

# Storylandia

## The Wapshott Journal of Fiction

Issue 11



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Cover: "Macarthur Park," by Justefrain, WikiMedia, 2009

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### Table of Contents

Dr. Hackenbush Gets a Clue	1
Ginger Mayerson	

Ginger Mayerson

## Dr. Hackenbush Gets a Clue

1987

Some nights are really good... including the audience or lack of one. Mabel Hackenbush, fronting *Dr. Hackenbush and her Orchestra*, was having such a night. Ross on drums, Cody Cole on bass and Phil Noyes on guitar were playing as if they were born to play those instruments. Her dance partner, Shorty Smith, was dancing with inspiration and with Hackenbush, possibly more with inspiration since Hackenbush was merely a good dancer, not an inspired one. She was a better singer, and that night she was a great singer because she had nothing to lose: there was no audience to cater to, there was only the irritated club owner and the bar staff that looking half asleep. Or possibly they were just poleaxed with awe at this incredible, unrestrained performance that, to the unenlightened, might sound more like a no-holds-barred jam session, but was in fact five artists so caught up in the moment they—

And then halfway through the next to the last set thirty thirsty patrons poured in and put a serious damper on the band's enthusiasm. Civilians, they called them, dilettantes on the make, and more

interested in each other than the music. That was okay. The Coral Cave wasn't a hardcore jazz club; it promoted itself as having tasteful music and tasty drinks. So the band became a tasteful accompaniment to a bunch of overdressed, emaciated, jittery-looking lounge lizards sucking down overpriced rum-laced fruit juice decorated with little paper umbrellas. As long as the band and Shorty were getting paid, Hackenbush wouldn't annoy the creepy patrons as they parted with the money that would eventually find its way into the band's bank accounts. This was her truce with and understanding of capitalism, as long as she didn't have to tolerate it too often. She figured the night would come out on the positive side because they got a good, free dinner and had two and a half smoking sets before they had to come back to earth.

In a way, Hackenbush was relieved they finally had a crowd. She hated to see a club, even one as badly situated and run as the Coral Cave, fail in Los Angeles, which—in her opinion—could never have too many clubs, even if she wasn't working in all of them. She was, in fact, impressed that anyone was in the Coral Cave at 11:30 PM on a Monday night and this close to Westlake's Macarthur Park, which had recently become even more the place to buy drugs in Los Angeles. Most nights, and some days, cars ranging from wrecks to new BMWs were pulling up on the south side of the park to make a buy. There was lots and lots of cocaine in LA lately, and there were more than enough buyers. Money and drugs brought violence, and the nighttime park was filled with shadows with unknown intentions. Not that any sane person went into Macarthur Park after dark—Hackenbush never went into it even during the day—

it was what spilled over into other blocks around it that was worrisome.

That was the gossip Hackenbush heard from her friends who still worked the occasional temp job in that neighborhood. Anna Kodaly had originally opened Temporary Insanity in a building just east of the park on Sixth Street, but moved over two miles west of it on Wilshire as soon as she could afford to do so. And Anna was tough, but not even she and her artist temps could raise the tone of that neighborhood. There was a pall of stress and despair over the whole area. Hackenbush wondered how any art was made at Otis Art Institute on the northwest corner of Wilshire and South Park View Street, but maybe the students just used the vibe as something to push against and made art anyway.

At the moment, Hackenbush was making a living as a musician and loving it. She and the band had four nights at the Lotus Room at the New Hotel Watenabe in Little Tokyo and enough casuals and gigs like the Coral Cave to stay solvent. Not that she didn't love Anna and wasn't grateful for all the temp gigs Anna got her that tided her over the thin spots, but she was so much happier this way.

Guitarist Phil, leaned over after the break tune and asked in an undertone, "Isn't that your old pal Mr. Bob Jones X over there?"

Setting her baritone ukulele in its stand, Hackenbush glanced into Phil's sweaty pasty white face and thought for the nth time he should smoke less and get out in the sun more. She opened her compact to check her lip gloss and caught sight of her own damp and pasty white face and thought she should smoke less and get out in the sun more. She lit a cigarette to underscore this thought and wondered why Phil

was whispering to her about a guy on the other side of a noisy club when there was no way the guy could hear him. On the other hand, the former coke-dealing scum, Mr. X, self-rechristened as Bob Jones, was a scary guy and deeply loathed by Hackenbush, the band and all right-thinking people. It helped a little to think of him as Mr. Bob Jones X, incorporating the past into the present with a potent reminder that under that Armani suit there was a conglomeration of idiocy, violence and wastefulness that a name change and stellar tailoring could never completely dispel. In the old days, when he was a scruffy, coked-out white boy thug with no guts, they could almost tolerate him. He'd had an embarrassing crush on Hackenbush in those days, and to demonstrate his devotion, he'd comped her into an embarrassing coke habit her friends had to help her shake. Lately BJX had become, well, affluent and successful in "import/export" or so he said, and with success he'd become frightening. He'd gotten his hooks in Hackenbush's pal Lola Rae and getting her away from him and off drugs had nearly killed them all. Not that BJX threatened them; he'd thrown Lola away like a candy wrapper, but getting Lola off coke, with no rehab, just tough love and chicken soup and friends sitting with her in shifts 24/7 until she was straight enough to see what a narrow escape she'd had, that was what nearly killed them all. In these years when Nancy Reagan wanted mere humans addicted to the most powerful drugs on earth to just say no, there were no facilities available to help those who'd said yes to change their minds and their lives. Lola had been lucky to have friends like Hackenbush, the band, Anna Kodaly, and a dozen other artists who loved her enough to fight for her; the morgue and skid row were full of bodies

that weren't so lucky.

