

# Dr. Hackenbush Gains Perspective

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AIDS and Class Warfare

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Dr. Hackenbush Gets a Job

Electricland

The Pajama Boy

1984

It wasn't obvious at first, but Mabel Hackenbush, better known as Dr. Hackenbush, was a well trained and serious musician. She looked younger than her twenty-eight years, and a big pair of black horn-rim glasses took the edge off her steely gaze. Singing with *Dr. Hackenbush and her Orchestra*, she appeared to be just another chick singer, albeit one with a better than average voice and phrasing. However, there was more to her than that; not only could she read music, including symphony and opera scores, she could sight-sing, arrange for anything up to a big band, conduct, and even orchestrate. She was one of the finest products of the Grove School of Music, which in its bare-bones, stripped-down, no-frills way produced some of the best composers and arrangers in the industry. She'd done well at Grove in spite of the three strikes against her: she was a vocalist, she didn't play the piano very well, and she was female. There were no women getting screen credits in film composing in 1984, and only a few in arranging (which was a dying art—Quincy Jones and the marvelous arrangements on the “Thriller” album notwithstanding). There were few female conductors, so Hackenbush was a woman in what was still essentially a man's world. And she couldn't have cared less; her goal had been to get the best musical education she could afford as quickly as possible and the mind-numbingly, life-crushing Composition and Arranging Program at Grove only took a year to complete. Thank God for that; after a year of poverty, sleep deprivation and driving to the valley almost every day, she was ready for a new life. After Grove, she managed the music industry by ignoring it. She and her baritone ukulele made themselves welcome in every jazz standards-loving club and lounge in the city. When she hooked up with the dancer Shorty Smith, they became the must-have act at every chic venue and upscale party in the county. Sidemen came and went, but the core act was Dr. Hackenbush and Smith.

Or had been. About a year ago, Eddy Lee, guitar player and frontman of the Eddy Lee Trio asked them to join him, Cody Cole on bass and a cat named Ross on drums, and make it a quartet or quintet, depending on one's point of view. They'd met one night when Hackenbush was singing serious jazz (she could do that, too) and Eddy was sitting in. It was as close to love at first sight as Hackenbush ever got. Eddy was in love, too; when she joined the band, he changed the name to *Dr. Hackenbush and her Orchestra*. Hackenbush figured if that wasn't love, she didn't know what was. The drummer and bass player eventually accepted her and Shorty, mainly because Hackenbush and Shorty got them a lot more gigs than they'd been getting as a pure jazz trio. Yeah, the Hackenbush and Shorty shtick was a little goofy, but man, could she sing and, man, could they dance.

Which is what they were doing that very Sunday afternoon at the Los Angeles Photography Center. Shorty was in the money enough to afford ten bucks an hour for three hours on a good floor and plenty of room to trip the light fantastic in. A meticulous choreographer, he didn't let Mabel get away with being lazy in rehearsals. She was a hesitant dancer until she learned her steps and then she was fine; prone to improvise, but Shorty almost had her out of that bad habit.

"Mabel, there's still only four beats in that bar," he said over the metronome.

"I know, Shorty, I know," she rasped at him. "How about a break? I can't feel my feet anymore."

He agreed and she promptly stepped outside for a cigarette. "You might last longer, dear, if you didn't smoke," he observed.

"I'd kill people if I didn't smoke," she observed back at him.

Since there was no comeback to this, Shorty left her to smoke in peace. He went back inside to look at the exhibit of photos of some landscape he didn't recognize. Art was the last thing he thought about at the Photography Center; Hackenbush was the first. They'd met there, two years ago: Shorty was dancing two solos in a little revue set to Cole Porter songs and Hackenbush and her baritone ukulele were the majority of the music. The show was produced, directed

and choreographed by Gregg Schroedingmeier, now long-gone from the LA dance scene, whose main complaint was that Hackenbush's voice got more attention than his dancing, his lighting, and everything he could take credit for. Shorty was surprised the egomaniac didn't take credit for the voice God gave the woman, but Hackenbush's voice was a thing unto itself. Soft, but powerful in its softness and vulnerable in its strength. Shorty eventually figured out the ukulele, which she could play credibly, was more prop than instrument, even if it went perfectly with her smoky, sultry voice.

After the performance, he'd tracked her down and asked her to dance with him. At first she said no, she didn't dance, don't ask her. But he kept asking and eventually, when a paying gig came along, she agreed, and found that not only could she dance, she loved it.

