

SOUTHERN COMFORT



After two years of art school in the North Country – with snow up to my easel – frozen and stuffed with self-portraits, tired of washing in turpentine, I dropped out and headed for San Francisco. I crashed for a few weeks with an old girlfriend until her new boyfriend took offense. I was mostly innocent and didn't feel like fighting, so I fled to the nearest corner to score some grass to grease the wheels for my next move.

The dealer, who called himself Nameless, didn't have the correct change, so I swapped bills with the girl next in line and let her choose the first lid. "Hey Man," she said as I walked away, "wanna mosey into the handle and blow a few?"

This was the first time I'd seen her and, despite the fact that I was all alone with no place to call home, I wasn't feeling very friendly. I was too old to be suspicious of strangers, too young to be so careful, yet next to her, short and tough looking, I felt tender. "M'names Janis," she said. "You got'ny Bamboos?"

I started to say no and explain that I was going to the de Young to look at the Fragonard. But, instead, I heard myself say, "Why not. Let's go

look at some pictures?"

"Whatta ya mean? Like yer etchings, Man? Sure."

"No." I blushed. "I mean in the park. At the museum."

Never having mastered the casual pickup, I was a little shocked and quite pleased to have succeeded so easily. And the sight of erect nipples through a t-shirt could, in those innocent distant days, still make me nervous.

"Oh. Sure. I like that place 'cept they don't like ya to talk out loud – like it's a library or somethin'."

We smoked a finger sized joint on the way. When it was down to the last knuckle, Janis passed it to a couple of lovers strolling by. Janis told me she used to paint a little. "Maybe I'll get me some paints again," she said.

A San Francisco shower began to fall as we passed the goldfish pond at the entrance to the museum.

The Fragonard was smaller than I remembered but the brushstrokes on the left hand were still amazing. Janis thought so too, though she preferred some pre-Raphaelite piece of trash. We went into a small skylit courtyard, sat on a stone bench and smoked another joint. Then Janis got up abruptly and said, "Later Man." And giggled. The guard came sniffing in but I was already moving.

After I straightened out, I got serious about looking for a new room. I found a place on the south panhandle, called my old girlfriend to see if it was cool to pick up my bags, and moved two blocks down the street.

I never did know where Janis lived, but time to time I'd run into her and we'd have a bite or a beer somewhere. She told me she was now doing

a little singing. I told her I was still an artist. I was stretching it and assumed she was too.

"I think I'm getting my thing together," she said. "Gimme yer address, I'll letcha know time and place." She took out a ragtag sheaf of papers, clippings, flyers, notes and cards, ribbons, even a few dried pressed flowers, all held together with a heavy satin garter. "My office needs a gentleman butlah," she said as she chewed a point onto a stub of a pencil.

I said, "Uh huh," and gave her my address.

Some time later, I was hanging out, looking to score some Jamaican I'd tasted at a party the night before. Janis bopped up, looking radiant in some new/old outfit. "Hey, Man," she said. "I'm singin' overta North Beach t'night. Getcher gal and make it. Oughta be hot, Man. Imagine that – me'n Bessie Smith."

I misunderstood and said, "I think Bessie's dead, Janis."

"I know she's dead. Shit man – I can tell ya where she's planted. I just meant..." Janis stopped and brushed a pheasant feather back behind her ear. "Ah – fergit it. Bessie lives. You know?"

Feeling like I'd offended her, I smiled and tried to make it better. "Nice feather," I said.

"Yeah?" She smiled back. "Thanks, Man. Put it on this mornin' cuz I got so much t'do t'day. Thought it might make me move a little smoother. Y'dig?"

"Yeah," I said. It was easy to like the girl even though she was a ragtag bundle wrapped, like her office, in someone else's discarded finery. Somehow, her fragility made her seem impervious and constant. She already was somebody and at the time I couldn't say the same for myself.

Janis opened her lunchpail/purse and pulled a flyer from The Diggers out of her office. She wrote the name of a coffee house on the back and handed it to me. I told her I'd see her there but I didn't go. I was into jazz in those days and spent most of my time and money hanging out at the Blackhawk, listening to Miles, Coltrane and Monk. I would stake my nightly claim at the bar, nurse two or three beers and hope that during a break Miles would chat with me instead of Ralph Gleason. He never did.

I still saw Janis on the streets. If she noticed my absence at her gig, she never reproached me for it. In fact, whenever I ran into her, she'd ask me how my painting was going. I'd lie and say, "Great." She'd laugh and continue on her way. You could always hear her, coming or going or in a darkened theater. She had the greatest laugh I've ever heard; a shriek with an embedded cackle.

Soon the Blackhawk was torn down to make room for a parking lot and everyone I'd come to know was heading for Nepal or Yelapa to avoid the impending cataclysm. That year Haight-Ashbury was on the cusp between beatniks and hippies and filling up with all sorts of curious young people who looked an awful lot like Janis. I went back to art school, having discovered that I was not yet an artist. I hadn't made so much as a drawing in over a year.

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By the end of the decade, I was at the American Academy in Rome, living off my wife's fellowship. JFK was long gone. RFK bought the big bullet that summer. We were listening to Armed Forces radio in a

campground about six miles from Daccau when I heard the news about Bobby. We burned our battery down that night listening to him die in stages. When we returned to Rome the news soon followed about Martin Luther King.

I'd been away during most of the civil wars in Watts and Detroit and Chicago. The Italians were not feeling very friendly towards Americans because of what we were doing in Vietnam. All of which made me feel like I ought to be back home doing something other than living off the fat of the land. But free money is free money.

