

## **Soundtrack**

**1700 words**

**ted.gross@comcast.net**

So Merc rented a room from this couple, and decided the third morning in the kitchen over corn flakes that he wanted to bang the wife.

The first day he called her Mrs. McCardle. She told him that was too formal, it's Elizabeth, and the third morning in the kitchen she said most people call her Betsy.

So you had that, plus the turquoise robe, stylish enough where you wondered what was in there, plus her commenting that he's kind of goofy.

That was after he told her about his roommate, the last place he lived, the guy up on a ladder trying to hang a curtain rod and Merc watching him lose his balance and put a hand through the glass, and Merc telling the guy see, you shouldn't be blocking out the light.

'I think you're pulling my leg,' she said. 'I mean I guess it's a concern but I've never heard of it happening.'

'Okay, how about he lost control of the rod and it bumped him in the nose,' Merc said. 'What does Mr. McArdle do?'

'His job? He's a district sales manager for See's Candy.'

'Gee. That's the one, they still give you the sample piece?'

'If Daniel had his way they would never do that. He says people take advantage.'

'Yeah I see his point. Anyhow . . . you enjoy your day, I better get a move on.'

She asked him where it was he worked again, and he said BJ's, and she said which location.

Then on Thursday she drops in for an afternoon cocktail on his shift, she's with a girlfriend, doesn't sit in his section, sits in the one by the bar but gives him a three-finger wave and he comes over.

The girlfriend's name is Jennifer, she's a little younger than Betsy and a little better looking, and Merc decided he'd have to work on her next if he ever got there with Betsy.

He said, 'You're spying on me. You think I can't pay the rent?'

The girlfriend Jennifer said, 'That's a fair question. It looks kinda slow.'

'It is,' Merc said. 'The flip side, a decent night shift, couple games on? I can make two fifty in tips.'

'Gosh,' Betsy said, 'I worked a coffee shop once, a resort town in Virginia. It was barely worth it.'

'Do you fool around on Mr. McArdle?' Merc said. 'Fuck it, life's too short.'

'Oh for sure she does,' Jennifer said. 'Can't you tell?'

'For God sakes Jen,' Betsy said, 'what are you, trying to corrupt the man? Don't listen to her.'

Merc got busy helping another server with a party of 20, someone's retirement lunch. When he came back Betsy said, 'Would you like to play some pickleball?'

'Uh-oh,' Jennifer said.

'Sure I guess sometime,' Merc said, 'why not.'

'They have lighted courts at Piper Park,' Betsy said. 'See you around 7? You're off by then?'

'Gee. Unless I don't make it,' Merc said.

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He did show up but the courts were filled so they had to wait.

'To elaborate on where Jen was going,' Betsy said, 'my husband gets more ass than a toilet seat.'

‘Ah Jesus, that expression,’ Merc said.

‘You’re supposed to be surprised. He’s kind of a nerdy man, right? . . . You know that’s what you’re thinking.’

‘Hmm,’ Merc said. ‘No kids in the equation. Not going to waste the effort asking.’

‘Why we’re still together?’

‘Maybe . . . Though you probably answered your own question. You’re needier than I would have predicted.’

‘Know what’s funny?’ she said. ‘Him and me, things jive in the bedroom. I mean absolutely sizzle.’

Merc thinking yeah she’s a little liquored up for sure--her and the other one were going at it pretty good--but regardless, forget about the original concept of trying to bang this woman.

‘So good then,’ he said. ‘An open relationship that works. You’re in rarified territory, is my guess.’

‘It really does,’ she said, ‘despite our differences.’

Merc said, ‘You really *are*, a piece of work.’

‘I know.’

‘I mean, you do anything?’

‘Sure. I tried to be an actress in New York. Studied downtown with Lee Strasberg’s academy, the whole nine yards.’

‘Wait. The guy in The Godfather? That guy was great, Jeez.’

‘Part 2, but correct.’

‘Man I gobbled both of ‘em up . . . I loved it he’s one of richest guys in Florida and he’s in a tract house watching college football and eating a sandwich off a TV tray. Nice touch.’

She said, ‘The house they used, it’s in North Miami, off Biscayne Boulevard.’

‘Wow.’

‘I was curious. They have these websites. The majestic Lake Tahoe place, for the opening wedding? It’s the boathouse for a gated community now. Kind of ruined it for me to find that out.’