"Hm. Know the guy with him?"

Leaning forward to ask his question, the drummer's big frame blocked a stage light and formed a nimbus around his head and shoulders. Nearly blinded by the glare off Ross' chocolate brown bald head, Hackenbush shielded her eyes. Ross was looking at her, but she knew he too was wondering about the overdressed Latino guy with BJB.

Hackenbush shook her head, and looked at natty Cody Cole, who didn't sweat much and never seemed to have a hair or seam out of place. He was a little lighter and shorter than Ross, and dressed to suit his café au lait good looks and wiry build. "What's he doing here, Hackenbush?" he asked in a normal tone of voice.

"I dunno, I didn't ask him," she snapped, and then lowered her voice. "This is his kind of crowd now, I think, lots of upper middle class money, ready to spend it on drugs..."

"And drinks and eats," Shorty put in, nodding in the direction of the mobbed bar and rushing wait staff. They couldn't see it, but they could hear through the swinging doors that the kitchen was jumpin' behind them.

"Speaking of, I'm dying of thirst." Hackenbush stalked off to get some non-alcoholic fruit juice. "Make that two, please," she said to the bartender, noticing Shorty beside her. "What do you think, pal?" she asked her dance partner.

Shorty pushed his cherubic jet ringlets off his glowing ivory forehead. Sweaty and pasty could never be applied to the delicate-looking, but tough as nails dancer, because he didn't smoke and he got more exercise than, well, all of them put together. He

shrugged at her question and gave her his trademark grimace: a smile on the left side of his face and a frown on the right. Marcel Marceau had nothing on Shorty Smith, Hackenbush was sure of that.

It was possible Mr. Bob Jones X was in the Coral Cave that night with the jittery jeweled horde because Hackenbush was there. She was the one that got away, the one he couldn't ruin with drugs, and the one whose friends—Ross, Cody, Phil and Shorty—had chased him off with irony and kept him at bay with scorn. BJX had also been politely banned from the Lotus Room. Wang, the bartender, was a black belt in irony and scorn, and Mr. Tanaka himself had had firm, but pleasant and effective, words with BJX, who henceforth stayed the hell out of the Lotus Room. Mr. Tanaka was shorter than Hackenbush and Shorty, but he was a force unto himself and in his quiet way kept peace and order in the New Watanabe Hotel.

So, a slightly shady, but very public venue like the Coral Cave was where BJX could annoy Hackenbush with a certain amount of impunity. On these rare occasions, he didn't bother to speak to her, he just stared, admired, and praised her singing in a loud voice as if he'd invented her.

“We got one more set, Shorty, that's all we got to get through and then we're gone,” she said. Her big black horn-rimmed glasses were fogging up in the overheated room, so she headed for the side door. Her long brown hair was hot on her neck; had she been alone, she would have twisted it into a bun and secured it with a swizzle stick.

“Until next week,” he reminded her, following her outside where she could finish her cigarette in the cooler air and de-fog her glasses. “That guy with him is perfectly dressed. You don't see that very often,” he

added when they were outside.

“Is he your type?” she asked, half seriously. Shorty was between men, and Hackenbush knew he was happier when he was dating someone steadily.

“His clothes maybe, but did you see what a hard face he has?” Shorty asked, and went on at her nod. “He makes Mr. BJX look like a kid.”

Hackenbush blew out a lungful of smoke and picked a shred of tobacco off her tongue in agreement. Bob Jones X was an overgrown kid, a vicious overgrown kid with some power now, but less anger, which made him scary and to be avoided. But the guy with him was something else, cold as ice and the hardest, deadest black eyes she’d had ever seen. Were these, she wondered, the much vaunted killer’s eyes the detective novels she read went on and on about? Whatever they were, they were definitely the kind of eyes a girl in Los Angeles learned to steer clear of very quickly. No matter how weird Hackenbush’s life got, it never sank to the level where human life meant nothing. BJX and his guest were gone when they went back inside.

Then it was time for the last set, which went by quickly and they were all paid in full and in their own homes by 1:30 AM, which was early for them.

One of the nice things for Hackenbush about working nights was that she could swan around town having lunch with her friends still working days. On that particular Tuesday, she would be dragging Anna Kodaly out to lunch because Anna’s usual idea of lunch was tortilla chips at her desk, with salsa if she felt she needed some vegetables in her diet.

Hackenbush wasn’t a model of nutrition, but most days she did better than tortilla chips for

lunch. On the other hand, she smoked about a pack of unfiltered Pall Mall Reds a day, so whatever food benefit she got was wiped out right there. Well, at least she didn't do drugs...

