

Playing Cupid.

Part 1.

THERESA GARNET was in love with Codell, he thought. He had first seen her show several months earlier, in the fall of 1979. He'd been back to the Ruby Slipper at Cass and Forest every Saturday since then to see her and the All Night Good Night band. On the weekends she played, he was a habitu  of the Bronx early and the Ruby Slipper late, late enough to avoid the cover charge.

Half of a concrete block propped open the Slipper's door, not that it made the place any cooler. Codell stepped in, nodded to the bouncer, and blinked against the stage lights. Bands played at the front of the Slipper, only a few feet from the door, so everyone who entered practically shared the stage with the band.

The band was getting ready for its last set. Codell flashed a smile to Theresa Garnet, poised at her keyboard, and she half smiled at him in return. At the bar it was standing room only, his Stroh's draft a dollar rather than the week day seventy-five cents. The head of the beer boiled up like a cartoon, half the thickness of the draught itself. Rumor had it that the owner added chemicals to make the beer foam. Defective refrigeration left it warm. It was flat, a notch above skunk beer.

The band started. Codell slid closer, under an autographed picture of Judy Garland. In 1967, Garland had played the Cobo Arena in downtown Detroit. The original owner of the Ruby Slipper scored the photograph that, forever since, watched over the bar and affirmed that "there's no place like home."

Written by K.G. Jones.

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The sound system chirped and crackled as the All Night Good Night band broke into a compelling, driving synthesis of jazz and rock. Theresa Garnet's rich vocal joined, weaving in and out, above and below the melody, alternatively blending with and dodging the instruments in scat virtuoso. She hunched over her keyboard, engrossed. Then she straightened, stood up, and flipped her tousled hair. Her jeans clung tight at her hips. Her breasts teased beneath a red V-neck t-shirt cut off above her navel. On one side of her T was a faded **Whip Inflation Now** pin from the Jerry Ford years. On the other, over her heart, a pin informed or commanded, **WOMEN VOTE!** Codell couldn't take his eyes off her.

The next number was a hard, throbbing mix of punk and shock rock that stood up the crowd. Frenzied, they hooted their approval and danced wherever they happened to be; there was no dance floor. The tempo and volume picked up. Theresa Garnet grabbed the mike from its stand, left her keyboard and gyrated in practiced ardor. Her belly flat and her thighs muscular, she was as athletic as a gymnast. Testosteroned drunks in the back catcalled. She pulled a short whip from under her keyboard and snapped it to the drummer's beat. She sang faster to keep up and louder to be heard. How long could it go on escalating?

As if the amplifiers had been cut, the music stopped dead. Theresa Garnet dropped to the floor. The audience yelled. The band members rushed to her. The saxophonist helped her up, rising slowly as if through Jell-O. Codell gulped the head off his draft. He'd seen the act, seen her collapse every time they did that song. The All Night Good Night Band returned to their instruments. Theresa Garnet gathered up the

whip and the microphone and cued the band. The music quickened, the audience livened, and soon she was prowling about the stage on all fours, her mane shaggy and swinging. The song ended, the show lights went out, and the audience raved.

“Do you know, man,” the sax player shouted, “do you people know you were dancing to seven-eight meter?” The stage lights flashed on and off and on and off, and the house lights came up on the wasteland of bottles, cans, glasses, puddles and haphazard chairs that was the Ruby Slipper after a show. The place smelled stale. Sweaty, disheveled and disoriented inebriates cast about the tables trying to focus. The juke box lit up and came back to life. Someone played the Stones’ “Emotional Rescue.”

Codell hailed the bartender - “Fred, last call?” - and tried to catch Theresa Garnet’s eye as she thanked her stumbling fans. Codell stayed at the bar. Theresa Garnet warily made her way to a bar stool. “My feet have enough tired in them for the whole week.” Fred fetched her a glass of water and departed to straighten chairs, collect empties, and wipe tables.

“Great show!” Codell gushed to Theresa Garnet. “I’m Codell,” he said, indicating himself as if they were meeting for the first time. He looked at her chest. “I like your pin.”

“Hey, thanks,” she said, draining her water, not looking at him.

“I’m not bad, not bad,” said Codell. “How ‘bout you?”

“Same ol’. Glad you liked the show.”

“Yeah. About that,” Codell said, “I was wondering, you write your own stuff, right? Original songs?”

“Mostly.”

“Yeah, I thought so, I was pretty sure of that. I really like it. I’m your biggest fan.” The band was packing up.

“I like it so much that I wrote a song, too. For you.”

Theresa Garnet looked at him for the first time. “Oh?”

Codell tugged a creased notebook page from his pocket and stuck it out to her. She unfolded it and read:

Yours

Yours until Niagra Falls [sic]

Yours until the popcorn balls

Yours until the toilet bowls

Yours until the dinner rolls

Yours until the horses fly

Yours until the fabric dyes

Yours until the airplane struts

Yours until I’m nuts

“This is a song?”

