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THE GOLDEN WEST TRIO PLUS ONE

By

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B.A., Stanford University, 1973

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

University of Montana

1987

Approved by



Chairman, Thesis Committee



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Table of Contents

DREAMS OF MY FATHER.....	1
MURPHY WATERS AND HIS BOILING BOYS.....	8
THE JAZZ MUTINY.....	30
THE GOLDEN WEST TRIO PLUS ONE.....	51

Dreams Of My Father

Last night I dreamed again about my father's return. But it wasn't the usual dream, the dream I have had many times.

In that dream I am at home again, home with my mother and stepfather. There is a warm Sunday, when I have little to do but work awhile in the yard with my stepfather, pruning the willows or the roses, and then sit on the patio with my mother in the heat of the afternoon, sipping a cool white drink from an egg-shaped glass. And there is early morning, just before dawn, when the three of us gather in the kitchen to sit quietly with our coffee, while the first pale blue light comes through the parted curtains and outlines the white table and chairs, and the profiles of our upturned faces, against the darkness.

I am at home, sharing this quiet life, when my father returns. And it is as if he has found us after a long and difficult journey, as if he has come back to the only place he can remember. He has come back to tell us, my mother and me, that there has been some mistake, that he isn't dead, he has only been kept away somewhere for this long time, that he is

here now and is here to stay, if we will have him. And I am always so glad at first.

I'm in the hallway that leads to the bedrooms when I first see him. He is walking with my mother, leaning on her arm and moving slowly toward me. For a moment I feel very calm. The scene is somehow natural and familiar. The hallway is full of shadows, but I can see my father clearly--his broad forehead, his tortoise-shell glasses. He is thin and pale. Suddenly I feel a flood of joy, and I run to him and throw my arms around his neck. It is as if I am a small boy again. His face is warm and leathery against my cheek. I press myself against him, and I hear him say my name softly. I am aware of my mother at his side, a foot shorter than he, looking tired and frightened, her hair mussed in front, her eyes swollen, just the way she used to look, in the evening, long ago, when she would help him to bed. But I don't think about that now. All I want is to be able to touch my father again.

My mother takes him into the kitchen, and I follow. I know that my stepfather is waiting there. The walls and floor of the kitchen are dark blue, and the only light is from a single fixture that hangs from the ceiling. The three of them stand beside the white table, motionless and silent, like strangers waiting under a streetlamp. My mother and father are no longer touching. My stepfather, tall and silver-haired, is standing apart

with something in his hand--a drink, perhaps. He turns and faces the window as if to look out, but when he pulls back the blue curtain, the glass is black. Outside the night is pitch dark. I stand there in the doorway, wishing I could think of something to say.

I am back in the hallway with my mother and father. My father insists that he doesn't need a bedroom. He doesn't want to be a bother, he says. He insists that he sleep on the floor. My mother tries to reassure him, but he won't listen to her. So she finds him his old orange quilt, the same one he used to carry around the house at night when he couldn't sleep. We would find him curled up in it in the morning, sometimes beneath the big window in the living room, sometimes beside the bookshelves. My mother produces from somewhere the thick orange quilt. He takes it from her, wraps it around his shoulders, and goes off slowly down the hall.

The four of us never eat together, in this dream. At one moment, I am having breakfast with my mother and stepfather. They both seem to be in a hurry to eat and quickly begin the day. The bright light is on overhead. In some other part of the house my father is asleep. I too am eager to finish my meal and leave quickly.

Then I am at the table with my mother and father. My mother serves us and then sits down across from us, but she eats nothing.

She tries to make conversation, but her face and her trembling hands give her away. She can't help watching my father's face as he eats, watching the corners of his eyes pinch together with each swallow.

My father keeps telling us, my mother and me, that he is a burden, that he shouldn't have come back, that he is only in the way of everything. He stops us in the hall, or outside the kitchen, and speaks to us in a whisper. We try to comfort him, to touch him, but he won't listen. He turns away and goes off alone.

Late at night I hear him moving through the house, bumping against the walls, knocking things over in the living room or in the kitchen. In the morning we find him curled up on the floor in his orange quilt, but even in sleep he can't remain still. There is always movement, jerking, twitching. Sometimes he rolls back and forth across the floor. My stepfather and I leave the house in the morning without bothering to eat. My mother follows us to the door in her bathrobe. As we go out I turn, and I see her look quickly away from us as she touches the back of her hand to her lips.

It is Sunday morning, and the house is silent. I am standing in the hallway. The door to my mother and stepfather's room is closed. There is an occasional noise, something in the walls or in the pipes, but I can hear no other sound. I walk

down the hallway. In the living room I can see a shaft of light, filled with swirling dust, shining at an angle from the window to the floor. My father, wrapped tightly in the orange quilt, is lying beneath the window against the wall. The shaft of light passes over him and produces a misshapen image of the window on the carpet. I step past him to the door, and go outside. The air is thick with heat. It must be close to midday, because nothing casts a shadow. I decide to work awhile on the rosebushes. But soon I find that there is no pleasure in working. I am too uncomfortable in the heat. I can't smell the roses, even up close, and they are nearly colorless in the glaring light of the sun. I stop to wipe my forehead, and I look up at the house. My father is standing at the window, bent at the waist, his hands gripping the windowsill. His face is the same milky yellow as the roses. I don't want to meet his eyes, and I look away.

Then it is evening, late, and my mother and stepfather and I are sitting at the kitchen table. I can see our three faces reflected in the shiny white table top, as if frozen beneath its surface. My stepfather is saying that things can't go on this way, it just isn't possible. His hand rests on my mother's. She too is looking at the table, and she says nothing. It's hard, I know, he says, but we really have no other choice. we will have to send him away.

And this is where the dream ends.

But last night's dream was completely new. They came to see

me here where I live now. My mother brought my father to see me. There was no explanation for his return. My stepfather was not with them, and there was no mention of him.

They surprised me when I was still in bed. I jumped up to greet them at the door and invite them inside. I felt nervous and uncomfortable. If I had known they were coming I could have prepared somehow, at least cleaned up a little. I was confused and unsure of myself, and something about my father--his manner, his face, his voice--was disturbing to me. The way they both were dressed was strange--my father in a suit and tie, and my mother in a dark dress and a hat with a piece of veil curving over her forehead. As I stood there awkwardly, unable to think of anything to say to them, I was aware that this scene was impossible and absurd. But at the same time I felt a terrible fear.

My father walked around the room looking at things, fingering the dust on the piano, kicking aside papers on the floor. He asked me what I had been up to. When I told him that I was a musician he made a sound low in his throat and turned away from me. With his hands clasped behind his back he said that he was disappointed to see the way I was living. He spoke in a strong, resonant voice, a voice I was sure I had never heard before.

Suddenly he whirled to face me. My mother looked up at him and put a hand lightly on his arm. His eyes glistened at me.

He said he was very sorry he had come. His voice was softer now, almost a whisper, and as he spoke one of his hands clenched into a fist at his side.

I felt angry and ashamed, and I began to tremble. But still I was unable to say anything. My mother and father stood facing me for another moment, and then they turned together silently and were gone. When I was alone I sat down on the edge of my bed, and the walls and floor seemed to press in against me. I closed my eyes and felt the floor becoming colder and colder against my bare feet, and I wanted to cry out. I knew I was dreaming, and I wanted to wake up.

And that was all this time.

I lay awake for awhile this morning, wondering if I was going to dream this new dream again, and thinking that I would like to visit my mother and stepfather again soon. It's been a long time since I've seen them.

And I thought about my father. Sometimes it's hard to remember, but I thought, as I have so many times, how different he was from these ghosts of him that come to me in dreams.

Murphy Waters And His Boiling Boys

This job isn't half as bad as it might look.

I usually wake at dawn to a breeze, a breeze so warm and salty I know it must be blowing in off the sea. And, as often as not, I'm treated to a spectacular sunrise.

Unless it rains during the night, which it rarely does, I keep my umbrella down so I can watch for shooting stars. My umbrella is yellow--a nice canary yellow--and when I unfurl it during the day they tell me it can be seen from a great distance. I always sleep on my back, so when I wake I merely have to scoot my sleeping bag a few inches, hang my head over the edge of my platform, and look straight out to the east. In this position I can take in mouthfuls of tangy air and relish the warmth of the blood rushing into my head, while I watch the sun slowly drop into the sky.

A beautiful sight--maybe the best view of the sunrise in the city. Anyway, it's good enough for me, which is all that counts. This morning, for instance, as the sun oozed orange and juicy out of the gray horizon, in my mind I could hear a fanfare in march rhythm with lots of brass on the backbeat--in the early style, along the lines of King Oliver's Dixie Syncopators.

As a matter of fact, as I lay there it occurred to me again how nice it would be to celebrate these sunrises, along with other important events,

with my trombone. But my wife refuses to send it up to me. She says that I'm liable to drop it, that if I really want my horn back I'll have to come down from here. She reminds me that it was my own decision to leave it behind.

Okay, okay. A person can change his mind, can't he?

* * *

"It's good enough for you and that's all that counts," Ruthy would say. "That's so typical of you, Murphy, you selfish bastard."

Naturally she wouldn't really call me a selfish bastard. But she would try to make me feel like one. She would lean forward without saying a word and, lifting my beret with two fingers, she would kiss me on the shiny top of my head. Then she would replace the beret at a careless angle, pat me on the cheek, and say, "Don't be silly, Murphy. I know you must be getting lonely and confused up here all by yourself."

But of course there is no way for her to know that. She has never been allowed up here. She has no special privileges. She must wait in line, like everyone else, to use the red telephone which has been installed at the base of my pole. And, even so, I am free to do what I want. I am under no obligation to listen to her, or to anyone.

* * *

Drop my trombone? Nothing could be more absurd.

If I dropped my trombone, it almost certainly would be dented beyond repair by its first impact with the street or sidewalk. Or run over,

crushed repeatedly, kicked about like a flimsy piece of yellow foil, by the trucks and buses and taxicabs that race back and forth on the busy avenue. Then picked up from the gutter, or from the shrubbery along the sidewalk, by one of the children who play every day in the park that borders the street--the same children who line up every afternoon to call me on the red telephone and ask me what I do up here all day and what happens when I have to go to the bathroom--and used, my poor broken horn, for a bugle in their childish war games. What a horrible thought.

* * *

"Murphy," Leo said to me one day, the day I asked him why we hadn't been paid in two weeks, "business is bad."

Leo's Lace-On-Thigh Lounge is my former place of employment. My long-time gig. From up here I can just barely see (with my binoculars) a piece of the alley in back.

"Business is so bad," he said, "I might have to close."

Close the Lace-On-Thigh? After all these years? I still shiver when I think about it. I tried to reason with him. I offered to make concessions. I said we'd drop the ten dollar request fee for When The Saints Go Marching In. But it was no use.

I looked over at the Boys, who were all sitting at the bar waiting for me. The Boys were going to be disappointed.

"But Leo," I said. "What about us? What about the music? And what about our fans, all those dedicated followers of traditional jazz?" I was trying every angle I could think of.

Leo gave me that look he's so famous for. "I'm sorry, Murphy." He shook his head. "I might try going with just the jukebox for awhile. Maybe a wide-screen TV." He shrugged his shoulders. "You and the Boys should find something else to tide you over."