After seeing Bob Jones X last night and working so close to Macarthur Park, drugs were on her mind. Driving home, down Wilshire through the park, she'd noticed a lot of activity in the shadows around her. Once again she swore to find another way home, but from the Coral Cave, or anywhere between Macarthur Park and Mid Wilshire, the drive home to Lincoln Heights would be much more convoluted, and probably as dangerous as the way she was doing it. That year she was driving a 1971 Volkswagon Fastback, which was almost as cute as a Karmann Ghia, but as unreliable as any old VW. What if she broke down on the way home in the wee small hours? Working pay phones were scarce in the neighborhoods Hackenbush traveled and Triple A took its time getting to towns in those parts of town.

She shoved these thoughts aside as she drove the reverse route, down Alvarado to Wilshire and then west to Temporary Insanity. The second floor offices had started out as anonymous as any office space in the east end of Westlake: bland, boring and beige. However, every artist Hackenbush knew had temped for Anna at one time or another, many had borrowed money from her, and all of them had benefited from the blond entrepreneur's down to earth good sense and business savvy. These painters, printmakers, sculptors, weavers, potters, and whatnot were a grateful bunch, so soon Anna's offices went from boring to Bohemian, bordering on opium den décor. Anna took home most of the swag she was given and, properly displayed in her Glendale bungalow, it was

somewhat tamed. She kept much of the best, though conservative, work in her office, carefully spaced for maximum presentation effect. One of Linda Lim's bronze figures, an old man holding a cat, had a shelf to itself in the tiny conference room. Visitors could fish Temporary Insanity cards out of clay pot that looked like azure lace on the reception desk or get one of Anna's cards from a hand-blown glass tray on her desk. The walls had abstract oils with powerful forms, but muted colors: the kind of art that was easy for visitors to ignore, but solace and inspiration for the eyes that lived with it. Hackenbush spent a lot of time looking at these when she was there. In the reception area, there were cheerful watercolors of goldfish and flowers. Beyond thinking they were pretty, Hackenbush barely registered these paintings anymore. They were in excellent taste—everything in Anna's sphere of influence was in superb taste—and eye-catching, but they were, in Hackenbush's opinion, demanding to be admired. The other art, the art on Anna's walls at home and in her office, was there demanding to be acknowledged, if not completely understood.

Hackenbush rolled in a few minutes before noon and said hi to a girl she didn't know sitting at the reception desk. "I'm Mabel Hackenbush, I'm here—"

"Dr. Hackenbush, right? I'm Dina Lee—"

"Like the song?"

"What song?" Dina asked.

"A very old song by Eddie Cantor," Hackenbush said, wishing she'd kept her trap shut. "A nice song about a girl he loves and what he'd do for Dina Lee." Now that she was thinking about it, it was a pretty dumb song, one of many based on a girl's name where the performance rose above the material. "Are you a

musician, Dina, or artist, or what?”

“I’m a dancer,” Dina said, standing up to show off her dancer figure. “I met Lola Rae and Suzie Reed at a ballet workshop up in Hollywood, and they recommended me to Anna. She’s wonderful. Anna, I mean, she has me working here so I can learn Lotus 1-2-3 and go out on jobs.”

Hackenbush, who didn’t have a dancer figure, slouched into her curves and agreed that Anna was, indeed, wonderful. “Suzie Reed’s one of the coolest people in LA and an incredible dancer. Lola’s got some talent, but she’s insane; did you notice that?”

“How funny, that’s what Lola said about you!” Dina exclaimed, clapping her hands together in a way so stagy, Hackenbush wondered if she did mime, too. “I asked her what kind of doctor you are and she said she’d tell me later, but I haven’t seen her. Can I ask you? Are you really a doctor?”

“Nah, when I was five or six, I saw ‘Day at the Races’ and Groucho played a veterinarian, Dr. Hugo Z. Hackenbush, in it and I said I wanted to be a vet so my name would be Dr. Hackenbush, too. The Doc nickname just stuck from then on. It makes a nice name for the band, though.” Hackenbush had told this story so many times she was seriously considering having cards printed up.

“But you never became a vet?” Dina asked; possibly she’d lost track of the explanation.

“Nope, I don’t even like animals that much.” Hackenbush winked at Anna, who’d stuck her head out of her office and waved.

Dina had another question: “Who’s Groucho?”

Hackenbush’s jaw hit the floor. “Who’s Grou-?”

“Ha! There you are, Mabel, come on in!” Anna rushed up to save Dina from whatever Groucho lesson

she was about to get. “Ross is here, with Tim Jackson, a new Insane Temp. Come meet him.” She swiveled around and hissed, “Go. To. Lunch!” at Dina, who grabbed her purse and split.

“How can she not know who Groucho Marx is?” Hackenbush after the dancer was out the door.

“She’s very young, Mabel,” Anna said, patting her sprayed-into-submission blond hairdo. Not that there was ever a hair out of place, so those pats were more of a prim shrug by a woman raised not to shrug. “Were you born knowing about the Marx Brothers?”

