

Well, at least he wasn't hard on the eyes. Medium height, triangle build; creamy, coppery skin you could practically ski on. In a turban and embroidered vest he'd do for an Arabian nights fantasy (as if she could be bothered with fantasy any more). Or without them. He was cute with a kind of distinguished edginess that Hackenbush associated with a tenuous grip on your socio-economic status and a deep and abiding need to keep up appearances. Ah, here was someone who cared enough about what other people thought that he might even be able to see their point of view and weigh their opinion, but only as it pertained to himself.

Resigned to action, Hackenbush took her foot off the Dictaphone pedal and a headphone off one ear and generated an interested look on her face. He said, "Hi," in a soft tenor that she thought was kind of cute. It had just enough whine in it to sound like a request for tolerance, if not approval.

But this was not the basso voice on the tape, Withers Junior's voice, or so she was told, so Hackenbush had no idea who this person was. She said, "Hi," just to be polite and waited for things to develop.

"I'm Frank Withers," he said eventually.

"Ah, one of the Brothers Withers?" Mabel worked up enough interest to ask.

"Half brother," he said.

"Half full or half empty?"

"Excuse me?"

"Sorry, never mind; it made sense before I said it." Hackenbush knew she was tired of a conversation when wit, his or hers, both or either, failed her. She adjusted the headband of her headphones meaningfully, wishing he'd go away and let her get on with transcribing the utterly fascinating real estate deal on the tape.

Smart guy or maybe sensitive, possibly polite or just able to see when a lady doesn't want to talk, Frank seemed to get the message, but didn't move. "I just wanted to introduce myself."

"Thank you."

"Bobby said your name is Mabel, but everyone calls you Dr. Hackenbush."

“That’s true, Mr. Withers,” she said, wondering how she could scare him away before he could ask...

“What kind of doctor are you?”

She leaned forward and looked around suspiciously. “Bobby didn’t tell you?” she asked in hushed tones.

“No,” he hissed in enthusiastic hushed tones.

“Go ask him.” She leaned back and smiled.

“I did, he said he didn’t know.”

“Huh, well he might not,” Hackenbush admitted, tired of the game. “Here’s the story: when I was a little girl I saw “Day at the Races”, and in that one, Groucho is a vet named Dr. Hackenbush. I thought that was so great, I, all of five years old, announced to my father that I, too, would be a vet named Dr. Hackenbush.”

“And did you become a vet?”

“Nah, but the nickname stuck and it’s a good hook for the band. Dr. Hackenbush and her Orchestra is memorable for some reason,” she said.

“Well, I’ll never forget it.” Frank smiled. It was a nice smile, interested without being overly nosy and somewhat on the timid side.

Hackenbush smiled back, suspecting this guy probably didn’t meet many musicians and why should he? Most lounge lizards didn’t have to work in offices. “So, anyway, Mr. Withers—”

“Please call me Frank. Mr. Withers is so formal.”

“And it takes so long to say, Frank,” she smiled at him. “And your brother? Should I call him Chuck or Charlie?”

“Well, he’s a little more formal than I am,” Frank said slowly. “You might want to start out with Mr. Withers and see where it goes.”

“Then I will. Is he coming to introduce himself, too?”

“He’s with clients all afternoon,” Frank said, waving a zaftig blonde over. “Won’t be back until tomorrow. Adela,” he said to the blonde. “This is Dr. Hackenbush.”

“Pleased to meet you, Doctor,” she said, handing a stack of papers to Frank.

“Oh, just call me Hackenbush or Mabel. I answer to either.”

“Lemme know if you need anything, Mabel,” Adela said. “Unfortunately, right now I need my boss to get on with his chores.”

“He’s all yours, Adela.” Hackenbush silently blessed her blonde-but-dark-at-the-roots savior leading the errant attorney back to his office as she sat back down to her typing. Ah, typing; just you and the machine and whatever bullshit was in the headphones.

Five o’clock seemed to come right away, so Hackenbush ignored it and worked until six thirty. There was plenty to do and the bus ride home might not be any shorter, but odds were it would be less crowded. She had to stand for most of it, which was fine because she was too tired to think heavy-duty thoughts and too busy watching her back. A French percussionist once told her French guidebooks for the Untied States advise visitors not to make eye contact in the cities. Well, Hackenbush made eye contact, tired eye contact with the tired eyes around her. These bus riders were just too damn weary after eight-plus-hour shifts to start anything. Rage and aggression were for those with the energy for it. And they were not on the eastbound Wilshire bus that rainy evening.

At Third and Broadway, she caught the northbound bus through Chinatown and into Lincoln Heights. She got off at North Broadway and Johnston, bought two packs of cigarettes at Big Saver and walked past the Post Office toward home. She lit a smoke out of habit, out of need from the long ride in the bus and out of the fantasy that if she were attacked, she might buy herself some time singeing her assailant. A kind of tobacco-Aikido. Mostly she smoked as she walked those last few blocks home to keep herself company. Nobody menaced her; in fact, she met no one on that evening. It was too early or too late, or all the action was over on Eastlake street that evening. Didn’t matter; Hackenbush finally relaxed when she got home and shot the deadbolt behind her.

