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strawberry press magazine

New fiction by Whit Frazier and Martin
A. David

A Perspective on Mandatory Jury Service
by Kyle Ancowitz

STRAWBERRY PRESS MAGAZINE
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VOLUME ONE ISSUE SIX

Check out the new look of www.strawberrypress.net online. We publish print and online fiction from all different types of authors and we are currently working on our second book publication – a collection of short fiction. We are also accepting submissions for upcoming issues of strawberry press magazine.

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Volume One Issue Six

Volume One Issue Six was sort of hastily constructed. The holidays, as I expected, have made everything a little bit crazy, and there's been a drop-off of activity here at the press; not to mention my co-editor was out of the country for half the month. No worries. We still prevailed!

This issue features work by Martin A. David, who has contributed previously to our website, as well as new work by Kyle Ancowitz, a talented up and coming theatre director who works with The Blue Coyote Theatre Group here in New York City. He's written a perspective on mandatory jury duty, with his usual strangely glib style. Check it out.

There is also an older work by Whit Frazier, excerpted from a longer aborted work (or work-in-progress, however you'd like to look at it.) It's a blues influenced piece in three parts, and is an entire sub-story to a novella I was working on a few years back. It's always occurred to me to put the parts of this piece together and see how they work on their own, and this was the perfect opportunity to try just that. I hope you enjoy it.

A Merry Christmas to everyone, and a happy New Year as well. The New Year will find Strawberry Press back with a renewed vigor, and possibly a new look.

Cheers,

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Martin A. David is the author of *Karpstein Was Hiding*, a novel (Writer's Club Press) and *The Dancer's Audition Book* (Sterling Publ.) as well as hundreds of articles, columns, and stories for newspapers and magazines in the United States and Europe. He is also a translator who has published seven works by classical Danish authors.

Shtetl In My Mind, a collection of Martin's short stories, will be published in 2004.

In addition to writing, he has been a professional actor, modern dancer and choreographer, mime and clown. He also designs and sells hand-made jewelry.

Bendl the Goniff and the Great Baby Exchange

Martin A. David



Bendl, our shtetl's crafty thief, prankster, mischief-maker and carrier of clandestine messages has stolen many things. However, let it be said in his defense, that he has never, ever stolen—or even really borrowed—a baby. In fact, he has never, as far as he knows and I know and the people of the town know, made a baby.

So then how did our dear Bendl get involved with more than a dozen babies? Well, it's not a long story, so if you sit and have another cup of tea, I might be able to tell you.

To begin at the beginning, it began with a wedding. Now a wedding is a good beginning—both for a story and for a life. When two people stand together under the bridal canopy and then make their marks on the ketubah, the marriage contract, it is cause for celebration. If the bride's parents are living, they feel blessed and relieved to see a daughter leave their room-and-board and go to join the mainstream of the community. Similar feelings can also be observed in the groom's parents. The community celebrates to welcome the couple over the threshold between childhood and the responsible existence of adults. The community, if the truth were known, also celebrates because life is not always easy and everybody likes a party.

The size and shape of the party depend on many things. If a rich man's daughter marries the son of a wealthy man, then the party becomes the subject of shtetl reminiscences and legends for many years to come. The daughter of a well-to-do father who is joined with the scholarly son of a great rabbi can also expect to see her parental house filled wall to wall with people on the day of her wedding. To be invited to eat, drink and dance at such a wedding is a great honor and is usually preceded by the construction of a huge appetite.

Another large wedding, one where everyone who is well enough to walk may assume himself or herself to be invited, is the uniting of the son or daughter of someone particularly beloved by the community. At such a wedding, there is also great feasting. It may not be on the same slaughter-the-fatted-calf level as the event hosted by the prosperous parents, but who wouldn't want to come and celebrate the joy of a well-loved rabbi or teacher? Of course, it is interesting to point out how the adored are not often affluent and the affluent are seldom adored, but that is the matter for another story.

A third kind of wedding is the joining of orphans or the offspring of families with little or no means. At these nuptial festivities, it is the guests and neighbors who supply most of the food

and drink but the size of the feast never seems to shrink the magnitude of the joy.

It was the middle kind of wedding that provided a background for this story. The children of two beloved, learned, wise, compassionate and very poor rabbis were being brought together. The son of Moshe Ben Beryl, the rabbi of our Narodny shtetl, was signing a marriage contract with the daughter of Rabbi Jacov Ben Itzhak, from the town of Dolek, which lay over some rolling hills just several hour's wagon ride from Narodny. The most commonly heard blessing being bestowed on the engaged couple was "May your progeny bring forth a dynasty of great Talmudic scholars." The spouses-to-be had gotten a glimpse of each other at the betrothal ceremony and, although they both were too young to understand what marriage really meant, were neither frightened nor horrified by what they saw.

When we say the fathers, Rabbi Moshe and Rabbi Jacov, were poor, we do not mean they lacked for any of the necessities of life. Food and firewood and used, but quite presentable clothing, all arrived on their doorsteps whenever such things were needed and their neighbors, Jews and Poles alike, made sure that want never cast a shadow on them.

Piotr-son-of-Piotr, a Polish landowner for whom Rabbi Jacov had once helped settle a dispute, made sure the bride had a respectable dowry. Benesh-the-Merchant from our own shtetl made sure that barrels of wine stood ready and that chickens and a well-fattened sheep arrived in plenty of time to be slaughtered in the ritual manner, koshered, and then prepared to serve the guests. Musicians arrived from all sides, ready to play just for the joy of playing. There were almost more volunteering hands than there were tasks to busy them.

And the guests. There was no lack of guests. It is a mitzvah, a good deed, to attend such a happy occasion. It was, if such a thing is possible, even more of a mitzvah to dance at the wedding linking the houses of two such prominent scholars as Rabbi Moshe and Rabbi Jacov. The guests came from every corner of the shtetl, they came from the surrounding countryside, and they came, in a long line of wagons, droshkies and ox carts, from the town of Dolek where the bride had grown up. Whole families came to share the joy. Fathers and mothers and older children sang songs in the fronts of wagons while old grandmothers and grandfathers held on tight and hoped their bones would not shatter from all the rattling. Younger children swatted and punched each other and ended up looking and smelling nothing at all like

the clean little angels that had been loaded into the vehicles hours before.

Weddings such as this tended to last from early in the day to late into the night. The dancing and eating and drinking went on as long as there were supplies to be had and guest there to enjoy them. A few people from outside the shtetl stayed with relatives, others wedged into crowded spaces with strangers or, in the case of the more rambunctious drinkers, just slept where they fell. However most of the guests had work to do in the morning. Just before midnight there was the sound of horses being set in motion, wagon wheels creaking and goodbyes being shouted. The horses knew the way and the drivers dozed most of the way home. They arrived in time to gather in a precious few hours of sleep and then to say the morning prayers in their own, familiar surroundings. Of course, weddings like this took place only once every few years and so the arrangements were hardly ever a problem.

Hardly ever, but not never.

You may have met Bendl-the-Goniff. In a shtetl, there is usually someone for every task. Yochnan, the Polish miller made his living by grinding wheat and other grains into flour or meal, Menachem-the-Tailor made his living by sewing fine jackets and caftans, and Benesh-the-Merchant made his living by trading one thing for another. Our Bendl made his living by running in between the raindrops and never getting wet. Yes, it is true that the word goniff means thief and yes it is true, though shocking to admit, that Bendl sometimes took things that were not his. Mostly he lived on the small commissions he received for running the unpleasant errands that needed to be done. If one needed to carry three plump chickens to express one's friendship to a police magistrate, one merely gave them to Bendl and as quick as a puff of smoke, the two plump chickens arrived safely at their destination. Superstitious folk whispered that Bendl could shrink himself down to nothing more than his smile, slip through the crack in a door and materialize again on the other side. Others countered that it had more to do with doors and windows being left unlatched than with magic, but who's to argue with superstition?

Bendl-the-Goniff was both lazy and industrious, honest and dishonest, clever and foolish. He was also a prankster. His sense of humor knew no bounds and when he wasn't using sleight of hand to conjure up a few bits of food or a silk scarf to sell, he was plotting jokes and tricks to play upon friends and strangers alike. If Jews believed in leprechauns, Bendl would have been called a leprechaun.

The adventure of the babies started innocently enough. When darkness fell, while the parents were still dancing and drinking and the older children were standing on the edges of the merriment, struggling to stay awake, the little ones were tucked away in wagons and carts to sleep until it was time for the ride home. Bendl was wandering through the shadows, looking for bits of this and that when he encountered one of the children. The child, a little boy, had been roused by a bad dream, called out for his mama and, not finding her nearby, climbed, more asleep than awake, out of the wagon. He was straying among the wagon wheels, munching horses and grunting oxen when Bendl found him.

