

Wilderness House Literary Review 18/4

Katy Abel

JACK AND DIANA

Diana hears the bridge, her cue that the song is ending. She lowers her headphones, blows into the mike, and listens for the final flourish of Angus Young's guitar.

"AC/DC going out to all you guys truckin' down the Highway to Hell tonight! Diana in the Dark here, rocking you 'til dawn on Q95. Another Q-Classic set with ZZ Top and Joan Jett coming your way in 60 seconds..."

Diana touches the screen above her to launch the commercial, slips off her headphones and grabs a commuter cup for a quick shot of caffeine. A local car dealer's thirty-second spot blares through the speakers. The clock on the wall reads 4:05 AM. She is halfway through her shift at WQED.

When it's over, once the morning drive team has crawled into the studio with bagels, wake-up comedy routines and trivia contests, Diana slips out. She crosses town to Precious Pooch, where she picks up the keys to the company van and begins the rounds to retrieve her four-footed charges, all in need of an early morning romp.

Diana takes the dogs to an ice-crusting soccer field to pee and play, keeping her distance from the other pet owners huddled together on a bench. They chat and laugh, raising their thermoses and Chuck-Its. Diana stamps in the cold, shivering inside an old leather jacket whose frayed lining no longer keeps her warm. The frosty air enters her lungs sharp as menthol. She's feeling jittery, wishes she had a cigarette. This morning as she was picking up the dogs, Jack called.

"Been a long time since we rock and rolled," he'd crooned. "How you doin,' D? Still at the station?"

Jack was coming into town for a doctor's appointment, seeing a guy about his knee. Thought he'd stop by if she was up for it.

Last Diana heard, her ex was living with a lady friend, Annabelle, in a seaside town known for its art galleries, drag shows, and the enduring cultural heritage of Portuguese fisherman. Diana had been there a few times, hiking the mountainous dunes that rose like camel's humps, the valleys of sand dotted with tendrils of beach grass and scrub pine. She had marveled at the stubbornness of those low-slung trees, their needles splayed like slender fingers, branches bent but unbroken against centuries of unrelenting wind.

Annabelle owned a gallery in the center of town. Diana had closely examined her photo on the gallery's web site, noticing how Annabelle's jet-black bob, short bangs and bright red lipstick set off her smooth, translucent skin. She wore huge pieces of silver jewelry that coiled around her neck and wrists like sculpture.

Botox bitch, Diana thought. *Annabelle Sawyer has an MFA from the Rhode Island School of Design and enjoys collaborating with both artists and collectors,* the bio on her web site stated. Diana imagined Jack in a back room, varnishing frames or perhaps whittling sea birds from driftwood.

She can't remember the last time she spoke to Jack. He'd been a musi-

Wilderness House Literary Review 18/4

cian when they were together, his rock guitar wailing in skanky clubs up and down the coast. Diana had been the assistant music director at Q95 in those days, back when A&R guys from the record labels arrived at the station eager to flirt, hoping to coax her into adding some new artist to the playlist. Local musicians like Jack would hover, hoping one of the record company people or disc jockeys would listen to their tapes.

The DJs were a motley crew of young dudes, gravelly-voiced, cocksure. But they would slip the vinyl out of its paper sleeve as if easing a sleeping newborn from its crib, thumb resting gently on the record's black rim, index finger balancing the disc by its center hole. Diana remembered watching Eddie, one of the jocks on afternoon drive, lowering a record onto a turntable that flanked his console and then tapping skinny lines of cocaine into its spiral grooves. Record company people, sales reps, even the GM – all crowded into the studio with rolled up dollar bills, their heads lowered and rolling as they tried to catch the powdery spokes of a spinning wheel of coke.

When did Jack's band break up? Diana can't remember. But after the band, she recalls, he worked construction. She used to tease him: you were rocking and rolling up there on stage and now all you're doing is rolling rocks. He didn't care; the money was good. Dirty deeds not done dirt cheap, he'd tell Diana at night, grinning as he unlaced his steel-toed Wolverines.

