

Me and Bobby McGee

Last night Irene rang.

She said it was time.

This morning I stood at the window and stared into the garden, watching the sparrows, and the neighbor's cat trying to hunt them. He was old, his belly so baggy it dragged on the ground. He missed them by a mile, but still crouched in the grass and gave it his best shot.

I sipped my tea; gathered my energy.

At the mall a busker had set himself up in the concrete square between the Bank and the Happy Sun bakery. He had an old acoustic guitar, its battered case at his feet. His grey hair was drawn back in a ponytail and he was dressed all in black like Johnny Cash. The sun was out. A few people dropped coins as they went by. He took a sip from his water bottle and waited while a bus rumbled by. Once the smell of diesel lifted he took a breath, strummed those familiar opening chords and threw his head back, his throat open and beautiful as a bird's.

Busted flat in Baton Rouge, waiting for a train...

Well, he wasn't Janis, but he did okay.

He and the song and the mid-morning traffic and the kids loitering, all of us there, just hanging out. Time peeled back: the four of us were still together, speeding through the night - *hey, hey, hey, Bobbie McGee.*

I stood in that patch of sun and held on to a moment of grace.

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If I could throw time in the air like a jigsaw puzzle and watch the pieces fall, I'd see that long ago summer ripple down against my bare arms and legs and feel again the touch of Bax's skin against mine. And If I could hold just one piece of it in my hand I'd lift it to my face and smell the heated earth cooling down, the zest of it sweet as oranges as we drove out

of town. Bax and me in front, Jerry and Irene in the back, listening to Bax's tape on the car stereo, Jerry pretending his sandal was a microphone, Irene with her eyes closed, her black hair glistening, seaweed on the foam of an incoming tide.

After lunch I sat in the car, waiting for my gut to settle and my breath to ease. I pressed my cheek against the steering wheel. Time caught me right beneath the ribs. My heart beat like an orphan's. Waves broke on black sand. Bax was standing knee-deep in the surf playing his harmonica under a fading moon, making it sound like a steam engine gathering speed. Irene danced barefoot, wet hair dripping salt water down her back, damp patches spreading on her white shirt like the map of an exotic country. I lay on the rug, peeling oranges and rolling joints for the journey back. And Jerry? He was leaning against the boot of the car, his eyes lit up, drinking in Irene.

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It was dark when I arrived. Irene made jasmine tea and chatted about which buildings had been pulled down and which ones turned into trendy cafes.

I carried my tea into the bedroom.

'You can talk to him,' she said, 'he can still hear you.'

I sipped my tea too quickly and scalded the inside of my mouth.

Bax's lungs heaved and slapped as he tried to suck in air. There wasn't enough energy left over to open his eyes or talk. His hands twitched above the sheet. I reached over and touched the desiccated skin on his palm. His fingers clutched at mine then curled and uncurled like a newborn. I looked away, inspected the walls and floors of Irene's house. They had that golden glow you get from polished kauri. Jerry had once lived there with her and, after him, Bax.

Irene stood by the bed in a turquoise shirt and black silk trousers looking down at Bax. Her figure was still good; her hair still lush, just two streaks of grey at her temples.

'They've given us enough morphine for another twelve hours,' she said.

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That long ago summer night we drove to the gorge where Bax grew his dope. It was harvest time and safer to reap the heads in the dark than in daylight. Irene sat up front with Bax. Jerry and I fell asleep in the back and they didn't wake us when we got there. I woke at first light wondering why Bax and I weren't back home in our own bed. I followed the smell of cigarette smoke and found Jerry sitting with his back against a tree. His eyes were closed, his cigarette burning between his fingers.

I ran my fingers through my hair. 'Where's Bax?'

Jerry didn't open his eyes, just waved his cigarette butt towards the bush.

I stumbled across the two of them in the centre of his patch. They didn't see or hear me. Irene was naked, her hair spread out across her shoulders, a luminous white shoot among all the green. She was slightly taller and heavier than Bax and his arms and legs were wrapped around her. He said something in her ear and I watched as she laughed and bent her knees, balancing his weight on her thighs as she lowered them both to the ground. His fingers curled and uncurled in her hair.

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A framed photo of the four of us was on the bedside table. I'm at one end, Jerry's at the other, a couple of bookends. Irene's got an arm around each of them. Her eyes are slightly closed; she's smiling straight at the camera. It was taken the week before she lowered Bax to the ground on her thighs in his dope patch, his body wrapped so tight around hers not an inch of air could come between them. A weird kind of rumbling came out of her throat as he entered her, like a cat when it catches a mouse. She drew him in until she was all filled up and there was nothing left.

I leaned over and smoothed the sheet where Bax's hands had been crumpling it. Lifted his head and shoulders, turned the pillow over and plumped it up. His head barely made a dent when I lowered it back down. His skin, stretched tight across his cheekbones, had that translucent morphine glow.

I reached across the bed to Irene's side. Her pillows were encased in pale blue silk. I pressed one of them against my chest. How easy to take Bax's last, difficult breaths from him; how satisfying to use Irene's pillow to do it. I rubbed the silk against my cheek. It was tepid as it slid against my skin, like water or blood. My fingers trembled. I turned and caught

sight of something in the mirror, something reptilian, clutching a patch of pale blue over the hole in her heart.

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Eight years ago, Jerry went from a doctor's visit about a persistent cough to the hospice in the space of a month. In the evenings when he couldn't sleep I sat beside the bed in the big armchair and held his hand. We cruised - two parts of the old puzzle together again, moving through one more porous night. Just before dawn, when sleep finally seemed possible, I'd play some version of *Me and Bobby McGee* and he'd smile and mouth that first word, *Busted*, the ghost of himself greeting the ghosts of the past.

Late one afternoon Irene came. She was over dressed and over loud, apologizing on Bax's behalf for his absence. He had three months to go before they'd consider him for parole. In her designer jeans and linen shirt she sucked all the air out of the room. Jerry was exhausted after fifteen minutes but when I suggested we get a coffee and let him rest he shook his head.

I stood by the window while she sat beside him. She smoothed her shirt, crossed her legs, flicked the back of her hair a couple of times. At the end of the hour she leaned over and kissed Jerry's cheek. His hands were shaking with pain but he still reached up and brushed the tips of his fingers against her glistening hair.

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I picked up my bag and walked to the door. I turned and looked back at Bax. His body had shrunk; his bones and joints too big for his muscle and skin. All that grace and beauty; all of it wasted.

Once I was out of town I wound the window down to feel the night air on my face and arms. I turned the volume up and listened to Janis.

Nothin ain't worth nothing but it's free...

When I passed the old turn off to Bax's patch I raised my hand in mock salute - the ghost of myself greeting the ghosts of the past.