"Well, well, well, little gentleman and what is your name?"

"Mama."

"And who is this mama of yours?"

"Mama."

"Do you know your papa's name?"

"Mama."

The conversation was not progressing well. Bendl studied the little face in the moonlight. Ah, he thought he knew whose child this was. This sleepy urchin must belong to Gittel-with-a-limp's cousin Miriam who, with her husband, Red-headed Kuppel, had a farm a few miles out of town, by the river. Bendl knew their wagon. He gathered up the small creature and carried him to the wagon. He lifted the canvas cover and started to put the now sleeping boy in the wagon. One, two, three...there were already three breathing lumps asleep in the straw. Adding the boy would have made four and four was one more than Miriam and Kuppel had produced. The boy belonged elsewhere.

That is when the idea struck the impish Bendl.

Three was the proper number and three it shall be. He put the boy in the wagon and took one of the sleeping lumps out. The lump did not wake up. He carried the moist bundle to another wagon and set it there. Then, for the next hour, he tiptoed from one vehicle to another carrying his little packages, some of them dripping with the childish accidents of night, and depositing them here and there. Some woke up and complained, but Bendl charmed them back to sleep again with his rocking and lullabying until the mixture was complete. At the wedding, music played. Outside the wedding, Bendl danced to its melodies. Each of his little partners ended up in a different place from that in which he or she started.

When the first sets of tired and slightly tipsy parents headed for their wagons and carts, Bendl was lurking in the shadows. The first cautious

mother, in a scene that would be repeated many times, lifted the canvas that covered her family's wagon, counted the sleeping bumps in the straw, listened to make sure all were breathing, and climbed wearily into the wagon seat for the long trek home.

After a few families had headed home, Bendl faded into the shadows and disappeared. Some things are better pondered and imagined from a safe distance.

The first discovery took place some miles outside of town. Jacob-who-squinted stopped his wagon and climbed off to drain some of the extra liquid he had consumed. At the same time, he thought it might be prudent to wake his oldest child, a son, and have him perform the same act of discharge. He lifted the largest sleeping bump out of the back of the wagon and stood it on its feet.

"Kom, kom, gayn pishn," he coaxed.

The sleepy child complied, but imagine Jacob's shock and consternation when the small creature beside him squatted down and did it like a little girl. It took only a quick glance to reveal that she was, indeed, a little girl.

His wife, Faygl, a very superstitious woman became nearly apoplectic.

"It is you, it is your fault," she screamed so loudly that birds in trees a half mile away began to stir. "Because you are always drunk. G-d has decided that we are not worthy to have a son. He has taken away our son as punishment and given us another girl to try to marry off without a dowry."

Similar scenes, some with more yelling and screaming, some with less, were taking place from Narodny to Dołek. Imagine going to wake little Herschel and finding out that he had transformed overnight to a little Hindel, or from a dark-haired boy to a red-headed one. Everything from sleep-walking to divine intervention was blamed. Some of the exchanged children simply looked around at their new surroundings, new siblings and new situations and declared, "I'm hungry." Others of the temporary changelings began to squall for their mamas—their real mamas—and set up a wave of noise that could be heard almost all the way back to Narodny.

Soon there was a great traffic of wagons and carts heading back towards the scene of the transformation. Neighbors met neighbors on the road and inspected each other's children. By the time they all got to the Narodny marketplace, it

was not a market day and the large, empty square seemed like an excellent place to meet, they all had realized that they were the victims of a colossal joke. An air of hilarity prevailed. It was annoyed hilarity, but hilarity nonetheless. Uninvolved townspeople stood around and roared with laughter, or whistled, stamped and applauded as groups of bewildered children were gathered in the marketplace and parents walked up and down holding joyous reunions with their own or bartering a child for a child as if they were trading goats.

At first, the happiness they felt in straightening out the tangled muddle was the only thing on their minds. After a while, thoughts drifted to questions of who might have been the perpetrators of such a scandalous practical joke. Could it have been a drunken Pole or a gang of young boys from the town. Were there demons lurking nearby whose earthly pleasure was causing great confusion? By late afternoon there was only one name on everyone's tongue. It was the right name, it was Bendl-the-Goniff. Nobody but Bendl could have played such a trick.

And where was our shtetl's goniff? He had made the very wise decision to go out and explore the countryside. At the moment he was lying out of the hot sun on the cool, moist earth under a bridge many miles from Narodny and chortling so loudly that any passersby would have thought he was mad. He often wandered out to live among the trees and hills. He would be back before the cold winds began to blow.

parable of the eternal drunk

whit frazier

there was a drunk once, who sat all day and all night and drank corn whisky. he played a guitar, and so long as he played on his guitar, it would always stay summer. years passed, and as the years passed the drunk started to lose his memory. he couldnt remember how he became a drunk, how he came to live in the house where he lived, how he came to sit day and night playing guitar, and least of all, how he was able to keep the summer going forever by making up songs.

one day a woman came by the house, and a few years passed, and the eternal drunk realized that they were married. still he continued to play. he couldnt remember where the wife came from, or who she was or even who he was.

a few years passed this way, and one day it came to the eternal drunk's attention that he had three children. he didnt know their names, or how old they were or really, who they were, if they were even his children. they just happened to be there. and the summer lasted on and on and on. sometimes he wished for a change in season, but as far as he could tell it was always summer and he always played guitar.

eventually the eternal drunk died. he failed to remember this event either. he continued to sit on his porch and play his guitar and make up songs and it was always summer.

a few years passed and the wife remarried. when the new husband moved into the place, he found it intolerable. why was it always summer, and who was the dead man with all his horrible noise pollution? it had never occurred to the wife to burn the dead man's guitar, but it occurred to the new husband. he burned it with great satisfaction, and sure enough, winter set in immediately.

PERSPECTIVES

KYLE ANCOWITZ

Thursday, November 13th

My summons said to be in Room 340 at 141 Livingston at 8:45 am. I was actually climbing out of the Court St. station on the N at 8:45, so I guess you could say I was late. This had me mad. Not because I hate being late, but mainly because I hate being bitched at. I was short on sleep too, and cranky. The booth attendant wouldn't talk to me through her microphone even though it was right in front of her. When I asked where Livingston St. was, she pointed me towards Montague instead. That ate up another ten minutes. Mentally, I was preparing myself to catch some major flak from the judge. Anyone who tried it was fucking with the wrong guy, though. I wasn't going to put up with it. I'd be all, "Hey, man! Guess you gotta lock me up!" What assholes.

I got fresh directions from a Korean grocery and walked some more until I saw a long line of people. I followed them for a bit until they went inside. A cop asked me to empty my pockets, so I did. I followed the line a little more, and then I got the stuff from my pockets back in a plastic tub. The elevators also had long lines. It was irritating, but I thought the lines would be a good excuse in case I got bitched at. While I was squeezing into an elevator with twenty other sweaty people, I could practically taste the excuses in my mouth. They were tart and salty, like little kippers or herring. I imagined them on a little Ritz with some capers and a little piece of dill. Anyone who wanted to bitch me out could eat that, man.

Outside the elevator on the third floor was a line of people sitting in a row of chairs. I pushed out of the elevator and grabbed one for myself. The chair had a cushy black vinyl seat and back, although the arms were just chromed steel, no pads. It was low to the ground, which was very good. I stretched my legs out in front of me. The soft vinyl-covered foam curved gently behind my shoulders and under my neck. It was spectacular. I rolled up my scarf for a pillow and let my head fall back.

I jerked awake when I heard the sounds of a TV coming from an open door down the hall. I noticed the chairs around me were empty now. I had a feeling I needed to be where the TV was—a good rule of thumb. I wiped the wet corner of mouth on my sleeve and stumbled through the

door into a much larger room. It was full of jurors. There must have been five hundred of them or more. I instinctively tensed up for a fight, but nobody even bothered to bitch at me. At the front of the room was a long counter with a black guy in a v-neck sweater behind it. The TV was on a rolling cart next to the counter, and all of the jurors were watching. On the screen, a mob of hooded druids were boiling a beggar in a big black pot. The voiceover remarked that the beggar might have preferred a trial by jury. Well, naturally. I paused for a moment to enjoy a burgeoning sense of purpose.