Diana wonders what he looks like now. Back in the day Jack epitomized the emaciated rocker, flat torso folded over his Stratocaster, long hair flapping on stage like kite strings carrying the music into the club's rafters.

She stands outside the apartment doorway and peers down the stairwell, watching Jack's head bob as he trudges up three flights. The long blond locks are long gone. She sees a grey-haired man gripping the banister tightly, knuckles white. Panting.

At the top of the landing, he moves in for a hug but Diana steps back. Jack wipes his forehead and raises his hands in mock surrender.

"I come in peace," he grins, catching his breath.

She makes coffee. Jack sits on a stool by the counter, hunched deep in his jacket. He blows away steam rising from his mug.

"Whole lotta memories here, D. Remember that night, I think it was like four in the morning, somebody's coming up the fire escape? I'm grabbing the hair dryer out of the bathroom to smash the guy's head. But it's just Connor cooking his dope on our stove."

"You miss the band?"

Jack shakes his head. She watches his eyes wander over the worn velveteen sofa, the amplifier they'd lifted from a club which Diana now uses as a plant stand, the concert posters still tacked up with pushpins. His eyes settle on a framed drawing of two birds above a bookcase. The Matisse.

"You've still got that," Jack says, pointing. "I thought you would have sold it by now."

Wilderness House Literary Review 18/4

Back when she'd had enough of him, it was easy to come to terms on how to divide their stuff because neither of them had much. Diana was angry, Jack sheepish. When she asked for the one thing he possessed that might have actual value, he surrendered it as quickly as he had their relationship.

Jack had pilfered the Matisse, one in a series of lithographs attributed to the French impressionist, from a glossy-haired college girl from Maine. She'd bought it back in the seventies at a fundraising auction for Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers. Jack didn't know anything about Henri Matisse, other than he was French. And dead.

He had always liked the way the two doves curled around each other, their charcoal beaks touching as if sharing a kiss. Diana thinks a first grader could have drawn the birds. Still, she is proud to own it. Sometimes, stepping into a well-manicured home to collect a dog, she will admire a painting in the foyer and casually mention that she too collects art and has recently acquired a lithograph by Henri Matisse. Wait for it, she'll tell herself, counting silently to three. And sure enough, the distracted dog owner would look up, astonished, appraising her anew.

Diana hasn't acquired much else since Jack left. She still sleeps on the futon mattress they once shared. She wears her long, straight hair parted down the middle, the same shade of mahogany brown it has always been. She is embedded in the fossilized industry that FM radio has become, abandoned by listeners who gladly pay Spotify or Sirius XM for the privilege of curating their own music. Their playlists. Not hers.

Diana watches as Jack unhooks his leg from her stool and lifts his mug for a final swig. He tells her she looks amazing, looks exactly the same. It's a complement, at first, but then it's not. He tells her she should move on, quit the station, quit the dogs.

"You're not doing yourself any favors, D. Who even listens to that station anymore?"

"People on the third shift who don't have satellite radio in their fucking BMW's," she snaps. "People who are loyal to the music. And to me."

"Me, I don't miss a goddam thing," he continues, as if she hadn't spoken. "You know what it's like playing 'Don't Stop Believin' night after night? At some point, D, we gotta stop believing."

Diana wishes Jack good luck with the knee.

When he leaves, Diana takes the Matisse down from the wall and examines it closely for the first time in years. She looks for signs of genius and again, finds none. The initials "HM" and

the numbers "7/20" are on the bottom right. Taped to the back is an envelope containing a letter of authentication signed by a gallery owner in California.

Diana had called the gallery after the split with Jack, trying to authenticate the letter of authentication, but the number was disconnected. She thought about trying to get on "Antiques Roadshow," imagining herself standing across from a bespectacled Sotheby's dealer as he bends to examine the work.

Wilderness House Literary Review 18/4

"This lithograph is in extraordinary condition," he might say, peering closely, hands behind his back. "And whilst Henri Matisse is known primarily for his expansive use of bright color and arabesque lines, on occasion he was known to produce simple sketches such as this. And I think it's rather brilliant, don't you? It demonstrates the fluidity that is truly a hallmark of his work. So, I'd say what you've brought to us today, Diana, is *most likely* a genuine Matisse."