And so it happened. Just like that. Murphy Waters and his Boiling Boys were out on the street.

* * *

"Ruthy," I said, "it's only temporary."

I did my best to explain.

After all, I could so easily have spent my afternoons on the living room couch, reading the Musician's Union magazine and rubbing Vaseline into my scalp. Instead I went out and found a job. And she refused to understand. She sounded just like those little boys in oversized baseball caps, and those little ponytailed girls, barefoot and giggling, who gather every day in their endless line: "What will you do up there all day long? Murphy, what happens when you have to go to the bathroom?"

I patiently explained all the details. I described the elaborate equipment, the expensive safety precautions, just as they had been explained to me. Just as they are, in fact.

But she didn't want to hear about it.

* * *

What do I do up here all day long? I think about Ruthy, for one thing.

We met one day a long time ago, beside an irrigation ditch. A summer

afternoon, a sweltering day, much like these recent humid afternoons I have spent in the quiet shade of my yellow umbrella. Heat waves rising from the pavement, blurring the senses. And me, not altogether awake at the wheel of my pickup truck. This was still in the days when I was willing to drive.

A wooded neighborhood, a hillside community of homes on stilts. I was taking a cruise in the country--the sort of thing I was apt to do back then--with an eye open for a new place to rent.

I swung around a corner, the way I remember, and caught a glimpse of her in mid-air, leaping into the bushes beside the road.

Quick stop, instinctive glance to the rear-view mirror--and there she was again, jumping across the narrow ditch that bordered the road, swinging in her upraised arm a big wooden-handled hammer. I got out of the truck and walked toward her, feeling neighborly. Hands on my hips, dark glasses removed, I watched her leap across the ditch again. Her target was a huge gnarled oak tree. She landed with her knees bent and weight forward, but there was no footing on the other side. The ditchbank was steep, with spidery tree roots dangling in thin air. Time for only one wild swipe with her hammer before her reverse leap back to my side of the ditch.

"Need a hand there?" I called out. Murphy the Boy Scout.

"Oh!" she cried, spinning around, losing her balance, and now she did need a hand, to keep from falling backwards into the ditch. "Thanks. You startled me. I'm trying to nail my sign to that stupid tree. I finally

got the nail started." And she laughed--a soft, soprano laugh. White shorts, blue teeshirt. Dark hair, long and damp, tips of her ears poking through. And there was something in that laugh, something so familiar, so close to my heart. I swear I heard it, even that very first time.

"Let me give it a try," I said. So I took her hammer, planted my feet firmly on the near bank, and fell forward across the ditch and against the tree. It wasn't all that much of a ditch, a couple of feet wide at the most. I was counting on being long enough to reach. At that angle I couldn't see the nail above my head, but I could hit it when she told me where to strike. A little left she shouted, between bursts of musical laughter. Now a little right. That's it!

"My name's Murphy," I said, back at last on level ground. And, feeling the hero, I actually tipped my hat. I lifted my beret and exposed my perspiring dome to her teenaged scrutiny for one split second.

"I'm Ruthy. Glad to meet you, Murphy." She laughed once more as she held out her hand. And suddenly I recognized that familiar sound. In her laughter I recognized the sweet dark-wood sound of a clarinet.

I can almost hear it right now. I can almost pick out the soft breath of a laughing clarinet among the sounds of the city, as I sit here cross-legged under my yellow umbrella.

The sign I nailed for her onto the tree that day read: BASEMENT ROOM FOR RENT.

* * *

I'm able to appreciate things up here.

I love the flavor of the air as it blows in off the distant sea. It's strongest in the mornings, but even in the heat of the afternoon I can feel it and smell it above the noise and smoke and hot blasts of wind that rise up to me from the streets.

I love watching the skyline come into view in the early morning, backlit and misty. When I breathe the bittersweet air and gaze at the line of buildings shimmering on the horizon, I sometimes think of the row of red and white boxes in the spicerack at home on the kitchen wall.

But I know a person can't have everything.

* * *

So I moved into her mother's basement. And one thing, as they say, led to another.

We would lie together in the dark, and with her whispered questions she would get me to talk about myself. I told her about my father the milkman and drummer, my mother the piano teacher, and my first trombone which I carried up to attic and painted red. Every other kid on the block had a dog and a baseball bat, but I had a red trombone.

As we lay there under my rose-patterned quilt, we would wonder what her mother would do if she caught us together, her poor enormous crippled mother who hobbled around overhead in a whirlpool of English terriers.

Her dream was to be a singer. She would come home from her guitar lessons in the evening and play and sing for her mother, and of course for me, her songs about dustbowls and riverbanks and rodeo riders, as we sat beside the fire with the dogs at our feet.

And I would go to great lengths to make her laugh. I would surprise her in the middle of the night, and she would have to roll over and press her face into the pillow so that her laughter wouldn't be heard upstairs. Then I would lean closer and whisper once more into her ear, and then turn my head to hear her better, to hear those clarinets.

* * *

"They're called Mountain Vale Realty," I said. "It's a publicity stunt. You know, a gimmick."

"You're out of your mind, Murphy." Ruthy was on the couch with her legs drawn up beneath her. "I have a perfectly good job at the typing service. I'm perfectly capable of supporting us both for a while."

I was cleaning my trombone that day, giving the brass a rubdown. I had met the fellows from Mountain View Realty the night before, down at the Lace-On-Thigh. Gig or no gig, I couldn't seem to stay away from the place. I knew this wasn't healthy. And now a real opportunity had come along.

"The whole thing just walked right up to me," I said. "How can I turn it down? Besides, it won't last forever, it's just a summer job. A month or so, maybe six weeks at the most. It's good money, Ruthy."

But she didn't want to listen to me. Her voice was cold, subdued. "You're out of your mind, Murphy."

* * *

Today is the red letter day I've been waiting for. Today everything

has finally fallen into place.

Even now, late into the night, I am practicing, loosening up with scales and arpeggios, testing my lip. My lungs, of course, aren't in the best of shape, my wind is weak. But it'll be there when I need it. I can hardly wait for morning to come.

Because today they brought my trombone. The Boys, bless their faithful hearts, smuggled it up to me.

"Boys," I said into the phone, as I peered over the edge of my platform with my binoculars. They were all down there. "Boys, it's good to see you. What have you got there?"

But I could see right away why they had come. They had a meeting with Leo down at the club, they said, and decided: Why not try to drum up a little business? Scare up a little action for the old Lace-On-Thigh. We would play in the park on certain afternoons, and on Friday and Saturday nights the Boys (without their leader, of course) would play at the club, for tips only. The idea was to attract a new audience. So they brought me my horn. If things started to pick up, they said, Leo just might hire us back.

"My trombone?" I said. "You brought my horn to me?"

And it was true. So I cranked my wicker basket down, I put my shoulder to the pulley's cast iron handle, and when I hauled it back up there was my simulated alligator case, and inside was my beautiful gleaming horn.

First we warmed up a little, the Boys and I, and then we got down to

business. We played our old theme song, Muskrat Ramble, and all the children in the park came gathering around, and I stood up and played my part from high above with the afternoon breeze at my back. I took it good and easy, I limbered up slowly. Standing with my feet wide apart and firmly planted on the slats of my wooden platform, I blew long lean notes against the waves of melody rising up to me. And we kept at it, Murphy above and the Boys below, until long after the blue mist of evening had settled into all the crevices of the city.

* * *

There is no way for me to describe the beauty of this morning. The subtle harmony of sight and sound. The modulation from dark and cool to rich and glowing, while the city slowly awakened to a soft wind from the far-away ocean.

I played whispering growls. I played bright clear tones with no vibrato. I played a single sustained high note. I played the Shepherd's Hymn from Beethoven's Sixth. But the most graceful and relaxed improviser was, of course, the rising sun itself. I was merely a poor bugler, a humble herald.

But I did my best.

* * *

Ruthy wasn't interested.

She stood in line, waited in the afternoon heat behind the weary young mothers with their squirming children, only to harrass me, to try to shake

me loose.

"I know what they did, Murphy," she said. "They stole it. They came in through a window while I was gone and stole your trombone. I suppose you're very proud of them. But Murphy," changing her tone, "I don't even care about that. I have something else to tell you."

She didn't want to hear. I tried to describe to her my newly discovered sense of joy. But she only interrupted me.

"Murphy," she said. "Listen to me. I'm pregnant."

Sometimes a person's memory plays tricks, I know. But this took place only this afternoon. I'm sure those were her exact words.

It was such a hot muggy day. Such a dizzying Saturday afternoon. I was so glad, at that particular moment, to be in the shade of my yellow umbrella.

Then she was crying. I could make out certain words. Love. Responsibility.

"Hush," I whispered into the phone. "We're not alone, Ruthy. We must be considerate of others. The children are waiting in line to talk to me, so many of them. Please Ruthy, you mustn't cry like that." And, in spite of the difficulty of that moment, I made sure to tell her that of course I cared, I did truly care about her, and about us.

Still, I just couldn't seem to make her understand.

* * *

It was long ago, soon after our wedding photos came back from the drugstore, that Ruthy first pointed out to me how I hate to look people

in the eye. "See for yourself," she said. "In all these pictures, every one of them, you're looking at the ground, or off to one side, or up in the air. You never once looked at the camera, Murphy."

Undeniably true. There I was, smoking my wedding cigar, looking otherwise jolly and confident in my beret and my rented tuxedo, and I was the only person who was not staring wide-eyed from the photographs. Posing with Ruthy, with Ruthy and her mother, with Ruthy and her mother and the dogs, with the entire party of guests and minister and tiered cake and raised champagne glasses, and it's true that in every snapshot my eyes were averted to some mystery out of the camera's view.

"You know something?" Ruthy said, as she pressed the pictures onto the sticky pages of her photo album. "You do that all the time. With people, I mean. Even when I talk to you, you don't like to look at me. My mother says the same thing."

Well, so what if I don't? That's what I always used to think. As a matter of fact, I still do.

* * *

Today I made yet another effort to explain. And I was only met with scorn.

"Ocean breeze?" she shouted, in a strident voice. "For God's sake, what are you talking about? Murphy," she yelled, and I had to pull the phone away from my ear, "there isn't any ocean around here!"

I looked over the edge of my platform. I could see Ruthy down there, her shoulder against the pole, her blue scarf fluttering in the gentle wind.

She hung up the phone and turned to walk away. Behind her, the line of children snaked out onto the dark green surface of the park.

And I wondered to myself: will I ever hear those clarinets again?

* * *

This morning, of all things--a letter.

My first piece of mail, delivered by the postman himself. He was in regulation uniform (white pith helmet, blue shirt, bermuda shorts, dark socks up to his knees, sensible shoes) and carried an enormous leather pouch over his shoulder. He dropped the letter, which turned out to be a picture postcard, into my basket and then picked up the telephone.

As he was dialing, he looked up. His dark glasses, I noticed with my binoculars, were the same style as my own--green lenses in brass frames. He had a handsome face, Caribbean-looking, especially in that helmet.

When I answered he said, "Mail for you, Mr. Waters," very business-like. Then he added, with a broad smile, "Keep on blowin', brother! Blow that bad trombone!" He hung up before I could say anything, and walked off with a definite musical bounce to his step.

