and-roll started," I said. "It's still great today." Ruth was making noise with her straw. "You want another coke?" I asked.

"We've got to leave pretty soon," Sylvie said. "Some friends are coming over tonight."

"Who?" Ruth said.

"We're having a little party—"

"Oh," Ruth said.

"A little Christmas party."

"Well, one thing for sure," I said, "that Christmas music they pipe in everywhere is pure crap."

"That's not very nice," Ruth said.

"And another thing. All that talk about the old days—well, it's great right now. You can go to Oklahoma and get a job if you're willing to work. And rock-and-roll is here to stay—"

"Bzz," Buzz said.

"What?"

"I think I'm getting buzzed," he said.

"What are you talking about?"

"The buzzograph is going wild." He made a buzz sound, I think by putting his tongue directly behind his front teeth. He looked like Honest Abe making a face, but he sounded like an electric razor. "I get buzzed whenever I hear a lot of foolish talk. I wish you could hear yourself, Cal, you sound just like a teenager—"

"I'm twenty-three," I said, "but what the hell is a buzzograph?" This J.B. "Buzz" Scanlon was just too weird for words.

"It's a chart I keep on the wall back at the library—"

"What library?" Sylvie said.

"In Gas City," Buzz said. "Gas City, North Carolina."

"Oh, so you do work after all," she said, "like a normal human being."

"I wish you'd let him explain himself," Ruth said.

"I keep this graph paper on the wall at the library," Buzz said, "and every day I mark my buzz level with a black dot. Then I connect the dots with a line. I can tell how buzzed I've been for the last week by whether the chart goes up or down. I've been keeping it for ten years."

"Whoo-ee," I said, trying to sound like Buzz.

"The rise in my buzz level all through the Seventies corresponds to the decline in American life. Pollution and crime and greed—it's all right there on the buzzograph. And the increase in noise pollution, like those tape decks that teenagers carry everywhere—that's on the buzzograph, too."

"Well, you listen to me a minute, Buzz Scanlon," Sylvie said. All the time we sat there listening to Buzz, she'd been tapping her orange fingernails on the table like she might explode. I tried to imagine her tongue inside my mouth. "You can criticize America all you want," she continued, "and live in a world of make-believe, but this is still the best place on earth. I'm not talking about the Arch or even St. Louis. I mean the whole country."

"Bzz," Buzz said.

"Where else can a girl like me, who might be a secretary anywhere in the world, go to college with the dream of becoming the first woman president of the United States?"

"You know, Sylvie," Ruth said, "it's easier if your daddy owns a meat-packing plant."

"The meat-packing plant doesn't have anything to do with it. I've worked every single summer. Just because I was smart enough to major in political science—"

"I started college," I said, "but it wasn't for me. I don't like those people."

"Maybe I'm too hard on America," Buzz said. "I love America, I really do. It's just that—"

"It's time for us to be going," Sylvie said. "The guests will be arriving."

"Let's have another coke," I said.

"No, we have to go. Come on, Ruth."

And Sylvie stood up. I felt my heart drop. It wasn't only her looks—I felt like I understood Sylvie. Maybe I was a dreamer, too, even though I had to work in a man's world. I couldn't be president of

the United States. I wasn't smart enough. But I'd get a little ranch someday, down in Oklahoma, and I'd get a pretty little girl like Sylvie to pass the time of day. Who knows? She might even educate me.

"We'd sure appreciate it if you ladies would accompany us to the station," I said. "It's only a couple of blocks. You know, it gets mighty lonely at Christmas when you haven't got anybody to put you on the bus."

I watched as Ruth gave Sylvie a pleading look, like she really wanted to help us out, but Sylvie looked as determined to go home. Maybe Sylvie was still mad about all the crazy talk Buzz had laid on us.

"Sylvie," Ruth said softly, "I'm going to accompany these gentlemen to the bus station. It's the least we can do after such a nice afternoon."

"What about our company?" Sylvie said.

"They can just wait," Ruth said.

"I'm not so sure they can," Sylvie said. "I'm not so sure they can wait, Ruth."

Buzz said, "I'd sure like to introduce you ladies to Sarah, maybe play a tune for you. Just one or two tunes." He smiled at Sylvie. "It would really make my day."

