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Roger Sheffer

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Sheffer: Blood On My Shoes

JOHN GARDNER MEMORIAL PRIZE

FINALIST

BLOOD ON MY SHOES

Roger Sheffer

Really, I was just walking through the hospital tunnel looking at my bloody shoes when some guy spoke to me.

"What are you staring at?" he said. His voice wasn't much more than a barking whisper.

"Nothing," I said. "Nobody." I never stare at the patients.

Then he said, "A man hears what he wants to hear and disregards the rest."

Or something very close to that. Song lyrics, definitely, but not sung, offered up in the dim underground as a challenge, like, what's the next line of this song, or the one before it? He pointed at me, as if to say, *It's your turn, buddy*. Another light in the tunnel fluttered on, giving me a clear look at the guy. So I stared at him. He wore a maroon bathrobe. He had a long neck and a knob of a head shaved bald, or he had lost his hair in chemo. He looked fifty, sixty, seventy, eighty. I didn't know who the hell he was, except that he was a patient at the Clinic, probably the psychiatric wing. He had on maroon slippers that matched his hospital robe. I coveted the slippers.

"Nobody? You think I'm nobody?"

"I didn't say that," I said. "You're somebody." I was on my way from the lab to my car, done for the day. Usually I walked outside, to clear the chemicals from my head, but it was raining.

"All right, who am I?" the man asked. He had started to follow me. His legs worked okay. He moved right along.

"I don't know."

"It's the hair, isn't it?" He held both hands several inches above his head and around the sides, to indicate the former shape and

extent of his hair, evidently some kind of white man's Afro. I'd seen bad ones, like the guy with the paint-by-numbers show on PBS, and at least a couple musicians on Lawrence Welk, back in the 1970s, when they *had* any hair.

"Could be the hair," I said.

He wanted me to guess his identity, but I don't play that game. I'm discreet. A couple years ago, an important head of state (Middle East) came to town for his lung cancer. It wasn't in the paper but the staff knew. I passed him several times in the tunnel. If he had asked me directly to guess who he was, I would have said, "I hope you're feeling better, sir. We're pleased that you came to our clinic for your treatment." King Hussein—when they wheeled him by, I acted like he was a normal patient. He looked dead already. Don Rickles, Zsa Zsa Gábor, Doris Duke. I had done the blood work for Zsa Zsa, her older sister, her mother, her eighth husband. Famous people came through these tunnels in bathrobe and slippers, bad hair, no hair, and I kept my head down. But this bald guy—I put a sizable corona of hair on him, deleted thirty pounds of fat, colored his pasty face with a youthful, rosy complexion, and, finally, dressed him in an open-collar plaid shirt, corduroy jacket.

I knew. The realization of his identity made me tremble, not from awe, nor from pity, but a kind of fear, the fear I had experienced a few years earlier when my father lay dying in another hospital in another part of the country and morphed from young-old to old-old in the space of a week. As Dylan once sang, *May you be . . . forever young*.

"Take a good look," the patient said.

So I looked at his feet. They were completely ordinary—they could have been my feet.

"All right," he said, "now that you've figured out who I am, are you gonna go out and tell everybody?"

"I doubt it."

"You doubt it. Put yourself in my shoes."

I kept staring at the maroon slippers. I thought about the shoes he would have stored in his hospital locker with his

turtleneck and corduroy jacket. Nice dark brown loafers, nothing too formal, tassels optional. Or Chukka boots, in charcoal gray. I remember cool people wearing them back in the 1970s.



