

Patrick McCord

Duet

Hard moonlight shimmered on the lake surface and the soft bottom sucked at Lobee's feet. It'd been a tough night, now he had a gun in his hand. He beamed the big Ray-O-Vac into the shallows, waited until a mass of minnows congregated on the glow, then K-TOW! he triggered a big hollow point into the broil sending up a spout of warm water, muck, and shock-dead fish. A step forward and his face lifted to feel the returning lake, gun arm vibrating. Then he pulled some burn and solace off the Ole Grandad in his other pocket, and sloshed along the shoreline until the tide of yearning and frustration rose bitter enough for him to blow another hole in the world.

Eloise stood in the driveway next to the ticking Pontiac. Lester had dropped her up the way so she could walk a bit, let some calm country night seep in, clear out the cabaret smog, but each time Lobee's .44'd thumped into the water she'd taken a low, bass drum ripple in her stomach. "Lobee, honey, stop that noise," she hollered toward the flicker in the cattails, her voice worn to payday sandpaper by the long weekend sets.

"The horse you rode in on," Lobee's baritone seemed to emanate from a different place than his silhouette.

Then K-TOW!

Then splatter.

Over in the bushes she heard Mr. George making worried little honks to Mother. She hated that they were too scared to come say

hello, but she'd tried and tried and it was getting to be something else and there she still was.

The screen door clacked behind her and she stood in the dark kitchen. His hands lifted the heavy hair from her nape and she filled her lungs with the weary atmosphere. What was that? She smelled a new smell. Or was she just whiffing the old house smell that usually went unnoticed? No. Among the blunt of cooking, the mildew scant, the thin fume of sulphur and the dust, something in there, a punky, animal bite in her woman's nose. Even familiar.

She groped into the darkness and switched on the radio. "It's just the three of us—" the tune cut in, "you and me and all that stuff—" and Eloise sang along as she tipped on the lights and the big, brown-yellow room jumped out of the dark: the old posters of Lobee and her fronting the band, the place where the TV used to be, Lobee's last horn with the dent in the bell, the loveseat with the slash and the stuffing coming out (no, it wasn't her hiding place), and the pistols, lying around like ash trays. She picked up a cut off leg of panty hose with a knot tied in the ankle and pulled it over her head, then leaned into the mirror. Nope. His face wouldn't be recognized. But what about the car? The plates?

"K-TOW!" blew weakly in from the lake and her insides twitched. "It ought to be easy, it ought to be simple enough—" Eloise whispered along as she pulled off the stocking, "— man meets woman and they fall in love."

The little boom waves flattened quickly and the lake was sheer and endless holding the heavens below the same as the heavens above. The hot cylinder chunked and jangled as Lobee reloaded, feeling in his pocket among the lint and toothpicks, then sliding tight the last five sluggers. Stars like a jillion-godzillion needle pricks and the big ole moon like a spoon he thought, wrist flicking the full belly home. Into his mouth he poked the round, cool Dad-bottle and inhaled the ghost of old corn. It was taking some of the edge off, but it wasn't the same. He'd waited, he'd tried. He didn't have to, no matter what she said. He'd gone down to the Pioneer Chicken stand hoping for a sandwich: crank and poison, a hot and

cold to sponge on the base of his flickering spine, a little toast to sop up the anxious rhythms warring between his brain and skull. It would feel good, that's all. Feel so good. But Jimmy Jazz had checked into Hotel Narco, at least according to Carmelita, back there with all that extra-crispy dead bird, who knew when he'd make bail? So Lobee'd taken the last of his presidents shopping, trusted a punker on Verdugo and fuckin' A, B, & C, gotten fucking burned.

The cook, the spike, the expectant leather fell from his teeth, but the vein stayed hollower than yesterday. Not a speedball, not a soft trip, not a trance or a chat buzz, just an empty plastic wrapper and Lobee'd be exploding that skinhead's snakey brains onto the pavement if only he could've found him. But ten gallons of gas later he was back lakeside with the Bourbon family, trying to put a rag on a fire that was only getting worse, flashing the last of his nerve into the dark immutable water.

The next morning it grabbed her again. But silently this time, on a string that snapped her over the side of the bed like a trick yo-yo. She was stumbling down the hall, part still in dream. She'd been astride the big red horse, pounding so fast, firm and rippling, she'd opened and leaned close over his sweat-damp mane but in midstride he crumpled away beneath her, wadding up and disappearing, leaving her falling and falling. Then the white cold wave swirled up from below and surged into the bowl in front of her face. It was time to breathe. She spit and gasped with the effort. On her knees, the sharp floor, the cold toilet, bilous sour peppered her throat and tongue. What time was it? Morning. Then she lurched again, her chin bumping the slick porcelain as she scrambled to hit the basin.

