

Being Bogart (Revision E#minor)

by James Lloyd Davis

Eyes like Fred Astaire, she thought, unremarkable, but nice. Turns from night to day when he smiles. Great smile. Those eyes look better when he smiles.

A devil's smile, though.

She stood behind him, watched his fingers move across the keyboard, thought, *His fingers move like two families of geese ... goose, gander, three goslings each, feeding in the grass, purposeful, pecking at the keys, fingers evoking notes instead of nutrition. Damn, but I wish I could write that down, use it. A little cheesy, as metaphors go. Very cheesy when you think about it. What the hell... I'll probably forget it before morning anyway.*

He was hitting on her, seriously, not at all like some puppy dog man, but quietly, with an almost European flair.

Going for the jugular, she'd asked him what, if anything, he believed in. He was slow to respond. Moving thoughtfully through the music, a song she'd heard recently on the radio and requested that he play, Blue Tango. He finally looked up from the keyboard, saw her standing behind him in the mirror over the bar. Tall, slim, chic, she wore a black sheath dress and heels. Pretty face and all the correct dimensions. Smart.

He smiled, said, "What do I believe in, she asks. How about music ... beautiful women..." He stopped playing, reached for a shot glass perched atop the piano, held it with his thumb and forefinger, knocked it back, smiled a mellow smile, said, "... and booooozzzzze."

She laughed.

In 1952, the place to be was the Roman à Clef, a piano bar not far from all the Broadway theaters, a place where famous names and famous faces blended with the bourgeoisie. His name was Earl Blanchette and, except for the fact he wore no tux with a

cummerbund, but a blue blazer and grey slacks with a leather belt, no tie, but silver cufflinks, he looked very much like the poster outside by the entrance to the stairway.

You went in the door and the wrought iron stairs wound down to the lounge, with tables and a curved bar, at the end of which stood Earl's piano.

It was a slow night. She was the only customer and she had his full attention.

Hers was a famous face and she wondered if he recognized her as she walked slowly back to the bar stool, leaned against it. Elbow resting on the bar, she watched his face as his eyes went back to the keys, fingers working out the notes to Stardust.

"Where you from?" he said, without looking up.

"From? You mean... I can't be from here, from Manhattan?" She pouted.

"No." He said. "Nobody really comes from here. They all come here ... from somewhere else... towns all over. They stay for a while... but not forever."

"Then what?"

"Oh, mostly they go back home to Idaho, work in a drug store. Get married to the pharmacist. Get fat. On Saturday mornings, they sit at the table in the breakfast nook of their split level homes, drink coffee, think. 'Sure... I could have been somebody. But this will do.'"

He looked up and smiled, looked back down to the keyboard and said, "This will do."

She smiled a smile that leaned precariously to the left, a smile that spoke volumes in sarcasm, said, "Is that where you're from... Earl? Idaho?"

"Hah."

"Well, Mister Blanchette? Am I right?"

"I'm from nowhere, baby."

Doing a very good Bogart imitation. He said, "I'm from everywhere. Everywhere and nowhere at all... you could even say I'm from hunger."

She clapped her hands slowly, said, "Bravo, Mister Bogart. Bra-vo."

He bowed slightly from the waist, worked a fast segue into As Time Goes By and said, "So, sweetheart...." still being Bogey, "...where's home?"

"Take a guess."

He smiled, started to play the theme from Oklahoma.

She laughed. "Not even close, Mr. Bogey Blanchette."

"So, you gonna to tell me?"

She smiled, said, "Good night."

He cocked his head to question her. "Goodnight?"

"Got to go, Mister Bogart. Have a nice life."

He watched her pick up her purse from the bar, a tasteful little fold-over bag without straps. Watched her in the mirror as she walked up the steps and disappeared around the turn.

He sighed, looked over at the bartender, Jack, who smiled and said, "Too bad."

"Yeah. Too bad is right."

Earl shrugged, turned back to the keyboard. He'd been drawn to her like no other woman he'd seen come into the bar. He'd given it his best shot and lost. It was as though she'd taken his lonely heart, lifted it from his chest for just a moment, looked it over and tossed it away. Tossed him off just at the moment when he thought he was home free.

It made no sense to him. *But*, he thought, *one more woman more or less, means nothing in the great, big balance sheet of midnight romance and...* He shook his head, thought, *Earl, check yourself. You sound like a fifty-cent detective novel gone really, really bad.*

He shook his head, played something he'd heard but never seen on a music sheet, an old tune, the name of which he could never remember, thought, *Losing my touch. Really gonna miss not knowing that one. Hell. Never even got her name.*

"What the hell..." he whispered. "... what the hell."