I walked carefully down the center aisle and found an empty seat next to a tall black guy with big plastic glasses. The seats in the jury room were those kind of stackable chairs that are bolted together in pairs. The arms and backs were straight and padded with black rubbery stuff and not at all like the cushy vinyl on the chairs in the hall. The legs were too long and the seat was too high for me to stretch out my legs. I tried folding them underneath me, one ankle over the other, and I guess that was comfortable enough. The black man on my left was switching his stare anxiously between his summons and the TV. He nudged me and indicated that he was Nigerian and had poor English. I communicated my sympathy. I refolded my scarf to fit under my jaw and nodded off.

Later, my head sort of fell over to the left and surprised me. I sensed that I was thirsty. Scanning the room carefully, I noticed that there were fewer jurors in the room now, like twenty or so. There was a water cooler by the up by counter where the man in the v-neck sat. I climbed over Nigeria and walked up to the cooler. A stack of paper cups in a plastic sack lay nearby, and I reached inside the sack to take one. The man in the sweater glared at me. A plaque on the counter identified him as the Clerk of Jurors.

"Now that's twenty-five cents, son," he explained. I narrowed my eyes to slits.

"Guess you gotta lock me up," I spat back. He dropped his hand to the telephone and lifted it to his mouth.

"We got one," he said. Then he grinned and laughed at me. I filled my little cup at the cooler and then emptied it slowly, finally crushing it in

my fist. The clerk laughed again, louder. I went back to my seat and hid my face in my arm.

Later on, Clerk crackled his microphone and announced that we were free to go. He made a point of saying that we were dismissed, not discharged. We had to come back at 8:45 the next morning. The day was over. It was around five, most likely. I don't know what happened to lunch. I must have missed it. I went straight home on the subway. It was dark when I got there, so I just got in bed and fell asleep.

Friday, November 14th

Friday morning was basically the same as Thursday. I stopped outside 141 and took a moment to observe my surroundings. I saw a breakfast cart, a pizzeria and a deli. There were two parking garages, one behind the building and one underneath it. There was a storefront for a psychic and a stationery store, too. It looked like downtown Brooklyn, since it was. You'll forgive me for not mentioning that shit earlier, since you probably figured it out already.

I waited in a few lines. I crammed in a sweaty elevator with some strangers. I went to the jury room and took my seat next to Nigeria. On the TV, Ed Bradley was explaining that jury service was burdensome but vitally important to our way of life. While agreeing, I nodded myself softly to sleep.

I heard Clerk call out my name on his microphone. There were only eight people left now, including Nigeria and myself. He and I were sitting together in our paired seats, surrounded on all sides by rows and rows of mostly empty chairs. There was also a Vietnamese guy, two black ladies, another black dude, a lady who was probably Indian or maybe Pakistani, and this other guy who was a white guy like me but older by twenty years at least. They all had names, but I can't say them because there's probably a law against it and besides I never bothered to learn them. A young man in a suit led us all to a much smaller room in single file. I wondered if all eight of us would be on the jury together. I thought of a good subtitle: "Twelve (or Eight) Angry (or Contented, or Indifferent) Men (or Women) (of Various Ethnic and National Heritages)

(Representing a Cross-Section of the Brooklyn Community)".

In the smaller room, a different man in a suit and a blonde girl were waiting for us. They introduced themselves as lawyers and told us to sit. The seats were low-slung, worn, fabric-covered stackers. The seat was rigid and the fabric was coarse and uncomfortable. The back too low for my to rest my neck on, and the arms had black plastic covers, like mockeries of real armrests. The lawyers explained that they were going to ask some questions and then do some selecting. I remember Nigeria looking confused. I twisted my hips to the left and set my cheek into the palm of my hand. This wasn't very comfortable, but somehow I made it work. I heard some people talking. Then there was some more talking, and some time passed.

The man lawyer called my name and I sat up. This was my moment. I'd heard from some knowledgeable people that if I handled the Q&A portion correctly, I could spring myself from the rest of service for five whole years. I had even prepared some responses:

A) Yes, sir. I believe all drugs should be decriminalized. I will not convict your dope pusher under any circumstances.

B) No, sir, I am fundamentally opposed to capital punishment. I will not recommend the death penalty in any case, regardless of the evidence.

C) Yes, sir. I hate the Jews. All of them. In fact, I consider my surname to be a Zionist conspiracy.

When Man Lawyer's question came, though, it was a real ballbreaker. He asked: "Mr. Ancowitz, do you have any strong feelings about personal injury lawsuits?" After some consideration, I was forced to admit that I didn't. I don't know why I get so sincere when I'm caught off guard. It's a flaw. After hearing that, Man Lawyer pronounced me Juror-Number-Six.

We got sent home after that. It was probably around one-thirty, so we'd just missed getting a lunch break. I left the building and stopped at a deli on Clark St. by the N. I got a turkey melt, which is like a tuna melt, but with sliced deli turkey instead of tuna. I got American cheese for the cheese. I got it on a hero roll, because I was feeling pretty hungry. I also got lettuce and tomato and mayonnaise. I've heard a lot of people say that they don't like mayonnaise on a hot sandwich, but you know what? I think it's actually really, really good. On a meatloaf sandwich, too. I like to meatloaf sandwiches on hero rolls, too, because I'm usually pretty hungry. I ate it all the way home, where I got straight into bed and fell asleep.

Saturday, November 15th

The sun was streaming in the window when I woke up on Saturday. I closed the blinds and got back under the sheets. It must have been ten or eleven. In the morning, I think. Yeah, it would be the morning, wouldn't it?

Sunday, November 16th

The sun was *trying* to stream in the windows when I woke up on Sunday, but no joy. Ha-ha. Still, I imagined that I could hear the little light particles pinging off the slats of the blinds, like a chorus of millions and billions of tiny screeching voices dying every infinitesimal subdivision of a second. This depressed me, so I got up and went across the street to the Pavilion to see *The Matrix: Revolution*.

I watched with rapt attention. It was really fascinating in the context of mandatory jury service. Think about it: when a person is suffering some injustice at the hands of a anything with more than two eyes, then I think it is proper and correct to take justice into one's own hands, as they say. Particularly if the eyes are red. Furthermore, where would you get an impartial jury of your peers if everyone else in the world was a hundred million copies of the same guy? I didn't enjoy the movie itself very much, though. I crossed the street back to my apartment and got back in bed. It was probably five. Maybe six.

Monday, November 17th

On Monday morning, I waited in the couple of different lines and removed and replaced the

contents of my pockets. If you're curious about what was in my pockets the whole time, I'll tell you: a pack of Trident Original flavor sugarless gum, some quarters for laundry, my phone and my house keys. All these things have metal in them, so I had to take them out every day. And so it goes. Then the elevator line, and then the jury in the jury room. Diane Sawyer was on TV explaining that jury duty was a hassle but necessary to the proper functioning of the democracy. I observed that this was Ed Bradley's point, too. I couldn't see Nigeria anywhere. I wondered if he hadn't made the cut. I worried after him a little, and then took a nap.

Clerk called out the name of our case. Seven people stood up, so I did too, making eight. I recognized some of them; others I'd never seen before. We lined up in single file and a bailiff led us back to the elevator and up to the fourteenth floor. There we encountered another jury room, but this one was much smaller and reserved only for us. At this point I got a little confused, because sometimes there were six jurors, and other times there were eight. The bailiff kept taking the same two away and then bringing them back, almost like he couldn't decide. Also, sometimes the bailiff was a woman.

I took a seat for myself around the jury room's beat-up conference table. The seats here were similar to the ones in the jury selection room, but a little bit nicer. The fabric wasn't as coarse, and the cushion was a little softer. I decided to try the same maneuver that had worked yesterday. I twisted my hips to one side, wedged my elbow against the wall, and put my chin in the palm of my hand. I found I could sort of lift one knee up onto the seat. This wasn't too bad at all.

Later, Bailiff came back through the other door and told us to line up. I'd never done so much lining up in my life, but I think I can humbly say that I was improving with practice. I was able to do it without even waking up all the way. We were led into the courtroom in formation. We marched past the bailiff's desk, around in front of the judge's little stable, past Man Lawyer and Girl Lawyer, and then around again against the left wall. Eight seats were arranged in two rows there, in front of a window that stretched the whole length of the courtroom wall.

The jurors' seats were carved wooden chairs mounted on pivots in the floor. I was a little apprehensive at first, seeing the wood. But after we stood in front of our seats and the judge told us to sit, I was happy to find that these juror chairs were very, very comfortable. The seats were carved so that they kind of cradled your ass. The back and arms were one continuous curving piece of wood, and the surface was smooth and cool against my neck as I slouched in it. It was better than the massage chair at Brookstone. Amazingly, the pivot in the floor let you turn the chair from side to side and also rock back and forth. I turned myself around to the left and leaned far, far back, peeping the Brooklyn vista from the fourteenth floor. It was all sooty and gray, but in a way that really thrilled me. I turned back around and faced the judge. He had a moustache. It moved from side to side as he spoke.