My roommate at Cornell (class of 1972) looked so much like my new tunnel acquaintance—back when he was a famous and attractive singer—that I used to call him Aggie. I could have called my roommate Aggie simply for the fact that he grew up on a Mohawk Valley dairy farm and was majoring in General Agriculture. He thought he could sing. When we sang together, he would take the lower part. He was naive and somewhat deaf but unaware of his handicap. Like in the song “Cloudy,” where the lyrics go, “Down from Berkeley to Carmel,” he insisted it was *Cornell* and not Carmel. I’d whip out the map of California and show him how Carmel made more sense. A hundred miles or so, a reasonable day trip on Highway 101, with a side excursion to Santa Cruz where we might toss breadcrumbs at the seagulls. “No,” he insisted, “it’s Cornell,” as if a mystical freeway connected Berkeley and the place where we attended college, three thousand miles distant. For both Aggie and me, there was a connection, a shortcut between two university towns, somewhat fogged in and potholed. So we did the song the way Aggie wanted. Other misheard song lyrics spewed from his mouth. Like in “Feeling Groovy,” he would sing, “We got to make these moments last.” Moments? It’s supposed to be “mornings.” My roommate wasn’t all that bright. He looked good when he sang, unquestionably, but he dragged me down by singing flat. There’s nothing more difficult than resisting the slow collapse of pitch, nor anything more exhilarating than finding the perfect blend, a musical soul mate.

Not that I had such a great voice, but at least I stayed on pitch, and when I sang along to my albums I blended okay with the performers. Some guy in our dorm said he couldn’t pick out my voice. “Can’t even tell you’re singing.” That was a

major compliment. And old Aggie, when it was his turn to use the record player, would slap on his folkie albums and sing along until he ran out of voice and just moved his lips, at which point, with the deletion of his off-pitch voice, the effect became quite stunning. Looking at his hair, the curve of his mouth, the way he held his head—like a flightless bird—I would think, *Man, if a certain famous person ever got sick and needed a stand-in during a concert, here's the guy for the job. Just teach him the songs, put on a scratch-free recording, and tell him to lip-sync.*

Aggie is no doubt fat and bald now, unavailable for stand-in work. Sold the farm to his son and moved to town, dumped his records in a landfill. Never sings. Groans all night from the pain.



Weeks later the famous bald guy was still getting his treatment at the Clinic. I saw him in the tunnel more than once. The second time, I saw him walking behind a couple of Arab sheiks and their entourage, kind of sponging off their security, like if our small town paparazzi tried to take a photograph, the bodyguards would grab the camera and smash it against the wall. I've pretended to be famous like that, smiling, turning my head a couple degrees so as to offer the smallest acknowledgment. It's one way to break up the monotony of tunnel walking.

The third time I saw him, a Friday around midnight, my shift had just let out. It was raining hard outside and I figured I would pamper myself, walk to my car as far as possible under cover. The tunnel was empty, but not dark. The city authorities kept it reasonably well lit, and it's not as if rusty water dripped from above or blood had splashed on the walls or snakes dangled from the pipes. This was a well scrubbed, utilitarian tunnel connecting hospitals and hotel and parking ramp. The acoustics were really quite good, the ceiling and walls lined with yellow tile. My shoes still had blood on them, a few drops on the toes. It looked purple in this light, somehow more visible. I could

have been a murderer, suddenly aware that the incriminating evidence was walking around in plain sight.

I heard the guy vocalizing. Yodeling. *Lie-la-lie-la-lie-la-lie*. Pushing the high notes. The high notes didn't come out clearly. Even with the great acoustics he sounded like a sick dog. Double-voiced, actually, like two sick dogs attempting a duet. As if I'd ever heard such a thing. I whistled Dixie to let him know he wasn't alone. Then I whistled the same tune he was yodeling. It was one of my favorites.

He saw me and turned away. He pretended to gag.

"Need help?" I asked.

"You a doctor?"

"Just a lab technician." Actually, I was assistant director of the hematology lab. I might have run a test on his blood. I might even have *his* blood on my shoes.

"Somehow I thought everybody around here was a doctor. Supposed to be ten thousand doctors in this town, I read somewhere."

"More like one thousand," I said. I scraped my soles on the gritty cement floor.

"They're all quacks, way overrated."

"Are you okay?"

"What?"

"A minute ago you sounded like you were having trouble. I could call for help or walk you back to your room. I could get a wheelchair for you. There's always a wheelchair in some alcove. I'd be happy to do it."

