

The Black and Tan

from *The Life and Times of Becky Kaplan*

by Allison Fine

June, 1967:

Becky sat home for several days, dying of misery and world-weariness, as if she had just digested the entire history of sexual ennui into her slender fifteen-year-old frame, drunk the green liquid of antiquity and found it wanting.

Her friend Cheryl, the self-appointed go-between relishing her role as the portal to the forbidden called Becky one bleak evening when the sun indicting Becky's eyes with a kind of longing and shame she had never known dipped behind the roofs of houses and passed out of sight to the other side of the earth.

-Becky, how's things?

-Fine.

-How's Hank?

-You know how he is.

-Has he called?

-Nope.

-He doesn't have a place to live—he's staying with his brother. I told you

Becky—

-What?

-Hank's a little strange. I told you that.

Hank. School over. The shipwreck of summer ahead. When the last bell rang Cheryl and Becky went to the little grocery store off Linden Street and they had Cherry Phosphates. Becky moved a finger around the wet frost outside of her glass, spelling H-A-N-K.

-I like him.

-Don't waste your time.

Cheryl was tough. She had her own car, a Ford Lark, dark red, with a choke on the dashboard that looked like a lighter. She smoked Larks to go with her car. Her father was over in Vietnam with the Marines; her mother drank beer all day from a plastic glass with red flowers on it, walking around in a bathrobe with blue rubber curlers in her hair. Becky preferred to go over to Cheryl's—they could do whatever they wanted—they could smoke and drink gin and play music in Cheryl's tiny bedroom. They never did much but sit around and listen to records and talk about boys.

-Hank is not a boy, Cheryl told her.

-I know that, Becky said. I like him.

-Look, there's a lot about Hank you don't know.

-Like what? St. Lawrence?

Hanks had spent a brief time on the psych ward of St. Lawrence hospital after an aborted suicide attempt when he returned from his 2nd tour of duty in Viet Nam. The whole ambience of it excited Becky.

-That's not all. He got a girl pregnant.

-Oh?

-She had the baby.

-Where is she?

-Up in Traverse City, I think—I don't know.

-Is she living with the baby?

-I guess. She's with her mother.

Cheryl dropped Becky off at home. It was 2:00 pm and she had just a few hours to get some tanning in before the rays of the sun slanted away from the house. She put on her bikini and went onto the patio, easing herself into the lounge chair, slathering Bain de Soleil over her legs, thighs, arms—remembering how it felt when Hank touched them. Her mother opened the patio door. Sylvia Kaplan wore an off-white golf skirt with a navy silk shell and her gold flats. Her dark short brown hair, plastered with hair spray, never moved but sat on her head like a brown helmet with her signature vigorous curls. You could see the scalp in between the curls. Sylvia's green eyes were hooded, her lovely, unwrinkled, tanned skin freckled at the nose; the lithe body with the glorious legs Becky had inherited, polished and shining. The mouth, in its perpetual expression of disdain and frustration turned slightly up at the corners, a little glimmer of expectation as punctuation betraying the tight control Sylvia maintained with extreme effort.

-I'm going out to the club to play golf.

-Fine.

-Virginia's leaving in an hour. The steak's defrosting in the fridge. Will you put it in around 6:00 please?

-Yes. Becky turned onto her back—she always ended up with an uneven tan, the front part of her browner than the back, so she wanted to make sure she got the color all over this summer.

-When's dad coming home?

-He has a business meeting.

-Again?

Sylvia slammed the patio door shut and Becky heard the sound of the electric garage opening.

After her mother left, Becky leaned back into the chaise and allowed the sun to soak into her skin, feeling heat on her buttocks and went to the place she reserved for Hank. She wrote possible scenarios in her head—dates, moments, phrases, experiences they would have—she exploited the situation to every possible advantage, except he still did not call. What about the baby? Every time the thought came up she compartmentalized it somewhere else. What would her parents do if she got pregnant? Her father would never send her away, that's for sure. He'd have a solution—they'd figure it out. They could send Sylvia away—she'd probably need it, if I got pregnant, Becky thought with a smile. Sylvia gone: just her and her father playing music, reading and eating out. This fantasy occupied Becky for a minute before the thoughts slid back to Hank. What is he doing now? Riding the Indian somewhere up the back roads? She longed to be on the back of his bike again, watching the world roll by like a film reeling it's fast, sweet story as they sped down infrastructure. School's over, she thought, and the long summer stretched ahead of her like the pages of *Ulysses* she was reading, only the book was far more interesting than her life.

