

BLUES FOR JANE

by

Brent Robison

I tried to be Sonny Rollins tonight, but instead I sounded like Sonny Ferguson, the fat kid who played second saxophone in my high school marching band, honking like a donkey next to me, twenty years ago. All my cells, angry, buzz: just another tenor man, just another one, one more tiny loser cringing in a dark corner of big cruel America. This tour was a waste, and I can't drink.

Maybe it's finally time to give up.

I stand in the shower, in the slimy motel steam, until my fingers are crushed velvet, and when I come out, Jane is in bed, lights out, eyes closed. The rainforest drum and sizzle seems to follow me and I realize the desert sky is pouring outside. Today was a hot, still day, dry and dusty, with that waiting tension in the air, the familiar electrons-humming-in-wires tension like before the first note of every gig, the dull tension that is now being washed away by this western rain, no same old New York drizzle, but pounding big drops of rain, much much bigger than tears.

As I stand naked in darkness, holding the drape aside, staring out at the wet street, Jane comes up behind me. She wraps her arms around my stomach, presses her breasts against my back, and whispers, "Come to bed with me?"

"I'm not tired." I don't turn.

"I know. Let me feel some of that energy." She strokes my chest.

"I feel like taking a walk."

"But it's raining."

"Right."

I feel her smile; her cheek rests on my shoulder blade. She sighs and murmurs, "Boy, are you a piece a work."

My breath goes out with a sound like opening a beer can. It's sarcastic and dismissive, like I hoped. Her face lifts from my back and her voice goes sharp. "Wes, give yourself a break, for God's sake."

So maybe I'm finally getting to her. She's been slow; with other women it was always fast work, boom bam, woman gone, me alone again, bitter drunk. But that was before.

For a blink she's ice, but then she melts, touches me, her voice a whisper, low and smooth. "You know, I get so hot watching you play, the way you hold your..."

"Yeah, yeah, man and his tools. Everything gets you hot." I forcefully remove her long arms from around me. "I'm going out."

I get dressed; Jane doesn't move. I feel something, maybe good, tough anyway, leaving her flat. This is not the first time. She stands there naked, not sure what to do with her hands so she hugs herself, a tall girl with big sad eyes, looking at the wall, at vacation romance fading, a film's end, black. I button my shirt, slow fingers moving up like I'm playing a ballad on worn brass keys.

I remember there was a little of her look, the lonely part of her look, in those wide eyes the night I first saw her in the little club on Second Street in Jersey City, watching me solo. Those eyes were lighthouse beacons piercing the smoke, headlights in the fog bearing down on me, a truck, a train of trucks, roaring like wind through misty midnight straight at me, me and my rambling solo, and suddenly I was caught, pinned in the glare, so self-conscious, every fingering suddenly suspect, my stance pretentious, my breathing so obviously faulty, and I closed my eyes and prayed, closed my eyes and fell away from that wide pure stare into the rhythm, and breathed, and finished okay. As Joey began his piano riff, I opened my eyes to meet hers, wide again but with a little smile, a shy smile, no more trucks in the fog, just a girl, and she clapped her hands, and I made a small bow, and then I watched her move through pools of light and smoke, moving like a young racehorse, all legs, long legs rolling from the hip joint, the young awkwardness of big feet, big hands, big shy head, eyes down as she moved through the dimness in long steps, all odd grace, all awkward pieces joined into smooth flow, big eyes glancing at me once more from the bar, and I knew I'd see her after that set, and after that night.

Now, here, my hand is on the door. She's looking away.

Jane likes to cruise, take the highway in her Honda, flying, Jersey Turnpike, Garden State Parkway, I-80, flying, fingers tapping the wheel, Monk on the CD, Monk or Miles or blues, harmonica blues, wailing electric blues, old Howling Wolf, Charley Musselwhite, Paul Butterfield. She's a Jersey girl, cruising from home, her parents' home in a Jersey suburb, cute white home hidden deep in the suburban streets of peace and green grass, out of the driveway every weekday morning, cruising an hour, a jazzy morning hour, cruising the highway to another Jersey suburb, a corporate park of glass and steel and landscaped lawns, to hide in a cube, a cell in the teeming clamor of cells in the vast body of the phone company.

She can't sing, can't dance, can't play, she found the music by accident, switching her car radio, station to station, lonely for truth, disgusted with endless pop, and she thinks she's forever talentless in all but computer networking and telephone system productivity stats, and she wants art, art by osmosis, art by the melting of one body into another. She's a yuppie with a secret, she moves alone through the sterile glare, and the people ask her what she does on Saturday night, and she says "Listen," never telling of her smoky search through dark clubs for some throbbing epiphany of horns and drums. And every 5 pm, she cruises home, an hour home, CD blasting, one nyloned foot, the left foot, up on the seat, tan thigh high against the door, skirt hiked way way up, steering with one finger, staying sane in the blast of Monk and Miles, the blast of blues, the blues that sing her salvation, her morning night and weekend salvation in the sweet songs of life outside the cubes, the sweet songs of deep night under the moon, in the street of pulsing neon, in the rhythms of quivering light spit by stars millennia past, light reaching her wide animal eyes in the dark as the highway blues pound in her ears.

