

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/3

David Krancher
Night Waitress

I'm in New York to play lead guitar at a recording studio. It's the first time I've ever done that. I never wanted to, but Tony talked me into it. Good for my resume, he said. I don't have a resume. Yes, you do: I wrote one for you, he said. But maybe it is my last time.

I heard a few tunes from the band who's cutting a CD—they suck. Some kind of acoustic punk country thrash band, if there is such a thing. I couldn't hear the words or the tune, but that's probably a good thing. Tony says they're looking for a huge acoustic guitar sound like The Who in "Tommy." Get Pete Townsend, I told him, but he just sneered. I also told him we'd have to re-write the whole guitar arrangement so the songs had some momentum—they aren't the Cowboy Junkies. He said I wouldn't have to play along with the band there, just do overdubs and solos. He also said we were almost broke, that he couldn't afford to pay my rent anymore, that I had a choice of doing this New York studio gig or working as a temp in a goddam advertising office. I'm thinking he's full of shit about that, but I don't know how to read checkbooks, so what do I know. I said pay for my meals and a hotel room and I get to buy a new guitar from Sam Goody's. OK, good boy, he said. What am I, a dog? Am I a dog who is a whore? He said, Just shut up—you will have fun. Yes, my pimp, I said.

So here I walk down a street I don't know what the name is. It's not Sunday morning but I pretend it is. I don't have to go the studio until the afternoon. Tony produces and engineers, so he's now there fiddling with the amps and mics and all that crap. I don't know why he's so happy about doing it—he must be paid real well to do this—but that's not why he's so happy. I think he gets to fuck that record company guy all week. But he's not the whore, just me—right?

I hate New York. It's better than Boston, but it's not big enough. Some people here look at you like you have something for them. That old guy just looked at me twice. The girl in the pink skirt put her hand over her mouth and turned away. Oh, damn, it's my lip again. Sometimes I bite down on it when I'm nervous and it bleeds all down my chin. I never know when. Here's a diner with napkins.

It takes all the paper napkins from a table to stop the bleeding this time. Are you all right? says a waitress. No, I'm fine. Let me look, she says.

No, it's stopped now—do you have pumpkin pie?

I can't hear what you say with a napkin over it, she said. The men's room is down there. You should wash that off.

I don't like to be touched, so I wave her hands away. She has all different color fingers. She is real cute.

Take the napkins with you, she says.

When I come back napkins are back on the tables and there is a piece of pumpkin pie. I wonder if she knows Hotel What's-its-name. I would let her keep the purple tights on. She's my type. Although my favorite type is no woman at all, really. No woman, I don't cry, I say. She could make me cry. Two cups of coffee. With milk on the side. And a menu.

She doesn't smile and doesn't frown. That a Les Paul? she says. No.

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/3

It's a Les Paul SG, do you play? No, I paint. My old boyfriend gave me a busted up one he found in the garbage. I painted it to look like a broom with wheels. He took it with him though, the cocksucker.

I can't remember the last time I laughed out loud.

No, he is a cocksucker, she said. Turned gay; you must know what that's like.

What? Yeah, I do know — my best friend is a cocksucker. Tony is also my boss. We're supposed to be partners, but he bosses me all the time. Good for him. You're my favorite waitress of all time. Most of them don't say cocksucker while I'm ordering my coffee. It's sweet.

Whoops, another customer, she says.

I point at the menu. I'll have coffee with this, I say.

After a piece of apple pie and three cups of coffee, she drops off the check. There are lots of people having lunch now. I stuff a take-out menu in my pocket. The diner is on 48th street.

The recording studio is down in the Village. I decide to walk.

Boy, if I wrote a song about that colored-finger girl, no one would believe it. I haven't made love to any girl since that cracker-head walked out on me back in June. It's not my fault her fucking soprano career didn't work out. She called Tony a faggot once when she was mad. Screw her. Colored-Finger Girl wouldn't do that. She knows herself too well. My song would over-write her. I always do that. I find the kernel of it that way. Who cares? Cut and splice is the art of it anyway. At first, don't censor yourself, Jack. Then cut and splice. Color-Finger Girl. Good song material.

I decide to take the subway. I love trains; you don't have to steer much and they always know how to get there. And riding the train to my first big recording session in New York feels better than before. Tony told me how he wants the guitars to sound. He knows how my guitar parts should fit.

He said this could be really great for us. Me producing and you with your guitar, but the best thing is our song will make the album — this will put us on the map down here in the New York scene. It'll be the single for the charts. "Choosers" rocks, has a story to it: Great tune, Jack. Now let's get it to make us some money. Tony sounds like he needs a cheerleader skirt with pom-poms.

I tell him they are some kind of folk rock or country punk so they won't like my kind of guitar parts. They'll try to pretty-up the chorus with twelve-part harmony or something. He said just show up.

It's the wrong subway train. I ask the toll guy. He tells me how to get there, but he uses only one note in his whole description and I can't remember anything in a monotone. I climb out of there and take a cab to the studio.

We'll make it work, Tony said. They're hipper and more punk than you might think. I'm the producer, I'll make it work.

Sure, I say. You should sleep with more A&R men — that's shrewd marketing. He said he didn't sleep with Karl. I said, Hip little bar on

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/3

Christopher Street? Washington Square in the moonlight? Sure, I believe that.