She spent nights looking up at the stars from the roof of the bike shed, listening to Beatles music on her transistor radio. Some nights she got Cousin Brucie on WABC New York and imagined Manhattan, the brilliant lights and all those crazy people and she was

one of them, wandering the village, having coffee with Bob Dylan, dinner with John Lennon—not a groupie, exactly, but a gorgeous marvelous woman they admired because of her incredible mind and enormous wit and vitality. Foolish girl, woman of the world, what was she? *Sun, shine for me! Friends and lovers, bring me all of them.*

-Why don't you play tennis with Beebe? Sylvia asked one day after watching her daughter wander the house in a daze for an entire week since school let out. Setting a tuna fish sandwich with a pickle on the side of the plate on the placemat in front of Becky, she watched this girl of hers, a complete mystery, sitting in a reverie at the breakfast room table staring out the window. Becky's glass of coke and (unknown to Sylvia) gin, gave her a slightly philosophical take on the world. Sylvia had noticed the gin bottle disappearing and wondered if it were Frank or even herself in lost moments.

-God, mother, I hate Beebe.

-What's wrong with her?

-Besides being retarded?

Sylvia put a napkin next to Becky's plate.

-She can't play. I always have to run after her balls. It's no fun.

--Well, you can go to the club with your father and play nine holes or something.

Or swim in the pool.

-He's at work.

-You can meet us over there for dinner around five.

-Do I have to?

-I'll pick you up. I'm not cooking tonight.

-Fine.

The thought of the club made Becky nauseous.

-I'd rather stay home, she spoke to the wall.

She waited until Sylvia's Lincoln turned the corner before she put on her albums—sometimes it was the Beatles, sometimes it was Miles Davis or Chris Connor or Chet Baker—sometimes Simon and Garfunkle or the Stones. She sat in the library in the pale blue rocking chair, staring out the window at the birch tree, drinking gin and coke, listening to music and thinking about Hank.

The summer solstice was Friday night and Cheryl said she'd pick her up—she had some news. They planned to cruise the gut—drive fast up and down Capitol Avenue after all the stores were closed, listening to the radio and shouting at boys in cars. Then they'd all go over to McDonalds and mess around. Becky thought the whole thing was stupid but she had nothing else to do.

When she got into the car Cheryl lit a cigarette.

-I've got to teach you how to smoke.

Becky took a Lark from Cheryl's pack, lit up from Cheryl's lighter and immediately felt like her mother who always stood at the kitchen window drinking coffee and staring out the window at the driveway, as if something might happen sometime—a Cossack might come riding out of the blue and burn the village or something.

-Why do they say 'Winston tastes good like a cigarette should'? There's no taste to this. Cigarettes don't have flavor.

-Shut up and smoke it, Becky.

Cheryl turned on the radio. She wasn't part of Becky's Canto literary crowd and she didn't give a damn. The incongruity of these two girls hanging out together

fascinated both of them and everyone else. Cheryl, with her impossibly short dark hair, olive skin and enormous brown eyes with dark lashes she made even darker and longer with mascara, her ubiquitous hoop earrings, low-cut shirts showing a bit of breast at the top, her nose for the dangerous, fascinated Becky. The Canto girls were serious and maybe Morgan was a bit dangerous in a mercenary, practical way, but none of them had the sheer audacious skankiness of Cheryl. And there was Becky: the impossibly thin, entitled Jewish girl with the long blond curls and the extended delicate hands with their intelligent fingers—no one could figure out why they liked each other, except them. Cheryl didn't read but she'd had sex and she knew about things. Becky studied Cheryl, wanting to know some of the things she knew, but not everything. Maybe now she might know more than Cheryl, but she could not go into detail about it.