“It still needs the music. What do you think?”

“Uhhh . . . it’s . . . interesting. Definitely original.”

“I knew you’d like it!”

Fred returned with a tray loaded with empties.

“I was wondering, watching your shows,” Codell said, “do you need any help?”

“Help?”

“Yeah, like help with your shows. Or anything.”

“No! No, no. We don’t need any help.”

She took a step back and looked at her band. Codell turned and looked, too. In that split moment, Theresa Garnet made a face to Fred, gestured at Codell, and jerked her head sideways toward the door.

Fred said, “looks like you’re done with your beer, pal.” He confiscated Codell’s glass. “I gotta lock up.”

“Sure, no problem.” Codell tossed a blind wave to Fred and focused on Theresa Garnet. “See ya next time.” He headed for the door, and Theresa Garnet rolled her eyes. “What’s up with him?” Fred asked. “Drunk?”

“Worse than drunk. He gave me a love poem. A really bad one.”

Fred chuckled. “You got the power, Super Chick. You knew the job was dangerous when you took it.”

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Many times Codell had walked the two blocks from the Ruby Slipper to his apartment on Prentis, but this one seemed longer. He prided himself on his independence and was not given to prayer, much less an invocation for help. Thus, he didn’t know what he’d done when, heart-sick for Theresa Garnet, he cried out in despair and loneliness: “CUPID, where are you when I need you?!”

Part 2.

THE VERY next Saturday night, Cupid was waiting for him. Cupid very well indeed could change your life forever, though you wouldn't think that to look at him. He was built like a Romanian weight lifter, barrel-chested and much younger in appearance than his years. His diminutive stature and baby face belied his confidence and transformative power. He wore a short-sleeve, collarless, buttonless, form-fitted baby-blue pull-over Izod and matching blue jogging pants. His bare arms were emblazoned with tattooed sleeves of Venus and Diana, inkwork worthy of Rafael, Rubens and Boucher, that glowed and sparkled with unworldly gold leaf. He toted a custom-made ArmaLite Rifle, baby-blue to match his clothes and his car. He called it his Rifle of Romance. He filled the AR magazine with bullets of aversion, libido-negating bullets that would convert amorousness to repulsion. The more ardent one became, the more repulsed was the object of the ardor. Smoothing down his jet-black mullet, Cupid drifted into the Ruby Slipper.

The band was Your Mother, three guitars and drums, four screaming punkers draped in black, outside on break. Theresa Garnet had the night off, but she was hanging at the Slipper anyway, chatting with Fred the bartender. Codell stood next to her and ordered a Stroh's. Cupid hovered in the back of the bar, his AR raised, waiting for a clear shot. The AR wasn't easy, but Cupid had the skill of a *bersagliere* and a stabilizing brace from the future.

"Hey, Fred," Codell said, "I heard you got shut down a while back."

"Nasty rumor. We closed for a few days. License problem."

Codell parked himself next to Theresa Garnet. "Hi," he said. She glanced at him and frowned.

Fred slid Codell's Stroh's to him. As Codell was fishing money out of his pocket, one of the bills dropped the floor. He bent over to pick it up providing Cupid a clear line of sight to Theresa Garnet. He gently squeezed the trigger and held it for a three count, more than enough to do the job, he thought. Theresa Garnet, pierced with Cupid's bullets of aversion, twitched like insects were crawling over her.

"How you doing?" Codell continued to Theresa. "Remember me from your shows?"

Theresa Garnet felt queasy. "Yeah, you're the guy who wrote that 'love' poem for me. How could I forget?"

"You remember! Well, uh, that's what I wanted to talk to you about. I owe you an apology for that."

Theresa Garnet stiffened. Fred fled to the far end of the bar.

"I shouldn't have given that to you."

"Forget it," Theresa Garnet said. "Women expect men to be assholes."

Codell averted his eyes. "Thanks -- thanks? I don't know, can't you be any blunter? I don't expect you to forgive me. I don't know that I can forgive myself."

She softened. "Don't you think you've already been forgiven?" They both sipped their drinks. The moment felt longer than it was. Your Mother had returned to the stage and ruptured into a belligerent caterwaul. "This band gives me a headache,"

Theresa Garnet said, and after a pause: “everyone screws up. Be thankful you screwed up. That’s the way we learn. The path to truth.”

“Now you’re a guru.”

“Not a guru, just been there. Lived there. Know the neighborhood.”

Codell pivoted the stool ninety degrees to face her. “Can I tell you something? I screw up with women. I don’t know why. I must not be learning.”