I cranked up the basket and fished out the card. On the front was a photograph of Jack Teagarden singing at a recording session, with his trombone over his shoulder. My favorite picture of him. I turned it over. Dear Murphy it said, in her tidy handwriting, I want to ask you a big favor. The post office told me you could receive mail. Here's what I'm asking: Could I come and see you? I hate talking on the telephone, you know that. I just can't be myself. I want to have a real face-to-face

visit. No strings attached. We could have dinner or something. I'll bring everything. What do you think? I'll come by to get your answer.
Love, Ruthy.

Naturally my first thought was--what has she got up her sleeve? I read the card over and over again. I searched every line, I looked under every word, for hidden meaning, a tell-tale sign of trickery, the way I used to turn over big rocks when I was a kid to see what lived underneath. But I couldn't find a thing. The more I read her little proposal, her sweetly worded message, the more I found myself longing to see her.

I admit it--I made my mind up pretty quickly. Why not?

* * *

"Well," she said, "did you get my card?" She was looking up at me, speaking softly.

"Yes, I did." I wasn't quite ready to make a commitment. "The postman was a music appreciator."

"That's nice. You're starting to get pretty famous up there." A pause. "Well?"

I cleared my throat. "Your request has been considered," I said.

I focussed carefully. There was a smile on her face.

"I see," she said. "And has a decision been reached?"

"Yes." I watched her face. She was still smiling. "You can come up."

She let out a sigh, a loud exhale. I could almost feel her breath

in my ear. "Oh, good," she said. But then: "Murphy, are you sure you have room for two? I mean, it's afe and everything, isn't it?"

How like her to worry about that. "Of course," I said. "Of course it's safe. We'll have to be a little careful, that's all. There's plenty of room. As long as we're willing to be close together."

She laughed, and right away my heart began to beat a little faster. "Okay then. How about tomorrow? It's Saturday, and I don't have to work. I can come early."

"Tomorrow?" I said. "The Boys and I have to play."

"That's okay with me. I'd like to listen."

"It's a date then," I said. We said goodbye, and waved to each other. And that was that.

* * *

I've found that I can think better at night. Lying here on my back, with my umbrella folded up and the stars rotating overhead, this is when I like to do my remembering.

So, she came up. Yesterday Ruthy came up, she listened to our performance, we ate together, we even drank wine under these same stars. Ruthy was able to see the sunrise for herself this morning, to smell for herself the powerful salty breeze. And yet, as I ought to have foreseen, she brought with her a measure of confusion.

She came earlier than I expected--it was barely noon. After I cranked her up and helped her out of the harness-like contraption made for going up and down (unused, of course, since the day I arrived) she put down her

bulging picnic basket, and kissed me. Not on the top of the head, or even on the cheek, but right smack on the mouth. This, before I'd had a chance to brace myself. I had to make an effort to keep my balance, for both our sakes.

Then we sat down together, and she took out a paperback book and made herself comfortable, while I took an hour or so to talk to the children who had begun to form their patient line. There are more of them on Saturday than any other day. When I'd finished with the children (I've actually come to enjoy this chore--I'm amazed at how much delight can be evoked with a solo trombone version of Row Row Row Your Boat) we ate a relaxed lunch together, while down below the park filled up with more people. We enjoyed the fresh air and each other's company, just the way they were doing down there in the park--couples of all ages, with their blankets spread out on the grass.

The Boys arrived right on time and we gave our performance. The crowd of families and grandparents and loving couples was attentive, as usual, and gave us many rounds of warm applause. I think we did one of our better versions ever of Do You Know What It Means To Miss New Orleans. Ruthy put down her book and listened, and when we played Sweet Georgia Brown, her favorite, she even sang along, although it clearly wasn't her key.

When the crowd finally went home, we sat down together again, and as dusk gathered around us I poured some wine. Ruthy once again spread

out her checkered tablecloth, we toasted each other, and then ate our picnic supper, while the darkness gradually thickened and the lights of the city began to come alive. The night was clear, so I closed my umbrella and tied it up. Ruthy said she felt like we were on a boat far out at sea, and that I was furling up the sail so we could drift with the current. It wasn't tough to imagine.

* * *

Later on, inside my sleeping bag, our two eyes gazing up at the sky, Ruthy took my hand and put it onto her stomach, which was warm and bare.

"Do you feel?" she said.

For an answer, I began to rub gently. Then I rolled toward her, still rubbing with a circular motion of my palm, and very delicately stuck the tip of my nose in her ear. It's one of her most ticklish spots.

She began to laugh, and it was a long time before she could calm herself down. It was just the reaction I was hoping for.

* * *

In the morning, with the first hint of gray light, I got up quietly, unpacked my horn, and when the first thin orange line appeared along the skyline, I was ready.

I blew a dramatic fanfare in the style of John Phillip Sousa. Then I played a slow 2/4 march in the key of B Flat, as the sun--right on cue--began to fill the sky with color. Ruthy awoke, of course, and when she

saw me there, wearing only my beret, my dark glasses, and my trombone, her laughter began again. It rose up and mingled in perfect counterpoint. Down below, if you had passed by right then, you'd have marveled at the sound of our duet.

* * *

After breakfast, as she was packing up her basket, Ruthy held out to me a brown paper bag and said, "I almost forgot. I brought you a present."

I took it from her and looked inside. There was a small jar of Pond's cold cream, my favorite lubricant for my trombone slide.

"I didn't think you had any," she added.

I was truly touched at her thoughtfulness, so I avoided telling her that the Boys had already brought me an ample supply, enough for at least a year. The Boys always overdo things.

She picked up her picnic basket and went to the edge of the platform. She turned around, seated herself, buckled the safety belt, picked up the basket and placed it in her lap, and finally looked at me again. A change seemed to have come over her. Her face had gone blank. It was a look I would have to describe as completely atonal. "I'm ready to go now," she said.

I stepped over and took hold of the handle. A feeling of dread crept into me that I should have seen coming: I didn't want her to go. I tried to smile, and said, "I hope you can come again."

She looked at me for a long time. "Murphy," she said at last,

"a week from today, next Sunday, you will have been up here two months. If you didn't know that already, I'm telling you now. Murphy," and she slowed the tempo of her words ever so slightly, "I'm not going to come up this goddammed pole again. It's time for you to come down." And then her parting line, her coda: "Murphy, I don't know how much longer I can wait for you."

We kissed lightly, and then, since there didn't seem to be much else to do, I cranked her back down to the ground.

Can it really be two months already? It doesn't seem possible.

This is what I'm pondering, along with everything else she said, as I lie here looking up at the sky, salty with stars.

* * *

I never dreamed so many variations were possible. Today, this morning, there was fog. Damp and pungent, a fog that shrouded the dawn in a hundred tones of gray.

I played ascending minor scales in whole notes.

I played a stately Nearer My God To Thee.

I played a slow blues, and dedicated it to us, Ruthy and me.

* * *

The Boys were by again today. They came early, to deliver a message: Leo, it seems, is giving up. Despite the Boys having displayed their colorful hand-made sign down there on the grass so diligently, our little outdoor performances haven't had the hoped-for effect: nobody has been coming to the club. The Lace-On-Thigh Lounge is for sale.

The Boys are unhappy. They want to know if I can help them. They want me to try to get them some money for our afternoon performances in the park. After all, they said, they're helping to draw the crowds.

And certainly they are. Even today, a weekday, there were plenty of children and picnickers, and the Boys and I were able to keep them entertained all afternoon. I thought I took an especially nice solo on Twelfth Street Rag.

Sure, I said, I'd see what I could do.

After all we've been through together, I owe it to the Boys to try and help them out if I can.

* * *

I spoke to Ruthy this morning, very briefly. She told me that she meant what she said the other day. She didn't want to discuss it any more. She told me she would be back on Sunday, to welcome me down.

She didn't look up once.

She also mentioned that she is feeling fine, that she'd been to the doctor again, who told her that she's progressing normally.

Progressing normally. I like the sound of that.

* * *

Today--just a little while ago--a fellow was here from Mountain Vale Realty. The same fellow who originally offered me the job. He told me that our venture (that's what he called it, "our venture") had succeeded beyond all expectations. He said that the publicity had been excellent,

that my notoriety was spreading day by day. He was authorized to offer me an extended contract with a substantial raise. I brought up the point about the Boys. He agreed to include them in the contract and to pay them for three show a week, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday.

He said Mountain Vale Realty was prepared to make whatever modifications were necessary to insure my comfort and safety during the upcoming rainy season.

He also told me that the Guinness World Record is three hundred and ninety-nine days. Not counting St. Daniel of Syria, who lived on top of a stone pillar for thirty-three years.

* * *

This morning, as usual, I was up at dawn with my horn. I began with something simple, a quiet little four-note figure, which gradually grew into an extended improvisation in the key of F Major. I came up with some ideas that I tried out on the Boys in the afternoon, which they all liked. I think I'm finally getting back into shape.

Tonight I'm sitting on the edge of my platform, with my legs dangling over the side and my trombone resting in my lap. The city always did have a special feel to it on Saturday night. From up here the streets are a solid flow of red and white light. The sound of automobile horns, in a mysterious rhythm, is carried up to me by the wind.

Tomorrow, Sunday, the Boys will be here again to play in the afternoon. And after that, Ruthy will arrive.

She probably won't have much to say. She'll ask me if I'm coming

down, and then she'll tell me that she's prepared to move back up to her mother's. Her mother, no doubt, will be ready to welcome her. She'll look up at me, and through the lenses of my binoculars I'll be able to see her face as if she were right next to me. There will probably be streaks of tears. And I may hear the sound of her crying into the telephone. She'll want to know if I've become a total madman, if I've given up on the world completely, if I'm no longer interested in our life together, or in the new life we have created together. I'll have to concentrate hard just to keep my hands steady, so I can keep her in focus.

At a certain point earlier this evening, I even began packing. A feeling overtook me, something I hadn't felt since my very first unsteady days up here: How will I ever fill these long hours? How will I contend with the sadness of these solitary afternoons? But my dufflebag was only half full when I stopped. I picked up my trombone and sat down right here on the edge of my platform.

Tonight I have to clean my horn thoroughly, and grease the slide with a fresh coating of cold cream. Then I want to play along with the nighttime sounds of the city, to try blending my tone with the noise floating up from the Saturday night streets. I have to make sure that my lip is well warmed up for tomorrow, so I can be at my best. The Boys have come to expect it of me.

So when the sun comes up in the morning, I'll be right here waiting. Three hundred and ninety-nine days. Just think of it.

The Jazz Mutiny

The trial is set to begin on Tuesday. We're all planning to be there (as many as can fit in the courtroom, and the rest will maintain a vigil outside) because, for one thing, Bix is the counsel for the defense and Bix is definitely a dude we can count on, but mostly because the issue is such an important one and we want to show our support and solidarity, et cetera.

"There but for fortune go you or I," says Bix, at the meeting Sunday night in his downstairs rumpus room. "That's a corny old cliché, but it happens to be true." Somebody else says maybe that's why clichés stay around so long, because they're usually true, and then somebody else says that's just another corny old cliché, and finally Bix says, "Okay, okay, let's not worry about it, we're straying away from the business at hand."