And then the dealer would ask: if you had to wager a guess, what do you think it would be worth? And under the glare of the studio lights, feeling a bit feverish, she would low-ball a number as the producers had asked her to do before the taping, so the big reveal would appear even bigger.

"It's just a couple of birds but I know he's a bigtime artist, so maybe five hundred?"

The dealer would smile, push his tortoise-shelled rims higher on his nose, and beam at her.

"Would it surprise you, Diana, to learn that this piece – if, as I suspect, it is indeed the work of Henri Matisse – would go for somewhere between seven and ten thousand dollars at auction?"

And Diana's eyes and mouth would go round, and she'd thank the dealer, who would bow in acknowledgement as people on the set clapped. As if she'd won something.

Instead, the Matisse remained on her wall, unauthenticated and unloved. Diana would vow to sell it but this vow, like many, seemed hard to keep. She had once vowed to move to Florida, get a condo near the beach, start building some equity so she wouldn't have to walk dogs in the rain when she was eighty. She had vowed to quit the overnights at Q95 and take some classes at a community college, try to get a lab tech or cybersecurity certificate so she could land a job – not a gig, but a real job with dental insurance and colleagues who'd surprise her with cupcakes in the conference room on her birthday.

But the truth is, the songs Diana plays in the pre-dawn hours feel like old friends, people you keep having the same conversations with, over and over, only it doesn't matter because you can't imagine your life without them.

"You're a real artist, Diana," Barry, the station manager, told her a few months back. "Nobody puts together a set list the way you do. You're good on overnights because you can break format, play whatever you want, and I don't have corporate up my ass."

But one day, he warns, this is all going away.

"Taylor and the Swifties are coming for you," he teases.

"Eat shit and die," Diana replies. Barry shrugs.

"The dinosaurs are going extinct, my friend. And when they do – all I'm saying is there'll come a time when no one left alive knows who the fuck Tom Petty is. Or was. Can't remember. Did he die yet?"

Wilderness House Literary Review 18/4

It is her night off, one week later, and Diana is deep in an Ambien-laced sleep when Jack comes up the fire escape and through the bathroom window. He lowers himself gingerly into the

clawfoot tub, then climbs out and tiptoes across the apartment to the Matisse. He secures it carefully under his arm before inching down to the dark street below, step by silent step, favoring the good knee.

It isn't until the next morning, when she returns to the apartment after dropping off the dogs, that Diana sees the Matisse is gone. The faded, flowered wallpaper against which the kissing birds have perched for so long is a shade lighter where the lithograph had hung.

She knows, instantly, who took it. Steal it once, steal it again, she thinks ruefully. She imagines Annabelle will know how to sell it. Maybe the gallery is going out of business, and they need money. Or Jack needs a knee replacement and can't afford it. Or perhaps he's leaving Annabelle and needs quick cash for another new start.

Diana sits down at the kitchen table and googles "Henri Matisse" on her iPad. Her wireless is slow. While she waits for the page to load, she looks down at the streetscape below her apartment, watching a woman outside Rite Aid struggling to push a shopping cart through a patch of slush. She's stuck, wheels spinning. The automatic doors of the pharmacy open, waiting for her. They close, then open again.

Turning back to the screen, Diana peers at an archival photograph of a bearded, unsmiling Matisse standing stiffly in his apartment in Nice in 1932. He wears a three-piece wool suit, eyes shaded behind small, round glasses. Paintings and sketches fill every inch of the dark, wallpapered room behind him.

Maybe he thought he was the greatest thing ever, Diana muses. Or was crazy depressed and wanted to cut off a body part, like Van Gogh. Or perhaps he was hiding from the world, fearful that his life's work would be forgotten in time, shoved behind bicycles and boxed clothes in stone cold basements, or hanging in lonely silence on the walls of apartments like hers.

Diana closes the iPad. She puts on her leather jacket, belts it tightly, and collects her phone and keys from the kitchen counter. As she heads downstairs for the drive to work, she tells herself that as soon as she's off the air and done with the dogs, she'll get in the car and head south to Annabelle's gallery.