"Well, I don't know," Sylvie said.

"Just one or two tunes," Ruth said. "Please, Sylvie. After all, it's Christmas."

"We'll only stay a half hour," Sylvie said.

We climbed the stairs from the underground room, where the twinkling Christmas tree seemed as small as ever, and when we got outside it was cold and the snow was dirty and the sun was starting to go down. You could look straight up, and it was like the arch of heaven itself was over your head. It looked even bigger now that we'd been to the top and swayed in the wind. And the orange sun made all kinds of reflections on the shiny aluminum curve. The colors just kept shifting the way Sylvie's personality must have shifted when she took hold of my hand.

We walked right through the downtown. People were hurrying here and there to do their last-minute shopping, and I lost track of the time. When we got to the station, I had only twenty minutes before the bus left for Oklahoma City. Buzz had almost an hour for the Nashville bus. The four of us sat together on a bench while Buzz played a tune on Sarah. It was called "Blue Moon of Kentucky."

Sylvie looked antsy, but I could tell that Ruth really enjoyed the music. She didn't seem as nervous as before, and there was a little smile on her face. Buzz played another country song. Then we stood to go to separate lines, because if you don't get in line at Christmas you get the worst seats, back where you can hear the toilet slosh.

So Buzz was going to Nashville, to the Opry, to figure out if he was Hank or Jimmie or Lefty Frizzell. He held hands with Ruth. I shook his other hand and wished him a good life. I said I hoped he got the buzzograph under control.

"Okay, Cal," he said. "And you be good. Maybe someday you can go visit the place where Woody Guthrie was born, in the Oklahoma hills."

Ruth said goodbye, too. "I'm sorry we didn't get to talk more," she said. "I get so shy I can hardly say what I mean. It makes me mad, Cal. But I wanted to tell you that I think you're going to do okay in Oklahoma. You've got a good level head." She leaned over to give me a hug, and I put my arm around her shoulders. I thought she might blush. "Just between you and me," she said, "I think you could be right about rock-and-roll. It's the music of today."

"I'm not so sure about that," Buzz said. He was about as grumpy a guy as I'd ever met.

"You just go have a good time in Oklahoma," Ruth said. She kissed me on the cheek, and I stared at her shiny red boots as she walked away with Buzz. They found a place to sit on the floor, in line for the Nashville bus. It looked like Buzz was strumming a few chords on Sarah, but I was too far away to hear.

Sylvie stood in line with me. She was all pink and gold. The cold weather had put color in her cheeks, and I just looked at her. She began to talk, maybe to loosen things up.

"I've never seen Ruth kiss anybody," she said.

Then she talked about this sorority that she was in, and all the girls who were her closest friends. I began to drift off. I wondered what Oklahoma would be like. Did you need experience to work on the oil rigs, or were there so many jobs you could just pick and choose? Of course, the only way to find out was to get on the bus and go.

The driver told people to get their tickets ready. I took hold of Sylvie's hand and told her that I wished she was going with me. I was probably out of my mind. Then I pressed myself close and kissed her. She kept her eyes open the whole time, even when I pulled back. I kissed her again. This time she stuck her tongue in my mouth. I'd heard about fast sorority girls, but I'd been waiting my entire life to be frenched by a complete stranger.

“Merry Christmas, Cal,” she said.

I knew she’d done me a favor. When I walked through the gate with my suitcase, I didn’t even turn around because I knew Sylvie would be gone. But I decided that if she ever became president, I’d look her up.

I didn’t have to sit back by the toilet after all, and I had a good view from my window seat as we left St. Louis. The Arch was all lit up. And then we rolled off into darkness. All you could see were the twinkling colored lights in houses along the interstate. I wondered if folks had put them there for people like me who had to be on the road during the holidays. Still, I figured that if I got to Oklahoma before New Year’s I’d have the jump on everyone else. And if I got time off from the oil rigs, or gas fields, or the ranch, I might travel on down to Lubbock, Texas, and visit the grave of Buddy Holly. Those songs were real for me. Maybe a girl like Sylvie wasn’t all that much different than Peggy Sue. You know, I wish I hadn’t quit on that electric guitar. I really loved to lose myself inside the music, but that goddamn Mel Bay Method just wasn’t getting me where I wanted to go.