"Live at home with your parents, huh?" I said, thinking Oh no, what am I getting myself into here? And then it was Christmas dinner and I was there in the white suburban kitchen, with Dad the mailman, Mom the secretary, Brother the salesman, and I'm wishing my earring didn't dangle so, wishing my pony tail could suck back into my head like spaghetti. But its all easy laughing there in her home, let's kid Mom about her coffee, let's kid Dad about his turkey-carving, let's kid big brother about his new girlfriend, let's kid Jane about her car, hitting 130,000 miles and still going, but it's a Honda and a good one, and the

conversation switches into cruise-control, about insurance rates and the costs of car repairs, and the comparative benefits of this VCR over that one, four heads, on-screen programming, I can get you a deal you wouldn't believe, and this refrigerator—hell, Consumer Guide did a comprehensive study, look at the figures—and I'm dumb, I'm in a daze, I'm a goddamned circus freak from the underbelly of Babylon, I don't belong here, and I sip my soda and wish it was whiskey and I listen, staring, staring at the wall, at pictures of Jane the baton-twirler, Jane on the debate team, and Jane my secret lascivious lover runs a hidden finger up my thigh.

After a few dates I said, "Let's talk about something," and then on and on, I'll never remember, rambling like, Hey, you're only 25, a nice suburban girl who wants a home and family, and I'm not the husband type, I'm an old dry drunk, I'm an applause junkie, I'm moody and mad and a midnight howler at the bloody moon. She lay across the foot of my bed, I sat on the chair there, holding her long fingers, saying who knows what: I want you, but you'll get hurt. I want you, but I'm making no promises, I'm crippled and mean and lousy at this couple stuff. And she cried, little mascara stains around those eyes, and left me standing halfway down the stairs when I had always always walked her to her car.

But in a few days she called and met me in a coffee shop to say, So maybe it's true, so maybe someday I want a family and all, so maybe you're not the one, but here we are, I'm here, you're here, and for right now, I want you, hell maybe I'll learn something, and then it was like the solid table top between us would melt or disintegrate or combust, held as it was between two bodies of heat, two celestial bodies of intense gravity that wouldn't, couldn't be kept apart. We ran to my place, up four flights into bed, and I'm thinking, God it's so hard to breathe with my heart jumping like this, and I'm a sucker, she's a sucker, I'll take from her, I can and will, I know the road we're on, she'll cry, I'll feel like shit, but here we are, sweaty, breathing, alive, so unbelievably alive, and she's laughing under me, and I'm thinking, a Nice Girl, a Nice Girl who loves crazy sex and jazz, what more could I ever want?

My hand is on the door, and it's deja vu, a film loop, a broken record; it's a pattern I'm stuck in, like a helpless robot, a numb machine. She looks up, stares a big-eyed brutal stare right into me, a double-barrelled flash of fire, point blank, and there's something boiling inside my chest.

Softly, with the cruel softness of a panther's step, she says, "Go, then." And she turns and walks into the bathroom, with that slow naked long-legged grace. Suddenly the room is silent and empty—completely, utterly empty. I want to kick the door, I want to yell, "Goddamn you!" I want to shout, "Hey, babe, live and learn, honey, you can't treat me well and get away with it!"

But the room without her is empty.

I'm so damned tired. My hand slips from the doorknob, all on its own. In rainy darkness, I drop my clothes and climb into bed.

Later, sometime later, in a dream hush of misty drizzle like soft brushes on taut skins, there's the click of a tape, then it's blues harp stuff, Mystery Train, and Butterfield moans like gravel and syrup and the electric scarlet of neon shimmering on wet streets before dawn, and Jane is beside me, all long cool legs and warm shadows and whisper-soft hair, breathing, "Kiss me..." And so I kiss her and kiss her again, and those soft sleepy lips melt and those long fingers touch me so feather-light and I'm saying over and over, "I'm sorry," and she says, "Shhhh," and kisses me silent, and we roll together in sweet struggle, searching for all we've lost.

Afterward, she whispers in my ear, "Wes, some nights you play lousy and some nights you play great. I don't care. I love you. Do you get it?"

And I say, "Yes I do, yes." And I hope I really do, God do I hope I do. Then she sleeps, while I watch as dim gray light seeps in like a slow stain around the edges of the drapes, and the tape switches paths like a train and cruises back the other direction, on an endless loop. The click of sticks on rims syncs with the clack of steel on steel, wheels on rails, and the harp hums notes identical to the whistle fading out across the tracks, filling with its echo this little drab room on the silent desert's edge. I hear a few last faint drips from wet eaves, and I reach across blue sheets to touch Jane as she sleeps, to be sure, finally sure, I'm not alone; to know that for now, maybe not for tomorrow, but just for now, there's someone to speak to in the deep lost language of kisses, that ancient healing magic of slow sweet touch, after the blood of love has pounded its point home.

The notes sing in tiny sparks where my fingertips brush the line of her waist and follow its perfect curve along her hip. She sighs and stirs, dreaming to the music, moving thigh across thigh in the faint dawn blush, exposed, innocent. Now the band plays a slow languid backbeat, a walking blues that lulls me, heart first, into the drift where she is, and with mind as gratefully empty as this new pearl sky, I see her clear, and I move close. My body molds to hers, softly, still damp from the sweat of wordless communion.

THE END

“Blues for Jane”

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