I'm not going to go on and on about the part that followed because I'm a little hazy on the details. First Man Lawyer talked for a while and then Girl Lawyer got up and talked too. A little Dominican boy came in and sat by the judge. Man Lawyer and Girl Lawyer both asked him some questions, and he answered in a very small voice. I couldn't really hear, and that was irritating to me because the microphone was right in front of him and he wasn't using it. I didn't feel very sympathetic to him, so I sort of looked at my knees for a while. When I looked back, it wasn't the little boy anymore, but an older man with the same complexion but way worse skin. Man Lawyer and Girl Lawyer got up and repeated the question routine. The man didn't speak English, though. He only spoke through an interpreter, who was a very elegant looking Argentine fellow with a shiny patent leather briefcase. I don't hear people speak in foreign languages very frequently, so instead of listening to the interpreter's English translation, I tried to listen carefully to the man's Spanish and figure out what he was saying. Oh, yeah--every once in a while, Girl Lawyer would get up and complain. The judge usually waved his hand at her because he was annoyed. I didn't feel very sympathetic to her, either. She seemed bitchy.

After the man was finished talking, the judge sent us all to lunch for an hour and a half. I walked around the shops on the Fulton Mall. I thought for a while that I might buy some clothes, but they were all too baggy. Then I went to a little underground restaurant and got curry chicken

with rice and beans and fried plantains. God, fried plantains are so good. After that, I went to Toys-R-Us to play Xbox for the rest of lunch, but they didn't have the video games set up so you could play them. I figured that was probably because we were in Brooklyn and not Manhattan. Racist fucks.

I went back to the courtroom after that big letdown. I lined up and lined up and lined up and lined up and sat down and listened to this black girl talk for a while. She seemed very nervous, and I felt a little sorry for her. Girl Lawyer was her lawyer, and since she was particularly bitchy through this part, I went back to being only indifferent about the black girl. The story was some people had stopped their car at a stoplight. It was raining. I guess it was slippery and dark. After the first people stopped, someone else came up and hit them. It wasn't clear if this was by accident or on purpose. It didn't seem like the lawyers could decide between themselves, and the judge also didn't seem to want to say one way or the other whose fault it was. If I'm not sure whether the accident was on purpose, how am I supposed to decide who gets the settlement? Also, maybe there was an oil slick on the road. No one mentioned it; why not? What were they hiding?

Later, after the black girl was done talking, the judge said we could go and come back again the next day for closing arguments and deliberations. And that's pretty much what I did. It was five or five-thirty, and nighttime already because it was November. I felt tired, so I got in bed and slept.

Tuesday, November 18th

Tuesday was a whirlwind of activity. After waiting in line, I waited in line. Then I waited in a line. I tried to sleep in the first jury room, but I was taken to the fourteenth floor before I had made any progress. Then I tried to sleep in the other jury room, but the bailiff put us in another line. Back in the courtroom, Man Lawyer and Girl Lawyer talked for a while, but about familiar sounding things, so I didn't pay a lot of attention. I tried to stretch out a little while the judge spoke, but he didn't have very much to say and we were taken back to the jury room before I had a chance to relax.

Bailiff left the six of us sitting alone around the conference table. I looked around. There were some pictures and a packet of papers on the table.

I noticed again that Nigeria wasn't there and I wondered what he was doing these days. The Vietnamese started talking in an argumentative tone of voice. I rolled my scarf up between my head and the wall and nestled against it. Everybody talked for a while and then sometimes they'd sign one of the lines in the packet of papers. When the packet came around to me, I signed it, too.

After that was done, Bailiff brought us back into the courtroom. We all took our seats and the Vietnamese guy read to the court from the packet of papers. The lawyers got very tense, but the judge mainly just nodded. I noticed some seagulls flying in spiral shapes outside the window. I wondered why they should be called seagulls since the only local bodies of water are harbors, rivers, bays, canals, and tidal estuaries.

Then Bailiff lined us up once more time and we retired to the jury room. Now we sat for a long time. I could hear a lot of arguing in the courtroom, but all of the jurors stayed pretty quiet. A couple of the overachieving jurors tried to solve the Kobe Bryant case too, but the others took naps. I did, too.

Bailiff took us into the courtroom one more time. I noticed that both Man and Girl Lawyers looked mighty peeved and tried really hard not to look at us. The judge was very cheerful though, so I didn't worry about the lawyers too much. Judge talked for a while about how he appreciated the work we'd done even though we hadn't come close to finishing. He didn't go into details about what we didn't do, or else I don't remember. Then he said we were discharged and told Bailiff to take us away. I was so happy, I felt like cheering. We went back down to the first jury room and waited while Clerk gave us certificates and little key chains shaped like gavels. After that, we all split up and left.

I went straight home on the subway. When I got there, though, I felt strangely anxious. I didn't

feel like sleeping at all, so instead I walked across the street to Prospect Park and walked around. I went to one of my favorite places, with is the big hill on the south side of the park that has to be the "Prospect" that they're talking about in the name. I climbed up all the stone steps from terrace to terrace until I was at the very peak of the hill. A little below the highest terrace is a round clearing in a bunch of trees. The grass in the clearing was high, but it was late in autumn and the grass was mostly wet and rotting. While I was looking at this, I imagined for a bit that it was springtime instead. I imagined a maypole in the center of the clearing, and I imagined my fellow jurors and me dancing around it. Clerk was there, and so was Nigeria. Bailiff, Judge, and Man and Girl Lawyer were there, too. Girl Lawyer even had bunches of fresh flowers woven into her braids. Everyone was holding the end of a piece of maypole ribbon, and we all bobbed under or over the other guys' ribbons as we laughed and hopped and danced. All the while, sunshiny light kind of gleamed off of all of our faces. Imagining all this felt pretty good to me. It felt like Justice.

Freehand Fred

Whit Frazier



I

It rained all morning, and underneath the gray sky, Fred found himself feeling about as weary as he could get. His room was dark and cluttered; beside him sat an almost empty bottle of whisky, an overturned ashtray, and a glass of melted ice. He got up and his head began to pound, and even the bright dull of the gray sky was too much for him. He squinted, turned around, and collapsed back onto the bed.

He thought he was going back to sleep again, but every time he tried to lie still, his head would start to pounding against his head, so violently that his whole body seemed to wanna shake in rhythm to it. So Old Fred dragged himself up out of bed, stumbled out of the bedroom, into the bathroom, turned on the sink and splashed his face with cold water. Then he took a good long look in the mirror.

Old Fred was getting kinda thirsty, his whole body felt all dried out, like he was dying of the bubonic plague or something, so he wandered back into the bedroom, picked up the glass of melted ice, and carried it back with him to the bathroom where he'd left the cold water running. He poured out the old contents, rinsed the glass, and let in the new. As quick as a drummer breaks beats, Old Fred had drained himself an entire glass of water, and was filling his glass up again for seconds. The phone rang.

Fred let it go. He didn't know what time it was, especially with the sky being all gray and rainy, but he figured it was too early for him to be receiving phone calls, no matter what, and with each new buzz, his face frowned fresh.

Down went the second glass, and Old Fred was beginning to feel better. He made his slow way back to his bedroom, sat on the bed and lit up a cigarette.

Now that he no longer had anything he was actively engaged in doing, Fred started to regret his decision: 'I wonder who that coulda been,' he thought to himself, and kept looking back at the phone curious, as if it might jump up and tell him if he looked at it funny enough.

Nothing happened, so Fred got up and waved it off. 'Ah, makes no difference anyway;' and he stumbled his way on over to the stereo, put on a tape, hit play and sat back down on the bed.

'Now that's alright!' Fred thought, listening to the muted jazz coming from his stereo. It was his own band that he was listening to; Old Fred was the flute player. 'That's not bad at all...' and he thought of all his bandmates the night before, and he thought of himself, all of them up on the stage

playing- playing and swaying while the rest of the world did just whatever the hell it liked.

And given the chance, that's just what it did.

'I wonder where that girl ran off to anyway...' Old Fred muttered to himself.

But the music was changing again, and Jimmy was going off into a beautiful piano solo, running up and down the keys like little drops of water splashing in a pond in the rain, and that's just what Old Fred was thinking about, because directly outside his window there was a little pond, and he could see all the raindrops, and he heard the lucid piano, and the two of them seemed to have some kind of secret understanding with each other.

'Well that's nothing the musician doesn't know about already. After all, who do you think *creates* that secret understanding?'