Shorty was a patient soul and Hackenbush loved him dearly for it. He made her look like a better dancer than she was and made her into a better dancer than she thought she could ever be. So as not to provoke him and because she really was interested in this complicated new dance he'd concocted, she only smoked half her Pall Mall. "Okay, boss, I'm back on the clock," she said, picking a shred of tobacco off her tongue.

Shorty giggled and turned the metronome back on. He worked them hard for another hour and then they had dinner at a Thai place across from the Samsara School of Oriental Medicine on Third near Rampart.

"You think I ought to let those Chinese doctors stick pins in me, Shorty?" Hackenbush asked over a plate of panang curry. "My right shoulder and thumb are killing me."

"I think you type too much, Mabel, and should carry your purse on your left side," Shorty said.

"Yeah, maybe," she said. "I'll be typing less when we start the new gig next weekend."

Shorty's mouth was full, so he just nodded. Eddy and Mabel had landed the band a peach of a long-term, high-paying gig in Santa Monica. A good room for music and dancing and it was a chain of hotels, so they might be in the money for quite a while. "We can all save a little money on this gig," he said when he could.

“I’ll be saving a little money when I move in with Eddy,” she said. “You know what they say about how two can live as cheaply as one. I’m giving my fucking landlord notice next week.”

“Hey, congratulations! I would dance at your wedding, Mabel.”

“You dance at everything, Shorty, my wedding would not be exceptional. Except that it would be my wedding,” she murmured. She was distracted with toting up the check, adding 23%, and dividing it in half. “And don’t jump the gun so fast, darlin’, we’re just moving in together.”

“Well, it’s nice,” Shorty said, digging in his wallet for money. “You really love this guy, don’t you?”

“Deed I do, Shorty, ‘deed I do.”

They smiled across the table at each other. Shorty had seen her through some ugly, tawdry affairs, one or two married men (until she finally learned that there really is no trouble like another woman’s man), and months of snarling celibacy and borderline man-hating. He occasionally wondered why she didn’t just switch to women, but the lesbians that made the rare pass at her were politely, but firmly, rebuffed. Shorty figured Eddy Lee got in under her radar because they had a foundation of mutual musical respect to fall safely in love on.

Hackenbush was happy; dear God, at last she was happy. All the years of scuffling, starving, working day jobs, suffering, and moments of pure musical bliss, followed by long stretches of creative growth, when all the work paid off and the music was as free and easy as breathing. In all those years, she’d always felt threatened, scared, and watched her back. Shorty was the first person in LA she felt safe enough with to let her guard down and relax a little. And now Eddy: Lordy, did that man make her feel safe and loved. She carried the warmth of his arms through the hours without him. His embrace was the home she thought she’d never find, and she knew it would be there when she got back to him. His love was one of the few things outside of herself she could count on. It was always something to look forward to at the end of the day, there was Eddy Lee, home, and all the peace and love in that.



She had thought that when she found this kind of love, she'd understand all those happy songs. It was not the case. No song could capture what she felt, not even words and music could do it justice. So, she reasoned, either what she had with Eddy was unique or this kind of once-in-a-lifetime love was just bigger than thirty-two bars and a verse could express. Hackenbush now had a better understanding of the dark songs of lost and hopeless love. She felt she knew more about them from her observations of others' emotional shipwrecks and her own varied and personal experience. She still sang those songs, they were some of the greatest songs ever written; but she now sang them with more hope than tragedy, in an effort to tell her audiences that life is sad, but it might not always be. She kept the message subtle, because she didn't want to get bashed in the face by some heartbroken poor devil who hated her for her happiness. And Hackenbush could dig it: when she was really down, the last thing she wanted was to hear about somebody else's joy. It was petty of her, but there it was.

"What's Ross gonna do?" Shorty asked.

Ross shared a house with Eddy and Hackenbush hadn't really thought about what he'd do when she moved in. "I dunno, d'you think he'd want my place?"

"Echo Park is a lot different than Mid Wilshire."

"Well, he's a big guy, he'll work it out," she said gathering up her things. "Are you coming to see me in my servitude tomorrow night?"

"No, but I'll get there one night," Shorty said, holding the door for her. "One doesn't hear you sing art songs very often."

"Yeah, I know."

"You should know better than to bet on Lola Rae," he said.

"I was betting on love, Shorty, Lola just happened to be involved," she said, sourly. "Although I should know better than to have anything to do with that crazy woman. Six months ago she nearly broke my neck."

"How?" Shorty asked. He was a big fan of the willowy, blond dancer, but knew she had certain eccentricities and gave them a wide berth. One of them was that she mauled

Hackenbush every chance she got.

“She grabbed my hair at Bart’s Bar and Grill to tell me she liked the way I sang ‘Moonglow,’” Hackenbush said, opening her VW Bug’s door for him. “She could have just told me, but no, she had to bend me nearly backwards to tell me.”