Which we were. Bix is always right. Well, he's usually right. We're all filled with admiration for Bix, for the courageous stand he's taking, for his tremendous ability as a natural leader and his talent for thinking right through to the crux of a difficult and complicated situation. Sure, he has a temper, and what some people might call a drinking problem, and there are those--it takes all kinds, I guess--who seem to

make a big deal out of his passion for two-tone 1960 Cadillac convertibles (the ones with the rocketship fins) and his prize-winning Doberman pinschers. But by and large I don't think you can deny that Bix is one of the solidest citizens around when it comes to standing up for what he believes in.

Anyway, the boys have been locked up for two weeks without bail, which we all feel right there is a clear-cut violation of human rights. "Habeus Corpus," says Bix, looking up from behind the wet bar. Just the sound of his voice inspires confidence. "Unlawful restraint. I plan to use that straight off the bat." Then he drops to almost a whisper. "And I can tell you this much," he says. "Nobody has confessed to anything yet. Otherwise, they wouldn't have bothered with a trial."

He brings out a couple of twelve-packs and the chips and dip, and we all sit down to review the facts so far:

When the new hotel was practically still on the drawing board, the president of the Musician's Local (Johnny K.--the old Knucklebuster himself) was down there getting a signed contract. It called for a full-time thirty-piece orchestra for the big showroom, a dance band for the supper club, and a rotating pool of musicians to work the little casino lounge called the ZanziBar. Now, of course, the Union has refused to help. They say there is clear evidence that the musicians themselves violated the terms of their generously negotiated contract (Bix has the letter from National

Headquarters in his hand) and that the blatantly unprofessional behavior displayed by the members of our jurisdiction had undermined the very principles upon which the American Labor Movement was founded, fraternally yours, et cetera.

Everything went okay for the first couple of weeks after the hotel opened. The first sign of trouble was in the ZanziBar. The Clef Dwellers were getting ready to go off shift. The band on afternoon shift was always called the Clef Dwellers, no matter who was in it. You had to wear Aloha shirts and beach sandals, and your job was to play pop tunes and standards and requests for anyone sitting at the bar, which curved around at the foot of the stage. That particular week the Clef Dwellers were Mousey on drums, Stick on keyboards, Jenkins on bass--with Elaine on vocals, who was always a good sport. One afternoon, just for laughs, they played a quick version of "Radiation Burn" at the end of a set. Figured it wouldn't do any harm. After all, it was four o'clock in the middle of the day. There doesn't seem to be much agreement as to the audience's reaction--or if there even was an audience at that particular moment--but by the next day there were three new members of the Clef Dwellers (they left Elaine alone, since "Radiation Burn" hasn't got any lyrics), and by the end of the week there were suddenly these brand new municipal ordinances prohibiting things like excessive use of dissonance and syncopation in a public establishment. Nobody wanted to believe it at first, but it turned out to be the real McCoy.

Despite the new laws (or because of them, as Bix likes to say) little incidents kept occurring. There was the night somebody in the supper club band slipped an extra page into everybody's chart of "Wanda In The Moonlight," and suddenly right at the peak of the Friday night dinner crowd the whole band broke into the "Roadrunner Rag" at one hell of a tempo. They stayed together too, and got right back into "Wanda" without missing a beat. The hotel is claiming that several people fainted, and the rumor is that the prosecution has found witnesses who say that some guy got a piece of prime rib stuck in his throat and it was only some quick thinking that saved his life.

"Sensationalism," says Bix. "But if it holds up, it'll hurt us."

And of course there was the night, now famous, when the superstar Australian pop singer, who was headlining in the showroom, walked right off the stage in the middle of her opening night act, cancelling her sold-out three-week engagement right then and there. I had a good seat for this one, since I was in the sax section on alto and tenor. The money is great for this gig, I'll be the first to admit it, but with some of the stuff they make us play, I can't blame anybody for going off the deep end. Anyhow, the Australian singer was doing her medley of her greatest hits, which was supposed to be her big showstopper. The arrangements given to us by her

music director, who was also her husband, were the worst things you ever heard in your life--heavy on the violin glissandos. What happened is that the guitar player sort of decided to take matters into his own hands. Charley (also known as the Ostrich) is a monster on the guitar, one of the best around. He was supposed to get a two-bar break leading into a key change, but when his cue came around he launched into a string of at least a dozen choruses, and by the second or third one he had everybody with him (well, almost--the violins didn't know what to do) and the tune, whatever it was originally, had turned into a straight-ahead uptempo blues. The brass and reed sections started trading fours, and nobody even noticed (except the music director, of course, who had got up on the piano bench and was flapping his arms up and down completely out of rhythm) when the Australian singer gathered up the folds of her white sequined gown and stomped off the stage. The next day she was on the first plane for Australia. By Monday morning, nine musicians had been singled out as the ringleaders and were rounded up and booked on a couple of big mouthfuls of charges--Disturbing This, Inciting That, Conspiracy to Commit God-knows-what-all--and that was the last we saw of any of them.

"It's a mockery of justice," says Bix, before he sends us all home for the night. "But we'll fight it with everything we've got."

"Atta boy, Bix, we sure will," we all say. "We can't lose, it's in the bag." We aren't sure of anything, of course. But we have to keep our spirits up and give Bix all the support we can. After all, he's our only chance.

* * *

TUESDAY. The big day is here at last. Most of us have never even been in the courthouse before. White columns, thirty foot ceilings, statuary, fancy woodwork--it could pass for a hotel on the Strip. The courtroom is packed with spectators and reporters. The picketers and chanters are outside, marching back and forth on the sidewalk. It's supposed to hit ninety degrees later in the afternoon.

The jury was sworn in yesterday. They look like decent types, but Bix isn't happy. Only seven of them even own record players. "Remember, we're in Wayne Newton territory," he says. "We have to keep a sharp lookout."

The defendants are brought in, marching in single file. Gray prison uniforms, one size fits all. Bags under the eyes. Aloof expressions. Yawns. We all give the high sign and wave like mad. Somebody in back yells, "How's the food?" The Ostrich, a head taller than everybody else, looks our way. Thumbs down.

A loud voice tells us all to rise, and the judge comes in. Black robe, white hair, heavy brow--just what you'd expect. The same voice barks out the title of the case like a prize-fight announcer ("The State of Nevada vs. ...", listing all nine of their full legal names, which most of us have never heard before) then tells us to sit down. The judge bangs his gavel three times. Bix stands right up and moves that the case be dismissed, citing a whole list of solid and convincing reasons. The judge, without looking at Bix, fiddles with his earlobe. Motion denied. Our ace card! Bix doesn't even flinch.

The prosecutor makes his opening statement. Short, balding, tending toward the roly-poly. At first we're having a lot of fun snickering at him, but it turns out he has a nice voice. Somewhere between a tenor and a baritone. Every citizen, he says, must accept a solemn responsibility to respect and uphold the laws of society, which are all that stand between freedom and anarchy in our fragile world, blah blah blah. He goes on like that for awhile, occasionally turning toward the boys (defendants, that is) and pointing a pudgy little finger. He's right in the middle of one of his smooth, reasonable-sounding sentences, when all of a sudden Bix springs up out of his chair.

"That is an absolute crock!" he shouts, pounding the table in front of him with one of his big fists. Bix cuts an impressive figure, no getting around it. Six-foot-three in his socks, two hundred and twenty pounds. And he's at his charismatic best when he's mad. "With all due respect to the court," he says, in a voice they can probably hear across the street, "any ordinary idiot knows that a true artist can never be held down by a bunch of stupid arbitrary rules invented by a few selfish morons who have the money and power to get what they want just by making a few phone calls and greasing the right palms."

The crowd (our side of the gallery, anyway, which is about thirty of us) bursts into rousing applause, which continues for a time over the sound of the judge's gavel. This wasn't planned, so help me. We just couldn't help ourselves.

Finally we all quiet down, and for a minute the judge glares at Bix over the edge of his half-lens reading glasses. Then he turns to the jury and orders them to ignore the statement of the defense counsel. Bix's remarks are to be stricken from the record. He is ordered to refrain from any further such outbursts or he will be held in contempt. All spectators (the judge waves his pencil at us when he says this, and his voice jumps about an octave) will remain silent for the duration of the trial, or the courtroom will be cleared. Most of us find something to do for a second-- look at the gold filigree on the ceiling, retie our shoes, fiddle with our neckties.

Prosecutor completes his opening statement, pretty much along the same lines. Bix sits quietly with his hands folded on the table, and doesn't move a muscle.

Court adjourned for lunch.

Bix goes off by himself to a diner around the corner and won't let any of us near him. We all go to McDonald's and worry for an hour among ourselves, as if that's going to do any good.

After lunch, Bix makes his opening statement. Is he marvelous,

or what? His voice is hypnotizing, his every mannerism commands attention. He paces up and down before the jury box. At just the right moment, he whirls around to the jury and hits fist to palm, with a slap. There is a murmur of agreement from the crowd, but as soon as the judge reaches for his gavel we quiet right down.

Bix is wearing one of his new Italian suits with matching tie and handkerchief. His hair, pretty gray now but still nice and thick, is swept back from his high forehead. The famous nose is tanned a deep reddish brown.

He moves across the room, punctuating with expansive gestures, emphasizing with dramatic changes of inflection. He stands for a minute in front of the defendants' box, and when he talks about music being the purest expression of the human soul, you can feel a chill go right up your spine. Whoever would have thought of it like that? He crosses the room again slowly. Facing the jury with his arms spread out wide, he finishes his speech in a hushed voice. He talks about compassion, and freedom, and faith in the creative power of the human spirit--stuff like that. He bows his head when he's done, and it is all we can do to not give him a standing ovation.

Court adjourned.

WEDNESDAY. The prosecution makes its case. A parade of

witnesses. First the hotel owners, the four legendary Italian brothers, making an unprecedented public appearance together, who take the stand one by one and in quaint halting English tell exactly the same story: their lifelong dream had been to come to America and build a grand hotel in the tradition of true old-world hospitality, which would stand as a living memorial to the people of their tiny mountain village in the old country, from whom the four boys had learned the simple values of humility and honesty and hard work which have stood them in such good stead in their adopted land, on and on and on.

The four brothers are all tall and tanned and distinguished looking, and their silvery hair and rich melodious voices suggest (as Bix says) either the deep waters of their ancient Mediterranean homeland, or their deep and powerful Mafia connections, depending on your point of view. In his cross-examination Bix is ready to expose their associations with the underworld, using names, facts, figures, dates. Bix has really done his homework. But the prosecutor objects indignantly: "Who's on trial here, anyway?" Objection sustained.

A bartender gives an eyewitness account of the incident in the ZanziBar. He speaks in calm, measured tones ("Obviously well coached"--Bix). Everything seemed to be going just fine, he says, a normal afternoon at the bar, no problems, when all of a sudden there was this noise like a shot. He turned around to where the noise came from, and realized it was the drummer. ("Can you point him

out for us?" asks the prosecutor. The guy points at Mousey: "That's him, the one on the end, in the dark glasses." Mousey scratches his nose, examines his fingernails.) And then--the witness continues--the rest of the band came in with this new song, if you want to call it that. Bix objects. Overruled. The guy goes on: He was loading up a tray of Margueritas for the waitress to take over to a bunch of elderly ladies who had just gotten off the bus, and a whole lot of good tequila ended up soaking into the carpet. And some nice glassware was smashed to smithereens. Never in his entire life, he tells the prosecutor, has he heard anything as horrible as the racket coming from that stage. Bix objects: Is the witness a bartender or a music critic? Overruled.

