

“I try to be a ray of sunshine in the life of everyone I meet,” she said, and then decided to stub out her cigarette in street, far away from the gas hoses Roberto was waving around.

“I think I have bad news for you, sunshine,” Roberto said, when she got back. “Looks like the tranny died.”

“Couldn’t it just be tranny fluid?” He showed her the suitably pink dipstick. “Ah. What’s a Ghia tranny cost these days?”

“A thousand and takes a couple of days.”

“It’s gonna take me more than a couple of days to get a thousand bucks together.” And pay the rent, and buy a new uke, and find a new steady money gig, and...

“How long?”

“If I can get a temp gig right away, couple of weeks; maybe more,” she said, after a review of her finances, which didn’t take long, and who she could tap for a loan, which took even less time. “What’ll you charge me for storage?”

“If you can get it outta here in three weeks, it’s on the house.”

“Ah, Christmas is early this year.” She gave his arm a grateful squeeze. “Four weeks?”

“Check back in three. See how I’m feeling.” Roberto closed the trunk.

“Give me a lift down to Wilshire?” Hackenbush tapped up a smoke and offered it to him.

“Sorry, my driver’s picking up parts in the valley.” He accepted the cigarette. “Bus that goes downtown stops across the street there. You can get a westbound at Wilshire and Fig.”

Get it, yes; like it, no. “Can you give me change for a five?” she asked politely.

“Well, that I can do.”

It was a shame that Hackenbush was unable to look down in a moving vehicle without getting nauseated. It meant she couldn’t read on the bus and had time to think.

Thinking while driving has a necessarily superficial quality to it. One is driving, after all, and crashing due to

thinking too hard doesn't go over well with the insurance company. Hackenbush never crashed her cars; they crashed internally or other cars crashed into them while parked. And it was hard to think in the go-carts she drove while part of her was willing it into continuing motion, moment by moment, mile by mile.

So she dreaded the bus. Not the company, nor the wasted time, nor the plastic seats, nor the scratched windows; none of that really bothered her. It was the hours she'd spend catching up on all the thinking she wasn't doing in the car or anywhere else.

How was Hackenbush, at age thirty-one, unable to pull together two thousand dollars on short notice? Or even fifteen hundred? Was her luck running out again? Why was she living on luck anyway? Savings: what a concept.

And the review went on and on. It helped to focus on the concrete. On the plus side, she had two hundred in the savings, a hundred in checking, about eighty in cash, a check coming for the past week at the Lotus Room (Tanaka was pissed, but he wouldn't hold up the band's money) out of which she would get five hundred.

On the down side she needed a grand for the car, two hundred for a new baritone ukulele, and then more money for rent, food, and transportation. And to get all this, she needed gigs, and lots of them, to keep her going. She couldn't gig until she got a new uke. Well, she could, but she got fewer just-singing jobs. Clubs and caterers hired *Dr. Hackenbush and her Orchestra* and that included a baritone ukulele, which she didn't have just then.

That left temp jobs. They were okay as long as they paid well and didn't go on too long. They were okay if there were any around. One thing in her favor was that it was only February and the students would all be in school or working nights and weekends only. That left a fairly good field of office jobs. Typing jobs. Jobs where you're worshipped if you can just get there on time. And if you can function, well, you might be elevated from idol to deity by lunchtime.

Temp jobs: friend or foe? She'd worked jobs at big, monster companies where temps had been there as long as

eight years. They might yet still be there. After eight years, they ought to hire that person, retroactive by seven years. But it just didn't work that way. A temp stayed on her toes or she (or he) was out. Eight years is a long time to be on your toes with no benefits. Or maybe they had benefits; Hackenbush had heard of agencies that would let you buy some benefits after a while. Yeah, buy; they're making sixty percent on top of your hourly labor and you can buy something they ought to give you if they had a decent...

"Oh thank God," Hackenbush groaned as the bus jerked to a stop and she could stop thinking this bullshit.

"For what?" the driver asked.

"It's not raining." They watched a shower start. "Ah. It's so good for the crops."

"Right, lady. Have a good day."

"Yeah, thanks buddy, you too." She hopped off the bus and dashed for the minimal awning across the sidewalk. Architects in Los Angeles either didn't believe in wet weather or never rode the bus or both. Anyway, no point in waiting for it slack off; LA rain never did when you needed it to—it could always outwait you. Lucky that Temporary Insanity was close by; sometimes fate let you outsmart the rain. Ha ha.

Anna Kodaly ran Temporary Insanity out of a couple of hundred square feet in one of the more modest and elderly towers on Wilshire between Westlake and Korea Town. It was cheap and cheerful; the building being neither new nor sleek suited Anna and her clientele down to the ground. She dealt in other peoples' needs; understaffed offices and cash-strapped free-lance secretaries preferred to face their problems without the distraction of pretentious décor and a fashionable address. Unlike her clients, Kodaly didn't need much in the way of an office, just phone and file space mainly. She was glad to have it after trying to work out of her apartment where a bad case of cabin fever took care of that idea for good.

So, the sole proprietor of Temporary Insanity looked up at the damp and bedraggled Hackenbush pushing open the door and smiled. It was always nice to see Hackenbush. Nice for Anna, meant she'd make a few bucks off the Hackenbush secretarial magic; not so nice for Hackenbush, who was

usually in a jam.