Mostly she just wanted to hang out with Cheryl and watch. She was good to have around downtown because things could get tough. Some of the guys who cruised the gut were hoods, they wore leather jackets, stole things, worked in gas stations, quit school—some had been in juvenile hall. They were nothing like the stupid Jewish jerks she met in Youth Group or the boys her father introduced her to. She didn't think these Jewish guys had penises, let alone know what to do with them.

Except Abe Green's son, who told her to suck his dick when they went down to Miami on a family vacation. They stayed in Myer Siegel's geriatric hotel. The place stank of urine and age. Old Jewish women, who lived there all winter, sat around the pool playing Canasta and Mah Jong, the folds of skin under their arms hanging down to their stomachs, the creases of their faces laced with tanning lotion. She hated going swimming in the pool in her little bikini with all those fat Matriarchs staring at her with a mixture of

indulgence, sadness and forbidden pain. She felt angry and irrational at the same time. They gave her lectures about saving herself.

The husbands of these women always talked about their money, they grinned wickedly at Becky as she walked by, they had skinny arms and legs, they sat around the pool playing cards, laughing at jokes she couldn't understand, walking gingerly to their rooms while their wives shouted orders at them. When the husbands grinned she could see the gold in their teeth. There was something cynical and lascivious about their attitude. Life for them had become simply the mastery of the material—they had no ideals or dreams, at least none that she found herself willing to research.

The husbands oh they had plenty of dreams: dreams that had died in sweat shops and factories, dreams that had died in running auto parts businesses and clothing shops and textile dealerships, insurance companies—business, business, it was always business, and raising little American children like Becky not to have the same future, dreams that were resurrected with terrible despair as they sat in temple on High Holy day picking snatches of memory from childhood—Russian childhoods filled with poverty and fear and family. The husbands had dreams that drove them into making dirty jokes as they looked at the woman they had married, the once beautiful Jewish girls with dark curls and flashing eyes, now fat and nasty and yelling all the time. The husbands remembered nights of sweaty sex, the final darkness when the kids were in bed, sitting on the porch drinking beer and looking out on the street, watching the street lamps come on. The husbands had dreams, oh they had dreams, and it all boiled down to the beautiful little tanned form of Becky Kaplan waltzing by them as they played cards by the pool.

-I hate this place, Becky told her sister Wendy as they walked through the lobby, where a bunch of geriatric Jewish people sat drinking orange juice and eating the complimentary bagels, cream cheese and lox at \$5.00 a pound.

-Me too.

-Why do we stay here?

-Dad and Myer are old friends.

-Why can't we stay at the Balmoral like we did last year?

-I don't know.

Becky reminisced about the last vacation in Miami. At the Balmoral she had met this cute Miami guy who took her dancing.

Frank came into the lobby, wearing red golf pants and a yellow polo shirt. Becky thought he looked like a bumblebee.

-Becky, I've got some plans for you. Wendy's going shopping with your mother.

-Oh God, Wendy said.

-She wants to buy you some clothes, Frank told her.

Wendy hated clothes.

-Why can't I go shopping, dad? Becky asked as she watched her sister's pained expression spread across her face like a shadow.

-I'll take you to Neiman Marcus tomorrow.

-Ok. So what've you got planned? Becky asked.

-Abe Green is down here and he wants you to go sailing with his son, Barry.

-When?

-This afternoon.

Barry Green took her out on his father's boat, a small sunfish—launching from their private dock out into the bay, trying to show off to Becky that he knew how to sail. He bragged about how much money his father made and how he was going into the business one day. Becky was not in the least impressed. They got out somewhere off shore; Barry put the boat in irons and unzipped his pants.

-Suck my dick, Becky.

She looked down at his white underpants, up at the sky, back at his ugly, greased hair, thinking she might be sick.

-Oh, go fuck yourself, Barry.

Barry pulled his dick out of his pants.