The cocktail waitress corroborates his story. She claims that at least three people got up from the bar and ran out holding their ears and screaming. The prosecutor asks her to describe for the court, in her own words, what the new song the band was playing sounded like. Bix objects. Overruled. It sounded like an automobile accident, she says. Bix on his feet again: "Who paid you to say that, sister?" Objection. Sustained. Stricken from the record. Another warning from the judge. One more outburst and Bix is out the door.

Testimony resumes. The man who choked on a piece of prime rib in the supper club takes the stand. He describes vividly the terrifying sensation of strangling. His life, he says, was

actually passing before his eyes. Bix lets out a loud groan, but somehow manages to turn it into a convincing cough. A close call.

The man's wife, a busboy, a man who had been at the next table, and the waiter who is credited with saving the man's life by performing the Heimlich Maneuver on him in the nick of time, all agree on the essential details: first he clutched at his throat, then pointed at his open mouth, and finally he was beginning to turn blue. This frightening sequence of events began at the precise moment that the band suddenly changed tempo. They all remember this perfectly.

A highly respected ear, nose, and throat specialist is then put on the stand. He explains that a sudden noise from an unexpected source could certainly produce enough of a shock to make the throat muscles constrict in the act of swallowing a piece of meat, causing it to become trapped in the esophagus.

"Perhaps a noise something like this?" asks the prosecutor, dropping the needle of a portable phonograph, which he has wheeled into the center of the room, onto Louis Armstrong's classic 1932 recording of "Roadrunner Rag." As luck would have it, the needle lands right in the middle of Louis's famous sixteen-bar sustained high C. The volume must have been turned all the way up. The witness covers his ears and makes a terrible contorted face, as does the judge, along with several members of the jury. Yes,

the doctor eventually answers, that could certainly do it. We have to admit, even way in the back, at that volume old Satchmo--bless his heart--even managed to set our teeth on edge. Bix objects, in a tired voice. Overruled.

Finally, the last witness is called. He is a representative from the office of the personal manager of the superstar Australian singer. The tension can be felt in the room as he reads a brief statement, signed by the singer herself, to the effect that never before in her professional career has she felt so humiliated, so outraged, or so deeply shocked by the conduct of any fellow performer, and she hopes that the court will recognize her heartfelt sincerity when she says that never in her wildest dreams had she imagined that there could even exist such a disrespectful bunch of barbarians with the unmitigated gall to call themselves professional musicians, et cetera.

This testimony seems to have a definite effect on the jury--judging by the way they are looking at the defendants. We all agree how unfortunate it is that just last night, on nationwide television, the Australian singer received four Grammy awards, including Entertainer Of The Year. Some things in this world, as Bix says, are not meant to be understood.

Naturally Bix cross-examines all these witnesses, pointing up the weaknesses in their testimony and the gaping holes in the prosecution's argument. Despite the prosecutor's numerous

objections (all sustained) Bix is still able to prove--or so it seems to all of us--that not one of these people would even know what music was if it walked up and bit him in the ass.

On the other hand, to be completely honest, we do have to admit that some damage has been done.

Prosecution rests its case. Court adjourned.

Later on we all gather up at Bix's house. We bring wine, beer, a few joints--no big deal, we just want to try to give him a little boost, show him that we care. But after an hour he sends us all home. He says he has to prepare his case for tomorrow. He seems quiet, preoccupied. Definitely not himself. We're all worried about him. But there doesn't seem to be anything we can do.

THURSDAY. We can't believe it! Bix looks refreshed, confident. Nobody has seen him grinning like that since one of his dogs took a Best Of Show last year up in Reno. The judge calls us to order, then tells Bix to present his first witness. We're ready to taste blood. Go for the jugular, Bix! Bix stands up. "Your Honor," he says, throwing his arms wide apart, "I have no witnesses to call." A gasp from the crowd. What does he think he's doing?

"Your Honor," he says, and then turning and bowing toward

the jury, "ladies and gentlemen, I beg your patience for a few moments. I have decided to let the defendants present their own case."

Everyone watches in silence as Bix makes the prosecutor get up, and the court reporter, and everybody else in the middle of the room. He pushes the tables and chairs over closer to the jury box. "I think the sound will be better over here," he says. Then, from a door behind the witness stand, a troop of policemen emerge pushing carts piled high with instrument cases, a set of drums, a string bass--even a piano. Extra guards are positioned around the room as the defendants suddenly come alive, moving out onto the floor, unpacking their cases, swabbing out horns, tuning up. The prosecutor finally rises to object, red in the face, but before he can say anything Bix pushes him back into his seat with one hand. "Oh, just shut up and relax," he says.

The boys gather around the bass and drums and piano, and all of a sudden it dawns on us that the nine of them just happen to make up an ideal small band. Rhythm section with guitar, three saxes, a trombone, and a trumpet. Until this moment it never occurred to any of us.

The boys warm up slowly, playing a little blues. testing things out. You can tell they're rusty--sitting around in jail isn't going to do anything for a person's chops. But

pretty soon there's some spirit in the air, they get a good little groove going. The high-ceilinged room turns out to have a nice bright sound. They run through several short tunes, mostly standards, tunes you hear everyday in elevators. And then Mousey (he's always been one of my favorite wise guys) hits one of his patented rim shots which means Listen up, you guys, and gives a hellaciously fast count-off into another blues. Now they've finally got something going. It turns into a beautiful improvised arrangement, with some nice ensemble work underneath the solos. By now the rest of us are tapping our toes and clapping along. You'd have to be deaf not to.

Suddenly they cut to just the piano and bass, and there, out of nowhere, is Bix, stepping out around the judge's platform, and damned if he hasn't got his clarinet! We'd seen him opening up his briefcase, but nobody paid much attention. Bix with his old clarinet! None of us have heard him play in years. When some of us were kids we used to sneak in when the Blue Clouds of Rhythm were doing regular Saturday nights down at the old Rooster Club. That was probably Bix's last real gig.

He sucks on his reed for a minute and then stands up straight and blows, slurring a chromatic scale upward, way up high, and then hangs up there on one note for a couple of bars, with a sweet vibrato. Then he plays five or six choruses over some punches and swells from the band, his feet wide apart,

one alligator shoe tapping steady time on the black and white linoleum. His face turns red as a tomato, but he's still got the old wind when he needs it. By the time he finishes and they wrap up the tune with a thirty-two bar drum break and a final turnaround, the whole room--well, our whole end of it, anyway--is shouting and stomping along, and with the last note we can't help erupting into wild applause and jumping out of our seats, courtroom or no courtroom. Bix opens his mouth for a couple of deep breaths, and then he indicates that he rests his case by simply turning first to the judge, then to the jury, and giving a slow and graceful bow.

The judge bangs for awhile with his gavel, but we haven't got any reason that we can see to shut up now, so we don't. Bix must have been up late last night, and early this morning, blowing the cobwebs out of his horn. We're all so proud of him. We keep on whistling and waving and clapping, as the boys (the defendants, I mean) all gather around him and one by one give him a big hug.

The judge is yelling something about giving final instructions to the jury, but nobody can really hear him, and at last he pounds with his gavel one final time, and steps down from his high seat. Court adjourned until tomorrow morning.

FRIDAY. Everybody's a little bleary-eyed (some of us ended up partying downtown most of the night), but we're all there at

eight a.m. sharp, right on time. The room is very quiet. When the judge comes in and raps his gavel the sound seems to reverberate for a long time. It's hard to believe that just yesterday Bix and the boys were rocking the chandeliers in this place. The judge puts down his gavel. He looks at the defendants, at Bix, and then at the jury, all the while tapping with the eraser-end of his pencil on a yellow legal pad, in no particular rhythm. We're expecting him to say something important--chew us out for being so rowdy, or throw the book at Bix, or charge the boys with more crimes, or hold the whole solar system in contempt of court, or something. But all he does finally is take off his glasses and wag them at the prosecutor, as a signal to get going.

The prosecutor gets up and makes his closing statement: shemeful abuse of a court of law, a clear demonstration of total irresponsibility, a cheap grandstanding maneuver, et cetera, et cetera. He covers all the bases. Then it's Bix's turn. He walks over to the jury, stands squarely in front of them, and then simply thanks them for being such a nice audience. A class act. Then the judge gives his final instructions to the jury (reminding them that their decision must be based solely on the facts as demonstrated by the evidence), the jury retires, the judge raps his gavel, and that's it, the whole ball of wax. So there we are, standing around wondering where to

go for a cup of coffee, when a familiar voice at the front of the room announces that the jury is returning with a verdict. It's only been five minutes.

Once everyone is back in place, the defendants are told to stand up. The boys get up slowly. They don't look like they've had any breakfast either. The foreman of the jury hands a slip of paper to the bailiff, who gives it to the judge, who hands it back to the bailiff, who hands it back to the foreman. I've got my eye on Bix. He's sitting very straight, both hands gripping the edge of the table in front of him. The foreman reads: guilty on all counts. So, big surprise.

Bix's hands cover his face and his head drops forward, and we know it's time to move. The whole room is in a ruckus, but a bunch of us fight our way over to Bix and crowd around him, as close as we can get. There's no need to worry about the boys right now. They know how to make fast transitions, it's what they're good at. But Bix is another story. We all start talking at once: "You played your ass off, Bix. You blew the roof right off this joint. It was the only thing to do." Flashbulbs are flashing, microphones poking in. Arms reach in from every direction trying to grab Bix. We pull him out of his seat and start to escort him out. People are shouting, the aisles are packed with bodies, we have to shove. I look over my shoulder on the way out, and I can see

the boys being led from the room. They've got their arms around each other. Some of them are even waving to the cameras.

It's Bix who's taking this whole thing too hard. Through the hall, out the door, down the steps, we keep talking to him, trying to calm him down. "It'll be okay, Bix. You did everything you could." He's going completely to pieces--tears, the whole works--and we just hate to see him so upset, after all he's done for us. We get him in his car, with the top down for some fresh air, and we drive him home, and the whole time we're trying to think of things to say. "Maybe the boys could have done a little more to help, Bix. They could've shaved maybe, or gone to the barber. They have barbers in the slammer, don't they? They looked like a bunch of junkies. That's no way to be in a court of law, for crying out loud." It seems like you'll say almost anything when you're trying to make a person feel better.

We'll stay with him the rest of the day, and probably through the night too, until he gets a good grip on himself. Some of us have to leave for awhile--we've got gigs to play tonight. But we'll be back, and we'll stick by him and see him through. It's been so long since Bix was on the bandstand, he just forgot what to expect. A person has to remember how to take these things in stride. There's an old saying in this business: You can get people to listen, but you never know what they're really going to hear. It's the truth, too.

Come to think of it, Bix is the one who's always saying

that. We're just going to have to remind him.

Sentencing is Monday. We'll all be there in full force.
And so will Bix. He'll be back to his old self again in no
time. You just wait and see.

The Golden West Trio Plus One

"Most people think Buck Owens has a harelip," the woman is saying, "but that's no harelip, it's a scar, and Lyle here is the one who gave it to him. The jerk made a pass at me, and Lyle hit him right here and caught him with his high school ring." She taps just below her nose.