"Happy?"

"Yes," I said. "It's a service we gladly provide."

He let me see both sides of his face, as if posing for a mug shot. One side was puffy and green compared to the other. Nauseating.

"You know who I am, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Pathetic, isn't it?"

"I wouldn't say that."

"That's doctor talk. Any time I say something like, 'Hey, Doc, I'm never gonna recover from this,' the doctor answers with, 'I wouldn't say that.' You people all read from the same damn script."

I set down my backpack on a bench. This was going to be more than a brief chat. The guy had a scene he liked to perform with ordinary people like me. He would suck me into a weird delusion with no exit, hire me as his personal assistant, his butler, his vomit remover. My agenda: I wanted him to stop thinking I was a typical Clinic employee. If this took time, I had plenty to spare.

"What did you think was pathetic?" I asked.

"The condition of my voice. You heard it." He coughed. The echo was like a distant gun being fired. "I hope to God you didn't tape it. Fans are always pulling that crap."

"Here? At the Clinic?"

"Possibly."

I frisked myself so he could see I carried no recording device. "No camera either." I opened my lab coat, like a magician claiming to have nothing concealed.

"That's good." Even on two simple words he sounded awful. He reminded me of a patient who'd had his larynx removed and spoke by swallowing air and belching.

Hoping to make this "moment" last, I asked more questions. "Are you seeing a throat specialist at the Clinic? Is that why you're in town?"

"I have a gig at the Elks Club tonight. That's what brought me to town. I'm that desperate." He might have intended to sound sarcastic, but his voice could not convey sarcasm, only bitterness. Elks Club. Maybe. He touched his neck and shuddered. "The official diagnosis is that I have a thyroid condition, and the official PR bullshit is that I'm getting treated for it. Otherwise you wouldn't find me within a thousand miles of Dogpatch."

"Does it affect your singing?"

"Are you deaf? It turns me into a monster."

I almost said, *I wouldn't say that*. "The hair is growing back."

"Yeah, great, like beautiful hair is the most important thing in the world. My *hair*. To think I was ever famous for my hair and women would rush the stage and pull my hair."

"Didn't they?"

He shook his head, as if his minuscule white follicles would move and help to demonstrate the point. Then he told me what *was*, in fact, the most important thing in the world. Singing. This had been the case for him since junior high school. "I lost my top notes. I can't get a wig to cover that fact." He cleared his throat. More distant gunfire. "You heard me. Rat-tat-tat. I can't hit my freakin' high notes. Or I hit them for maybe a second and then I crack and start spitting blood. It's true."

"I'm not afraid of blood. I'm covered with it, most of the time."

"We're talking about my voice, dammit."

"Sing low notes then," I said. "Change your style."

He tightened the knot on his maroon bathrobe and pointed the end of the drawstring at me, not like a gun but more like a paintbrush. "Who are you anyway, man, to be telling me how to sing?"

I don't blame him for sounding nasty. He must have been struck by the oddness of the situation—a person of his stature, a musical legend of the second or third order, being given advice about "vocal production" by an anonymous lab technician with blood on his shoes. In a midwestern tunnel, at midnight. It was freaking out the both of us.

"The fact is," I said, "I've taken a few voice lessons."

"Yeah, the fact is, everybody in the world has taken lessons." His voice cleared somewhat as he grew calmer. "And what good are they? I tell you, the loudest singers who ever cracked a windshield probably took voice lessons. Fifty bucks a shot."

"I paid thirty."

"And all it did was make them able to sing louder, which increased the pain of the poor folks who had to listen to them, or it boosted their ego, or it created a perverted relationship between them and their teacher. That's what you get for a hundred bucks

an hour in this business. The poor saps still couldn't sing in tune and yet they believed they were one phone call away from fame and fortune. People used to come up to me in the street and sing in my face because some two-bit voice teacher told them they were wonderful. They wasted their money, right?"

"Right."

"Not that I couldn't have helped them out if they had real talent. And some of the *best* singers were born that way. Are you one of them?"