So I was painting – wishing for the first time in years that I had some dope to smoke – when I heard a scuffling on the gravel path outside my studio. Someone said, "Buon giorno."

I looked up, saw an American my own age, looked back down at the canvas I was staining red next to the yellow. I said, "Howdy," without missing a stroke.

"Name's Jerry," he said. "I'm new. You speak Italian?"

"Solo un poco," I admitted. "Mi dispiace."

"I can't speak a lick. Just got in – you s'pose you could help me with the portiere out there."

"Certo, andiamo," I said, almost exhausting my vocabulary. We walked out to the gate and had a stumbling conversation with Pietro who always insisted on practicing his English while I practiced my Italian. It was hilarious but Jerry's bags got stowed. Then we came back to the studio for espresso.

"Bitchin' place – huh?" Jerry said.

"Sure is," I said. "Lemme guess. California – right?"

"Santa Barbara," he admitted.

We chatted as I went back to my painting. His wife Gretchen was coming in later that day. My wife Linda was upstairs playing cards with a gay architect she'd become attached to. Eventually, Jerry and I got around to a more crucial subject.

"Dope?" Jerry asked.

"Niente!"

"How get dope?"

"Non so Io."

"Damn!" Jerry said.

But Jerry wouldn't settle for damn. Furthermore, coming from California he was adept in ways I was not at smelling it out. He could spot a connection before it came around the corner.

"There is dope in this place," he insisted.

"I don't think so," I replied, hoping I was wrong.

That night at dinner, Jerry scanned the length of the banquet table as the Italian waiters ladled the stracciatella into our bowls. By the time the pasta was served, he had spotted three or four fellows who smoked dope. Not only that, one couple, John and Danielle, were sitting there, silently smirking into their gnocci. As soon as Jerry pointed them out, I too could see it.

After dinner I introduced Jerry to John, the composer in residence. Words were whispered, a toss of the head and an entourage followed John downstairs to the recording studio where we smoked hash and sipped Frascati.

I was plucking strings inside the piano as accompaniment to Steve

Lacy playing Bemsha Swing when I saw Linda stop dead in her footsteps in the middle of the studio. It was the first time she had ever smoked dope and had panic in her eyes. She could scarcely manage to mutter, "...c-c-c can't breathe."

John was closest to her and easily the straightest one in the room. Or perhaps he was only the most accustomed to the kif. He gave Linda a slap on the back and said, "Sure ya can."

The color returned to Linda's face. She said, "Whew!" which about summed up her conversation for the remainder of the evening.

Meanwhile, John was back at the amplifier, fiddling. Slowly, he was turning up the volume, interminably dragging out the last few notes of DAY IN THE LIFE. Now, I usually can't wait for a Beatles song to be finished but this time there were ten people focused on the crescendo with such intensity that the studio ceiling lifted appreciably. Everyone felt the room rise and no one questioned the diminuendo as the studio settled back down, squirming slowly into its proper niche on the bedrock of the Gianicolo.

At some point Jerry had left the room and now came back carrying an LP. Gretchen let out a squeal and Jerry said, "Hush Mert."

"Mert?" I said.

"Jerry calls me Mert," Gretchen said.

"Mert?" I found that incredibly funny and didn't stop laughing until Jerry said, "Listen to this. We heard her at Monterey last year." Mert nodded knowingly.

The music came over me instantly. The recollection was slower. I remember thinking I've heard this before, yet knew I hadn't.

After the first side, after whoops and hollars and other less coherent expressions, Linda said, "Who was that?"

I watched in slow motion as Jerry tossed the record jacket like a frisbee. "Ya gotta see her," he said. "She's a little bitty thing – all feathers an' tight pants."

"Toss me that cover, " I said. One glimpse and I felt lost. I felt like a black butterfly fluttering through a darkened room.

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Monday, October 5th, 1970 – 3 a.m. St. Louis, Missouri. In the bedroom, Linda is nursing our five day old son, Aaron. His twin sister Gretchen began to fuss too. So I got up, fixed a bottle and took her into the studio. When I switched on the desk lamp, the radio came on too. Faintly, I could hear Janis singing PIECE OF MY HEART. I wanted to crank it up, but I left it low, like a lullaby. I sat there marveling at Little Mert's mouth puckering like she'd been sucking for centuries. Her tiny hand touched the bottle like a microphone as Janis sang CRY BABY CRY.

Gretchen fell asleep, then awoke when I tried to remove the nipple. She whined and sucked it right back into her tiny motor mouth. BALL AND CHAIN was playing as I left the studio, Gretchen asleep in the crook of my arm. I couldn't bear to turn Janis off, so I just closed the door and put Mert back in her crib.

Linda was already asleep as I crawled back to bed. Softly, through the wall, I could just barely hear MERCEDES- BENZ.

Still exhausted when the alarm went off at 8:30, I none the less rolled out, got dressed and drove to school to teach my painting class. I thought it

was curious that they were still playing Janis as I pulled into the parking lot.

I saw a couple of my students hanging a banner above the door to the art school. It read: JANIS LIVES. Flowers and filigrees filled what was once a dormitory sheet. One of the girls on the ladder, Sarah Bonfiglio I think it was, had a pint of Southern Comfort stuck in her back pocket and tears in her eyes. As I approached, she pulled out the bottle, uncorked it, took a shot, wiped the mouth on her paint splattered t-shirt and passed it to me. I admired her nipples as I took a slug and handed it back.

Then I canceled my class, walked across the street into Forest Park, lit up a joint and continued on to the museum to look at some pictures.

Danny Dries

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