There are lots of kinds of tired, but this was not them; this was drained, wrung out, dead-on-her-feet weary. It was what the first day of sitting on her ass typing did every time. Hackenbush knew she’d get over it, build up a tolerance to it, but, man, the first day of a temp job was pure hell. Well,

actually, the aftermath and letdown were hell; the job itself was just boring. Thrashed though she was, she cleared her answering machine out of habit. Anna Kodaly called to see how it went; Hackenbush would call her tomorrow, from work. Shorty called to see if she was still alive; she'd call him tomorrow from work, too. Bruno Carlos called about a gig at the Island Room weekend after next; him she called back.

"I don't have a uke," she told him.

"I hear," he said, *Meditations* blaring in the background. "I hear you don' hava gig either, 's why I can get you for a weekend gig, diva baby."

"Excuse me, Carlos, but can you turn the fucking Coltrane off while you talk to me?" she yelled into the phone. "I mean, if you were listening to *Coltrane Sound* or those recordings with Monk, okay, but this stuff just—" she cut herself off in the sudden silence. "Hello?" She listened intently. "Fuck! I hope he didn't hang up." She was relieved to hear a match strike and a wheezy inhalation. "Good thing you play the congas, Bruno, you couldn't play an oxygen mask on those lungs," she thought as she lit up herself, but assumed Bruno had something more interesting to smoke. Might have been nice, but she didn't have any interesting stuff around and tomorrow was a work day after all.

"Jus' bring your beautiful self and more beautiful voice down to the Island Room on week from Sa'day at nine," Bruno drawled.

"Saturday or Sunday?"

"Sa'day at nine, my goddess."

"The twentieth or the twenty-first?" she said, digging her calendar out of her purse.

"Week from Sa'day."

"Fuck." She'd call the Island Room tomorrow and find out. "What's it pay?"

"Fifty, plus tips."

'The usual,' she thought. "Who else is in the band?"

"Only people you like, Hackenbush," he wheezed. "Bring Shorty, he amuses me."

"Can you pay him to amuse you?"

“He can take a cut of ‘s tip jar, no?”

“I’ll ask.”

“See you on Sa’day, my diva.”

“Yeah yeah yeah.” Hackenbush rolled her eyes at the dial tone and hung up. “A gig’s a gig’s a gig.” It was merely the shank of the evening but, after making a quick to-do list for the next day and setting the alarm for the hellish hour of five forty-five am, she hit the sheets and slept the heavy, dream-free sleep exhausted secretaries sleep.

There is a particular kind of raw chill in the winter air at five forty-five am in Los Angeles. Cold with a touch of some acetone-like vapor that leaves the skin stripped and slightly burning. At least Hackenbush thought so, as she fought off the alarm clock and the almost overwhelming urge to roll back under the covers. But she was strong, she was invincible, and she had to get to work. And get there on the bus, which could take a while. She turned on the space heater by her bed on her way into the bathroom.

It was more trouble than it was worth to light the ancient gas heater in there. It usually gave her a headache before it warmed her up and the Gas Company warning sticker that they were not, absolutely not, completely not responsible if the “occupant(s)” asphyxiated their own stupid asses because they had been warned was also discouraging. Well, it was true, Hackenbush had been warned, so she let the water take the chill off and the gas heater stayed cold. The Department of Water and Power might despair of others, but they could be proud of how much Hackenbush took their drought warnings to heart. The singer put a bucket under the faucet to catch the water until it was warm enough to get under the shower, she’d use to water for plants or cleaning later, thereby conserving at least some gallons of city water over the course of the year. Possibly it went deeper than DWP’s pamphlets; possibly, simply deep down Hackenbush knew that when there isn’t enough, one conserves so there is some for everyone. Wasn’t that being a good neighbor? Do unto others as you would... She showered quickly and rushed back into the electrically warmed bedroom to finish toweling her hair, which was well

below her shoulders and needed to be cut, which would have to wait a while.

What a number of things would have to wait awhile until the rent and utilities were paid, the car fixed, a new ukulele purchased. She added a note to call around for prices on a baritone uke and see if she could get a brunette discount. Sometimes that worked, but usually in person. So she'd need a haircut to negotiate. "Oh well," she thought, filtering a cup of coffee and moving her insufficient funds around her expanding expenses like valet parking attendants moving Ferraris on a Friday night. She liked that metaphor even though she'd do almost anything not to pay for valet parking because that was something else she couldn't afford. In a city of cars, paying for parking was a little like being charged for oxygen. It pissed her off so much, she only did it under extreme duress and in certain parts of town, the more dangerous parts.

Hackenbush took a sip of coffee and lit her first cigarette of the day. She liked to wait until she could take that first blissful drag with a cup of coffee because it was especially divine that way. The rest of the day's smoking would never quite recapture the pleasure of the first half of the first cigarette, but the memory and nicotine withdrawal kept her trying and trying and never succeeding. But sometimes chemical necessity takes precedence over pure hedonism and Mabel Hackenbush was a realist down to her two-inch heel office pumps. Actually, she put the office shoes in a totebag, along with a book to read at lunch and her to-do list and some sheet music she was arranging for her combo, and marched off to the bus in a pair of cheap tennis shoes. She could face anything if her feet didn't hurt and was enough of an RTD rider to know that LA buses were dismal just-fucking-get-me-there vehicles and nobody cared about your shoes. She also wore a long, ratty overcoat to keep the grime off her second hand navy blue serge dress that the more pretentious observer would call 'vintage'. It was used clothing; good fabric, good styles and right in her price range. She could never afford this stuff new, so she went for vintage hip, not pricey status. Vintage hip was more affordable and you could haggle better