"No," I said. "I'm average. Never made a record, so if I was ever any good there's no proof of it. Maybe a few old cassettes in my mother's apartment, the tape all wrinkled. I haven't sung in public for decades." Nor had *he*, really. When was his last public appearance? Ten years ago, during a PBS fund drive, one of those horrible oldies shows where only one original member of the group is still living, with gray hair and no teeth. "I have to hurry along," I said. "Gotta get home."

"To the wife and kids."

"Actually, no."

"Glad to hear that," he said, perking up. "You can stay up all night with me. I was beginning to believe you had a normal life." He tapped me on the shoulder, hard enough that I felt pain for a few seconds. "Who needs a family?"

"I thought you had a wife and kids."

"Everything is temporary. Love, respect, a working phone, copyright protection. Lemme ask you something," he said, in a casual tone. His speaking voice really was getting better. He sounded human, like an old friend. "I mean, you're not in any big hurry. Do you know the last thing on my mind?"

"I couldn't even guess."

"No, I meant the *song*." He sighed and looked up at the ceiling. "'The Last Thing on My Mind.'"

"That's an oldie. Judy Collins."

"Tom Paxton, but who gives a crap anymore?"

"He still living?"

"You know," he said, "I always wanted to sing that kind of

music, that kind of pseudo-authentic folkie stuff, but it was passé by the time I came on the scene. I had to sing all this new material, by you-know-who. It was all over the map. We'd have a whole freakin' orchestra for backup, gospel singers, church bells. All I needed was a piano player."

"So, you weren't really a folksinger."

He rubbed the top of his head, then brought his hand down. His hand shook violently, as if it had picked up an electrical charge from the white hair bristles. "Here's a shocking fact. The first wave of so-called folksingers are in their seventies now. Eighties. Those who aren't dead."

"It makes me sad," I began.

"What?"

"It makes me sad when *Entertainment Tonight* does celebrity birthdays and they give the person's real age. They should just wish them happy birthday and leave it at that. Judy Collins is sixty-six." I pulled that number out of the air. I had no idea how old she was.

"You're off by a few," he said.

"I guess you would know."

"Of course," he said. "We exchange the most pathetic birthday cards. They never do my birthday. On that TV show."

"Why not? You're famous."

"They have no clue what year I was born. Check your latest World Almanac, and you'll see me listed but no year of birth. I'd sue the bastards if they ever put the year in. Go to the internet, type my name in the box and check out the unauthorized bios. They're all guessing."

I would have guessed his year of birth right then, thrown it against the shiny, yellow wall to see if it stuck. 1940? Pretty close. Older than Dylan, younger than Elvis. Same age as Lennon. *John Lennon, past retirement age, getting fat and ugly*. Yoko Ono, now in her seventies—I just read about that.

"How old do you think I am?"

"It would be rude of me to guess."

"That's right," he said, almost smiling. "I wish someone in

this town would be rude to me.”

“You’re not sixty yet, are you?”

A nurse came through the tunnel, swinging a couple of tote bags. She sang a few words, like “honey, honey, baby,” testing the great acoustics. I think she knew who this guy was and wanted to impress him. Like, make me a diva, get me out of this uniform, out of this stupid town. She sounded like Carly Simon, bouncing on the high notes. A very young Carly Simon, who only needed to be discovered and pampered and recorded while walking through an acoustically-perfect tunnel. We stood and listened. Her heels made a nice, wet tapping noise as she walked along.

“Not bad,” I said. “A few sharp notes.”

“Sometimes it’s more about looks than talent. More about being in the public eye and misbehaving and creating a legend.” The bald guy poked me again. “What the hell was I asking you about?”

“The Last Thing on My Mind?”

“Thank you. That song has been driving me bananas,” he said. “Maybe it’s the medication. I keep screwing up the verse that goes something like, ‘My thoughts are a-rumblin.’” He sang in a low raspy voice, eyes closed tight, like a ninety-year-old blues singer. “In the subway, I think.”

