

ECREVISSE A L'APPALACHIENNE

The first thing I did when I got out of jail was to ask Jim Christian to give me a ride home. I wanted to get my oboe. It'd been five years since I'd played.

"Naw, Buck, certainly I don't mind," he answered with a big grin, "seeing as I'm off duty in ten minutes and I could use a couple or six cold ones." He winked at me.

I'd gotten to know Jim pretty well over the last few months. He was a new jailer, and I was the inmate that probably gave him the least trouble. He was always willing to do some little favors for me, especially if I was willing to sweeten the request with some beer money. Jim's idea of a good time was to cuddle up with a six-pack in front of the 24-hour fishing channel.

Jim started to drive me to the mobile home park where he'd managed to find a rental trailer for me so I'd have a place to go after my release.

I asked him if he wouldn't mind taking me to my old home.

"What for, Buck? You hoping the old lady wants to see you again?" he chuckled lasciviously.

I told him that I was sure she didn't--I didn't expect forgiveness from that quarter--but that I had an old friend I

needed to pick up.

"An old friend? Somebody going to live with you?" Joe said it as if it were a daringly strange idea.

I told him it was "sort of somebody." More like a pet, I said, "sort of."

"Sort of a pet? What do you mean sort of? Is it a pet or ain't it?"

I admitted that it really was a pet: an oboe.

"A noboe? I thought a noboe was one of them big birds that can't fly, you know, the kind some folks is using like packhorses? What, you thinking of starting a stable or something, you know, take some tourists riding noboe-back up in the mountains or something? You going to have a hard time raising a herd at Shady Manor." (Shady Manor was the name of the mobile home park where my new home was to be.)

I corrected Jim. No, my noboe wasn't a bird. It was a type of crayfish, commonly known as the French singing crayfish.

I don't know why I said it. Impulse, I guess; stupidity, more likely. It seemed too good an opportunity for fun to pass up, but I of all people should have know that fun can go bad. After all, that's how I wound up in jail.

"Crayfish? You mean crawdad, don't you? Boy, I ain't never heard of no singing crawdad before."

No, I said, this was a European species. You had to import them. Mine was an old pet. I'd had her for 28 years.

"Her, huh?" said Jim as he pulled a u-turn and headed back toward Reedyville, where I'd lived back in 1991, B.C. (Before Corrections). "Ever try breeding her? You could lay in a stock up in a creek somewheres. Crawdads is good eating."

Not noboes, I said. They had been bred for their voice.

Even the French, those gastronomes of universal repute, had not found a wine to complement the ardently sentimental aftertaste of the noboe; hence it was not eaten. Rather it had been cultivated since the days of Louis Quatorze as the musical accompaniment sans pareil of the festive repast.

"Louie Cathorse, huh? With a name like that, I bet he tried to cross a mockingbird with a lobster. Man, what kind of person would even think about trying to teach a crawdad to sing?" Jim drove on in thought for a bit, and then said, "I bet it was karaoke give him the idea."

I asked Jim what he meant.

"Buck, you ever been in a karaoke bar? Hear somebody with a bathtub of beer in him try to sing? It's the awfulest caterwauling you can imagine. Makes your thoughts run to things like 'Hey, I could teach a crawdad to sing better than that.'"

I had to admit that Jim's theory had at least the aura of plausibility.

We drove on a bit, pondering the interior landscape of historical causation, when Jim piped up, "28 years, huh, Buck? Your crawdad's a pretty old mama."

If I'd had any sense at all, I would've given up the charade right then and there, but the gambling urge was just too strong. I answered Jim's observation with an innocent-sounding "Oh, really?" Then I mumbled something about not knowing all that much about the life-span of the crayfish.

"If a crawdad lives to be 20, it's a geezer. 28, Buck, and you're talking Guinness Book," said Jim with authority. "Either that or a mummy. And if you don't believe me, you can ask my papaw. He's a crawdad farmer."