I read the address off the business card to the cab driver. This sucks, here I go. I almost shut the door and leave my guitar behind, but there is a leash on it to a dog collar on my wrist. Tony says he doesn't want me to loose the only pet I love.

I wish I was home. I would have pizza for breakfast around two o'clock and watch the Red Sox. They are just like me. They lose every fucking year. And then I would play a little guitar and have a little chocolate for the third inning. I should re-write the chorus for the Chooser song—it sucks like that: too much jazzy beat, not angry enough.

I find the recording studio. The studio has a receptionist with ten ear rings who lets me into the studio and I meet the other engineer. I hate him. The studio is too big and it has too much equipment. I hate it. A Fender amp is set up, that's all I care about.

Tony hands the CD of guitar parts I'd worked out ahead of time to the engineer. It was his idea to have me pre-record my guitar ideas. He locks my guitar in a closet. He knows I might run away. I do. Be back by six, Jack—meet the band, show off your guitar, help with the arrangements, do a solo or two.

I go uptown to music store row and find a small parlor-style guitar to play. I decide to charge it to Tony's credit card when a funky beat breaks out from the electric guitar section. A tall black man in a slouched hat riffs through some R&B-type changes set down by a bass player who looks Latin. It sounds like a meld of funky chocolate and salty nuts. My feet tap along and my knees swing side-to-side. I keep playing the chords to "Choosers." I let their rhythms answer the questions in my chords. Then I catch the right feel and "Choosers" becomes a new song. It rocks and lat-ins at the same time. I play the chorus ten times and then I buy the guitar.

Then I go back to the diner and have waffles. Color-Finger Girl is not there.

I walk over to Central Park and find a bench under a tree. I can't stop playing that riff I reconstructed. A ten-dollar bill falls into my guitar case. A middle-aged man in tight jeans walks past with a young blonde on his arm.

Wait'll he drops his pants, hon. Disappointment is only a button away, I say.

The man doesn't stop walking. I write it into my little notebook: "But-ton Away" I'll call it. I work up a reggae riff for it and play it into Tony's cell-phone voicemail.

I have to wait until the next day for Tony to record my new guitar ideas into a rough demo of "Choosers." Afterwards when we're hanging out in the control room Tony is so pleased he kisses me on the forehead. Two of the band guys turn their heads away. Fuck 'em. They just sound like punk clichés played on acoustic guitars. I don't care how the recording session goes. I play my solo in two takes and tell Tony I'm going back to Boston.

Maybe I let Tony down but I don't care. I'm not really a session player.

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/3

He knows that now. It's too tedious to sit in a studio while some stoned drummer tightens his drum heads. The only part I like is when I record my own songs. Tony always works on the arrangements and keeps the track schedule and talks to all the band guys. But I don't care, so I get out.

It's late but the diner is still open. The best thing about New York City is a place to eat at 2:30 in the morning. Color-Finger Girl is there. I hide my guitars under the table. Good night—no more do I have to stumble through the fifth demo of guitar licks with a twenty-year-old acoustic guitar player with fifty zits. Tony says I can overdub the rest in Boston anyway.

I ask if I can buy her a cup of coffee.

This is not a bar, mister. I'm not some fucking hooker, she said. We don't serve pimps here: get out!

Sorry, I say. I blink about five times.

How's that for a tough cookie? she says.

What's that? I say.

A friend of mine is doing an indie film and I play a "tough cookie" waitress. How was I?

Oh. Yeah. Scary. I'm just a country boy lost in the city, so take it easy on me, would ya?

Scared? You want scared? See that plywood window over there? Some junky tried to hold up the place last night on my day off. The cook called 911 and the thief's little gun went off when he dropped it and shot out the window.

I don't believe it. New York City will get a bad name, I say.

Hey, the cook writes mystery stories during the day, so the whole story could be a lie, except the window does have that hole in it. What are you writing?

A song about a tough-cookie waitress from NYC.

Lies, eh?

You can star in the movie version.

See this? she says. Red, blue-green, black, gray-blue—I'm a painter who doesn't use brushes. Like these fingernails?

Maybe I should get a late-night waitressing gig. I'm really a failed songwriter, I say.

I'm not a failed painter. You should see my stuff; knock you over, Babe.

I'm sure, I said. I'm sure.

But how many tips do you think I make with one customer like this? Forget being a waitress; you don't have the tits for it. Also, our customers don't start coming in 'til 5:00.

Oh here, I said. I pushed a crumpled twenty-dollar bill across the table.

No—you don't have to do that.

Expense account. It's covered.

OK, thanks. So you sell . . . songs? she said.

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/3

Yep: songs. Badly. This was probably my last paying gig. Take advantage of me now.

Lay off, mister! My boyfriend is a biker.

Oh, god, I'm sorry . . . oh, no—not again.

Gotcha. You are a farm boy, she said.

At 5:00 a.m. it was raining. I left the diner, looked up, looked left, looked right, looked at my room key and dragged my guitars back into the diner.

Where are we and where is this hotel, I ask. The waitress drew me a map on a napkin and put her phone number on the bottom. She drew a sketch of a Les Paul broom on it, too.

On the train home to Boston I worked on the lyrics for “Song About a Waitress” but I never finished the song. The train hit a rock slide and I hit my head pretty hard. Only after Tony got home did I remember the diner and the waitress. But the napkin was gone.