I had said Buck Owens off the top of my head, when she asked me what country singers I liked. Ever since I'm sleeping alone again, I've been keeping my clock radio tuned to this one station up in Oakland that plays country oldies from nine to noon every morning. Today I happened to wake up to Buck Owens and His Buckeroos doing "Act Naturally." If I'd really thought about it, I'd have said somebody else. Merle Haggard, maybe. I was just trying to make conversation.

The woman, Kay, is on the couch across from me. Their daughter, Little Kay, is at the other end of the couch, watching some game show with no sound. Her mother got up and turned it down when I first came in. Lyle is over to one side of us, almost in the other room, bent forward in a wooden chair he pulled out from their dining room table. He has his fiddle in his lap and is wiping down the strings with a white terry cloth towel. Lyle has hardly said a word since I came in the house. I'm sure he's going to look up when Kay says that about Buck Owens, but he doesn't.

I'm there answering an ad for a guitar player that they posted at the music store. On the phone Kay told me it was a steady weekend gig for good money, but they had to hear me play first. My guitar case is right here

next to my chair, I've been sitting around for twenty minutes, and so far nobody has said another word about the gig.

For such a small person, the woman has a powerful voice.

"You see him now," she says, "the big star of 'Hee-Haw', sitting there in his designer overalls with his red, white, and blue guitar, you probably think he's just another good old boy with a good old fashioned American harelip. Well, I'm here to tell you he's just another two-bit jerk who needed to learn his manners the hard way." She takes a drag on her cigarette and with the other hand holds out the bag of potato chips. "Here, take a few. You look like you need some carbohydrates."

"No thanks," I say, but when she shakes the bag at me I take it anyway. I pull out one chip and pass the bag over to the daughter. Little Kay looks to me to be about sixteen. Her legs are folded up beneath her, and she's wearing a red teeshirt pulled down over her knees. She takes the bag from me, reaches in for a fistful of chips, and passes the bag to her mother, all without taking her eyes off the TV screen.

"We were working up in Reno at the time," Kay goes on. "It must be twenty-five years ago, wouldn't you say, Lyle?"

Lyle finally looks up. He has thick glasses with heavy black frames, and he's wearing a fake-looking hairpiece that covers most of his head. It isn't a good match with what's left of his own hair, which sticks out in little tufts around his ears and at the back of his neck, and is a lot grayer.

"That's right, Kay," he says in a gentle voice, and then he goes right back to cleaning his strings.

I lean forward in my chair, with the idea of bringing up the subject

of why I'm here, when suddenly Kay is pointing her finger at me. Her eyes, which are deep and black, have opened up even wider. There are dark crescent-shaped creases in her cheeks.

"You ever been to Reno?"

"Reno?" I say. "Yeah, sure, plenty of times."

She gives me a sharp stare, as if she doesn't believe me. "Reno was nothing back then. Just a bunch of dives. We were working the Riverside Hotel, switching off every other hour with Mr. Big Shot Buck Owens and his quartet. He was nobody. Just another hick. One night he sneaks up on me backstage and starts to put on the moves. It was tough being a girl in those days, let me tell you. Every yokel who knew two guitar chords thought he was the next Cassanova. So there I am fighting him off, trying not to get my makeup all smeared, when along comes Lyle and pow!"--she slaps her palm with her fist--"right in the kisser."

I take it as a cue to look over at Lyle again, but he goes right on cleaning his fiddle strings. Meanwhile Little Kay claps both hands over her mouth trying to stifle a giggling fit. Kay spins around on the couch, and the tone of her voice makes me grab both arms of my chair. "What did I say about minding your manners, young lady?"

I hear a throat clear close by on my right. I turn and there's Lyle, who has brought his chair up right next to mine. From this close I can see that his glasses are bifocals.

"Well," he says. He scratches his ear, looks down at the floor for a second, then back at me. "What did you say your name was?"

"It's Carl," I say.

"His name is Carl, and he plays guitar, and he's been waiting half the

night for you Lyle, and so have the rest of us." Kay uses the same tone she had just used with Little Kay.

Lyle doesn't act as if he has heard her. He gives me a little smile.

"The thing is, Carl, Kay and I want to get the trip back together again. Not to go on the road or anything like that." He chuckles to himself. "Just as a family thing." He nods toward his wife and daughter. "Kay's been teaching Little Kay some songs, and we thought it might be fun to go out and play somewhere. It's sure been an awful long time. I've got my own business now, and it just doesn't give us much chance." He makes a broad stroke in the air with his fiddle bow. "I run my own striping business."

"Striping?" I say. I realize I'm still gripping the arms of my chair. But I know now I've already missed my chance for a quick getaway.

Lyle gestures with his bow again, in a criss-cross pattern above the carpet. "I paint stripes on parking lots. There's pretty good money in it."

"Oh, for God's sake, Lyle, he doesn't want to hear about that." Kay has jumped up from the couch. "Let's get down to business before we bore him to death. Carl came over here to play, so let's play. I'll be right back. You guys get yourselves tuned up." She's walking out of the room as she talks.

The easiest thing now seems to be to go through the motions. I unpack my guitar, glad to have something to do, and while I'm getting it out Lyle leans over and winks at me. "Don't let her scare you," he says. "She's not as mean as she looks."

Over on the couch Little Kay snickers again. She turns her head for the

first time. She's got the same dark eyes as her mother. "If you want to know," she says, "the whole idea behind this is to try to keep me out of trouble."

"Now Little Kay." Lyle wags his bow at her. "That just isn't true. "You know we just want to have some fun together, that's all."

She turns right back to the TV.

Lyle is still smiling. "Play me a G chord there, Carl." I play him the chord, and he pulls his fiddle up to his chin and strokes a beautiful little lick, very bluesy. And right away I start to feel better about all this. He lifts his bow off the strings. "Sounds like we're in pretty good tune to me," he says, and I'm about to agree with him when Kay comes back into the room. She's carrying a full-sized stand-up bass, gripping it tight around the middle with both arms. She stops in the center of the room, next to me, and sets it down with a grunt.

"God," she says, "This thing gets heavier every day." Then to me: "What are you staring at? You never saw a lady with a doghouse bass before?" Then to Lyle: "Come on, Lyle, give me some notes so I can tune this monster up."

The three of us do a version of "Hey Good Lookin'". Kay plays bass in the old slap-rhythm style, hitting her palm against the fingerboard on the upbeats between each note. She closes her eyes and keeps her head tilted back while she sings. Considering the size of their living room, she sings a lot louder than she needs to. She's got that shrill Kitty Wells sound, the type of voice you don't hear much of anymore. When she finishes the second verse, she looks over her shoulder and without missing a beat shouts, "Get over here, Little Kay."

Little Kay unfolds herself from the couch and comes over. With the bag of potato chips in her hand she sings along on the chorus, trying to do a high harmony with her mother, but she really isn't in tune. Not even close. I keep expecting Kay to stop and chew her out for not getting it right or for not trying hard enough, but she never does, and we play right on through. Lyle and I each take a little solo break. His playing is pretty loose, but it's easy enough to hear that he must have been a fine fiddle player when his chops were in good shape.

When we finish Lyle says to me, "Say, that was a sweet break you did there, Carl. Not too psychedelic, if you know what I mean. A lot of guys these days, they act like they're getting paid by the note."

"Thanks," I say. "You played some nice stuff too, Lyle."

Little Kay goes back to the couch, and Kay stands with the bass leaning against her hip, looking back and forth at Lyle and me.

"When you two are done complimenting each other, maybe we can get around to talking business." She reaches over and pokes me hard in the shoulder, as if I'm not paying enough attention. "We told you we had work, and that was no baloney. Go on, Lyle, tell him about it."

"Well," says Lyle, scratching the back of his head, right about at the line of his hairpiece. "I've got this friend who owns one of those Straw Hat Pizza Parlors, just up the road here in San Jose. I did his parking lot for him last year. Anyway, he wants some live music for the weekends, something a family-type crowd can enjoy. Not too loud, not too weird." There's a snort from over on the couch, but this time none of us look over there. "It seems like the right place for us to try out the old trio again. But we need a guy who can play nice tasty guitar on these old tunes. Sixty bucks

a night, and free beer. What do you say?"

I feel another jab on my shoulder.

"You got a white shirt, with pearl snaps?"

"Yeah, I do," I say.

"And some dark slacks, nice and conservative?"

I look over at Lyle. "What are you going to call the group?" I'm not really dying to know. I'm just stalling for a little time.

Lyle and Kay exchange a glance.

"The Golden West Trio," he says, smiling again. "It's the name we always used in the old days."

Something along the lines of common sense is telling me to stay clear of this one. But the fact is I can use the money. For weeks now all I've done is sit around the house playing along with records.

Kay is looking over her shoulder at Little Kay, who is curled up again in front of the silent TV. When she turns back to me her eyes have that same fierce look as when she first handed me the potato chips.

"The Golden West Trio Plus One," she says. "So, are you in or out?"

* * *

The pizza parlor is a long narrow room with about twenty wooden tables set in two rows. The stage is at one end. The waitresses are all wearing red and white striped outfits and little flat hats made of styrofoam instead of straw. A movie screen is on one of the long side walls. They show old black and white silent movies continuously, even while we're on the bandstand.

It's our first break of the night, and I'm having a beer. Kay and

Lyle are over at another table, talking about songs for the next set. Little Kay is across the table from me, sitting sideways on the bench with her legs crossed Indian-style, drinking Diet Coke from a quart-sized paper cup. She and her mother are wearing identical outfits--short turquoise skirts with fringe, white blouses with puffy long sleeves, and white boots almost up to their knees. Kay made the skirts and blouses herself, as well as the turquoise and gold vests Lyle and I have on with our white shirts and bolo ties.

The first set went pretty well. Kay and Lyle know every old waltz and country-western tearjerker--Hank Williams and Ernest Tubb and Patsy Cline. They hardly bother with anything written after about 1965. On every tune Lyle does a snappy fiddle intro that clues me into the tempo, and if I don't pick up what key it's in right away he'll lean over and tell me while Kay is doing her standard walk-in lick on the bass. I try to play something compatible underneath Lyle for a few bars, maybe even a harmony line if I can come up with it fast enough, and then Kay rears back and belts out the song. She and Lyle don't even have to look at each other to keep the tunes flowing. I doubt if anyone can tell we haven't rehearsed. Little Kay has sung on only one tune so far, which is fine with me.

She turns toward me. All I can see of her face are her eyes above the lip of the red and white paper cup. Suddenly she slaps her cup on the table, bouncing out a couple of ice cubes. She makes a face at me, bulging out her cheeks. For a second I think she's about to spit, and then I realize she's just sucking on some ice. She rolls her eyes.

"This is a total drag, don't you think?" She bounces the ice cubes back and forth in her mouth.

I look around the room. There are about twenty people at the tables, mostly families with kids, and everybody is eating pizza and watching the movies.

"Oh, I don't know," I say. "It'll probably pick up later."

"No, it won't. Nobody comes in here. I wouldn't be caught dead in here."

She has a way of looking at you--just like her mother--that makes you think twice before you say anything.

"How can you stand to play this stupid corny music? I mean, you're a guitar player."

"I don't really mind it," I say. "I kind of like it. Your dad's a damn good musician, you know."