Crawdad farmer. Right. Now who's pulling whose leg? Well,

Jim, I said, I doubt your papaw has much experience with noboes. I understood that the French singing crayfish was capable of incredibly long, sustained passages.

"Could be," shrugged Jim. "That's enough about noboes, anyway. I want to hear the story of how you went to jail. I love that thing. It's the funniest dadburn thing I ever heard." He laughed out loud.

To me it was an embarrassing tale of a practical joke gone bad, but to Jim it was a sidesplitting moral tale. I could never tell whether he got more out of the humor or the lesson. He mentioned only humor, but the way he asked to hear it again and again, I supposed he was thinking about what it meant, since it wasn't really all that funny.

Anyway, with Jim heading me back to Reedyville, the windows of his car open and gushing hot air because the air conditioning was defunct, I started telling how six years ago I did the silly thing that would ruin my life.

I started telling how Hans van Eyckbieter was (is) the conductor of our fine community orchestra, an institution I had served as principal dobroist. I had really been the principal oboist, but the first time I told the story to my fellow inmates, they took it upon themselves to impress upon me the fact that there was no such thing as an oboe, and that I had in fact been the principal dobroist. So forceful was their argument that ever since that time I referred to myself as the principal dobroist.

"Now tell me again, Buck, what's the dobroist do in a sympathy?" Jim cut in, meaning, of course, "symphony."

The dobroist, I answered, (meaning the oboist) is the silver thread of the orchestra, the ill wind that few can perfume, the compass of symphonic intonation.

"Sounds like somebody trying to rudder a boat with a fart wrapped in baling wire," responded Jim.

No, Jim, I said, that's a bassoon.

Jim swerved the car off the road and screeched to a stop. He turned to me and pointed a beefy finger at me as he glared at me and spoke in tones of measured ferocity, "If you care to stay alive, Buck, you won't never, never refer to the bassoon in that way again."

I assured I had no intention of ever, ever entertaining even the dullest glimmer of such a notion. Jim drove off, tires squealing furiously.

I could never figure out why it was that, while none of my prison associates on either side of the cage had ever so much as heard of an oboe, when it came to the bassoon, they were practically members of the Fagott Fan Club.

Finally, after a mute hiatus pregnant with spite, Jim spoke up again. "I thought the dobro was a string instrument."

Jim had never had these questions before. Was it possible that he doubted my credibility?

I responded to his question with an improvisation, a detailed description of the Aeolian dobro: a double-reed, conical windpipe attached to a soundbox with a metal top across which were strung strings that were set into sympathetic vibration by the tones generated by the reed, as altered by the fingerings of the windpipe. The Aeolian dobro has the distinction of being the only orchestral instrument that is both string and wind.

Jim let fly a brown gob of tobacco juice out of the window of the car. "Yeah," he drawled, wiping a trail of muddy spittle from his chin, "same distinction as a mule: neither horse nor

donkey. And you say your hee-haw of a dobro tunes the orchestra? Why's that?"

My somewhat long-winded explanation came down to the fact that the Aeolian dobro is the only instrument whose name starts with "a," which is the same letter as the tuning note.

Having satisfied Jim's organological curiosity, I went on to explain how it was that I had ended up in the klinker by being, as it were, the hit man as well as the fall guy of what essentially was a conspiracy against our conductor, Hans van Eyckbieter.

It is safe to say that the maestro is not well-loved among the musicians of the orchestra. He is overbearing and snide, but these traits would be bearable if he did not also possess the musical elan of a cigar-store Indian. He has a number of nicknames, usually "Eggbeater," a play on his name that by happy coincidence also describes his inimitable style of stirring the beat. Our second bassoonist, a paleontologist from State, calls him the Piltdown Man and swears he is a robotic hoax perpetrated by Luddites to demonstrate the limitations of Artificial Intelligence.

Musically, he's a joke, but he's not without a certain realpolitikal savoir-faire: He's a bottom-liner and a chestnut-roaster, which endears him to boards and provincial audiences alike. Which means he'll be here forever.