Lobee was working all his fibres of self control. Every shred of poise he had left. "Ell honey?" He called, careful to chew around the jitters. And then: "You OK?" looking in on her, naked on the toilet. Painting, a little glass dropper, iodine on her knees. Her skin was so white against the blue tiles, her black hair, bleached white, bone white. Snowstorm white and hard to look into. Big maroon

dots on her knees. And sudden blue eyes looking up at him, into him, searching his itches. Find out what he'd done. She stood and maroon dots on her chest swung at him, shiney white, film of sweat, blue veins in her breasts. An accusation? No.

"I'm scared shit to weigh myself," she half laughs, pushing past.

Lobe holds his heartbeat. OK. Soon.

"Aren't you hot?" She wants to know. "Heatwave today." Hand wipes her face, chest, belly.

He follows and flops down as the refrigerator sighs and shadows. Nonchalant. No big D. Let her see him put down the stocking. Let her think he's done a 7-11.

"What about borscht?" from behind the door. "I've got a craving. God I'm hungry." And as she swings the monolithic door bright morning sunlight washes in almost scattering everything.

Careful not to fumble, give his need away. Set it up. Letting her see. Belt. Matches. Works. Shiney tools. No secrets. "Want to get high?" polite to share. Fingers touch slip of plastic. Out of pocket. His hand calm. Blue eyes catch gun butt at waist. Just right. A-OK. Lift-off in progress.

Hand on his hand. Hot hand. Her hand. Firm. Heavy. "Lobe, you said..." she's saying. Saying and saying. He talks to her questions:

"OK Honey.

"I know Honey.

"But they won't Honey.

"I want my nod Honey.

"I need my shot.

"The one catty corner from All Martyrs.

"I took the plate off the car.

"OK?"

Wiggly ass goes away.

Matches. Matches.

Later she's opening her purse when the first crooning phrase slides through the afternoon heat. Eloise is surprised to hear him playing the horn again. That old smokey song. Arpeggios and

apostrophes, swoops of memory, his, hers, tickle up and she holds them just below thinking. Purse in lap, she sits on the bed and listens, feeling her defeated heart. Not too much smack this time she reckons, good. She swipes at her eyes and blows her nose, squeezing the soggy tissue feeling bubbles pop. Next to the pink flowered Kleenex box is the bedroom gun, a .357 automatic, dead and scaly, and heavy as a fish in her hand. She feels the weight make up her mind.

Standing by the window she watches Mother and Mr. George diving on the lake, the late afternoon sun like a burning coin above the water. "Good-bye Girl, Good-bye Boy," she whispers and starts toward the smoldering sound. The mirror on the bedroom door tells her she looks silly. A little, sweaty naked woman with a big black gun. What you gonna do with that?

Now Lobee is touching something most excellent with his noise. Growling and whirring and running away. Like he used to. Like those young afternoons when he would grin and say: "Tell me." And she would lean close and look deep and sharp in the darkest center of his eye and sing softly, her breath on his face — "Shu bob, swee bop, boodillee doodilly DEE bop, woe-de-oh-doh: hidey hi." And he would marvel and smile every tooth that it could be done so absolutely honest, so, so, so pure.

And then she would say, "Tell me."

And he would groan the warm circles of breath through the brass in such a way that she felt an alchemical melting inside, as if fluid strings of possibility were swinging out of her, and they would grasp below and above like perfect handshakes or perfect octaves.

And she notices a melting inside now as she brings the gun barrel down smartly on his shoulder the way the cops do and the horn fumbles from his paralyzed arm clunk thunk on the floor and his eyes come whites around to see that she means capital B, Business...

"I needed that money," hisses Eloise in a voice like deep chains. "I needed all of it." And saying it out loud frees the only thing left for her to feel or him to understand. Her left hand closes over the right squeezing the wide rough grip, thumbs hard to spring back the

hammer, flexing maroon knees. Lobee rolls to her left and up, stunned arm still hanging, but lefty fumbling at the .44 in his belt. Very speedy drug she notes as his eyes slide clever like an ape, but this is my forefinger. Her .357 explodes and bucks her backwards. Her ears hold on a high A flat. Fourth of July smell like old times evaporating. Lobee's eyes crouching now, glancing at the plaster hole much too close.

"Eil, baby, what's uh? What're you doing?" The .44 out now, but unsure. She lifts the smoking magnum at his middle but the swelling in her chest pushes the backs of her eyes, the A flat insisting in her ear, she jerks down too hard on the rough metal and pistol's recoil spins her toward the window, a broken ladder in the yard, the huge sun touching the lake. She missed. She's down, all fours, knees hurting again. Bleeding. Her face is wet: what was this? What did she want? What good would it do. She. A naked girl, gun in hand, lost. And lost.