"Oh, come off it. How old are you anyway, Carl? Thirty? Forty?" She starts to laugh. "Fifty?"

I try to stare back at her. But I know I can't keep it up for long. "I'm thirty-four." I reach for my beer.

"How come you don't have your own band?"

"I used to." I might as well answer her next question in advance. "I got a little sick of travelling."

She raises her eyebrows. "What kind of band? A rock band? You don't look like the type to me."

Now it's my turn to laugh. Her idea of a rock band is probably four twelve-year-olds with filed teeth. "Sort of. Rock and roll, anyway. And rhythm and blues."

"Hey, you mean like B.B. King? He's pretty cool for an old guy."

I shrug. "Yeah, that's the idea."

She tilts her head sideways. "So are you married, or what?" She starts chewing on the lip of her cup.

"I used to be." I try for a tone of voice that'll cut the subject short.

"Divorced, huh? How long ago? Was it before your band split up?"

I take a gulp of my beer. It's starting to go flat.

"Come on, Carl. It's good for you to talk about it. What was her name?"

I take another drink, then have a nice long look at my watch.

"Okay, be that way," she says. I'm thinking maybe she's about to get up and leave, but suddenly she smiles. "Alright, I'm being nosy. I'm sorry."

She pours some more ice cubes into her mouth, slurps them around for awhile, and spits a couple of them back into her cup. She looks at me again.

"You know why they're doing this to me, don't you?"

It seems like another good time to not say anything.

"Well, I'll tell you why. They're doing this to keep me out of trouble."

She leans closer. "They're doing this to keep me off the streets." She's speaking in an exaggerated whisper. "I'm a very bad girl."

Her head snaps back as she bursts out giggling. She has to grab the edge of the table to keep from slipping off the bench.

"They think I'm a juvenile delinquent," she says. "I have boyfriends, and I ride around in cars and smoke pot. I've been kicked out of school once already. So they got this idea for a family band. The trouble is I don't have a microgram of talent. The other trouble is ~~this~~ band stuff starts reminding them how wild and stupid they were when they were young. And that makes them even more paranoid about me."

She stares at me again. I have the feeling she's waiting to see whose side I'm on.

"Her name was Rhonda," I say. This even takes me by surprise--not that the thought came up, but that I suddenly decided to tell her.

She gives me another smile. Then she winks. It's the first thing she's done that reminds me of Lyle. "Rhonda, huh? What a crazy name. So who left who?"

I could very easily keep my mouth shut again. I'm not sure why I don't.

"She met somebody while I was on the road. That's all there is to it, really."

"Oh, sure it is."

Her eyes shift. She's looking past me, over my shoulder. "Here comes Mom to get you," she says. "She really likes you, you know. You think she's a total ogre, but believe me, to her you shy types are the best thing since sliced bread."

She leans in close again. "She'd never let me sit and talk to you this long if she didn't like you a lot. You just wait. Next thing you know, she'll be inviting you to dinner. You better be prepared." She taps me on the arm. "Sorry about Rhonda," she whispers, and then she lifts her cup and tosses her head back.

I feel a hand on my shoulder.

"Time to hit it again, Carl," Kay says. Then to Little Kay, with a rise in her voice: "We're going to try that one we practiced, the Loretta Lynn one." They look at each other with their dark eyes. Little Kay bites down on an ice cube and breaks it with a loud crack. "Sure thing, Mom," she says. "Your wish is my command."

I step over the bench fast and head for the bandstand. It suddenly seems like it's been a long fifteen minutes. Lyle is already up there, plucking his fiddle with his thumb and humming to himself. After I climb up and put on my guitar he says, "Hey Carl, you know a silly old Joe Venuti tune called 'Hot Canary'?" Already I can feel myself snapping into a better mood.

"Never heard of it," I say. "But I'll be glad to fake the chords underneath you."

He beams at me. "That's what I like to hear. Let's give it a go. I'll hack at it for awhile and you'll get the idea. You catch that, Kay? We're starting with 'Hot Canary.' Key of D, as in Dreadful."

Kay has climbed up behind me and picked her bass up off the floor. "Oh, Jesus," she says. "That stupid old thing?"

She takes a minute to adjust the height of her microphone and tug at something underneath the back of her skirt. Then she steps up to the mike and switches it on. Her voice comes booming back to us as it bounces off the far wall: "Now here's one for all you fans of the good old fiddle tunes, a novelty number from way back called 'Höt Canary.' We hope you like it as much as we do--take it away, boys!"

Lyle taps out a quick bar with his foot, does a variation of his standard intro, and we're in.

* * *

The photography studio is in a converted gas station and is run by a woman named Inez Hooker. Kay said she was an old friend, and she probably gave them a good deal, but anybody can see it isn't the most professional operation in the world.

When I first got here, Lyle said hi to me and winked and shook my hand the way he always does. Kay and Little Kay were having some trouble, and weren't talking to anybody. It turns out Little Kay isn't too pleased at the idea of being photographed in her performing outfit. While I was cinching

up my bolo tie in front of the mirror in the hallway, I heard them going at it on the other side of the door behind me. They were in a closet that served as a storage and dressing room. Little Kay was crying and carrying on about having to dress up like a drum majorette, and how it didn't matter in a pizza parlor where nobody in their right mind would go anyway, but getting her picture taken for an ad in the paper that would be seen by half the people in northern California was another story. She went on like that for awhile, and then Kay spoke in a couple of quick bursts at low volume. I couldn't quite make out what she said, but whatever it was, a minute later Kay came out alone and we are now proceeding with the photo session.

We're posing in front of the camera--Lyle, Kay, and me. Little Kay still hasn't emerged from the closet. Inez Hooker is standing on a little step ladder, peering down into the lens of her camera which is mounted on a high tripod. She is a thin woman in yellow slacks and a black teeshirt that says SMILE! in big pink letters across her chest. Lights with umbrella reflectors are positioned on both sides of us. One of these has already fallen over. The bulb shattered, and it took some time to sweep it up and reposition the light and comb our hair again, but now we're finally ready to go once more. We all have our instruments, and we're supposed to be holding a pose that looks like we're playing. I'm between Kay and Lyle, holding a C-seventh chord and trying not to blink.

Inez looks up.

"Guitar player. I'm getting a bad reflection off your glasses."

"No problem, I'll take them off," I say, and I put them in my pocket.

"What about Lyle's glasses, Inez?" says Kay. "Are they reflecting too? They're so damn thick."

"His are okay I think, as long as his face is pointing down. Just don't look up from your violin, Lyle, whatever you do."

She adjusts the camera some more. "I think we're all set here." Then she suddenly snaps her fingers. "I've got a great idea. I'll take a quick Polaroid, to give you an idea how you really look. Don't move, it'll only take a sec." She jumps off the ladder and runs out and comes back with a Polaroid camera. Back up the ladder, she points it at us and says, "Come on now, smile everybody!" She snaps, the picture slides out the front, and Inez hops down and trots over with it.

Kay holds the snapshot in her hand as it fades into view. There we are all right, a perfect likeness. Kay in her fresh beehive hairdo, Lyle with his wig on straight, and me in my vest and bolo tie. I make a mental note to stop squinting.

"Oh my God," Kay says. "I look awful."

"No, you don't, dear," says Lyle. "You look very nice."

"I don't either look nice, I look horrible. I look like a fat broad hugging a fat bass fiddle." She holds the picture closer. "It just isn't ladylike."

We stand there for a minute, all of us just looking at the picture. I consider putting my glasses back on, but then think better of it. I don't want anyone to think I'm ready to give an opinion. It isn't until I hear Little Kay's voice behind me that I realize she has finally come out to join us.

"Listen, Mom, I've got an idea." She reaches over and takes the snapshot out of Kay's hand. "You know that old picture you showed me the other day, of you and Dad when you were on that radio show? Where you were sitting right on the bass--sort of sexy. Remember?"

Kay snatches the picture back and looks at it even more intently than before, as if expecting a new image to materialize. If she's wondering at all about her daughter's sudden change of attitude, she doesn't show it. I tell myself not to, but I can't help catching Little Kay's eye. She winks at me. Even without my glasses, I see it clearly.

"Okay, let's try it," Kay says. And without another word she puts the bass down on its side, steps around in front of it, and with one hand holding her turquoise skirt against her rump she slowly lowers herself backwards, so that she sits on the bass where the body curves inward, opposite the f-hole. Then she leans over sideways and rests her elbow on the fat part of the bass. She smooths down her skirt in front with her other hand.

"There," she says. "What do you think?"

We all step around to where we can see her better. Now I do put my glasses back on. Inez takes a few steps back with her hand on her chin. "Hmm," she says. "Very interesting."

Kay crosses her legs. "Is that any better?"

Her legs, especially above the knees, are thick and muscular-looking, and kind of purplish in places. Her white boots are tight around her calves, and something about the position she is in seems to draw your attention to her kneecaps, which look heftier and knobbier than when she's standing up. It's a type of pose that might make sense for someone young and long and lean. And maybe not even then.

"Not bad," Inez says. "Not bad at all. Why don't you two fellas step back in there, just the way you were before. Let's see what we've got." She goes back to her ladder and climbs up. Lyle and I step around and face the camera again. I take my glasses off. "A little closer in, fellas." Inez is

peering into her lens again. "I think we may just have it."

Little Kay has gone back to stand next to the ladder. "Oh, yeah," she calls out. "That's it, all right. That's absolutely beautiful." Then she suddenly marches toward us and comes all the way around to stand between Lyle and me. "How does this look, Inez, if I squeeze in right here?"

"Well, well," says Kay from down in front. "Miss Primadonna wants her picture taken after all."

I notice Little Kay is being careful to keep most of herself hidden behind her mother and the bass. "I can change my mind, can't I? Otherwise who's ever going to believe this?"

"It looks great, everybody," says Inez. "It really does. I think we can shoot this one for real."

I steal a quick glance over at Lyle. As usual, his face doesn't give you a clue. His fiddle is in position under his chin with the bow on the strings and his elbow up high in the air. He's wearing a nice big smile. He looks like he's right in the middle of "Orange Blossom Special."

"Here we go!" says Inez. "Look happy everybody. Very good!" And she starts snapping away. From up on her ladder she keeps saying, "Oh, that's nice, that's just a beauty. We'll be out of here in no time at all." And before long, we are.

* * *

Saturday night, our third weekend on the job, and we still aren't playing to more than twenty or thirty people at a time. Of these, it's clear most of them are coming in for beer and pizza and silent movies, not to listen to heart-

break ballads and fiddle tunes.

Still, I'm enjoying certain things about the gig. Lyle's good for a few surprises every night. The more he plays, the more tunes he remembers. He's starting to throw quotes from things like "Take The 'A' Train" into the middle of two-chord waltzes. If I pick up on it and quote it back to him later in the tune, he'll double over as if he's about to burst out laughing--but this turns out to be a trick to get me to laugh first. Sooner or later Kay starts to slap the bass extra hard or sing a couple of lines extra loud, which is our signal to quit horsing around. In terms of complaining about what we play, that's about as far as she usually goes, as long as the tunes begin and end together and we stay out of her way while she's singing.