That being the case, it was the idea, plan, and project of principal bassoonist Doris Jones, hatched somewhere in the putrid, sunless, Mariana-Trench recesses of her septic tank of a brain, to render an "embarras" to Maestro Eggbeater that would put him where he belonged--anywhere but here.

When Doris revealed to me the contents of her evil plot,

which had all the markings of the Machiavellian mafiosa that she is, I responded in horror. Mock horror, of course. It was a beautiful idea.

As I have already mentioned, Jim and my correctional confreres all profess an undying affection for the Bozo of the orchestra, so whenever I tell the story, as I was doing now for Jim, I have to conceal that Doris Jones is a bassoonist. She is simply "Doris Jones, vixen." I think they take this to mean that she is a flautist.

I, with my innocent, smiling, simple-minded, fun-loving, back-stabbing nature, readily agreed to play the part of hit man. As I now recounted to Jim (making allowances for the fact that he needed to hear "dobro" instead of "oboe"), I feathered a staple--with feathers given to me by Doris Jones, vixen--and, using beeswax, outfitted it with a needle, which gave me a nifty dart, which when placed in the top of the bottom joint of my oboe, could, by fingering a low b-flat, be blown thencefrom accurately for a short distance (say, the distance between the principal oboist and the conductor's podium).

The appoggiatura of the plan--likewise composed by Doris Jones, vixen--was the oil of bhuya-kokali, bot. name Solanum jacquini, a plant held in high (or ill) repute as an aphrodisiac. The needle of the dart was to be dipped into this.

The plan, then, was a gorgeous one. The execution was flawless: As Eggbeater was taking a bow after the overture (can you believe "Pomp and Circumstance"? If I were the Elgar estate, I would admit that the career of that piece has been permanently vitiated by graduation ceremonies, and would order all copies to be rounded up and buried in a time capsule that would not be exhumed for 100 years), I set about dismantling my oboe in order

to blow some saliva from the D-hole. With Eggbeater in the deepest part of the bow and, a posteriori, presenting an excellent target, I raised my bottom joint blowgun just above my stand and puffed. Direct hit.

As it happened, the only problem turned out to be a pharmacological one: the dose didn't take full effect on schedule. Rather, it kicked in gradually. The consequences were not dire enough during the course of the concert to accomplish our objective. They were nonetheless relatively bizarre to us in the orchestra, as the bhuya-kokali slowly loosened the bonds that had hitherto protected Eggbeater from the temptation to dance. We first noticed something during "The Blue Danube." Eggbeater provided a pelvis-thrusting waltz that effectively rendered it "The Danube Blues." At intermission Eggbeater pranced through the backstage area like the Isadora Duncan of hippopotami, then he jerked himself through "Rhapsody in Blue" as if he were in the corps de ballet of "The Rite of Spring."

The sad fact is that Eggbeater was a huge hit that night, at least until he got home. As it happened, his wife called the police to report a domestic disturbance. She complained that Eggbeater was attempting a bacchanalia with only one maenad--her--and could they please come relieve her. The officers apparently did not know what they were getting into until Eggbeater started trying to take their uniforms off.

After a complete investigation (in which there was undoubtedly no small amount of connivance on the part of one Doris Jones, vixen), I was charged with, tried for, found guilty of, and given five years in the county lockup for assault with a deadly weapon (a blowboe), manufacturing a product with the feathers of an endangered species of bird (how was I supposed to



know they came from the resplendent quetzal?), dispensing a non-FDA-approved drug, practicing aphrodisia without a license, and hunting domesticated livestock out of season (in my deposition I had said I thought Eggbeater was a pig).

Doris Jones? Nary a squeak from anyone about her involvement in all this. Except from me, of course. Lots of squeaks, but everybody thought I was just practicing the altissimo of my tessitura, so it didn't go any good.

Oh, how Jim relished this story, although I was sure he didn't understand the half of it. The telling of it did make for a quick trip to the old homeplace. When we got there, I ran in past the glares of my ex-wife, retrieved my oboe, some music, and my reedmaking supplies, and was back out in Jim's car in the time you can say Joe Robinson (or is it Sherri Sylar?).