Kodaly had worked for a big agency before opening her own. In that time she'd noticed a few things, such as the best temps were usually in the arts and not making much money there. They were the ones who could find the address, get there, do the job and even leave a good, often excellent, impression. But to leave was the important thing; these people did good work because it was a short-term thing and didn't completely demoralize them.

So Anna saved her money and opened Temporary Insanity, casually letting a few of her best temps know where they could find her. They did and they sent their friends. Anna was unusual in that she could handle a cash-strapped and frustrated artist with grace and charm, and the artists loved her for it. She built a steady little business on placing actresses on phones, which they answered with well modulated, dulcet tones; poets on word processors, where they typed like furies and composed grammatical letters; and dancers rising on their powerful legs to usher well-heeled clients into boardrooms and even glide cheerfully away to get coffee for eleven (hey, it beat the hell out of being a waitress). And all the while these efficient, overeducated, often brilliant people were dreaming of their own work and bringing the focus, brains and perfectionism of that creative work into offices all over Los Angeles. Such workers were impressive, appreciated and gone, gone, gone as soon as they'd saved enough to get the hell out there. Thanks for the dough and the free coffee, see ya. Too smart for their day jobs, but not smart enough or lucky enough or whatever enough to make a living at their real work.

But even among the best of the best on Kodaly's books, Hackenbush stood out. Her bosses not only liked her and her work, they respected her. Hell, most of them went to hear her sing at least once. Hackenbush was impressive; she got things done, she anticipated what was needed, worked well under pressure, could follow even the stupidest instructions, worked hard and long hours when needed and was reliable. She gave everyone she knew the feeling that it was all under control. And she was exactly what Kodaly needed at Withers and

Sons, and needed now.

So her smile was part pleasure, part relief and a splash of regret when Hackenbush settled into the interviewee chair before her desk. “Heard about the Lotus Room, Mabel; sorry.”

“Man, the word gets around, don’t it, Anna?” Hackenbush accepted the proffered cigarette and ripped the filter off. “That scene happened less than twelve hours ago.” A study in studied cool, she was tidying up the ripped end before she put it in her mouth.

“Your bass player’s wife called first thing and needs a job until he finds another gig,” Kodaly told her. “I hear it was Shorty’s fault.”

“Only that a mean drunk went after him.” Hackenbush blew out a lungful of smoke and pinched a piece of tobacco off her tongue.

“And you got in the middle of it.”

“I thought I could talk him out of it,” Hackenbush said, tired of the subject. “I didn’t know smashing up my uke was just a prelude to smashing up the bar.”

“You could have stayed out of it.”

“Yeah, well, and he hurts Shorty, who, like me, has no health insurance, and then smashes up the bar and I’m still out of work and a gutless coward to boot.” Hackenbush stubbed out her mutilated cigarette and lit one of her own. “Better this way. I can’t pay for the car with my guts, but I do sleep better at night.”

“What’s with your wheels?” Kodaly asked, mentally reviewing the bus lines between chez Hackenbush and Withers and Sons.

“The transmission died last night.” Hackenbush winced a little; Kodaly was a good lady, but you never want to be too much at anybody’s mercy.

“All at once?”

“They’re like men, Anna; sometimes they warn you before they go, sometimes they just go.”

“I must remember that.” Kodaly was grimly amused and recalled that Hackenbush had not been so blasé when Eddy Lee dumped her four years ago. Ah well. “When it rains it

pours,” she said, reaching the file she’d had on her desk for the past three weeks.

“Comes in threes,” Hackenbush said.

“Oh? The bar is closed, your car is dead; what’s the third?”

“My baritone ukulele got smashed.”

“Oh, yes, you did say that.” Kodaly looked up. “I could lend you a hundred or so for a new one.”

“Thanks, maybe later. Still got that job you called me about three weeks ago?”

“As a matter of fact, I do. Can you start this afternoon?”

“Ah. Progress,” thought Hackenbush. She was momentarily relieved, but then got suspicious. “Your client waited three weeks for me?” she asked.

“Not exactly. You’ll be taking over from somebody who wants to leave.”

“Why do they want to leave? Eleven bucks an hour is good money for a secretary job these days.” She watched Anna close the file folder and sigh. Hackenbush sighed too, just to keep her company.

“Here the scoop, Mabel: I’ve had seven temps in there in the past three weeks,” Kodaly said, looking right into Hackenbush’s deceptively bland eyes. It was her ‘listening to the deal’ look; it meant she’d take the job, but needed all the facts. “These guys are a little goofy at this place. Not really mean, but playful.”

“What kind of playful?” Hackenbush asked, figuring if she could handle drunks (sort of), club owners, guitar players...

“Well, they’re not ass grabbers,” Kodaly said. “They’re booby trappers.”

“That’s worse, Anna, now c’mon...”

“No, no, I mean they set traps around the office,” Kodaly quickly explained.

“They what?”

“Set traps, you know, snares. Like changing the character set to Chinese on the computer, putting envelopes so they fall when the cabinet is opened, taking the add key off the calculator, telling a dirty joke on the Dictaphone. Things