She pivoted as well. “Can I tell YOU something? I don’t really know you, but I think I do know you. You’re a nice guy, on top of that you’re a hunk. For some reason you think you’re worse than what you are. You don’t realize what’s worthy inside of you, what it takes – but you’re persistent. That’s what women want, someone who won’t quit on them. When you find that woman, you’re not going to quit on her.”

“That woman’s not you?”

She shuddered with uncontrollable revulsion. “No, not me.” Cupid clicked the safety lock on his AR.

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Cupid, a full foot shorter than Codell and downright buoyant behind him, exited the Ruby Slipper. They headed north on Cass Avenue, past Cupid’s car, a baby blue Dodge Dart Swinger with front disc brakes, dual exhaust, and a 360 cubic-inch, four-barrel V-8 engine, and we’re not talking vegetable juice. Cupid fired the remaining bullets of aversion into the air because that’s just what you did in Detroit. They were nearing the Bronx. In place of the bullets of aversion and repulsion, he loaded bullets of arousal and desire (BAD) for his next mark. He never missed.

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Part 3.

A HEAD taller than almost everyone else at the Bronx, Yolanda was a marked woman. She waited for her drink at the end of the bar closest to the door. The door opened; Codell entered, Cupid behind him bobbed with his AR ready; hearing the door, Yolanda turned and saw Codell; Cupid raised his Rifle of Romance and drilled her point blank with divine BAD. She tingled all over and her face flushed. In three steps Codell was at the bar eye to eye with her. "Hi," Codell said.

"Hi," said Codell's bar buddy, affixed to a stool next to them. He bore a vague resemblance to Detroit's Nain Rouge. "I saved you a seat."

"Thanks," Codell said. "But I wasn't talking to you."

"Hello, Codell," Yolanda said tersely. There was no pretense, no artifice, no delay. "Why'd you give me the wrong phone number? I called, and instead of you I got Shield's Pizza."

"Shield's Pizza?!" Codell exclaimed.

"It wasn't funny!" said Yolanda.

"Shield's Pizza!?" repeated Codell's buddy. "You gave her the number for Shield's instead of your phone number? Jeez-o-Pete!"

"Did you order one?" Codell asked Yolanda with a lame smile. "A pizza?"

"That's not funny, either!" Yolanda tensed up ready to pop Codell a big one.

"He owes you a pizza," Codell's buddy opined.

"I can explain. I know what happened," Codell said. "Let's find a table."

Codell and Yolanda relocated between the Space Invaders game and the juke box. A preppy-looking girl punched in the Eagles' "Heartache Tonight." Cupid waved a hand, "Heartache Tonight" skipped, and a Sam Cooke song started playing instead. I must have punched in the wrong song, thought the preppy girl.

"Do you remember my name?" Yolanda asked.

"Of course. Yola.

"Hey, I'm sorry about the phone number. It wasn't intentional. I waited for you to call me like we said, and then the phone didn't ring. I waited probably ten minutes. In the rain. I must've given you the wrong number, and it turned out to be Shield's."

"How can you not know your own phone number?"

"Well - " Codell bit his lip - "I don't have a phone number. I use the pay phone by my apartment. I thought I knew the number when I wrote it down for you. I obviously switched it around."

"So you lied to me about having a phone."

"Well -

"I wouldn't call it a lie. It is the phone I use." Yolanda held him with her eyes.

"Can we be done with that?" Codell asked. "I'm sorry. It seems like that's all I'm doing tonight, apologizing." They took refuge in their beverages.

"Anyway," Codell said. "I was hoping to see you here again. Is your friend coming? Was it Nickie? Her boyfriend, what was his name?"

"Rikki. Donnie. They broke up."

“Doesn’t surprise me, from their ‘love talk’ that night. They could’ve used a little help from Cupid.”

“Cupid!” Said Yolanda. “Hmphh. I bet Cupid only helps those who help themselves.” Cupid bristled indignantly. “Rikki” Yolanda continued, “should be here soon.”

“You just getting a head start on her?”

“My apartment’s kind of empty. I broke up too, with my husband. My apartment is no place I want to be, alone on a Saturday night.” Codell’s heart knocked.

“I don’t know what to say,” said Codell. “Why’d you break up?”

“He was cheating on me.”

“Your husband the delivery man, cheating on you? Wasn’t that the play Nickie was in the night we met? *The Iceman* something?”

“Her name’s Rikki. *The Iceman Cometh*. Rikki wasn’t in it, she worked on it,” Yola said. “My hubby *cometh*, alright, but not with me. He *cheateth*, and I *lefteth*.”

“Weren’t you,” Codell said gently, “going to *cheateth* on him, too? We had something that night that we didn’t finish.”

Yola frowned. “That doesn’t make it any better. It makes it worse.”

Codell considered his platitudes and chose two. “Nothing like a dose of divorce to make you eat humble pie.”