“No, but that was corrected before I could walk,” Hackenbush said. “Wanna hear me sing ‘Whatever it is, I’m against it’? I don’t remember learning that song, I’ve just always known it. I think my father sang me to sleep with it when I was a baby.”

“He would, wouldn’t he? Wanna hear a Hungarian lullaby my mother sang to me in the cradle? Same thing, Mabel, different culture,” Anna said, ushering her into her office.

Yes, there was Ross, taking up most the space in Anna’s office, and with him a trim young black guy wearing a suit and tie Hackenbush thoroughly approved of. He looked quite nice; even the yellow backpack slung jauntily over his shoulder added to the overall pleasing effect of his ensemble. After Anna introduced him to Hackenbush, he said Ross helped him pick the tie and the suit.

“Ross has great taste,” Hackenbush said. “You should see him all dressed up.”

“I have, he was at my wedding.”

“Oh yeah?” She looked at Ross and then back at Tim. “How do you know each other?”

“Ross was my Big Brother when I was in high school,” Tim said with a weird combination of

pride and embarrassment Hackenbush thought was charming. “And he testified at my trial. Got some time knocked off, too.”

“Trial?” she asked in the rather awkward silence that followed.

“Grand theft auto, drunk driving, and property damage,” Ross finally said. “Well, Mabel, you see Tim here grabbed a car with some friends, got drunk and ran it into the river. Nobody got killed, but he was driving and had just turned eighteen so they threw the book at him. We got him the best lawyer we could, and he got probation and community service, but no jail time.”

“Thank God,” Anna said softly, gazing at Tim.

Hackenbush agreed; Tim was way too pretty for the big house. “Who’s we?” she asked Ross.

“Me, Legal Aid, some of his High School teachers, and the Big Brother organization,” Ross said. “I’m grateful to Anna for giving him a chance.”

“Ross,” Anna said in her businesswoman voice, “he has an Associate’s degree in accounting from LA City College. Anyone would hire him. I’m just glad I got him.” She smiled at Tim. “And you’re perfect for the Monroe Company job that starts tomorrow. You’re really helping me out, you know.”

“I salute you, Tim,” Hackenbush said. “I couldn’t do accounting to save my life.” This was only partly true; she could do accounting, but hated it to death.

Tim said he hoped he’d do a good job. Ross said something about being hungry and they went off to lunch.

“Would anyone hire him?” Hackenbush asked when they were gone.

“No, not even if he had angel wings and a halo,”

Anna said, sounding angry. “A young black man with a felony conviction almost doesn’t have a chance to be good in this damn town.”

“There’s always you, Anna,” Hackenbush said, leaning on her desk, hoping they were going to lunch soon. “You’ve helped a lot of us.”

Anna looked up at her with a grim smile. “This is a two and a half week temp job for him, Mabel,” she said. “It’s the first job in what he studied. I’ll... I’ll get him a couple of more, so he has a few things on his résumé, and then I’ll try to find him a perm job with some big company... He’s got a pretty wife and three year old daughter, he showed me their picture...” There were tears in Anna’s voice, but her eyes were dry.

Lunch could wait, Hackenbush leaned over and answered a ringing phone, took a message for Dina Lee, and hung up. “Anna, when you think Tim is ready for a perm job, let me know, I’ll call everybody I know to help you find one for him.” She gave Anna a reassuring smile. “He’s an insane temp now, he’s part of this crazy extended family you keep going.”

“I’m only doing it for the kicks, Mabel,” Anna said matter-of-factly.

It was hard to tell when Anna was being sarcastic, so the best course was to assume she was serious. “What kicks?” Hackenbush asked. “You scrape by every month like the rest of us and you put up with more bullshi—”

“Well, it’s never dull.”

“And Dina Lee! How can that child not know—”

“Mabel, please, I’m not even sure she knows who Nixon is.”

This brought Hackenbush up short. “Was it that long ago?” Anna nodded. “Oh well. Does she

know who Ronald fucking Reagan is?”

“I think she’s heard of him, yes.” Anna leaned down to open her deep desk drawer.

“Aren’t you hungry, Anna?” Hackenbush asked. “Let’s go find—”

“I have salsa for the chips, Mabel, I also made that onion dip you like so much,” Anna said, laying out their lunch. “I have to be here for the phones. Sorry.”

“Oh well,” Hackenbush said, accepting a paper plate of chips and adding a dollop of onion dip à la Kodaly. “I really like this dip.”

“How’s it going at the Lotus Room?” Anna asked.

“Musically and food-wise very well,” Hackenbush said around a mouthful of chips. “I think they’ll give us five nights in the bar and Sunday brunch in the hotel restaurant next month or the month after, when the tourist season picks up.”

“Can you live on that?” Anna asked, seeing, with her usual mixed emotions, one of her best temps succeeding away from Temporary Insanity.

“Yeah. Can’t save much, but I can live on it if my luck holds and the car keeps running,” Hackenbush said with a smile.

Anna smiled back. “They’ll miss you at the Gas Company next time they ask for you.”

“Tell them to come to the club to see me.”