And then Old Fred was really pleased, because the flute chimed in for its solo, and it seemed to sing in a key so pure and so pretty that to compare it to the songs of the birds would be to do it a harsh injustice. It was more like, or to Fred's mind at least, the singing of angels under the hypnotic spell of a perfumed night, or even the ghastly and beautiful lure of the sirens, calling away the souls of whatever poor listener chanced by.

'I wonder where that girl ran off to anyway...' Old Fred muttered to himself.

And suddenly he was tired of listening to the band. He turned down the stereo and stood up. He looked to the left, looked to the right, and then began to pace, back and forth. He picked up his empty glass of water, broke his pace routine, and strolled towards the bathroom. He took a long look in the mirror as he filled up his glass.

Old Fred had just exhausted his possibilities, and he didn't have anything left to do until he finished his new glass of water, at which point he would have to go get another, but until then- and he began to pace anew, and his head was still pounding, even though he felt a little bit better.

After a while, having done some reflection, and finding that he couldn't figure out who'd called him through pondering alone, he stopped next to his telephone, gave it one last curious look (just in case) and then picked it up and put the receiver to his ear. He heard the dial tone, which was what he expected, but maybe he was hoping the phone might let him in onto some kind of secret that he was overlooking. He put the receiver back slow, always looking at it kinda out of the corner of his eye, because he didn't trust it.

So she *had* to have left during the set, he decided. Because she was there backstage, right before he went on, and she'd been there the whole night up until then. She'd been with him. Hell, she

came with him! So she must've run off during the set, because after the set he couldn't find her. I know I'd been drinking and all, Fred thinks, but- and then people seemed like they didn't know anything all of a sudden, and- I know she's up to something, and I got all these friends of mine helping her cover her tracks!

Old Fred was beginning to get himself worked up, and his pacing quickened. His anxiety, the gray sky, the monotonous tune of the rain, the untidy and small cluttered room and the sound of the tuned out jazz captured in the background were all building up on him, and he was getting agitated and morose.

She *can't* have a problem with my *drinking*! Old Fred decided. Not the way that girl drinks herself, and I don't know what it could be. The flute player, that's what. The flute player never gets any respect, although if you ask me, it's one of the prettiest, *hell*, noblest instruments that a jazzman can play. But you know how it is with them young girls these days, they have to have the sax player, or maybe the pianist- man, even the *drummer* gets the better deal than the flute player!

So went Old Fred, back and forth, just like his pacing, until he decided to give up thinking on the whole matter, and breaking his pacing route, turned around towards the bathroom where he could get himself another glass of water.

Old Fred emerged a moment later, sipping his water and frowning. He stopped just at the almost empty bottle of whisky that was lying on the floor. Looking at it just as curiously as he'd looked at the phone a few moments earlier, he stopped, picked it up, and began inspecting the bottle.

That's how a man ought to begin his morning, thought Old Fred, and he pulled out the cork and gave it a long sniff, his nose jutting just into the open tip of the bottle. Good Lord, now that's good whisky. He corked it back up. Old Fred will make himself sick drinking this poison so early after last night's excursion.

And again the night started to reassert itself, and feeling a little better now, Old Fred made his way back over to the stereo, leaned forward and turned it back up. Another song was playing, but it was still his band, and everyone started to take shape in his mind again. Little Tommy was sitting behind the drums, keeping that cool pace that he was famous for; most young drummers just want to beat away at the instrument. Little Tommy sure knows how to treat that instrument right though; like it's a woman: he has the tenderness.

Though it does a man no good, thought Old Fred, to treat a woman with that tenderness. A lot of thanks you'll get back in return. Disappearing

acts in the middle of the night while you're breaking a sweat trying to earn your bread, butter and whisky. *Hell!* I don't even remember rightly who was there that she might've run off with, coulda been anyone really. At least I know it wasn't no one from the band, cuz they were all there. Sure was one hell of a jamboree! That's probably the best one we've had down here in the past twenty years. Hell, but at least it couldn't have been one of the bandmembers. But that's how jazz fellas are- they're tight and can trust each other- they stick together and look out for one another.

But sly Frankie's sly trombone started to creep out of the sides, playing a low, sultry, lilting rhythm and it struck old Fred as kind of tricky. It was certainly very pretty. It seemed to creep around the edges of the piece, and slide unnoticed beneath, like it was up to something, and Old Fred got to thinking about sly Frankie's thin little mustache, and his small sharp eyes, and he thought, but what if it was a band member?

What if she slipped off during the show to go see a bandmember later on- meet up with him somewhere, and since the fella woulda been playing with Old Fred, Old Fred would be none the wiser. In which case it could be anyone. It could be sly Frankie, with his thin mustache and his silky way of talking.

"That scoundrel," Old Fred muttered, "but it can't be true." And he realized he was getting upset again, so he stood up, finished his water, and continued to pace, back and forth, just like his thoughts.

He stopped thinking up conspiracies, and started remembering the good times hanging out the night before, after the show, playing cards with sly Frankie, Jimmy and Little Tommy. Old Bo was there too, not to mention Slide guitar Clyde. They'd been talking and joking, talking about women and talking about drinking and talking about all sorts of different things, and that'd been all right. Old Fred hadn't let his mind wander once all evening, wit poured from his lips like wine from a man who's had himself a little too much of it. He'd made himself a good amount of money on the cards, and he'd just been laid back, whistling, drinking and not doing too much thinking.

That's how a man ought to carry himself, Old Fred started thinking again, and broke his pace for the bathroom to have another glass of water. He emerged from the bathroom a few minutes later, the glass filled up in his hand while he looked down at it with a kind of distasteful frown.

"I've had too much of this stuff," he grumbled. "The Good Lord knows its no good for me." And having arrived at this conclusion he set it down on the floor, and in exchange picked up his bottle of whisky. Again he uncorked the bottle and took a sniff. "It's like jumping into a pit," he said aloud, "but I'm about ready to make that jump." And with that he took a good long swig off the old bottle. Old Fred got dizzy right away. His head felt light and he had to sit down. He reached for his glass of water, and he thought to himself, oh I've done it now. He finished the water off in seconds flat, but feeling just a little too funny to stand back up, he collapsed backwards onto his bed. Now there was no getting away from it:

So if she run off with someone, isn't there any way to figure out *who*? Hell, I don't know what she did one way or the other. For all I know she was out saving a bunch of goddamn children from a burning church. Hell, when I find out whoever it is!

And Fred began to concoct in his head a wild idea of how he might trail her while she thought he was still playing onstage. Well I got to know that Slide guitar Clyde isn't the guilty party first, but he kinda has my build and look. If he could dress up like me, and you know, he can't play flute, but if he just pretends he's real drunk no one will suspect it's not me up there, and then I could slip out real quiet like, and follow her out- at a safe distance of course, and then- if I bring my pistol, just in case I get attacked- or she does, or who knows what might happen in the middle of the night, well then I can be at the bottom of the mystery once and for all.

Old Fred felt much better about everything having come up with this plan, so much so that he even regained the strength to sit on back up, look around weary, move toward the stereo and turn it up. Some other band had come on, and the tape had been left running.

These guys ain't so bad, Old Fred thought. I mean, they don't play like we do, but they's young guys, what do you expect? I hardly even remember them playing. Yeah, I remember now, they were alright. Old Jim and I were drinking shots backstage, Little Tommy kept trying to find someone who would go outside with him and smoke some reefer. Hell, I woulda even gone, but I had my old lady to find and attend to- a lot of reason that turned out to be!

So Little Tommy had gone out all by himself to smoke his reefer, while the rest of the boys sat backstage and drank down shots. Before long, the cards were broken out, and the gambling man that he was, once the deck hit the table, Little Tommy

came stumbling right back inside, a silly old grin across his face, and a bottle of beer in his hand. He flipped a chair around and looked at everyone, his eyes shot blood red, his face wide and relaxed in the orange light with his slack grin. "So what's the game?"

"You're asking to lose money tonight, High Time Tommy!" Old Fred had laughed.

"You'll be the only one losing tonight," Little Tommy grinned back.

Cards were dealt, plays were played, bets were made... Old Fred lay back on the bed.

It's a rough life I make my poor old body live. I got to give it up. Maybe retire someplace quiet. Set down with my flute by the water or something, and only drink when I'm thirsty. It's a rough life, I tell you. It'd be better just me and my old lady. Where the hell did she run off to last night *anyway!*

And the thought got Old Fred so agitated all of a sudden, that he stood right on up, and started to pace like it was the last thing he had left to do on earth. Back and forth, back and forth, not very much like his thoughts, because in his agitation his thoughts were all over the place, and he could only keep a slow linear pace, like those blues songs, he was thinking, that describe the most complicated and convoluted sorrows and anxieties in a simple, melodic rhythm that lull deceptively back and forth, the voice of the singer crooning on a smoothness that cracks with confusion.