“What?” Yola looked at him funny, then refocused. “There’s no divorce, not yet. I don’t have the money. I don’t even know about rent. He just moved out last week.

The preppy girl came back to the juke and played “The Long Run.” Yola squirmed. “The Eagles?”

The preppy girl put on a pained expression. “How can you not like the Eagles? Glenn Frey, he’s from Detroit!”

“I can’t stand the Eagles,” stated Yolanda. “He’s from Detroit, so what.”

“I don’t like the Eagles, either,” said Codell.

“Well, SOR-ree,” said the preppy, sashaying back to her table.

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Fifteen minutes of small talk later, Yolanda checked the time. “I wonder where Rikki is.”

Codell said, “before she gets here, I need to ask you something.

“We’re going to get together again, right?”

“That’s more of a statement than a question,” Yolanda said.

“We should get together again.”

“That’s definitely a statement.”

Codell exhaled and adjusted himself in his chair. “Can we get together again?”

“We might,” Yola said. “It’s possible. Maybe.” Cupid gave a little start and fingered the trigger of his love gun.

“C’mon! The best you can give me is ‘maybe’?”

Yolanda straightened her back. “I feel for you, I don’t know why I feel as strongly as I do. But ‘maybe’ is a safe thing to say. Because we don’t know what’s not going to happen.”

“ ‘What’s not going to happen’? I don’t understand.”

“I have a friend, Iris. She says, ‘you never know what you won’t want to do when the time comes.’ ”

“ What? ‘What you won’t want to do’ . . . I don’t get it. She’s either a genius or an idiot, I don’t know which.”

“Don’t dis my friend! Codell, we don’t know what we know, do we.”

Codell shook his head, trying to clear a fog. “I do not get it.”

“Do you have a girlfriend?” Yola asked.

“What?! No, I don’t have a girlfriend.”

“Why not? You look like you should have a girlfriend. Why don’t you?”

“I don’t have a girlfriend. What does it matter? I have bad luck.”

“I doubt it,” Yola said.

“The relationships weren’t all that good.”

“Was it love? Did you love any of them?”

“More than they knew,” Codell asserted.

“Oh? How many?”

“That’s not what I meant!”

“What do you mean, then,” asked Yolanda.

“You won’t laugh?”

“I promise.”

Codell’s stomach twisted. Cupid crossed his arms, closed his eyes and cleared his throat. “What I mean,” Codell said, “when you love someone, you want them to

love you back as much as you love them, and if they don't, it's painful. Agonizing. If they do love you, you may not know it. Maybe you think they don't even though they do. And if they shouldn't love you, that's worse.

"Does that make sense?"

Yolanda said, "I think so. Are you okay? I don't know how you make your voice change like that. Are you tearing up?"

"I think," she went on, "we don't see the people we love the way they really are. Instead we see them the way we want to see them, and that's what we fall in love with. Then one day we discover who they really are, and they're not the same. It's not that they changed, maybe they did, maybe not. But no matter how you saw them to begin with, if you can't love them the way they really are, it's over."

Cupid nodded his head approvingly. Over the hub-bub of conversation and the inexorable pinging march of Space Invaders, Cupid made the juke box play the Mills Brothers' "All of Me."

"There's something else," Codell said. "I have a, uh, physical problem. I'm sure you've noticed. My GI tract is messed up. That's not the bathroom you smell."

"I don't smell anything," said Yola. "I lost my sense of smell when I was a kid."

"You look shocked," she said. "Even if I could smell, I'm from Delray. You can't smell any worse than Zug Island."

They sat close, brushing each other. Cupid clicked the safety back on on his AR and slid it in its holster, an accessory from the Vatican gift shop blessed by the Pope.

"Does that mean we get together again?" persisted Codell.

“At Shield’s Pizza?” teased Yola.

“Shield’s Pizza?! No! Tonight. I live a block away, Yola.”

“I can’t stand Rikki up. I have to wait.” They sat, wanting.

Cupid made the juke box play Sam Cook’s “Cupid.” Yola squirmed. “Who’s playing Sam Cooke?” Cupid put on a pained expression.

“Y’know,” Yola said, “if Rikki ever gets here, there’s a dance club a couple blocks over that we could all go to. Live band, Theresa somebody. Ever hear of her?”

“Who?” Codell said with a start. “She’s not my type. I mean, her music’s not my type.”

“Yola!” Rikki hurried to their table. “Sorry I’m so late! I had to work over.

“What a surprise to see you!” she beamed at Codell. “Look at you two, quite the snuggle-buds! How’d that happen?!”

Cupid bowed with a wave of his arms. His Venus and Diana tattoos swayed as if they were alive, sparkling in gold illumination. He holstered his AR, rocked up on his toes, and took his leave.

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