‘That happens,’ Merc said. ‘Bottom line though, they could pull some strings for you? Or no.’

‘Nope. The girl I lived with kinda broke through. She did an underwear ad and then got into the soaps. Where she hung on for about 10 years.’

‘Ah. Didn’t advance out of them, or didn’t want to?’

‘It’s all about a comfort zone. My boyfriend back there, he worked security. He had to shoot someone once.’

‘Wait . . . *Kill* them?’

‘Yes. A music store on 47th Street that had been broken into multiple times.’

‘Holy Smokes . . . so he came out of it okay?’

‘Eventually. The bad guy was unarmed, so there was that.’

‘So did this, like, up that ante for you at all?’

‘Relationship-wise? In the bedroom you mean?’

‘You tell me.’

‘Didn’t give it a chance to. I was scared of him. I moved.’

‘Whoa. That’s how you ended up out here? Or just a different apartment?’

‘I moved to Staten Island. That’s when I got into the waitressing at the diner in Virginia.’

Which didn't connect but whatever. Merc noticed the far court opening up, though no point bringing that to her attention, he didn't feel like playing pickleball.

He said: ‘Really? Mr. McArdle? No shit?’

She said no, *not* really, they hadn't done it since last July 4th . . . and the only reason she remembers, she

went in the backyard after, to water some plants, and she got bit by a yellowjacket.

Merc said you mean stung, and she said no, see, that's a misconception, they bite . . . and Merc said sorry but *that's* a misconception, they may bite you to hold on better but they definitely sting.

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Betsy picked a place three towns over, an hour away, and she said take separate cars and Merc thought that was overdoing it but he didn't argue.

The room was decent. There was a bar next door and you could hear music and she asked if he was okay with heading down there first.

Merc said sure, we can head down there period.

Hard to get a read on Betsy's reaction, kind of poker faced, and Merc wondered what is he doing . . . though admittedly there was enough up and down with this gal that you wanted to explore some part of it.

It was a western bar which you didn't expect around here, and there was a decked out guy with a guitar standing on a little riser singing country songs.

Merc said, 'My high school, they had a rodeo team if you can believe it. Three people. One girl did barrel

racing and the two guys, buddies of mine, one rode saddle broncs and the other rode bulls.'

'Interesting,' Betsy said. 'Why the *if you can believe it?*'

Merc said, 'Let me ask you something--why the need to challenge it? The point I'm trying to make, those guys would refer to this dude as a Ro-day-oh Cowboy.'

'Okay. Rodeo Drive I'm assuming. Not that clever, honestly . . . And what makes you sure he's not real?'

'I don't know. How about, go up there and ask him if he knows a show tune. Something from the Broadway shit you were working so hard towards. Supposedly.'

'How odd from you. And then what?'

'Then you sing it with him. Here's ten bucks, take care of the man.'

Betsy let another couple songs go by and then surprised Merc by going up there.

She conferred with the guy for a minute, and the guy scrolled around on his iPad and then he announced we have a special request--from *way* back in the archives--this one's from the smash musical *Hair*.

And he set her up with a mic and she did the one that goes *Manchester England England* . . . and she had



the British accent down pretty darn good, and the guy sang harmony with her and he did too.

Some small applause and a big hug for the guy and she's back in her seat all smiles. Merc said, 'Well that was transformative. Didn't know you had it in you honestly.'

'Thanks a *lot*,' she said.

'I'm serious,' he said, 'I'm sorry if I put it wrong.'

The guy was on his iPad again. He said if anyone remembers this one feel free to join in.

He eased into the title song, *Hair* itself, building the opening momentum just right, and dang, belting it out amazingly, this cowboy or fake cowboy, it didn't matter . . . *my hair like Jesus wore it, Halleluja I adore it, Long as God can grow it my Hair!*

The guy played the final chord, said he was taking a short break, and he'd be back with more hit tunes.

Merc absorbed it a minute. When he looked at Betsy her eyes were wet.

'What?' he said.

'It's stupid,' she said.

'What, it triggered something?'

‘Where we lived,’ she said, ‘it was a hole in the wall walk-up on 1st Avenue and East 59th. You heard the sound of the bridge all night. It could keep you awake.’

‘That was okay though? Or no?’

‘It was,’ she said. ‘I didn’t mind.’