-Oh, Becky—look—I'm fucking myself.

She hated Jewish boys—more than ever, and ordered him to pull the thing in and get them to shore quick or she would tell his father. Barry obeyed and the sail back he avoided her eyes, looking arrogant, angry and foolish. Barry had trouble docking the boat; Becky walked off and left him there to handle the ropes by himself. Back at the hotel Frank quizzed her about how the date went.

-Fine, she answered.

-So, do you like him? We're having dinner with the Green's tonight.

-Oh, I don't know--I feel sick Dad, too much sun.

-You know, Abe is business partner.

-So what?

She left the room and went to hers', flopping down on the hard, hotel mattress, wondering when they'd go home. Wendy's boxes of clothes sat unpacked at the end of the bed.

Hank was not stupid like that.

Cheryl and Becky got downtown and the whole place was lit up with car lights playing off the street and darkened storefronts, even Kresge's Five and Dime was closed, horns honking, kids driving old cars sixty, seventy miles an hour up and down Capitol. The sound of radios blasting summer air—these children consuming life; wanting to demolish the night like hungry jackals devouring kill.

After racing to one end of the street they'd turn around and go back to the other end, honking and screaming out the window. It was mindless and electrifying. June 21st a full moon hung in the sky, alabaster with a blond halo, a design in the destiny of the life of this night.

Cheryl revved her Lark and shouted at some guys in the car next to them. Becky looked over and saw how young they were—pimpily. Maybe not even old enough to drive.

-Hey—there's a cop car down there! One of them shouted.

-We better get out of here, Cheryl said, whipping the car around and heading off for McDonalds.

McDonalds parking lot, next door to the all-night grocery, spilled out with teenagers milling, pumped up and excited, restless, hanging outside in groups drinking coke and showing off. Some girls huddled together watching the boys primp and preen,

others mixed groups tussled and baited and teased. Some guys, older than the rest, arrived with bottles in brown paper bags.

Becky, wearing her tightest white jeans paired with a black lace gypsy shirt, had wound a black satin ribbon all in and out of her peppercorn curls, tying some up and letting a good deal of it tumble down her face and neck and back, like she'd seen in a magazine. She wore black hi-heeled sandals she could barely walk in.

Sylvia eyed her in the kitchen before Cheryl arrived.

-You look like a *shiksa*.

-What's wrong with that?

- Nice Jewish girls don't dress like *shiksas*.

-Nice Jewish girls are boring.

-You don't know what you're talking about, Sylvia snapped and lit a cigarette, looking out the kitchen window.

-I know more than you think, no thanks to you.

-Your smart mouth is going to get you in trouble all your life.

-So what?

Becky wanted to smack her mother but she knew that would never happen. Her mother wanted to slap her but she knew it wasn't going to do any good.

-You look sexy, Cheryl told her. Maybe Hank will be there.

-Is that the news?

Cheryl didn't answer.

Becky's body tensed up when they got out of the car. Cheryl's gold earrings flashed against her tanned neck. She wore a tight black T-shirt with her breasts spilling out of the top and sides and her bra strap showing, tiny little black short-shorts and hi-heeled sandals, beige, with red flowers stuck on top.

Becky studied Cheryl's look carefully making a mental note. This girl was a real *shiksa*; she didn't have to fake it, she thought as she noticed Cheryl's thick black eyeliner, the color of the night of Summer Solstice, her heavy blue iridescent eye-shadow, white pearl-color on her lips, nails long and blood-red like polished claws. The guys rushed up to her, with Becky hanging back behind. Cheryl had an easy manner, joking, laughing; swaying her hips around, bumping into bodies.

-Hey Ray! Cheryl shouted across the parking lot. Ray loped over, a big fat guy with long greasy hair and a dirty yellow T-shirt on. Cheryl and Ray hugged tight.

-This is my friend Becky.

Ray glanced over at Becky and pursed his lips tight; then looked at Cheryl.

-Hi, Becky said to his back.