Hackenbush loved the Lotus Room, mainly because Wang the bartender made her feel not just like the only woman on earth, but the only woman on earth who could appreciate his brilliant Ramos Gin Fizzes. He was one of the few bartenders in town willing to make a brunch drink in the middle of the night. He

was also the only man Hackenbush ever knew who could instinctively gauge the exact amount of gin to put in her drinks based on some mysterious intuition he had about her. Or something; Hackenbush had no idea how he knew what her gin level should be, he just knew, and that made her ridiculously happy.

Wang was a great guy. He'd heard the band at the Hotel van Gogh-Gogh and then convinced Mr. Tanaka to hire them so he'd have some decent music four nights a week. He'd originally lobbied Tanaka for five nights, but Sunday through Tuesday nights were slow that time of year. Tanaka was cautious, too; he wanted to see if a jazz combo and dance team could develop a following at the Lotus Room. Wang's enthusiasm was one thing, paying customers were another.

So far so good, though. There was a steady crowd for *Dr. Hackenbush and her Orchestra* and most nights at least half of the Storm Hill restaurant's dinner crowd, being within tasteful earshot, was lured into the bar by the music. And they stayed in the bar, drinking, for the music and the dancing. This was a very good sign for Tanaka; he even spent a little on advertising, and told the kitchen to give the band and Shorty better food. Dinner was part of the deal; someday he'd have to pay them more and also give them decent dinners. He'd cross that bridge when he came to it; for now, the band and Shorty got great food and okay wages. That they were prompt, professional, easy on the eyes, and a delight for the ears was expected, and therefore taken for granted.

Hackenbush was just glad to have four steady nights at decent pay, where Shorty got paid to dance with her. They'd always been a good dance team, but the security of regular performances was turning

them into a great dance team.

The band never had a bad night at the Lotus Room. They had competent and professional nights, and those were about as bad as it got. Under Wang's watchful eye and educated ear, the quartet strove for more than just a good performance, they strove for an enlightened performance. They took risks, more and daring risks when the room was light on audience, or was full of musicians. Because they played on Wednesdays, and many of their fellow musicians had that night off, sometimes the room was full of cats. When that happened the band really took off.

These nights were a special heaven for Wang because he really loved jazz and all the creativity that went into it. The jagged edges, the walls of sound, the familiar melodies turned inside out, rising above the original and into the moment, no words could describe. For Wang, and guys like Wang, *Dr. Hackenbush and her Orchestra* were almost a philosophy. The band had versions of tunes that everyone was comfortable with, that for Wang were like slippers he could relax in. But, depending on the mood and circumstance, the same tune might take on a nuance, something startling, even disconcerting, as if the riff just slapped the listener. When that happened, sentences hung in midair, drinks stopped their way to lips, and anyone trying to tune the band out finally gave up, sat up straight and listened. Wang had seen a lot of bands, from the bar and from the audience, but very few of them grabbed a crowd like Hackenbush's could.

On a night when the civilians were in the majority at the Lotus Room, the band went easy for the first two sets. In the third set, they started to heat things up, but by then the crowd was mostly music lovers, and the non-music lovers were having a new

experience, so everyone had a good time. In the fourth and final set, the band played as if they had nothing to lose, and by then, they really didn't; most of the crowd might not understand everything that was going on, but they were aware they were witnessing something important. They were seeing artists making art that lasted an instant and was gone forever.

The dancing was another matter. It was just fun to watch Hackenbush and Smith trip the light fantastic; they were funny, graceful and powerful all at the same time. Shorty was a great choreographer, even if he had to dumb it down for Hackenbush's rather limited terpsichorean abilities. Nevertheless, he got a lot out of her; what she lacked in technique she made up for with hard work. And in front of an audience, some extra flair kicked in, and Hackenbush looked like a better dancer than she actually was. That fire warmed Shorty as well, and together they were so in tune with each other and the dance that it was pure joy to watch.

Ross, Cody and Phil liked the dances because they were a kind of break for them. No improvisations, no shocking melodic or rhythmic Hackenbushian innovations on some innocent song to swerve around while making it sound like they knew she was going to do that all along. Sometimes they did know; sometimes they could see it coming, and then sometimes she chickened out of wherever she was heading and that was another musical train wreck to be dealt with. Not that they minded; they'd rather work with Hackenbush and her crazy ideas than play on auto pilot behind a blander singer with an equally lovely voice. But the dancing, that was different, that was nice, all they had to do was play the tunes the way Shorty asked them to. And, if there were no interesting

people in the audience to look at, the dances, even from behind, were interesting for the musicians, who didn't dance (don't ask them).

So life was good for everyone at the Lotus Room in those days. On a break, Hackenbush asked if Ross heard from Tim. Ross said, once, but it was a very short call; Tim was too busy working to call him just to gossip.

"He's been there, what? A week now?" she asked.

"Hm... yeah, I think I saw you at Anna's a week ago yesterday," Ross said, humoring her. "So, I guess he's got next week, too."

"Maybe they'll hire him perm," she said idly.

"Didn't sound like that when Anna described the job," Ross said. "Sounded like they had some snarled up checkbooks and just needed those fixed up." He sipped his drink. "That neighborhood is too far from where he lives, too, and it's not so great."

