

9 And The Horse You Rode In On

Horse Johnson sat in the Cosmo Bar just off the Atlantis casino floor. It was dark and cozy and was a good venue for being close to the music. He allowed himself one Jack and Coke and listened to a wretched jazz quartet. Wretched may be a little strong. Maybe inexperienced would be better. The bassist was clean but was hampered by the drummer who sounded contrived and classically trained enough to lack spontaneity but not enough to be any good. Horse could tell the bassist wanted to tear loose, maybe even crazy good loose, but he stayed within the confines of the drummer. He was a good team player. The piano player, like the bassist was constrained but not good enough to overcome the drummer. It was the singer that interested Johnson. Not for her skill—she needed some seasoning—but more for her long, sleek body with dark flowing hair pulled back with a simple red ribbon; she looked like a model, not a jazz singer. Her black sequined dress hugged her body curve for curve and so Johnson, who usually listened for the truth in music, completely ignored its falsehood and focused solely on the woman, the allure of her sultry voice mesmerizing.

His charge and her friends had been in the casino earlier and when Horse asked her, Abigail Spencer told him they were going to hang around a bit longer and then take a cab into Nassau to a ladies' strip club—one where the men stripped for the women—the perfect place for a bachelorette party. Johnson had said he'd tail them but that was forbidden.

“You’ve got your cell phone, Horse.”

He acquiesced.

When the set finished, the jazz singer sauntered to Johnson’s table with a seductive smile.

“What do you play?” she asked.

“That obvious,” he laughed.

“Yeah. I could see your reactions. I know we’re not good but hey, it’s better than working a dive in Miami.”

“You got that right,” replied Johnson. “What’s your name, baby?” Horse slipped out of his Texas Ranger hat and into that of a jazz hipster.

“Melody.”

How apropos.

“Horace,” Horse said, slipping his hand into hers.

“Okay Horace the jazz musician, buy me a drink.”

He smiled and signaled the waitress. “I consider myself more an artist. I like to paint the notes, you know?”

She sat, a quizzical look spreading over her face.

“You know that Van Gough guy, he was bat shit crazy. He could have painted stiff, contrived pieces but he closed his eyes and saw the scene through his fucked up mind and then let go. All his emotions, his fears, and maybe even his brief happiness poured out onto that canvass.”

“He was painting,” she responded.

Johnson nodded his head.

“Honestly, I don’t know,” she laughed, “I guess I’m just a white girl without any soul.”

Johnson smiled. “What kind of bullshit is that?” he teased her with a sly grin. “Just because I’m black I’m supposed to be Louis Armstrong? I don’t play basketball very well, you know. Can’t run no more touchdowns either.” He shook his head and sipped his drink through the cocktail straw. “Jazz knows no race, sex, or religion. It’s an equal opportunity employer.”

“No, I’m sorry if I offended you,” she said placing her hand on his.

“You didn’t.”

“I’m not that good but I’ve seen it, I’ve seen some of these guys I’ve had gigs with, you know, they don’t know what’s around them or who’s around them and they seem to live in another world. I wish I could feel that.”

“Baby, you just close your eyes and let go. You don’t worry about fallin’ off cliffs ‘cause you know they’re coming. You’ll catch yourself. Man, you just dig deeper. Like you said, you go into a trance. It’s like painting.”

The waitress brought the singer her usual.

“How long are you here, Horace the artist?” she asked while seductively toying with the straw.

He sat back in the chair. Okay, he would allow himself another drink.

“I’m here through Wednesday.”

She sat forward. “Did you bring your horn?”

He winked and smiled, too into the melody to realize he hadn't told her what he played.

"You should sit in," she said. "We're done for tonight but maybe tomorrow?"

"Well, I probably ought to audition first," he replied with a devious grin.

"Do you have your horn with you?"

He resisted grabbing his crouch and saying play away, baby, play away.

"Why don't you audition now?" she added.

Johnson glanced at the waitress and canceled his drink order. His mind was no longer on Abigail and that was his first mistake.