She stood there feeling stupid, not knowing what to do. A bunch of guys and some skinny girls were laughing over to her left. She wanted to get out of there but she was stuck until Cheryl was ready to leave and it didn't look like that would be for a while. Cheryl hooked up with her latest guy Mike, wiry, bad skin, leather jacket, shifting eyes. He grabbed Cheryl over to his Impala and they began making out like crazy, his hands all over Cheryl's breasts. Becky turned away and bumped right into Hank.

-Hey—I thought I'd find you here. His voice sent her into the place she'd been waiting for—no amount of fake poise could hide the proud passion in her eyes.

-Yeah, I'm here.

-Want to take off?

She couldn't breath. He wore an indigo blue shirt, turned up at the collar, off-white chinos and his penny loafers. She touched his arm, feeling the cloth of the shirt—the material soft and grainy—his muscle underneath. She wanted to sing and fly, hug and kiss, but she just stood there looking up at him.

-I'm over here, he said.

She followed him across the parking lot to a green Falcon.

-Where's your bike?

-I got it in the shop. This is my brother's.

He opened the door for her.

-I know a place that plays some good jazz, he said as they pulled out of the parking lot.

-What about Cheryl?

-What about her?

-She's supposed to take me home.

-I'll bring you by here later.

Becky's heart sank—she didn't want to come back—she wanted to stay out all night with Hank.

-Where we going?

-The Black and Tan. What time your parents want you home, little Jewish girl?

-One o'clock.

-How'd you talk your dad into that?

-He's away on business. Mom said ok.

-Nice mommy.

-Not always. She saw his Camels on the seat. –Can I have one?

-You smoking now, baby?

-Yeah. She took a cigarette and he pushed in the car lighter.

Inside the Black and Tan was like a door into the elemental, a hut, a cave, a mushroomed hole in the ground. Just one long room with the barest of decoration—a few paintings of African women and men on the wall, a long, low bar at which sat a huddle of black men hunched over drinks, a small stage with a microphone, a piano and drum kit, people sitting at tables laughing, drinking, eyeing one another reading thoughts as if they were slips of paper, a place both ugly and gorgeous for the dank, sweet smell of it. Tables and booths lined the walls, men wore suits with glorious ties and women wore brilliant silk and cotton, polyester, rayon, nylon in colors and some wore black. An old woman in a huge chocolate muumuu, looking about seventy, wearing a blond wig, with strange, buggy eyes came up to hug Hank.

-Who your little girl?

He hugged her back.

-Shirley, this here's my friend Becky Kaplan, Becky, this is Shirley Henderson.

-Pleased to meet you, Shirley rasped, offering the tips of her fat fingers for a handshake. She wore enormous ugly rings.

-Is Billy playing tonight?

-He'll be by later, honey. Her eyes turned to look at Becky with a gaze that cut into her chest like a razor.

-Why don't you two go sit down—I'll get Willy to bring you something.

Hank grabbed Becky's elbow, steering her toward a table at the back.

They sat down and Becky stared at the salt and peppershakers.

-Why do they call this the Black and Tan?

-Why do you think?

She looked around and saw a lot of blacks; no tans and they were the only whites there.

A few musicians wandered up to the stage and got out their instruments. There was a horn player, a sax, a drummer and a piano player.

-Billy plays the keys. He's boss I want to tell you. Real mean stuff.

-I love jazz, she told him

-Yeah, he said, stabbing her with his disdainful eyes.

-My dad has been giving me jazz records since I was a kid.

-You still are a kid.

-I got Chet Baker's new album.

-Huh. He loves Lucille.

-Who's Lucille?

Hank laughed.

- Lucille's everywhere, girlie, and a lot of people are looking for her. But not many seem to find her. She is very mysterious. Those that do find her, usually have to

pay for her in more ways than one. She can kill you. She can get you fired. And she can have you thrown in jail. But, it seems they still want her.

-How can she do that? Becky asked, not understanding a word of it.

-Never mind, he said, what're going to have?

She tried to think of something different than her usual gin and coke.

-An Old Fashioned.

-Christ, that's an old man's drink. Something for those rich assholes who play golf at the club, or something

Her father was one of those assholes.