When Jim dropped me at my new abode, he asked me if I wouldn't mind bringing my noboes over to his place tomorrow night so he could show them to his papaw. I hemmed and hawed and said I didn't know, they might even be dead now for all I knew as I hadn't had a chance to look at them yet.

"Aw, that's OK, Buck. Just come on over anyway. Bring some brew and we'll look at some teevee. What do you want to bet the fishing channel will have something on it about noboe bait?"

So I said all right, unenthusiastically, and showed up at his address the next evening. It was more than a little irritating to have my sweet return to oboeland interrupted by a hoedown with a hillbilly couch-potato, but I tried to put a good face on it. Jim, smiling big, waved me inside. The house was dark.

All of a sudden, the lights went on, and there was all this yelling and screaming. "SURPRISE! SURPRISE!" People were

jumping up from the floor, jumping out from behind chairs and sofas and from inside closets. There were the sheriff's deputies who'd arrested me, the D.A. who'd prosecuted me, the judge who'd sentenced me, the jailers who'd enslaved me, and the prisoners who'd tormented me: my very favorite bunch of people.

Jim hugged me and shouted, "Buck, we wanted to get you off to a good start again and wanted to be sure there's no hard feelings. Judge here let your buddies out for the evening 'cause he wanted everybody to have a good time. All right, y'all, let's party!"

It all went very swimmingly, and our brains were barely afloat when Jim staggered up and said, "Bring on Lorelei! Bring on Lorelei!" I thought, oh no, not a stripper. Lorelei was a name I had seen in the newspaper in advertisements for the area's only nude dancing establishment: "Succumb to the charms of Lorelei." While I might have enjoyed such a display in the privacy of my own home, I found that sort of exhibitionism in a public arena excruciatingly embarrassing.

The chant went up, "Lorelei! Lorelei!" I lowered my head into my hands. It didn't want to be a part of this.

From the raucous hoots and whistles I knew that Lorelei had made a sultry entrance. But then things became oddly hushed and still, the way they do before the first note of a concert. I lifted my head to look.

There, sitting in front of me, clad in nothing but a long black evening gown, was Doris Jones. She winked at me and lit into the eternal gambit of bassoon show-offs, meaning the Stravinskian wolf-whine from "The Rite of Spring."

It got an immediate response from her audience. "Oooh-weee! Just love that high 'n' lonesome!" yipped Jim. After Doris had

finished the excerpt, and amid the resounding applause, Jim called to her, "Hey Lorelei, hows about laying down some Mozart!" So she launched into the concerto, which had the audience clapping in time with the music. As always happens, the clapping disappeared in time for everyone to concentrate on the development section. It was a sight to see this crowd of tattooed roughnecks and buzzheaded law officers hanging with silent intensity on every note from Doris's bassoon.

That done, someone yelled, "Alfred Hitchcock theme!" Then it was "The Sorcerer's Apprentice," upon which the group commenced a good-natured round of leapfrog. In the middle of this, someone started squalling for what I thought was "more beer," but from the change in the bassoon music I figured out was really "more Meyerbeer."

After a little of everything from Boddecker to Bartolozzi, eventually everybody wound down, and the assistant D.A. led everybody in a sing-along, in unison with Doris, of Sarastro's aria from "The Magic Flute."

"O Isis und Osiris, schenket der Weisheit Geist dem neuen Paarl," they sang earnestly and badly, just the way they'd sing their jalopy camp-tunes in church tomorrow morning.

The gig done, Doris packed up and came over to me. "Welcome back," she said sweetly. "We should get together and play sometime." Then she left, arm-in-arm with the judge.

"Mm-mm-mm, that Lorelei's some lady," grunted Jim in appreciation. "I don't think that's her real name, though. Strippers never use their real names. I wonder what it is?"

"Doris Jones, vixen," I said.

Jim hooted. "Yeah, right! And an oboe's a singing crawdad!"