"Tim? Tim? Tim! Is this that Tim kid you taught to drive, Ross?" Cody asked.

Mabel and Shorty exchanged shrugs; Ross and Cody were old friends and odd facts popped up between them now and then. Such as that they'd met in the LA County Honor Jazz Band, which was the cream of the crop of all LA County high school music programs.

"Yeah," Ross said. "Tim turned out okay, got a business degree and now he's working for Anna K." He looked at Hackenbush. "The hours on this job are weird, too."

"How so?" she asked, perusing the song list Phil had just handed her for the next set. Phil was organized like that and they all loved him for it, except when it pissed them off.

“First day, he got there at 9, like Anna asked, but no one had any work for him until 11,” Ross said. “He said the maintenance guy let him in, gave him coffee and said to sit tight until somebody come in. Then, hmph, they asked him if he could work 11 to 7:30, not 9 to 5:30. Those aren’t great hours, but he mostly misses traffic.”

“Where is this job anyway?” she asked, handing the revised and improved song list back to Phil with a smile. He could put “Stella by Starlight” on his list until Hell froze and she still wouldn’t sing it.

“In some building on Wilshire a block east of Alvarado.”

Hackenbush looked Ross in the face. “What a crappy neighborhood to have to work a day job in. At least he can eat at Langers Deli.”

Ross scowled and said Tim was probably taking his lunch. “Hmph. Man’s got a family to support. No extra money for over-priced pastrami, Mabel.”

Hackenbush might have argued that Langers pastrami was worth every penny, including the stress of getting to and from the restaurant, which was diagonally across the street from the south east corner of Macarthur Park at seventh and Alvarado. And in the late afternoon, which was as late as Hackenbush ever wanted to be in Langers, one could watch the Guardian Angels in their red berets patrolling the park, making it safe for, well, the bus stop across the street.

The next night, Friday night, for the first time ever, Ross sent a sub to the gig.

He was a young Latino named Lou Martinez that Phil seemed to know. Or at least the kid was willing to listen to Phil, to whom Hackenbush left the musical direction to when she felt too lazy to be

bothered. Lou was a good listener and a quick learner. He played under and occasionally to the side of Hackenbush's vocals, supporting the band with some cool licks the singer would have approved of more if she'd heard them at least once before they were in front of the audience. Being young, he didn't have much in his bag of tricks and his playing sounded suspiciously like Ross'. Hackenbush later learned that he was one of Ross' students from Grove, and that Phil, who taught at Grove when the regular guitar teacher needed time off, knew him from the school's big band. When Hackenbush was an arranging student there, it was called the Tuesday play-down band, because they sight read the student arrangements.

It was the dancing that threw Lou for a loop. The poor guy had obviously never played for something that was choreographed. Not that Shorty's choreography was the most predictable thing in the world, but someone with more experience might not have syncopated the bridge to "Let's Face the Music and Dance" after seeing the dancers staying on the beat in the verses. Hackenbush never bothered to write out arrangements for the club gigs, so Lou really had nothing but his musical instincts go on. It was hardly his fault he was subbing for the great and wonderful (and now fully appreciated) Ross and was therefore tossed in over his head. After a maiming look from Wang and a few words from Phil, the drummer laid way way far back, and stayed on brushes during the dance numbers. Hackenbush and Shorty vowed to kiss Ross' feet next time they saw him.

On the first break, Lou apologized to the dancers. "Hey, I'm really sorry, I--"

"Lou, it's okay," Hackenbush cut him off. "You're doing a great job on the songs, just keep on keeping

your head down during the dances. And the ballads,” she added, cringing at the memory of a jagged tomtom run in the middle of “All the Things You Are.”

“Yes, please,” Shorty said, rather sourly. He wasn’t particularly charming to musicians who screwed up Hackenbush’s dancing and made them both look bad. He’d not really noticed the jarring drum moments during her singing, but Shorty was usually distracted before the first dance number and more into the music after it.

They were interrupted by Wang asking, rather belatedly Hackenbush thought, to see Lou’s ID. Fortunately Mr. Martinez was a few months past his twenty-first birthday.

Wang was carding a lot of the crowd that night; they all seemed to be friends of Lou, including one Gregg Miller who eased alongside Hackenbush, introduced himself and offered to light the singer’s cigarette. “Thanks,” she said coldly, filing his name away so she could forget it later.

“I really liked what you did with ‘Wave’ up there,” he said, trying to smolder and look cool at the same time, which is a mistake Hackenbush noticed the younger set made a lot.

“Thanks.” She gave him the once-over from his shaggy brown hair, threadbare sports coat, black jeans, down to his scuffed-up sneakers, and then looking off in to the middle distance as if he didn’t exist.

“Some of these old songs,” he bravely continued. “They have such trite melodies a good voice is all they need to sound, y’know, good.”

She looked hard at him. “And phrasing?” He nodded. “And intonation?” He nodded. “And singing with the band instead of over it?” He nodded. “And

not falling on my a—

“What about the dancing?” Shorty cut her off before she could verbally decapitate the cute young guy. Gregg was more Shorty’s type; skinny and in need of nurturing, fashion and otherwise.