It does me no good, anyhow, to think about this girl. She does whatever she does, and it doesn't bother me. For my part, I just wish I had some way of killing the time. I wish I knew who it was just called me a minute ago. And he shot another curious glance at his telephone.

The telephone gave a little shudder, and almost as a response, rang.

Old Fred looked at it curious, wincing and thought, there's no reason to bother answering it anyhow. But he was already making his way towards the phone. His face broke into a fresh frown each time it rang. On the fourth ring he picked up the receiver, put it to his ear real slow and said, 'hello? This is Fred speaking.'

He paused for a moment while the speaker spoke.

"Betty!" he yelled. "Where the hell did you run off to last night? How did you get home? You know you were supposed to come with me!"

Again he paused while Betty answered, his eyes rolling all over the room and his jaw pulled back in a proud snarl. Slowly, the snarl dissolved, his eyes stopped going wild, and sitting down on

the bed, reaching way over to pick up his bottle of whisky, he said a little softer, "wash and dress."

Again he was silent and this time looking a little sobered, sad and maybe broken, he took a good swig out of his whisky bottle, finishing, for all practical purposes, it's contents.

"Yeah baby, I'll be there. Of course I'll be there. Just give me an hour okay?" And sadly set down his receiver.

A little while later, looking clean, dressed and whipped into submission, like a dog with revolution in its heart, he opened up the door to his apartment, and went to go pick up Betty. Say what you will of him, he didn't forget to grab his pistol.

II

You ain't seen America until you seen it from a train. Well, bullshit, thinks Old Fred, winding his way down the highway in a dirty red Chevy Nova, so old it still has four doors, and would once have been considered something of a luxury car. The thing still runs as smooth as butter though, and he and it have memories that go a long way back, back to when he was still a young man. Well, fortysomething anyway thinks Old Fred, and he smiles ironically to himself. Sure, a fine summer morning in your trusty old car can sure stir up the memories.

And a fine summer morning it was indeed. Out here, well outside Chicago and driving in, the Illinois sun beat powerful down on the glowing maize fields, the bright colors complementing each other, and doing so quite politely. The fine warm breeze chasing you into the city, and all the music made by the invisible orchestra of crickets and birds, locust and lawnmowers way off in the distance, letting you know that somewhere around here someone is living their life. You sure don't see 'em, Old Fred thinks to himself smiling full smile now, you don't see no one, and there's no shame in that. Hell. This was Fred's favorite type of weather. It started out raining all morning long, so bad it looked like it wasn't gonna ever stop, but here it was, late morning, soon enough it would be noon, and the rain had gone, and the sun come up, and there was the coolness of a passing rain mixed with the warmth of a late Illinois summer morning mixed with the battling humidity that swept in and out in waves with the breeze. But Fred was romanticizing too, and he knew it. He liked the country, sure that was true enough, he loved the air, he loved the rich smoky smells, he even loved the insects- and even the mice. He'd an old saying that it was a clever man came up

with the tale of the country mouse and the city mouse, because he'd be damned if there wasn't a world of difference, like country folk and city folk.

Truth was, Old Fred loved the city with all his heart. He loved Chicago, really didn't have much of an opinion on many other cities, on many other places than Illinois to tell the truth. But Chicago was alive, and Chicago was where his jazz was, and his clubs, and his entire social existence, and if Old Fred had been forced to live in rural Illinois all his life he'd a let the whisky do him in long before now. Besides, Betty lived in the city.

This was a sore point for Old Fred, and he didn't like to go to pondering it too much, 'cuz it got him down, but Betty and his music was about all he had left in life. And it wasn't the same with the music anymore anyhow. Not like when he was young, and he had all these aspirations and dreams and hopes, and he and the guys would sit up playing dice and jazz and drinking whisky and talking about how sure, Lady Day had Soul, but Bessie Smith had Power and she had Soul, and how sure, what Dizzy and Bird were doing was revolutionary, but it *wasn't* Mingus, and listen to this new sound I'm working on now. It had lost that excitement because it had lost that hope. Not that Old Fred didn't love playing still, loved nothing more, except for Betty maybe, and even that was different from back when he was young- he'd a never put a gal before his music.

Betty was young. Betty was only twenty two, and Fred got kind of weird about that sometimes. He had no problem, of course, with enjoying the caresses of a beautiful young woman, but really she was the boss, because Fred didn't have money, he sure didn't have looks, although back in his day he didn't do half bad for himself, and she knew that he was getting more out of the relationship than she was. So he was always scared she was running off with someone or other. Old Fred just smiled. Don't make sense anyways, he'd say to himself, why would she stay with a broke old man like me if she didn't like me? And that seemed to satisfy him.

Sure, a fine summer morning in your trusty old car can sure stir up the memories, but Fred's approaching Chicago now, and he's on his way to see Betty. It's not too far now, right up the street, and here he is. He gets out of the car, heads on up to the apartment and buzzes her. "Who is it?"

"It's *me*, baby," Fred says.

"I'm on my way."

"Let me on up," Fred says.

The buzzer goes offline. Fred sticks his hands in his trousers. Must not a heard me, he mutters to

himself, and so he steps outside and lights up a cigarette.

A moment later Betty comes down, looking very pretty and coy in a long blue dress, cut low in the back, cut low in the front, her firm brown breasts just barely visible, and straps on the shoulders. Her hair is put up, she's wearing no makeup because she doesn't need it and she knows she doesn't need it, and her hourglass waist swishing, but high class high society style, real subtle. Fred almost forgets that he's still angry with her when he sees her come out the door, not that he remembered anyway, the ride had done him so much good, but now he's not even cynical about Betty, he's hugging her and kissing her and asking her how does she do.

"I'm just fine Frederick, but how are you?"

That's when he remembers about last night and he steps back slow, with dignity. "Well that's a good question," he says. "Just how am I? I don't know Betty, you ran off on me last night."

"Aw, you're not still sore about that are you?" she coos, and climbs into the passenger side of his car. Fred walks around and gets in himself. "Hell, what do you think baby? *Of course* I'm still angry about that. We were supposed to meet up after the show, and there you go doing disappearing acts on me. What am I supposed to think? Anyway," he gets real quiet. "I know who you run off with."

"How dare you!" she says. "What's that supposed to mean? I told you over the phone this morning I wasn't feeling well, so I took a cab home."

"With what money? I was paying for your drinks all night. Remember, you left your wallet at home."

"Oh that; I was just putting you on so you'd buy the drinks."

"*Goddamn* baby!" Fred starts the car and they go racing off. A couple minutes pass and neither one of them says anything. At last Old Fred speaks up. "Where are we going anyway?"

"I don't know, where ever you want to go."

"I don't want to go anywhere! I wanted to stay at home. It was you called me. *Goddamn* baby!"

"Aw, you're not still sore at me are you honey?"

"Yeah, I'm still sore. I don't even know what to believe from you anymore these days; you're lying about not having your wallet, disappearing in the middle of the night- after I bought all the drinks- *Goddamn*, baby!"

But Betty is laughing, and Old Fred gets a smile at it too, although against his will, because he must sound pretty funny, but all in all he knows he's in the right. But what's he gonna do anyway?

It's like he was thinking back on the rural roads, Betty's the boss, and there's no other way it could possibly be.

"I'll let it go this time," he says, suddenly remembering that he's got his gun, "but it sure ain't too much for a man to ask that his own good gal lets him know if she's gonna take off in the middle of the night- or at least leave a message."

"Well next time baby, I'll leave a message with somebody," she says. Old Fred looks over at her, and he doesn't like the way she said that, and he doesn't like that sly little smile she's wearing- well, that's not quite all true, he does kinda like that sly old smile, in fact he likes it a lot, he just doesn't like what it might be insinuating.

"Well there won't need to be a next time baby, that's all I'm saying," Fred says, and again he's smiling in spite of himself.

"Never know."

"Well don't make it tonight at least," he says and looks over at her again. Betty doesn't say anything.

"You do remember tonight don't you?"

Betty doesn't say anything.

"We're playing down at the Blue Beats club. It's a big gig. I'm gonna need my best gal there."

"Of course I remember Fred!" Betty says at last, "and what do you mean about that best gal bit? Are there other gals I should know about?"

"Oh baby if you only knew the half of it!" Fred laughs.

"What kind of thing is that to say?"

"I think it's damn nice of me," Fred insists, smiling. "All those gals, and I'm straight telling you you're the best. You got some heavy competition."

"I can believe heavy."

"Now baby..."

"You started it."

"And I ain't leaving you a dime when I die."

