

Bones and Blues

by Deborah Jiang-Stein

No one's heard from Etta Robinson since her husband Silky died, Silky Robinson, once the best blues singer in the Ozark Mountains.

His last years in their one room log cabin, they lived in recluse even before cancer rotted him to death, his body once packed tight into three hundred pounds. His khakis stained orange from days of Cheeto finger wipes on his thighs, Silky tucked his harmonica in his back pocket every morning after Etta dressed him, even though he hadn't played in a decade.

Etta threw Silky's memorial fest the day after his cremation. As mourners entered, she handed out photos of Silky, photos inlaid into matchbook covers, along with incense out of her husband's cremated remains.

Fifty mourners chanted and danced like a swirl of dervishes around his body displayed on an elevated table. Etta leapt and hopped in her dances. Covered with flowers and silk scarves and bandannas, she whirled around the room, then tossed herself on Silky's body. She smothered him with memories of their forty-nine years.

Weeping, she lifted herself and danced some more. The whole room danced, even the lone man in a three-piece suit who joined in after he stood in the sidelines for the first hour.

Everywhere in the chapel, Etta tacked up pictures of Silky and his former band members, pictures made crooked by all the dance and merriment.

Etta invited her closest friends to watch the cremation after the service. They declined. Etta said the body flailed around in the crematory for two hours. She watched it, then asked to keep the bones. "Make instruments from my bones," Silky asked her in his dying wish. The cremators gave her just the finger, the hand and the toe bones.

Soon after the funeral, Etta's convinced she needs new teeth, sure the family dentist put her to sleep in her last cleaning, then created

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a frown on her face, she said, and engraved his initials on the roof of her mouth.

Anything's possible without Silky to protect her. He left her a bunch of money and some land — a square inch of Alaska he purchased from a cereal box top as a small boy.

Etta filed a malpractice suit against her dentist, lost the lawsuit for dental blunder, and disputed the ten-thousand-dollar attorney fee. Etta searched for another dentist to remove her teeth, to remove the memories and the feelings. Most dentists refused.

At last one dentist agreed to grind Etta's teeth down, twenty-one teeth, and cap them. "New set of teeth will help me forget," she told the dentist. The frown and the initials will be there forever.

Etta disappeared months later, and married the man from the funeral, the one in the three-piece suit. They live in the same back woods behind her cabin where they sing and swirl, dance with scarves and bandannas. It's part of their new act, about to go on the road. Etta jams on Silky's blues harp. The man in the three-piece suit, he's just the scarf swirler.