“Uh, it was good,” Gregg said, starting to look really nervous. It was dawning on him that the babe wanted to kill him and this guy wanted to—

“Just ‘good’?” Shorty asked coldly.

Now they both wanted to kill him.

Phil rescued him. “Hey, Gregg, glad y’could make it,” he said, tossing a fatherly arm around the kid’s narrow shoulders and bravely placing his own body between Gregg and the dancers. “Wha’d’ya think of my solo on ‘Wave’?”

“I liked it,” Gregg said, his relief embarrassingly visible. “I thought you could have, y’know, played more of the upper chord structure—”

“That’s how y’play it, Gregg,” Phil said, gently. “Someday you’ll get ta see it the way me ‘n Hackenbush do: less is more.”

Hackenbush actually thought Phil’s solos were a little on the thin side on Latin tunes, but she wasn’t about to agree with Gregg. “Figures he’s a guitar player,” she said in an undertone to Shorty. Hackenbush didn’t have a lot of love for guitarists on the make. The band’s previous guitar player, Eddy Lee, had eventually won and then broken Hackenbush’s heart and nearly broken up the band when he jilted her and left town without finding his own replacement. Romantics will understand that a man running away from the love of his life isn’t likely to tie up all the loose ends on his way out, but he let a lot of people down, and those people had long memories.

“That doesn’t make him any less cute,” Shorty

undertoned back at her.

“Look at his clothes, Shorty,” she whispered, hoping to poison his mind against Gregg, via his sartorial sensibilities, before it all ended in tears.

“It’s not the clothes, Mabel, it’s the man in them,” he whispered back.

She covered her laugh with a cough. “So how do you two guitarists know each other?” she asked Phil.

“I’ve been subbing at Grove for Joey Bell,” Phil said, knocking back half a vodka tonic. He’d switch to straight 7-Up on the next break and finish the night on it. “Someday Gregg is gonna be the guitar player in town everyone wants ta sound like.” He winked at Gregg. “Provided he survives meeting you, Mabel.”

She laughed and accepted a Ramos Gin Fizz from Wang in a quart-size glass. “What’s up with Ross?” she asked after the first heavenly sip.

“I don’t know,” Phil said, wrinkling his brow, which went farther and father up his scalp every year. He’d once tried a comb-over but Hackenbush couldn’t keep a straight face and Ross, who was completely bald, took him aside and told him to just accept God’s will for his hair. “I ran into him at Grove and he asked me ta get a sub for tonight or do without. Something had him worried. He didn’t stop t’talk about it.”

It was time to get back to work, so Hackenbush sucked down half her drink and asked Wang to put it in the fridge for the next break.

The next set went considerably better and she even threw in a few more vocal trills and thrills to impress Gregg Miller. Then she tried to stop because she realized the last thing she wanted to do was impress him. But, and this was a tough one, if Hackenbush knew she had one enlightened listener

in the audience, she couldn't help but pull out all the stops. She noticed Phil was playing more of the upper chord structures and harmonics to impress that damn kid, too. At one point Cody leaned forward and asked them if they were auditioning for some avant-garde opera because he hoped they got that job, since they were losing most of their audience. They cooled it, but they'd made their point. Lou was in the groove on the songs and out of the way during the dances. On the whole, the second set was more of a success than the first.

"Have you talked to Ross, Cody?" she asked, stirring the second half of her enormous Gin Fizz.

"Nope."

Hackenbush drank her drink and watched the after dinner crowd roll in. Wang leaned over the bar and said something about the "younger set" taking up tables to drink soda all night. Hackenbush said something about this being an extremely unusual evening. Wang said he hoped so.

Lou overheard most of this and strolled over to say something to his fellow music students. They all migrated to the bar. And Wang was so happy, he broke out extra rations of pretzels.

Mr. Tanaka rolled in early in the third set and, eyeing the two distinct classes, if not species, of bar patron in the Lotus Room that night, frowned at the bar and smiled at the rest of the room. He took up residence at the extreme end of the bar where he could watch the room, but not the band.

He could, however, hear them, so Hackenbush and the band toned it down even more. They didn't like being wallpaper, but Tanaka paid them well enough that they didn't mind being wallpaper now and then. Only Wang expected brilliance on a regular

basis, provided his boss wasn't around. This was where Gregg's unappreciated remark about the beauty of Hackenbush's voice paid off; she could sing these Tin Pan Alley tunes straight and the quality of her voice and sensibility of her subtle phrasing made the performance seem more sublime than it was. They might be wallpaper, but by God they were top-notch quality wallpaper. Which is what Mr. Tanaka wanted for the after dinner crowd; he was as worried about their digestion as he was about their wallets.

Hackenbush could see the kids at the bar wondering if, someday, they'd have a deluxe gig in a nice room like this and have to bank their fires, rein in their genius and be, y'know, boring. "Yes, children," Hackenbush thought. "Someday even you might have to cool it to keep your club boss happy. And you, too, will survive. Hey, kiddies, it sure beats the hell out of typing and filing eight hours a day."