“A-tumblin,” I said.

“Right. Keep going.”

I sang the entire verse for him, not to show off, but to get it right. I sang in my best voice, in tune, open, light, unpinched, folky. Good echo. It might have seemed as if I were auditioning to be his partner. I even did the chorus, with a specific feeling, thinking of a woman I might have loved, but not well enough, and who, disgusted with my attitude, took off one day, unannounced, because, of course, the best women often did pack up and leave this town. I gave it that feeling, as if my life were like that, a tragedy that I had managed to step back from, objectify, and sing about. He nodded. He placed his hand over his mouth and coughed. Evidently, something had connected.

But he didn't need a partner, especially one whose range fell so close to the way he used to sing. He sang along with me anyway, an octave lower, and got a few more words wrong. Like, in the next-to-last verse he sang, "For the weeks they have been steadily growing," and I stopped right there and I actually touched him on the arm, as if to stop him from crossing a busy street. As if I really knew this guy. I told him, "It's *weeds*, not weeks," and he kind of pouted for a while, and I realized how sick he was. I should have treated him more kindly. Like, he wouldn't be appearing with me on stage in the near or distant future. Unless the Clinic doctors worked a miracle, his career was finished.

"You know," I said, patting him on the arm, "either way makes sense." And he thought so, too.

We finally sat down on the bench, like two old buddies. He told me about the times he had screwed up the lyrics on stage in front of thousands of people. Woodstock, Central Park, Monterey. It never mattered. Sometimes he had sung nonsense verses until his mind got back on track, and he had wondered even then whether he had something wrong with him, medically, like some inoperable brain tumor. I told him what it was like to be cursed with a perfect memory. Once I got started on a song I never forgot the lyrics.

And then he said, "We'd be great together then, wouldn't we?"

I had no quick answer to that. The two of us, together? Standing on stage in front of a real audience? Like, sharing a microphone, with our faces only inches apart as we leaned toward each other to perfect our blend? Is that what he meant? He should have contacted me twenty-five or thirty years ago, when I would have benefited from that kind of offer, when I actually worshipped this guy and would have sprouted wings to get close to him. Wasn't that the ultimate scene in every half-assed musician's fantasy—to climb up on stage and perform with his hero, the singer whose voice he had so often lip-synched or doubled? Even to perform in a yellow-tiled underground tunnel connecting two hospitals.

Finally I said, "You could sing with the nurses. They'd get a big kick out of it."

"I'd rather sing with another guy."

"Not me, though," I said. "I'm an amateur."

"You're very good, actually."

Okay. I should have asked him right then to put his appraisal in writing and sign it for me, as if I were some idiot autograph hound. I had a Clinic memo pad in my pocket, a Clinic pen. He didn't even have to write it if his hands were too shaky; I would take dictation and then ask him to initial that note. I recalled the episode of *The Simpsons* where Homer ended up in a mental hospital and befriended an inmate who claimed to be Michael Jackson. I mean, maybe this guy in the tunnel wasn't who I thought he was, or even who *he* thought he was. "Gotta get home," I said, standing up from the bench.

"Right," he said, "you were just going. Going away."

"With no word of farewell," I said, half singing.

He winced, shook his head. Then he had this look in his face as if he were trying to remember more lyrics, maybe from his own songs, the two or three he had written. Or it was pain. Or both. Because when you think about those songs and how they came into being, you get a vibe, a tremor in the gut, a wave of heat in your mind that is much more than nostalgia. And I shouldn't put too many Tom Paxton lyrics in this story because after a certain point I guess I'd be owing him royalties—or his heirs, if he's no longer living—but I'm thinking about the last verse and why somebody might have those particular words running through his head. *Each song in my breast dies a-borning.* Or is it *breath*? Like, that's where the poor guy is now, on life support if he made it back to his hospital room. Can't write, can't sing, wanders the tunnels, ghost-like, making people look at him and remember who he used to be and even sing with him for a while because he doesn't want to die thinking he missed that last big chance.