

I was having trouble keeping my peeps on the sheet of music in front of me. Large green eyes, framed by coffee-colored stockings, lavender panties and a garter belt, gave me a come-hither stare. The face was upside-down, long blonde hair, straight as a horse's tail, hangin' behind the oak bar top, pendulous breast partially concealing her lips and lower face. Her hair and bosom swung gently one direction as her elevated bottom moved the opposite way to the heavy, bumping rhythm my band was pulsing out.

The lady stood suddenly, shaking her tail feathers and rotating her head, her hair fanning out and circling over her. She turned, thrust her chest forward and smiled directly at me, then strutted down the bar in front of more than a dozen assembled police officers of very high rank. At the other end of the bar, a portly cop with silver bars on his collar pushed a chair up close, then gave the lady a helping hand as she stepped from her makeshift runway. The heavy lieutenant then took her hand and led her between booths and tables, stopping at the red suede bench closest to the bandstand.

I'm not a great sight-reader. Like, I can read music, and I can play fast licks, but I'm not accustomed to doing both at the same time. I'm a jazz cat. Improvisation is my forte, and I'm known to be good at both playin' brass instruments and singing. It's the same with most the cats in my band. We form the house band here at Blondy's Waterfront Dive, a small, wigged-out jazz club on 7th Street, three blocks from the main channel of the Los Angeles Harbor complex. We usually play our own music here six-nights-a-week, but tonight we'd been handed charts. Blondy's guests wanted some special tunes rendered, and they had brought their own, poorly written arrangements; no improvising until all their requests had been played!

I glanced over at the nearest booth, the one Blondy usually reserved for herself. The dancer was moving her three-inch heels carefully around the Formica tabletop, close enough that I could almost reach out and touch her,

thrusting her most intimate female parts in the face of my friend Tom Cheatham. Across the booth from Tom, sat his good buddy and co-worker Lieutenant Rich Moen, the women's lavender panties pulled over his brush-cut of blond hair, crotch down on the center of his head, and waistband looped under his ears.

Just an hour ago, the Los Angeles Police Chief had been here at Tom's table as well. The department had rented Blondy's for a private party, the occasion being to celebrate Tom's promotion to the rank of captain. The evening had started out quiet and mellow, senior officers and a few of Tom's homicide squad in their seats with mugs of Miller Genuine before them, talking quietly among themselves and takin' a sip of suds from time to time. There had been some grumbling about the Miller beer, but Lady had told Tom emphatically that "Blondy's don't serve no stinkin' Budweiser!"

Detective III Carl Berger, our appointed stage manager and Master-of-Ceremonies for the evening, had queued us into "Land of Hope and Glory," as Chief Birkason led Tom to the stage. While we had droned out what sounded like some high school's sorry chart, the chief exchanged Tom's sky-piece* for another similar model, but with clusters of gold leaf across the black visor. Carl pushed an open palm toward the floor, a signal to drop our volume toward pianissimo, and the chief summoned Blondy to the dais.

"Pearl," the chief intoned, "Pearl Van Weiriden, can you join us up here please?" Blondy stepped up onto the crowded stage, where the chief asked her to pin the gold badge of his new rank on Tom's left collar while the top cop fastened the same on the right. Captain Tom stood at rigid attention until his new status had been made official, then he relaxed and smiled as Chief Birkason shook his hand and Blondy planted a big smack on his cheek.

At that, forty-some policemen came to their feet applauding. Their hand clapping fading behind shouts for beer by the pitcher and bottles of single-malt scotch for each individual table. The room erupted into a serious stag party with

loud shouting, catcalls, and officers coming forward to squeeze onto our podium in a ribald roast for the new brass hat.

We were hard into Charles Mingus's "Peggy's Blue Skylight" when the patrolmen from the alley door came ringside and whispered something in Carl Berger's ear. I watched Carl pat the man's shoulder, then take a couple steps over to Tom's table. He said something to Captain Tom, Lieutenant Moen and the other high ranks in the booth. The officers got to their feet and followed the uniform out Blondy's seldom-used back door into the alley. Carl Berger turned to us and drew a finger across his throat; stop the music. Loose Bezich, my alto sax player was right in the middle of some nutty, frantic idea. I wanted to find out where his newly acquired King Super-20 horn was headed, but the studs pickin' up the tab said 'cool it,' so cool it we did.

Carl grabbed my microphone from its holder, tapped it nervously with a finger, sending serious sonic pops over the PA system. "We've got an emergency situation here, men. Candy-Anne, our lovely dancer, was attacked in the alley. We've called an ambulance and the crime scene guys are on the way. Meantime, I think we'd better slow this party down. The media is likely to be here soon, and we don't want to give the wrong impression."

At that point, Rich Moen came back into the Dive. I overheard him tell Carl that our nude dancer had been raped and severely beaten. "At this point," he told the younger detective, "she may not live long enough to see the inside of the ambulance."