

ride—traffic, gridlock, traffic accidents, idiots in cars, idiots on foot—and she'd had to stand. Actually, what she didn't have to do was give her seat to an old woman, but, since she was betting on being an old woman someday, she figured she better store up all the good karma she could. "But I'd rather be dead than be on the bus at that age," she sighed.

Tired as she was, hunger got the better of her and she stopped for a half a chicken at Chapalita. Chapalita had ruined her for all other roasted chicken. Unfortunately they were sold out so she settled for two lingua tacos, one of which she ate on the way home. The bonus sandwich Withers Junior sprang for at lunch had been nice, but lunch was long ago and far away.

"Yes, lunch," she thought, walking home, eating her taco. Lunch had been the last normal moment of the day, which had descended into muted chaos with the arrival of Charles Withers, Senior, Esq. in his motorized wheelchair. His first action was to bump Hackenbush, who was innocently walking across the lobby, onto his lap and carry her off to his office.

Since she was on his lap she had a good, up-close look at him. He was older than God's wet nurse and had more wrinkles than anyone she'd ever seen alive. It was impressive, at least Mabel thought so, as she introduced herself.

"Ah, the new temp," he hissed, going around a corner on two wheels. "Fresh meat."

"Ah, too bad you've missed lunch, mister," she said. "That was all the fresh meat there was here."

He didn't laugh and wheeled her into his office, where he didn't protest when she got off his lap. "You're older than the last one," he growled, motoring up to his desk.

"Not really. I'm sure I'm only, oh, a fifth of your age."

"That would make you sixteen," he said, looking her over. "And if so, mam'selle, you're not holding up very well."

"Touché, dad," she thought, but merely smiled and said something about getting back to work. She was glad when he waved her off as he struck her as an angry, old guy and she

wasn't in the mood to listen to any angry old guy bullsh—

“I see you met Withers Senior,” Paula said, inspecting her for damage.

“Yes. And I was completely carried away by him. Ha. Ha ha. Ha.” Hackenbush dragged the office manager into the mailroom. “So, like what, Paula, is the scoop on him and how often is he here?”

“He comes in when he feels up to it,” Paula explained. “He comes in and the effort wears him out before he gets here and he gets really cranky when he's tired.”

“Can we put him down for a nap? A little Seconal in his Bosco, maybe?”

“Very funny, Mabel, just remember; this guy is everybody's, including your, boss.”

“El jefe. Le patron.” Mabel saluted.

“Just steer clear of him, okay?”

“I'll try, but it was a sneak attack today.”

“Watch your back. Especially the lower part.”

“Yes, ma'am.”

They went back to work. Sometime later they could hear Withers Senior yelling at Bobby. Paula told Mabel that was unusual because Bobby was his chief playmate. Bobby came out, red-faced, and shut himself up in the mailroom. Another kid, a tall, skinny redheaded one Hackenbush didn't know, went in and stayed there for a long time. There was no more yelling that afternoon, just ominous silence.

Hackenbush kept a low profile the rest of the day. Withers Junior had gone to a client meeting and Withers Other had gone to court so she had few distractions from her transcribing. She buzzed Bobby in the mailroom to see if he was okay and the poor kid sounded like he was almost in tears. She told him to buck up; it was only a day job. She thought she could hear him smile and would have gone in there and told him a joke or something if she hadn't felt like the hallway was 'mined' somehow. She left at the stroke of five, looking neither to the right, the left nor behind her as she went down the stairs (which were faster at rush hour).

And it seemed like the entire city was heading home at five that Friday.

So as she walked home eating one of her tacos, she wondered what nonsense Withers Senior was going to give her on this job. “And I thought Withers Junior was trouble. The only good Withers is the Withers Other,” she thought, bolting the door behind her and leaning on it. Whatever it was, it would have to wait for Monday; she had a car-less weekend ahead of her, which did not mean she was excused from shopping and laundry and errands, alas. But the light was blinking on her answering machine and that always cheered her; someone somewhere wanted to talk to her and that could be nothing but wonderful. Yes, positive thinking could be applied to phone messages; too bad it was worthless everywhere else.

It was Bruno Carlos with a pretty standard song list: *Wave, Meditation, Night and Day, One Note Samba, The Coffee Song, Estrada Branca, Lady Be Good* (Hackenbush could have done without the wheezy leer behind that title, but, oh well), *Stardust* (with a Brazilian beat? Well, let’s try it. If anyone could carry it off, it was Hackenbush and Carlos), *I Won’t Dance, Day In, Day Out, When Your Lover Has Gone* (“Ah, now there’s a great song” she thought). He named a tune she’d never heard of - *The Goodbye Look*. And then the message ran out and she was reaching for the phone to call Tim at Rockaway Records, to find out what the fuck *The Goodbye Look* was, when the message beeped at her and it was Carlos playing the record for her. Much to her horror, after the synthesized steel drum intro, Donald Fagen of Steely Dan (or formerly of Steely Dan, she supposed) was singing at her and doing a fairly impressive job. Her message was only a minute long, so Carlos kept calling back and dropping the needle more or less where he’d left off. As neurotic as this way of leaning a song was, Hackenbush had a fairly good idea of the tune and what she could do to, ah, with it.

Nothing against Mr. Fagen or his song; her problem was more with Carlos, who always seemed to find a song that upset Hackenbush’s theory that no song of any value had been composed after 1964. It was a cozy assumption for her; it kept her warm at night and singing material that could be Hackenbushed and still hold up. Tough songs like *You Go To*

*My Head, A Fine Romance*; brutes of songs like *Body And Soul* and *Stardust*; songs that almost sang the singer and usually mauled a lesser musician than Hackenbush. And even she never claimed to have mastered any of these songs because she always found something new in them. Or perhaps they found something new in her as she aged. Too bad she didn't have time to dwell on that comforting thought; she filed it away for when she needed something to keep her going.