And the little eye of the .44 blessing her face. She could see Lobee's heartbeat shaking the end of it. Kill or be killed informing all the muscles of his face, crooked lines of fear. And she sees the finger squeezing the trigger and the hammer falling and hears the insipid click. She is looking into an empty weapon. She is still alive.

The nerve crunch to his arm had worn off enough for Lobee to manage car keys but it'd also ripped all the drug pad from his nerves. As he revved the big Pancho he felt his skeleton starting to vibrate in that bad way, pulling away from his flesh while fear made ugly skunk high in his nose. Too close to dying. Shit, she was crazy. Coconuts. Color him his-to-ree. Slam the ledger. The three hundred and two remaining dollars still folded underneath him. More score. He'd take it. He needed it.

Gravel ka-glanged as he spun the wheel, rear end skating, nose to the highway, but there she was. Naked as Jesus, the big automatic down at her side, yelling at him but only an outline, the furious sun at her back. He swerved all his jitters to take her before she could shoot. No hesitation this time. Foot hard to the fossil fuel and the big yacht surged forward. Over the seething V-8 he heard two sharp

snaps like pool cues breaking and then he saw her fly away from the bumper, hair and arms all crazy, tits, bush, legs, white white on green grassy. Tough luck Ellie. Too bad. You pull a gun you better be OK with everything after.

But the Bonneville lurched with an iron grumble and the power steering froze in his hands as the tonnage slid stuttering to the ditch. The magnum, Lobee thought, has perforated my block with teflon ordnance. She has killed my ride. And there was another crash, pissed off fist bash rearview mirror.

And then he settled, feeling his shoes, noticing the cirrus drift of dust around the car, and in the sudden quiet he could feel the last day heat close around him, thick to the earth, clinging like magnesium fire until it burnt itself out. His right hand throbbled. I'm fucked he thought. Fucked in the neck. He caught his own eye in one square of broken rearview. A man with no dope and no car and no ammo. Three hundred and two dead woman dollars, car fare to only more junk. He sucked the oozing lacerations that jitterbugged his knuckles and gouged his lip on a sliver of mirror still embedded in the bone. The blood was pale and saline and tepid in his mouth. I'm nothing but a glass of water he thought. No zip, no protein, no tendrils. Just a sack of zero with the sun blowing through.

The window over his left ear burst apart spilling heavy sparkles on his neck, in his lap.

"Your ass is mine, Lobee!" Eloise's jagged voice rose out of the soft asphalt. "I'm gonna twist your dick off and feed it to my geese."

Oh fuck, he thought, I missed.

"Move reallll slow," her voice commands. And a dizziness rises up from the soles of his feet through the ace cold bottom of his gut and washes him with weary certainty.

So Lobee moves slow, his synapses exhausted, his teeth huge and heavy and rough textured in his mouth. He is ready, it almost surprises him. The setting sun reflects a long ripply path across the lake straight to Eloise, coloring her bronze and black against the lavender sky, like a painting he thinks. "You look pretty Ell," he says to the face behind the gun, and his knees collapse, his arms go

rubbery. There's a mean wet burn on his left leg and he remembers from childhood the feeling of wetting his pants. He recalls a dream he had when he was that age, a dream his ears had, a birthday and army tanks, and flashbulbs and outerspace, but all in sound, no pictures. And in his ear now Mother Goose and Mr George are honking good-bye to the day and in his nose the bright grass flavor and a shiver of pine on the exact breeze that moves Eloise's hair around her face. And he notes how steady the gun barrel is, closer now, like an honest word hanging on the edge of evening, true for his brain and his emptiness and the soil under his knees is sandy, he feels its tiny plants and industrious insects as the gilding light is holding everything in amber and Eloise is there, steady as a Biblical knife.

"Tell me," he says and looks the gun in its deepest eye. And as his senses open to take in dying he smells her now, her musky twists up his nose, under his eyes, and in them a milky sweet cut opens and he smells the change in her, and finally he sees her, sees the roundness, the beginning belly, the full breasts and the gun presses its firm cool kiss on his forehead. But Eloise sees Lobee seeing, and he sees her seeing him and what he's seeing, and with a sudden moan and lurch and wheeling toss the gun sails upward, arcing toward the lake, and the evening holds the soft splash as Lobee kisses the torn purple knees, as his ragged arms wrap around her waist and he lays his stubble gently against her warm, swollen womb.

"I'll try." He speaks his mouth to her skin. "So help me, I'll try. I'll kick. This time I know."

Her fists softly punish his head. One, two, three; one, two, three; a little waltz she's learned from weakness, a little song she knows from pain. "I've heard it all before, Lobee. I've heard it all before."