Betty laughs. "There goes my fortune, baby."

"Just wait, I'm gonna be famous. I mean, sure Dizzy and Bird were the tops, they were *revolutionaries*, right baby? But they weren't Mingus after all, and wait until you hear what me and the boys are gonna break out with tonight."

And Old Fred is in hysterics, and Betty would be too, you can tell by the big smile on her lips, but she's looking at Fred in a way that arrests her smile, and Fred sees those eyes and he stops laughing, he's still smiling, turns his head away and says through a big grin, "*goddamn*, baby!"

"I wish I coulda met you when you was younger," Betty says very softly, like an accidental sigh escaped, and she looks away, blank ahead immediately after.

“Hell, and what does that mean?” Fred says real quiet, which descends into another silence. The city is speeding by them at Fred’s breakneck speed, and suddenly they shoot through onto the highway and head towards the sun, where Fred knows the rurals of Illinois await them.

“Where are we going Freddy?” Betty asks softly.

“I thought I’d just take us for a drive, just me and you and this here old car. A lot of memories in this car. It’s not much we get time to be alone like this anyway, we’re always places, bars, jazz joints, hanging out with musicians. It’s fun, baby, sure, but we need our own time too. With me living way out here, and you in the city. A man gets to thinking.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. You know, I’ve been getting to thinking. Maybe I should move into the city. We could get a place. Don’t worry baby, I’d pay all the bills. I need to be closer to my music anyway, it’s hell sometimes, living all the way out where I do, and I take chances all the time. Hell, baby, I *drove* home last night. I know that doesn’t strike you the same it strikes me, but you didn’t see how blind I’d got myself by the end of the night. And there I was, driving all the way out of Chicago into the rurals. And it ain’t the first time I done it either. Probably won’t be the last. Not unless I move. No one can beat the odds forever. And then there’s you, reason number one. Reason number one, baby, and I’m being dead down straight, painfully straight with you.”

Betty doesn’t say anything.

“Well there’s no need to say nothing yet, baby, it’s just a thought. Hell, however you think. If you don’t want me in the city I won’t do it, there’s no point complicating things. But you should think about it some.”

“I want to dance tonight Freddy,” Betty says.

“Dance? Sure baby, sure. Why not?”

“You know, like we used to do? You can do your set, and then we should just get drunk and dance and be fools like we used to do, and get laughed at, but still be having a better time than anybody else there.”

“Well it’s a plan.”

“And I want to play cards.”

“Play cards?”

“Yeah, with the boys, like you do, and lose too much money.”

“What are you talking about baby?”

“And smoke reefer with Little Tommy.”

Fred laughs. “Who told you about all that?” And then he gets serious. “How do you know what he does anyway?”

Betty looks at him stern. “Not this again Frederick. I saw him go out last night and smoke on my way out.”

“But you were gone *before* he went out to smoke.”

“No I wasn’t. I saw him plain. Your band took about a five minute break and he went out and smoked a reefer. He saw me out there and asked me if I wanted a little bit, but I said no.”

“You’ve got it all wrong baby, he smoked that reefer *after* the show, right before we played cards.”

“Maybe he did and maybe he didn’t. But I know he smoked one during the ‘pause for the cause,’ and she giggles.

“And you didn’t smoke with him?”

“No Freddy, of course not. You know I don’t do that stuff, and besides, I was sick already, I didn’t want to make myself *really* ill.”

“No, I guess not.”

“You’re paranoid, that’s what’s wrong with you honey. I’m with you and I trust you. I wish you’d do as much for me.”

Old Fred just grunts. “It’s beautiful country out here, isn’t it though,” he says a moment later, and looks over at Betty who is staring straight ahead.

“Sure Freddy.”

“Anyway, we’ll do some dancing tonight. We’ll tear the place up. But today’s special too. Just remember that, you don’t have to say anything. It’s just nice having you here.”

And that’s exactly how Old Fred feels, because suddenly underneath the rural Illinois sun, and in the middle of all the long stretches of corn fields, and inbetween the songs of the locust and the cricket he feels a slow lazy peace creep up on him, inside the car, blowing through the car, in the warm breeze pushing them back into the city. And for just a little while, with Betty there in the car beside him, and with all this space and speed and freedom, he really does feel as if he’s young again, as if there are still hopes beyond being allowed to move into the city and be miserable, beyond a few more drinks, a few more times with a pretty girl, a few more tunes turned out at the bar, and death. Betty looks like she’s feeling something of the same thing too, but Old Fred doesn’t want to push his luck. She’s sitting there, all tucked away and silent, gazing ahead, slightly smiling... of course she doesn’t *have* to feel young again, she’s already young, she still has hopes and ideas and futures to plot out. But Old Fred starts to think that maybe that’s worse because she’s still got something to lose. All he has to lose is

her, and if he ever does lose her he'll know he never had her to lose to begin with.

It seems like it should be sad, but Fred thinks all these things, and he's feeling very happy and contented. Sure, a fine summer morning in your trusty old car can sure stir up the memories. And he turns to Betty thinking for the first time in a long time that maybe he can create new ones:

"Say Betty, nothing like a day like this in an old car. You don't have to say anything or anything, but it sure can give you a feel of life, of the world, of America and where you are and what you've been doing you're whole life just driving around like this, with no particular place to go."

Betty laughs and looks at him sheepishly. "Silly old man. Everybody knows you ain't seen America until you seen it from a train."

III

The moon breaks its way through the trees, but nothing else stirs and the sudden silence feels very empty. So this is loneliness Betty. All around me the grand chestnut trees hang silently, gloomy witnesses, and the still leaves feel like this restless absence.

There were so many dreams we had together girl. There were so many nights we spent together that convinced me there was substance to these dreams, like a shared feeling at the bottom of a beautiful blue solo. Our memories girl, yours and mine. Our shared memories. The way we would talk together like we wouldn't talk with no one else, and the way we looked at each other, and the strangeness of us, me being old and you being young and all the ways that made us seem closer together not farther apart. These things were real, weren't they? Say they were all the fantastic imaginations of an old man, say they were only that, like feeble, like senile murmurings in the middle of a lively song, and suddenly you put out the sky. When I was up there playing Betty, I was playing those songs for you. When the audience was out there swaying Betty they were swaying for you, only they didn't quite know it. When we kissed, when you kissed me, when I kissed you, we kissed with so much soul, so much soul I couldn't even blow into a flute so much soul and prettiness the way we kissed, and there is no sky Betty, hell there isn't anything if there wasn't that.

So this is loneliness Betty. Like finding yourself outlived one morning, like maybe twenty years ago when you knew you blew it, and by blew it you meant everything, that you blew life, and that you were still trying and kept telling yourself you were noble and knowing the whole

time you was just a coward, and then you try to recapture it. It's like children Betty, like trying to keep going. Like knowing you blew it. Maybe that's all it was, and then that's all anything is, all we were Betty, all anything is, like knowing you blew it and trying to keep going, and trying to get back what you blew and knowing all the time, blowing energy into what you did once love, onstage, everyone watching, and only you knowing you blew it, and trying to keep going, and having children and having a Betty, and watching yourself dying in their youth, but them not knowing your secret, one so deep you'll never let anyone know it, not even yourself, your secret, you blew it. And you know it and Betty knows it and all those children, they knows it, and there you are, blowing out your soul onstage, and nobody lets on to anyone, not even themselves, that they know it. So you got a whole room full of music and sound and color and liveliness, and everybody knowing you blew it and nobody knowing nothing. That's all it comes down to Betty.