-Ok, well, you order something and I'll have what you have.

Hank lifted his hand and Shirley nodded to Willy. Willy wore polyester, a deep wine-colored shirt and gray pants. He looked like an obsequious jerk to Becky, there was something wrong about him with his skinny pants tapered at the ankle, and he had buckteeth.

-Hank, my man. Willy and Hank slapped hands. -This your girl?

-Yeah, Willy this is Becky Kaplan.

Willy's eyes slid all over her, oozing like dirty water.

-Canadian Club, Hank said.

-Sure she don't want a Shirley Temple?

Hank laughed.

-Breakin' her in, I see.

Willy smiled at her breasts and went back to the bar.

-Now obviously, don't tell anyone about this. They could get busted big time and shut down.

The band began tuning up—the horn player had a sweet sound, the drummer ticked a little off his high hat and the piano player ran glissando up and down the keys.

-Do they have a singer?

-Yeah, Shirley sings. This is her place.

-You mean she owns it?

-She and her dead husband. She owns it; she works it.

The band began playing in earnest and reached into her. Jazz was something she felt she knew; she could sink her mind into it. She didn't have to talk to Hank and try and figure out the crazy things he said. The jazz took her away from sitting at the table, from the feeling she had just being there. She closed her eyes and listened. They were playing Basie's '*L'il Darlin'*'.

-I know this.

Hank looked at her out of the bottom of his green eyes, head tilted off to the side, as if scrutinizing her soul. At that moment she thought he looked like James Dean, not Marlon Brando.

-Good, that's why I took you here.

Willy brought the drinks.

Shirley walked up to the stage and stood up in front of the mike. The band slid into a slow intro and she began singing: *I just want something to live for.*

Her voice low, sultry, filled with aging despair and reflection with a bitter taste of heaven lost—the spectrum of divine. Becky vanished; drinking the whole of it into every part of

her body—filling up with the liquid pleasure of the notes, the horn and Shirley’s voice.

The song was sexier than sex, the song made her feel like a woman.

-Now don’t drink it fast, sweetheart, just sip it slowly.

When Hank said ‘sweetheart’ something hit the pit of her stomach.

She took a taste of the bitter liquid, feeling a hot burning go down inside of her, and started to relax.

-This feels good.

Hank nodded, looking at the band.

-Wanna dance? he reached his hand across the table.

-Not now, she kept sipping, letting the music move into her making pictures of color and light allowing her to go away somewhere. His presence became an interruption to the mood of the horn player who laid sadness all over her like silk, draping its fine texture from the inside out.

-Are we going back to McDonald’s later?

-Are you kidding?

-But—

-Forget it Becky.

The song wound up. A small black man wearing a little brown hat perched on the top of his head moved quietly onto the stage and whispered something to the guy at the piano who got up. The room applauded.

-Yeah! A voice came out from a dark corner on the other side of the room. —You blow it Billy!

Billy sat down and played on the keys the kind of romance she wanted from Hank.

After Billy and the band got warmed up they started cooking. Couples went out on the floor and the energy of the place shifted. Becky felt things lift and allowed herself to pour out into the space and time of the moment—it felt holy, natural, more true than anything before.

-Are you restless? You want to dance? Hank asked her.

-No, I just want to listen to the music. Is that all right?

-I don't care what you do.

-Maybe you're restless, she offered.

-You don't know what I am, Hank said, lighting a cigarette.

He smiled at her with the stinging words.

A young black woman eyed Hank from a table next to them. Shirley began singing *Someone to Watch Over Me*. Hank eyed the woman back. She wore a deep red silk chemise with a flower at the meeting of her breasts, and a black ivory amulet around her neck. Her hair wasn't straightened like a lot of black kids Becky knew—it was frizzy and short and close to her head. Her gold earrings set off her glistening ebony skin and high, imperial forehead. She looked like an African princess and made Becky wish she were black.

When Hank looked back at Becky she felt diminished by comparison.

-I guess I'm going to walk around and talk to some friends. You can sit here and listen if you want to.

