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PARDON THE BLUES HERE

JOANNA BROOKS

“Human lives are composed like music. Guided by his sense of beauty, an individual transforms a fortuitous occurrence into a motif, which then assumes a permanent place in the composition of the individual’s life. . . . Without realizing it, the individual composes his life according to the laws of beauty even in times of greatest distress.”

—Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*

“Where can I be headed for?
The blues crawled in my door
to lick my heart once more.”

—Billie Holiday, “Deep Song”

EVERYONE NEEDS A GOOD FICTION NOW and then. You need to fill that sad space between reason and real life, so you make the religion and the mythology. There the unrequited love rules. The magic, the daydreams, the fiction, the voodoo. We all have our incantations, our imaginations. Who among us does not have a long gone lover built into icon? An emotion built into epic? At the convenience stores in my native Southern California, they sell crystalline Mexican candles with *la Virgen* painted on them. Twenty-four hours a day. Seven days a week. We want our fiction on demand.

And when my heart needs a good fiction now and then, I listen and give it what it needs. Usually that means blues. When everything’s bad blue at

heart, it makes more sense if Bessie Smith's singing in the background, you understand? I have found life to be generally hard and heart-breaking and so I say *no pretending*. Let's put on an appropriate soundtrack and lay on our backs and watch the stars reel across the sky and stay here until they come back tomorrow.

I found my soundtrack last summer, at the end of a long, hot June spent alone in that great lonely city—New York. After work, we were sitting in a club where the waiters' ties are far too good for you and the menu changes as fast as it's chi-chi and no one cares if you don't catch on. Club Tatou it was. And at the bar of this Club Tatou, there were businessmen mixing with model-types in black velvet catsuits. Old blonde men with well-paid companions. And a seventy-year-old woman with a shaved head in a backless sequin dress and stiletto heels. The whole place was longing so hard that it was leaning. Totally at tilt.

So about eight o'clock, this old black woman in fire red bugle beads and bedroom slippers shuffled up the aisle between the tables, bone-tired bobbing this way and that. She made it to the front of the room and sat herself at a big black washed-and-waxed Cadillac of a piano. And she played the ivories. And she played the ebonies. And she sang in a low voice that frayed something beautiful as it dragged low across the floor, as it dragged on and out, sweeping everything up, and suspending everything about a foot off the floor. Minor key, minor key—that woman recast it all in minor key, her brown fingers beat thin with hurt beat out some real bad blues that night that shamed us all right off the floor.

And everyone shut up. And everyone stopped. And she sang, setting the rocks in our hearts knocking, making the subways rumbling beneath us seem not so far down. It was as if Billie Holiday herself came back from the dead, with Joe Guy on the horn and Tiny Grimes at the piano, and leaned on the mike and sang the whole of the hurt of this world in one perfect take. Near revelation. I tell you, when truth walks in half-drunk dizzy and sets everything back spinning in minor key, you remember every loss you've ever had, and it all stacks up on your table like a lot of lipstick-stained crystal. And you lean on your elbows, and you light a cigarette, and

no matter how fashionably safe you are, and no matter how *au courant*, all of the past settles heavy on your lap. And sits. And sits. Unsafe. Until the end of the set.

And when she was through, she rose from her seat, and cursed at all of us, soft and made-up, unfashionably transfixed. She shuffled and cussed to the back of the room, was propped up in a velvet seat, and served a drink, and a young couple bought her mimosas for another hour or two. And I think the couple was in love. And I hope they were in love. Because cab rides are so long. And the city is really a very dark place when you sit down and look at it for a while.

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So during this comfortable Provo winter, I work late on weekends in a small cafe. You think Provo is much less strange than dark miles of shoreline? Much safer than New York City? Sure, you may not get shot on Center Street. But your heart's in danger here, friend. Heart hitmen (and I speak of hits in the traditional Mafia sense) must find easy pickings in a place like this, where love is a theology and everyone really wants to believe.

And I watch all this happen, mixing up mochas and clearing tables. I see two people meet, talk, flirt, leave together. And in two hours, they're both back, alone, looking for someone new. I see a lot of self-thought big shots playing small games. And I see a lot of senseless posturing, and I think when things are as clear and cold and black as ink outside, people should just be good to each other.

Anyways, after the bands go home and the amps sit idle, I move between the tables with my dishrag in hand and hum Bessie Smith blues in B-flat. And make eye contact with the microphone. And if I feel real bold, I pick it up. And sing to the great out there, the great unknown, the great unmet man with really black eyes. And sometimes I sing like this: "Sometimes you're right man, / And sometimes I'm wrong. / But I know that you're wrong, honey, / now that you're gone . . ."

Sure, the lines are predictable. As predictable as the fact that when you meet someone good, he'll soon be gone. As predictable as storms moving in, flowers shutting at sunset, as things falling

apart. As predictable as violence. Call it dramatic. Call it vain. I've already admitted both of those vices, thank you, and feel no shame. Everyone's got a vice or two, something to soften the edge of the hunger pangs—some motif around which to order things in this largely senseless place or some drug to knock all the false reason down. And if mine is singing blues and making my own fiction, so let it be.

Some say when you write something you make it alive, and when you don't write it, you make it dead. But quiet won't kill these blues, friend. In the quiet, the blues threaten to do me in, rub me out, black me away into the avenues somewhere east side midtown. They howl like coyotes in the moon-rubbed sage scrub at home. They took Billie and they took Janis Joplin and they take most blues singers before long, but I figure as long as I keep scattering words for them to eat, they'll stay. So I make lots of words. Late. When everyone else sleeps and the dark settles on the good souls' eyelids and the streetlights go out. I put words between me and it all. I make big fictions. The coyotes circle, but they keep their distance. They stay. Yes, tonight they stay.

And what keeps your coyotes away? What's your fiction, baby? What's your vice? Don't pretend you don't have one or two. Life's not nice enough to get through undeluded? What are you making of your life? What is this life making out of you?