There were so many dreams we had together girl. Do you remember that time we took a boat all the way to Paris, and they was gonna pay for me to play out there? Sure you do girl, and I felt something in that. We were on that boat and we was dancing and drinking and carrying on, you know the way we do, and then some fancy young man in a smart suit comes up to you and wants to take you away. Do you remember that Betty? And how me and him, we got into a fight, and how he said he would throw me on over into the ocean, and I said I'd like to see him try, 'cuz not if I got him thrown over first, let me be an old man even if I am? And then that time we was just walking along after a show, and you picked me a flower, and old fool that I am I stuck it in my hat, happy as a rabbit in his hole? Then you said you didn't even want to be seen walking next to me, some crazy old man with flowers in his hat, just strutting his way along. We have so many good memories girl, so many good ones, like when I would come on by your apartment, and there I was trying to teach you to play a flute, and holding your hand and showing you the fingering, and there you were, playing those raspy notes, and sounding horrible and you just screamed and offered me some hot coffee. Well, I don't much like coffee Betty, but you never knew that because how could I resist just sitting there drinking coffee and talking with you? Sure Betty, it gets me to thinking that maybe I'm wrong, that maybe there is something, that maybe it's not all about blowing it and not being worth it anymore, and all

the youth and soul is gone and that was all that mattered. Because the soul is still there baby, and the youth is still there too, and it isn't just there 'cuz of you girl. You help, but it isn't just because of you. I go around places Betty. I have thoughts and feelings and emotions, and they're not the same as when I was a younger man, but then they couldn't be. A younger man couldn't have them. And maybe there's something more tired to me baby, something more defeated. Maybe I don't have the energy and the brightness and vivacity as when I was a young man, hell maybe I don't even have dreams anymore girl, and let's say I've outlived myself. Can't I play that too? Isn't there something in that as well, maybe something even more revolutionary than the unusual experimentation that fascinated me so much when I was young? That stuff was only kind of real, and others were doing it, and we were doing it but had maybe lost sights of why, and so we couldn't really take it anywhere. But this is all I got anymore Betty, this being older and sadder and less alive, and that's pretty in its way. And its not been done; hell, Betty it valid. It's damn valid. And that's why when I play up there I move them folks, and I mean the young and the old, because what I have in me is something everyone's got in them, only it's waiting to unfold in the young, like some terrible prophecy, and they hear me play that flute, and something in them starts to laugh and cry hard. Like the way I touched you girl. Like how I got to your soul. And you can't say there was never anything there, that I never touched you deep in your heart, like you were looking directly into this prophecy and loving me for it, and learning from me through it. I saw the way you looked at me sometimes, wishing I was younger sometimes, but that would be impossible; you wouldn't have loved me like you loved me if I was younger, and that's why I say the way I play is valid. That what I've got to say in my music is more valid now than ever. That as a failure I'm more successful than ever. Is that fair to say? Can an art of failure be an unparalleled success?

So this is loneliness Betty. Sitting here, looking out over the lake with the silver reflections from the moon running smooth over the surface. Looking at all the small stars hidden and vague behind the heavy leaves of the chestnut trees. Remembering youth and validating the present. Making excuses for yourself. The absence of you. Betty. And this horrible silence, initiated with violence, and then the slow drowned out roll of the jazz pushing in from the background, back at the club where they're swinging and drinking and getting high. Or your

body baby, lying there, all elegant and wonderful, sleeping beauty. No Night can fade your beauty. All of it, and everything, right now, where everything's just peaceful and sad, and the moment before which was all anxiety and anguish and hurt; confusion of the worst sort, and not knowing what to do, and acting out of my mind and knowing I'm acting out of my mind, and not even minding it. All back to now where it gets quiet and peaceful and sad, even sentimental with the drowned out jazz, just humming in the background. And then the next moment, finishing it all. Washing everything away, the bodies and a lake, and how much it's gonna hurt, and walking around in fear for the rest of my limited time, looking at folks and wondering what they know and wondering about that peculiar light in their eyes, and always wondering... Never being able to act straight with anyone again. Exile, baby. Exile around your own kind, exile in your own land, exile among those not your kind, exile in foreign lands. This constant terrified sleepiness, like just wanting to drop off, and feeling like you're going to any moment, and then not doing it because you're afraid, and going about like that everyday. And validating yourself, what you do, why the hell you're still alive, saying silly things to yourself, like fooling yourself into thinking your failure is a success, and other logical lies like that.

There were so many dreams we had together girl. Even today when we were driving through the rurals of Illinois, and the wind was blowing through the car, and we was talking and smiling, I know there were moments when we were as close as two people are gonna get. Just sitting there in that car, and neither of us needing to say anything to the other, just flying across the golden roads all thoughtless for love. And that was just today baby, that was just today, and now here we are at tonight, and I gotta wonder baby, what happened? And didn't I know it to begin with, waking up this morning, waking up without dreams, waking up drunk, waking up alone. Didn't I know? And then I go back and tell myself that I'm just being a foolish old man, that if I get to thinking about it, thinking about our memories, thinking about how I got nothing to give you but my love, and there wouldn't be any other reason for a young girl like you to be messing around with an old fool like me, that I should realize that we got something pure, that we got something real, like in the movies, like everyone wants to have and like everyone wants to think they have and like nobody does have, but we have it. But I don't know girl, that's obvious. I don't know what you were thinking, and I never will. I never would

have anyway, 'cuz you'd a never told me, and that's probably right, because I wouldn't understand. We were worlds away baby, we were conversing but it was like we were characters in two separate stories, conversing in their own way back and forth, but really we were worlds away, worlds that didn't even run by the same damn logic. And I think everybody's gotta be like that, because I always get to feeling lonely and down, even when I'm with you sometimes I just drift off and get to feeling lonely and down, and then even when I'm with the guys, well then a lot of the times I get to feeling lonely and down and blue, and then all I can think to do is play the flute, and believe it or not baby, a lot of the time that'll be just enough to help bridge up the gap a little bit. And it doesn't even matter, 'cuz I don't need to validate what I do anymore baby; I don't care anymore if I'm revolutionary, because I guess in my way I will be if I just play. I got nothing to play for. I got no hopes of victory, fame or fortune. Not even a tiny little glimmer, 'cuz my day is done. I got nothing to play for except sometimes when I'm playing and I'm playing good and it gets downright personal like I might just any minute break down and cry, I bridge that gap a little bit. And I like it when I do that, 'cuz I feel I'm getting close to people, I'm getting to know them, like I don't feel blue anymore.

And so this is loneliness Betty. When you don't know what you're doing or why you're doing it, and you're running around half the time just talking to people and trying to feel like you're getting somewhere with yourself and with others and you know at the bottom of it all you haven't gotten any damn place at all. When you're just plain living your life the way you feel you got to live it; when you're paying your bills, when you're eating your breakfast, when you're just walking on down the street, when you're watching TV. It's everything baby, when you're washing the dishes, when you're out with your friends, when you're out in a car with your best girl, and the wind and the breeze make you feel just perfect, when you feel that intimate connection between the two of you, like there ain't anything else to even consider in the world, when you're making love, especially baby when you're making love. And it only stops when you're performing. When you're playing those

notes, be it alone at home or in front of a crazy party; and then it's over, and then you're in the party and you're there with everyone else drinking and dancing and getting high while somebody else plays, but it don't matter none anymore that you're alone, 'cuz you can't feel it, 'cuz you played it out, and there you are just talking and laughing and socializing so glowingly it's almost like you jumped up in church and started speaking in tongues. And then there you are at life's best, and then you go home with your gal and you make love to her all night, and all that loneliness isn't there 'cuz you blowed it out early that evening, and you can keep on going with her like a man possessed. And that's just what I'll do tonight, only you won't be there tonight Betty to give it that special ending, but maybe I'll just go through Chicago and find myself a nice young girl on the street and I can take her back to your apartment and turn off the light, and it might as well be you if she's young. After all, don't nothing really exist anyway.

There were so many dreams we had together girl. And I'm gonna rediscover them tonight. I'm gonna run through them, our dreams, or memories, one by one, playing that flute like there ain't nothing else. I'm gonna close my eyes and play and play and play. Then the set will be done, and I'll be on fire, and then I'm gonna start drinking, and I'll smoke some reefer and I'll talk and laugh and socialize. I'm gonna kiss the pretty young girls, I'm gonna play cards and drink whisky with the guys, and I'm gonna get myself so damn blind it'll be lucky if I can ever see again. Then I'm gonna get in my car and go for a nice long drive out into the rurals, maybe drive all the way home. I'm gonna pick up all my most important things, and drink all the way back into the city, swerving around those damn city streets like a man gone mad. And that won't be the end of it. Then I'm gonna drive through the dark and shady streets of Chicago and find a nice young girl, she's gotta be young Betty, and pick her on up. I'm not gonna go cheap either, I'll get one of the best- a real professional baby. Then I'm gonna take back to your apartment and I'll holler your name all night long. After all, I been getting to thinking lately. Maybe I should move on into the city.

*There was an old man named Freehand Fred
Drank whisky all night til he seemed most dead
Used to dream of Sweden and he used to dream of France,
And he used to dream a gal called Betty AintgotSense*

*Now Betty Aintgotsense was as foolish as he
Theyd drink gin all night at the jamboree
Start to cursin and swearin til the break of dawn
And by the time they got to kissin ol Betty was gone*

*Betty Aintgotsense aint around no more.
She got killed one morning maybe three or four:
Fred come found her cheating down at Chestnut Lake
And when he shot her from the trees he felt his old heart break*

*There was an old man named Freehand Fred
Drank whisky all night til he seemed most dead
Used to dream of Sweden and he used to dream of France,
And he used to dream a gal called Betty AintgotSense*