Hank went over to the table where the woman was and stood up near her, talking and laughing. The woman smiled back with big white teeth and a wide smile. Her high, smart breasts flashed out of the chemise. Becky could see the nipples through the dress. She imagined Hank could see them too. The girl stood up and leaned into Hank, laughing and looking up at his eyes.

Hank touched the woman's arm and Becky saw her melt under his touch. The band played louder and louder—the sax player got into a long, tortured riff that made Becky's heart pound. Billy on the piano gave his soul, annihilating the room with chords that teased the hearts of dancers and drinkers and smokers and listeners. Willy brought another round of drinks and set them on the table.

-This on the house. They cookin' ain't they? He said, leaning against the table. Becky stared into her drink, twirling the swizzle stick with the cherry stuck on it.

-Yeah.

-Looks like your man's sidling up to a mighty nice frame over there.

Willy scanned the dance floor.

-Her guy's ain't gonna be too pleased. Well, I gotta get back to work.

He winked at her. His sly smile and the measured wink made her wish she'd made a back up plan for this excursion. Willy slid away, going from table to table. The place filled up. More people came in the door. The horn player went nuts. The dance floor was packed, Billy got crazy on the keys, and the drummer went with him. Everything smelled of sweat and perfume and jazz. Becky watched the place—drinking her second drink—wondering what time it was and worrying about her mother waiting up in the den, chain smoking and watching old movies on television.

She looked at Hank standing belly to belly with the woman in the red chemise, her head swaying back and forth, earrings catching a flash even in the dim light of the bar, her thighs meshed into Hank's. Shirley went up to the stage again, said something to Billy and he began an intro into her song.

-Here's an Eddy Duchin song for ya'all.

A guy walked up to the stage with a clarinet and began blowing a wailing, sad counterpart to her voice.

What'll I do when you are far away

And I'm so blue what'll I do...

Becky's eyes were closed when a huge hunk of a black man, looking like a prizefighter, leaped across the floor toward Hank and the ebony girl. The room continued in its swaying hypnotic blend, nothing ruffled or alarmed, but Becky's eyes shot open and saw Hank and Princess kissing. The big black man grabbed her arm; whipping her around so fast an earring fell onto the floor.

-Chamique, get yo ass on over here.

-Don you talk me that way, Early, I ain't don nothing. You made me lose my earring.

The big man shoved her toward the table.

-Sit down, Chamique.

She wrenched her arm loose from his grasp and bent down to pick up the earring. Early's hand caught her on the side of the head, sending her sprawling onto the floor. The room took notice but nothing stopped. Becky saw the princess on the floor, fishing for her earring.

-I said, sit the fuck down, bitch, Early exploded above the noise of the bar.

Hank faced him, jaw to jaw.

-Now, where do you get off treating a lady like that?

-You mind yo bidness, white boy.

-This is my business.

-No, it ain't.

Becky looked around the room. Willy, his nervous little body jerking around, ran even faster from table to table, delivering drink orders from a little tray.

Shirley and the band kept playing.

Chamique stayed on the floor.

-Help me up, Early.

Becky saw the side of Chamique's face all smashed in from the blow, black mascara running down the side of her cheek.

-I'll hit you again if you don' get yo ass sit down, Early said, breathing heavily. He removed his jacket, revealing a pinstriped shirt and a dazzling red silk tie. Becky noticed he was dressed smartly, like a businessman, but he wore gold chains around his neck and a huge diamond ring graced the pinky finger of his left hand.

-I ain't about to bother wit you, Early said to Hank, you just a guttersnipe I kick away wit my foot. Hank looked tensed up and little next to Early, his frame got smaller the bigger Early's chest got.

-You throwin' the first punch, whitey? Go ahead on—throw me one.

Early unbuttoned the two top buttons of his shirt; loosened his tie and thrust his enormous chest out, spreading his legs, in fight position. Hank squatted, turned and

kicked out with his right leg. The kick glanced off the hard body like a rubber ball bouncing off a wall. Early laughed and looked around the room for confirmation, grabbed Hank by his shirt and threw a punch at his jaw, sending Hank onto the floor.