Little Kay is up to two or three songs per set, usually just singing backup lines to her mother. Sometimes it sounds all right, but most of the time it doesn't, and then Kay has to sing even harder to drown her out. This often causes people sitting up front to gather up their pizza platters and their pitchers of beer and move to a table further back. When Little Kay's numbers are done, she moves over to the side of the stage to play tamborine and practice dance moves she's picked up from MTV. Eventually Kay gives her the signal to go sit back down.

Now I'm outside on my break, around the corner from the front door, leaning against the building and finishing a beer. It's a nice warm night, with a light breeze blowing in off the Bay. I guess I've had my eyes closed or something, because when I hear her voice it takes me by surprise.

"Hi."

I turn my head fast.

She's right next to me, about a foot away. She's leaning against the

wall with one shoulder, her outside hand on her hip. She's looking at me.

"Little Kay," I say. "Where'd you come from?"

"Oh, I just parachuted in. Airlifted by the Libyans. I came from inside, birdbrain, where else?" Her eyes get wider. "I followed you out here. I snuck up on you, while you were lost in thought."

"Is it time to go inside?" My voice has an edgy sound to it. You might even say nervous.

"No, there's loads of time still. Ten minutes, at least. Aren't you so goddamn bored you could just scream?"

Our heads are very close together. I hadn't realized until now that Little Kay and I are just about the same height. The sensible thing for me to do is take a couple of steps sideways. Instead, I lift my cup and go through the motions of taking a drink, which only makes me feel sillier, since I finished off my beer a couple of minutes ago.

"I hear you're coming to dinner tomorrow night," she says. "What'd I tell you?"

"Yeah, I guess I am. Your Dad's the one who asked me."

"She told him to, though. She makes these decisions, in case you haven't noticed."

I look straight ahead again, out toward the Bay. I want to say something to her, something about Lyle's integrity that I don't think she understands, but before I can say it she has stepped around fast and put both hands on the back of my neck. Then she falls forward against me, pushing me against the wall. Her face comes in fast and she kisses me hard on the mouth--a real grown-up kiss. I can feel the pressure of the cinderblock against the back of my head.

It doesn't last long. She steps away from me, dropping her hands, and as she moves back my arms fall away from her waist. I don't have any idea what happened to my cup. It's a curious thing: in the two or three seconds it takes her to back away some fast impressions replay in my mind--the lightness of her body up against me, the feeling of her mouth rubbing against mine, even the sweet, soapy smell of her hair--but for the life of me, I can't remember reaching around and taking hold of her. Maybe I was just trying to keep my balance. My cup, I can see now, is lying on the ground next to her foot.

She puts both hands on her hips and stands there smiling.

"Jesus Christ," I say.

She giggles. "My curiosity was killing me. You're the first guy I've ever liked that my mother approved of. I wanted to know how it would feel."

Then she starts walking away. After a few steps she turns and looks back. "It was nice, don't you think?" Without waiting for an answer, she goes ahead on inside.

I stay out there as long as I can, trying to relax, trying to remember that I came outside to take in the fresh breeze. But finally I realize that if I've got to go back in there and get up on the bandstand and play through the rest of the night, what I really need fast is another beer. At least.

* * *

"Have some more, Carl. There's plenty of white meat still. There's a whole leg left there too. Take as much as you want."

Lyle's holding out the platter, so I take it from him even though I don't want any. I pass it over to Kay sitting at my left. I still have

plenty of everything--turkey, stuffing, peas and carrots, both kinds of cranberry sauce. It's a regular Christmas dinner at grandma's house. All afternoon I kept thinking that the smart thing to do was call them up and say I couldn't make it. And here I am anyway. I'm not even hungry.

Little Kay is sitting across from me. She's wearing a pink tank top and a pair of earrings that are miniature globes, with tiny oceans and continents. So far I've avoided looking her in the eye. On the wall above her is a large framed photograph, about three feet square--an aerial view of a baseball stadium.

"You're not too crazy about my cooking, I can see that." Kay pops a forkful of mashed potatoes into her mouth.

"Oh, no," I say. "I'm just not a big eater, is all." This is far from the truth, under normal circumstances.

"It figures. You guitar players are all like that. I don't know where you get your protein from. Drugs and alcohol, I guess, same as always."

I'm looking down, spearing a couple of peas with my fork, so I don't see who it is--one of them, Lyle or Little Kay, must have given her the eye.

"I was only kidding, for God's sake," Kay says. "Let's not be so touchy around here. Carl's practically one of the family, anyhow."

Little Kay flops against the back of her chair and looks at the ceiling. "Mother, I don't believe you sometimes."

On my right Lyle clears his throat, nice and loud, and I'm glad to have the chance to turn his way.

"Candlestick Park," he says. He's pointing at the photograph on the wall. "That picture was taken from a helicopter. Thirty-seven thousand parking spaces. Thirty-seven thousand two hundred and fourteen, to be exact."

The photograph is in sharp focus. The pitcher's mound and basepaths are easy to see. So are the white lines criss-crossing the huge expanse of parking lots.

"It took us sixteen weeks to do the job. Biggest contract I've ever had. Just me and my partner, working seven days a week for four months. That's what made the down payment on this house." With Lyle you can never tell for sure, but it sounds like real pride in his voice. Then he reaches over and puts his hand on my arm. His grip is surprisingly tight. He's wearing his same old smile. "But I'll tell you something, Carl," he says. His voice just got a lot softer. "It's the most boring God-awful work you ever imagined in your life. I wouldn't recommend it to a dog."

I pull my arm away. My stomach just took a jump, like being in an airplane when it hits an air pocket and drops. Maybe that's just the effect Lyle was trying for. A little kick in the pants to get me to use my head.

"Listen," I say. It comes out so loud and firm, I don't even sound like myself. Before I say anything else, I meet Little Kay's eye. She's staring hard at me, her mouth drawn up tight. Her forehead and cheeks are giving off a soft pink glow. She's a beautiful girl, really. That's not such a tough thing to admit at all.

"So out with it, Carl," says Kay. She's tapping the tablecloth with the handle of her spoon. "We haven't got all night. There's dessert coming up, you know."

I carefully put my fork down next to my plate, and then I say, "I'm afraid I have to quit the band."

There's a moment of silence.

Kay's fist comes down on the table hard. My glass and silverware and plate

all jump. "What did you say?" Her voice sounds pinched, up out of its normal range.

I should have had a nice tidy explanation ready to go. Now all I do is sit there staring at the picture of Candlestick Park. Behind the stadium on the right field side, you can see the waves of San Francisco Bay breaking onto the landfill shore. And I start thinking about how Candlestick Park is built on a gigantic pile of garbage, thousands of tons of fish heads and coffee grounds and old tires, paved over to look like solid ground.

"Mother," says Little Kay, "are you deaf, or what?"

My eyes move down. Little Kay is wearing just a trace of a smile now. "Carl just said he has to quit the band." She's speaking in the calmest tone I've heard her use yet. "He's quitting because he got an offer from another band. It's a rock band and they're going on the road, and they're really good. And not only that, his new girlfriend is in the band. Her name's Rhonda, and she's a singer. They're crazy about each other, and this is their chance to be together all the time. Carl told me so last night. He was going to let you know then, but I told him it would be easier for you if he waited till today."

She faces me again, with that same little half-smile. I could get mad and throw my plate of food at her. Or I could answer her dare, and play right along with this cockeyed story. I hesitate, but only for a second.

"That's right," I say, turning to Kay. Her hand is still clenched where it landed on the table. Her eyes are wide and her mouth is clamped in a frown. I'm surprised at how easy it is to look her square in the eye. "It's a pretty hot band, and they've got a lot of work lined up. I just can't turn

it down. They've got great gigs, Tahoe and things like that." It's coming nice and easy now. I look over at Lyle. "I'm sorry about it, Lyle. You guys have been nice to work for. But you can see how it is."

Lyle's expression doesn't change, and he doesn't say a word. He just keeps right on smiling. I can't see his eyes too well because of the light bouncing off his glasses. I could be imagining things, but I think I might have seen him wink.

"Oh, we can see how it is, all right." Kay has stood up and now she's leaning over toward me with both hands gripping the edge of the table. "You're no different from all the rest. You take the best offer of the week. You chase after anything in skirts. You don't care who you're letting down. You don't care who's counting on you." Her voice keeps rising in pitch, like a tape being sped up. "What about the money we spent on those goddamn glossy photos? What about the audience we were beginning to build up? What about that, Mr. Big Shot Guitar Player?"

Now the rest of us are standing up too. In a couple of minutes, I think to myself, this whole crazy scene will be over, I'll be outside getting in my car and going back to my radio and my record player.

"You'll find another guitar player, Kay," I say. "There's a million guitar players."

"Oh, don't I know it!" She's shouting now. "You're a dime a dozen. I don't need you to tell me that. I don't need you to walk in my house and sit down at my table and make eyes at my baby daughter and then tell me there's a million guitar players in the world." She's starting to cry, but it doesn't effect the power of her voice. "Why don't you just get the hell out of here?"

Why don't you take your polite ass and get the hell out of my house?"

She's pointing a beefy outstretched arm at the front door. It doesn't take me long to get my jacket off the back of the chair in the living room, put it on, open the door, and step out into the Sunday night air.

There's a cool breeze. Lyle follows me outside and then walks beside me to the car without a word. We stand there quietly for a minute. Finally he says, "She didn't mean it like that, Carl. She never really means to be that way."

"It's okay, Lyle. I'm sorry about all this. I truly am."

I'm thinking that I ought to shake his hand, or something, when the front door of the house opens again. Little Kay steps out onto the porch and closes the door behind her. She has on a sweater that's way too big for her. It must be one of Lyle's. She comes up and stands close to him.

"She's going to be fine," Little Kay says. "I told her to go lie down, and she did."

She links her arm through Lyle's. She's looking at me, but it's hard to see her face in the dark. "So anyway, Carl, good luck with your new band. I bet you'll make it big someday." She runs a hand through her hair. "Stay in touch, huh?" She still sounds so cool and collected. I'd even say sincere, if I didn't know better. It could fool anybody. It's a talent that seems to run in this little family.

"That's right," Lyle says. "Best of everything to you, Carl. You're a good guitar man. Maybe we'll see you on TV or something."

"Thanks for everything, Lyle," I say. But now I'm suddenly thinking of something else. It must have been what he said about seeing me on TV. Maybe

I know I ought to leave it alone, but I don't know when I'll ever see him again.

"Lyle, can I ask you something? About that business with Buck Owens. You know--his scar, or harelip, or whatever it is. Did you really hit him the way Kay said? Is that whole story true?"

Lyle starts to laugh, and so does Little Kay.

"Is it true?" he says. "Well, no, not exactly. Though it might as well be, when you get right down to it." He laughs softly to himself again. "What I mean is, it works just as good as the truth. Or maybe even better."

In spite of the darkness, I can tell by the sound of his voice exactly the look Lyle's giving me. I feel like I'm beginning to catch on about this knack for sticking to a story. Maybe it's what in the end counts the most. Maybe it's the thing that can hold a family together. All of a sudden I feel very sure of this.

"Yeah," I say, and now for some reason I'm laughing too. "I think I see what you mean, Lyle. Forget I asked."

So I finally do shake his hand, and we say good night all around, and then I turn around and get in my car. Once I have the keys out and the motor started, I look up and see Lyle and Little Kay one last time, arm in arm, standing on their front porch. As I drive away, they both wave with their free hands.