By the fourth set, Mr. Tanaka had satisfied himself that he still had a jazz room, but a civilized one. The Grove kiddies took off unobtrusively during the break and a few solitary jet-lagged business men took their places at the bar. The dinner crowd finished up their third drink; surprised they'd ordered a third drink, the music was so good, they'd lost track of the time and they must come back very soon for more.

The room was peaceful. Shorty and Hackenbush glided around it, oblivious to everything but the music and each other, but still missing Ross because Lou, in the half deserted room, was inserting riffs where no riffs should ever be. But, oh well, Ross would be back very soon, they hoped.

And then they realized Ross was sitting at a tiny table in a very dark corner and they had no idea how long he'd been there. They finished the dance;

Hackenbush went back to the band to sing the last eight and finish the night, Shorty went to sit with Ross in the dark.

While Lou was packing up, Hackenbush, Phil and Cody joined Ross and Shorty in the dark. Shorty looked pale, even for Shorty.

“Hey, Ross, what’s—” Hackenbush began.

“Tim Jackson’s been murdered,” Ross said, accepting a glass of scotch from Wang. “Can you keep these coming, Wang?”

“Sure, Ross.” Wang had never seen Ross drink straight liquor before. None of them had. The look on Ross’ face must have been enough for Wang’s bartender sixth sense; he pulled the pourer out of the neck of a bottle of Cutty Sark and brought it to the table.

“They found his body in Macarthur Park early this morning, or yesterday morning, Friday morning,” Ross said, drinking steadily. “I just finished up with his family.” He looked at the shocked faces around him and said into the silence, “Mabel, you better call Anna Kodaly. The cops found her card on his body and called her to identify him.”

Without a word, Hackenbush went to the payphones by the Ladies’ room.

“Anna said his head was so bashed up, she wasn’t sure it was him,” he said when she was gone. “But Tim’s wife, Alice, had called her office looking for him, so she had her come do the official ID. Alice asked me to come get her to go to the morgue.”

“Shit.” Cody leaned back in his chair. “How is she?”

“She’s very messed up, will be for a long time.” Ross poured more scotch in his glass.

Lou, sensing the vibe, tapped Phil on the

shoulder and said something in his ear. They went to talk to Wang, who paid Lou out of the cash register and sent him on his way. Hackenbush walked up and asked for a drink, was informed it was too late for her to drink and got a glass of cranberry juice over ice.

“Wha’d Anna say?” Phil asked, looking tired.

“She didn’t pick up when I left a message, so I don’t know,” Hackenbush said, also tired. “I’ll try again tomorrow.”

“Is Ross going to be able to get home?” Wang, ever thoughtful, asked.

Hackenbush looked at Phil, and knew he had a wife to get home to, and then looked at Cody, and knew there was a girlfriend waiting for him at his place, and knew it was up to her or Shorty.

While Cody and Phil were packing up, she made her pitch. “So, Ross, uh, let’s go to my place,” she said lamely. “I can sleep on the couch,” she added quickly.

Ross looked at her like she’d just landed from Mars. “Hmph, thanks, Mabel, but Shorty offered to drive me home.”

“Where I can sleep on the couch,” Shorty put in briskly.

“Oh, never a doubt, Shorty, never a doubt,” Hackenbush murmured. She watched them leave, Ross steadying himself on the smaller man’s shoulder. More than once Hackenbush had steadied herself on that same shoulder so she knew how strong it was. She hoped Ross would be okay, or okay enough to make the gig that night, Saturday, which sounded cold, but if he could make the gig, then Hackenbush would know he was mostly okay. Ross managed his feelings extremely well; there were some very complex, but organized emotions in that man. She’d seen him hurt

and keep going. So, she predicted he'd hurt for Tim Jackson, but keep going for the good of Tim's wife and kid, the band, and maybe Anna, too.

Poor Anna... Hackenbush had never seen a dead body; she cringed a little thinking about it.

"You okay?"

She jumped finding Wang beside her, holding her coat and her ukulele case.

"Yeah, thanks. Hey, Wang, put whatever Ross drank on my tab."

"Tab schmab, Hackenbush," Wang said. "See you, and hopefully Ross, too, tonight."

"Yeah." She took her stuff and went home.

Shorty drove Ross home and then sacked out on Ross' couch. It wasn't the first time; Shorty was periodically broke and homeless and, when he wasn't in the mood for Hackenbush's cheerful irony, he stayed with Ross. He couldn't stay with Phil, who was married and uptight, and Cody's girlfriend made it clear she didn't like him, so it was good that Ross gave him a key and Shorty respected the ground rules: clean up after himself and don't bring anyone home. Ever. This last was kind of a non-issue; if Shorty was homeless and broke, it was because he was between men. At the moment he was in the early stages of a new romance and, thanks to the Lotus Room and other gigs, was solvent. So, although he had his own home to go to, he thought he'd better stick close to Ross.

He'd never seen Ross like this. Ross was a grown man, so he'd had his share of sorrow, but he never let it get him down.

"Not easy being a Black man, Shorty," he'd said in the car. "Hmph, hard to find something Negroes and Whites will let you do. Music is one thing, sports