Shirley motioned for the band to quit.

-Now boys and girls, ladies and gents, let's keep it civil here at the Black and Tan. We here to have fun.

Becky couldn't move. It was too exciting, too riveting and too much. A Hemingway heroine would rush over to her man and comfort him, wiping his face, but she sat still, unable to make a move. Chamique got up from the floor and looked at Early, puffing her high, haughty breasts out at him.

-Now, why you you go do that, you big ass brute? He just a skinny little white boy.

Early looked down at Hank.

-You want to take it out back, honky?

Billy got up from the piano and walked over to the mike.

-Nigger, shut the fuck up and let us blow!

-Yeah! Voices exploded from the room.

-Take it away somewhere else, Billy said and went back to the piano.

Willy walked over to Becky's table.

-Little girl, take your boy on out of here.

-I thought they liked him here.

-Yeah, well he done messed with the wrong woman.

Becky gathered the nerve to walk over to Hank, nursing his bruised and bloody face with Early's handkerchief.

-Hank, you gotta take me home.

Hank got up. Becky thought he looked weak and worn-- all messed up—nothing like the man she thought she knew. Early stood in front of them both, guarding his table and watching Chamique, who sat in a corner of the booth, looking furious, rubbing her face and trying to put the earring back in her ear.

-I'll escort the man out the door, Early said.

Shirley came off the stage and walked over to Early.

-You causin' trouble, nigger? She looked at Hank. -You look a mess, young man. Take this little girl home and clean up yourself. We'll see you another day. And you— she stabbed Early in the chest with her fat hand, -you just sit down with your woman and stop being such a hard ass nigger.

Early's face softened, went all childish, humble and chastised; grabbed his jacket from the backside of the chair, hunched his shoulders and did as he was told.

Shirley took one glance at the sorry group: Chamique hunched over in the corner, Early protecting her with his enormous body like a giant tree shading a little flower, kissing her over and over, saying -Sorry baby, did I hurt you? Sorry baby, I'm so sorry, and she acting all miffed and successful and proud and self-righteous. Shirley glanced around the bar; then turned her eyes back to the group like a matriarch disciplining her brood of wayward children.

-Men and women. Thank God I'm through with all that- she spoke to the room. Laughter and a splatter of applause, then Billy playing a few comic chords on the piano

ended her speech. She ambled back to the stage and looked at Billy who smiled at the crowd and gave the intro chords to a new song.

Hank took a last mournful look at Chamique and one short glance at Becky.

-Come on, I want to get out here, Becky ordered.

The ride home was dead silent, not even the radio. Hank's face looked a mess and she didn't want to kiss him. He left her at the corner a block from her house because her mother thought Cheryl was taking her out.

-Well—he managed a pathetic laugh, quite an evening, huh?

-I still love you, she said, bolting out of the car before he could say anything.

Sylvia was waiting up in the den, smoking and watching the window.

-Do you know what time it is, Becky?

-Yeah—I know—I'm sorry—I—Cheryl got—

-Wait till your father hears about this.

-What time is it?

-2:30. What were you doing?

-We were just messing around, Where's dad?

-He's at a business meeting.

-A business meeting at 2 in the morning?

-Go to your room, Becky.

Becky trudged up to her room and slammed the door, wondering about her father and his all-night business meetings. After what she saw at the bar, maybe he did things like that too. She wished he were home so she could talk about all that had gone on for her—how much she was changing.

The crisp, cool, ironed sheets felt like heaven on her warm skin—a sliver of moon shot a white light across the bedspread. The hot night air brought a breeze that cooled her from the open window next to her bed. She did not fully realize at that moment that music would always be her lover; those moments between the notes, the notes themselves, the way she lost herself in the fabric of chords and words and thoughts--all this made her sleep, gave her dreams, excited that innate feeling that wanting more was just another avenue of that larger panorama—the events of life a backdrop to the rhythm of dream. Hank was just a moment to get her to the beat.