She played Carlos' messages again, mildly impressed by the melody and really digging what she could hear of the guitar player. Nice groove, AABABBAB structure; definitely a Hackenbushable tune and wasn't it odd that she and Donald Fagen sang in the same key? "I wonder which one of us should be alarmed by that?" she asked herself

In addition to Carlos, Shorty called to say he'd be there a week from Sa'day; Luis Taylor, Carlos' bass player, called to say he'd give her a ride to and from the gig (he lived up in Highland Park so they were almost neighbors); and then Shorty called again to ask her when and where they could rehearse their dancing for Sa'day. She made a mental note to call these guys back and then called Tim, at Rockaway.

The store was blaring the new Little Feat single (which, Hackenbush supposed, rocked in a mindless kind of way, if you like that sort of thing), and yelled that she'd like to talk to Tim, please. He came on the phone and she yelled that she needed the lyrics off a song called *The Goodbye Look* by Donald Fagen, could he pretty please help her out and she'd be much obliged? He said okay and put the phone down, cruelly not putting her on hold so she had to listen to more Little Feat, the next song being far inferior to the hit single, which even Hackenbush had heard somewhe-

"Got it," Tim said and read it to her as she jotted it down. "You singing this somewhere?"

She told him the Island Room, 9 PM, Sa'day, sorry, Saturday the twentieth. He said he'd be there and he'd tell people and she didn't doubt it; Tim was one of her more loyal fans.

"You're my hero, dahlin'," she drawled and hung up, wondering for the nth time why she couldn't hook up with a

nice, normal, steadily employed guy like Tim. And for the nth time she shrugged, reminding herself Tim and his kind were all happily married to females very unlike Hackenbush. The Tims of this world were easy-going guys married to easy going gals, which is why they were all easy-going. “Oh well,” she said and realized she hadn’t sat down since leaving the office, almost three hours ago. So she sat on her couch and ate the other taco, which was good even cold.

It would have been a luxury to take a hot shower and go to bed, but she had too much to do. She went over Carlos’ song list in her head while she smoked a cigarette. Then she stood up, sang a few scales and sang through the more predictable songs, songs that she’d sing more or less as is so the guys could solo. There might be a fillip or two on her last chorus out, but not much. She then tackled the tougher songs—*Stardust*, *I Won’t Dance*, *Lady Be Good*—songs that were easy to do wrong and that could go very wrong with an unpredictable guy like Carlos.

Hackenbush had worked with Carlos and Luis enough to know that whatever weird conga thing Carlos might do, Luis would keep them all out of hell with his bass. Luis was a wonderful bass player; he was everywhere a band ever needed him to be. Most bands, the good ones, always gave him room to shine on his own and shine he did. It wasn’t that Carlos’ band was bad, it was Carlos’ leadership that suffered when he got carried away with a song.

So she rehearsed by herself, trying to hear Carlos’ congas in her head, she wound up listening to Luis’ bass more and more. She wondered who he had on guitar and drums; if they were good, it would be a good night. If they were flakes or prima donnas, she and Luis would have their hands full keeping the music going over the egos.

But she’d worry about that next week. Right now she was in deep communion with *Stardust*, dragging the vowels over a syncopated rhythm and crashing the consonants over the bar lines, until it wasn’t so much a song anymore as a happy howl all through the resonating chambers of her body. It was the physical act of singing, the roar from head to toe that she let herself go in for a while. She bent at the waist to

let the high notes loose in her head and blood rush up and drive out the day, the worry, the troubles, and the nicotine. She let the song run loose with her and began to rein them both back down to earth or at least back into the stratosphere. Eyes closed, swaying, almost back in a civilized groove, she reached for where her baritone ukulele would have been... if she still had one.

“Damn!” she barked, shaking her empty fist at nothing. She slammed her palm on the closed piano and listened to the strings growl at her.

“Fuck with me, will you?” she thought, opening the one instrument she did have and played a few bars of *Lady Be Good*. She began to sing, decided she was rushing, and started again a hair slower. She elongated the phrases so there were no breaks in the melody, one long tone with hills and valleys. On the second chorus, she picked up the tempo and subjected it some glottal machine gun phrasing, ignoring the vowels completely. She tried to fit it into what she thought Carlos might give her as a conga line, but kept hearing tiki room music and sound effects and gave it up as a bad job. She had to stop to laugh at a memory of listening to one of her father’s old records from the sixties—*The Polynesia Room Jazz Quartet*—she recalled her clarinet-playing father in his Hawaiian shirt and grousing that woodwinds would never stand up in the humidity of the islands; however and nevertheless, a gig’s a gig.

“Yeah, a gig’s a gig and I got one a week from Sa’day,” she told her upright and dug out a fake book for the changes on *I Won’t Dance*. Like most of Kern, she liked the lyrics better than the melody, but was stuck with both. She sang it straight a few times and decided she used all the inspiration she had for that evening on *Stardust* and *Lady Be Good*. She also knew this was bullshit, but it gave her an excuse to play Carlos’ phone messages with *The Goodbye Look* on them and work on that.

“Ah, progress,” she thought trying to pull the song inside out to see what it was made of. She copped the copa rhythm and picked up the chord changes; mostly, Hackenbush never claimed to be a great pianist or even a good one. And