“Well, we are talking about Lola Rae, aren’t we?”

“Yes. Thank God Cody held me up while she did it.” Hackenbush shuddered at the memory. “I might have been snapped like a twig.”

Shorty didn’t comment on Hackenbush’s un-twig-like figure; few twigs of his acquaintance had quite so many curves as she did. He merely smiled, and said he figured Lola was in the Bay Area for good. “She’s knocking them dead up there.”

“Dancing?”

“Of course!”

She dropped him at his new place in Hollywood. It was a nice apartment in a deco building on Bronson. She wondered how he could afford it and she suspected he was being kept, but was too arrogant to ask him. Besides, if he wanted her to know what he was up to, he’d tell her; until then she’d pretend not to give a damn.

Shorty had mixed luck with the men in his life; they were either givers or takers. Hackenbush thought Shorty was a great guy and could never quite figure out why he couldn’t find a man that was a bit more balanced and settle down. “Count your blessings, Hackenbush,” she reminded herself as she merged onto the 101 Freeway south. “Not everyone is as lucky as you and Eddy.”

That night the band played a wedding reception in Marina del Rey. Hackenbush tried to put the idea that she might have one of these one day out of her head.

“You looked nice tonight, Mabel,” Cody told her when they were packing up.

Hackenbush had on her basic-black-combat-casual-job evening gown; legions of waiters had spilled drinks and food on it and it all came out in a cold water wash on delicate. “Thanks, Cody, I do try to look nice at these jobs,” she said. “How’d I sound?”

“You sounded nice, too.”

“Just nice?”

“It’s just a casual, Mabel, save it for the gigs,” Cody said, zipping his bass cover up. “I hear you lost that bet.”

“News travels fast,” she said. “That’s what I get for betting on Lola Rae to do anything sane.”

“I hear she’s comin’ back,” Cody said.

“Figures. You gonna come see me in my suffering?” she asked.

“I might fall by. Arty said he’s tired of being the only Negro at his nightclub.”

Hackenbush shrugged, but Ross thought it was funny.

“He said that? Hell, Cody, maybe I should come by, too, except lute music gives me hives,” he managed to say between guffaws.

“Laugh it up, cats, at least dinner comes with the gig and you know how good the food is there,” she said on her way out. Eddy was packed up and tapping his foot waiting for her to get with it. They went back to her place; she’d spent part of her afternoon cleaning it up and changing the sheets.

Hackenbush was going to be on a tight schedule that week. Her temp job in Glendale ended at five; she had to get home to Echo Park, warm up, change into the modest and severe black silk jersey gown she’d picked up secondhand, which she now thought of as her “recital” dress. Then she had to be in Pasadena at seven to sing art songs with the lute-playing rocket scientist from the Jet Propulsion Laboratory.

The bet she’d lost was that Lola Rae and Mark Wilson would stay together even if Lola went to dance in San Francisco for a month. Hackenbush had bet on love and lost because Mark took a gig in Japan and left town a few weeks later; Lola still wasn’t back. Hackenbush could be forgiven: she was in love herself and her judgment was a little off. But off in a good way, it was “La Vie en Rose”, something she’d never believed in, much less thought would ever happen to her.

But back in the present and due to losing this bet, she had this stupid gig at Inn Arty’s wine bar in Pasadena with Dr. Herbert Friederman, physicist, Ph.D., and lute player. He’d

been admiring her at a party and guitar player Al Juarez had made a week of Hackenbush singing art songs with him the payoff if she lost. The payoff if she won was that Al would be standing up there singing in badly-accented French. Now, that would have been something to see. The deal had been that if Lola came or didn't come back by the end of May, she and Al would pressure Arty into giving Dr. Friederman a week of weeknights. Dr. Friederman mailed them photocopies of the songs that he immediately set to perfecting on his lute. Difficult to know how much science was lost due to this wacky errand. Hackenbush was annoyed to have to learn the very songs she'd so successfully avoided all her vocalist life. But a deal's a deal, and she was a woman of her word so there she was. Professional to her sensible shoes, she'd even forked over some real cash to a vocal coach, just to see if she was doing it right. She was, and lessons were fun, if expensive and all the way down in Newport Beach. Anyway, after the first gig, Eddy would be waiting at her place and this would give her courage to get through the two and a half hours, with breaks and dinner, of Ravel, Debussy, Fauré, and other dead French guys she'd never heard of before, and never wanted to hear of again. At least Hackenbush was singing well, in badly-accented French, but well, nevertheless. She gave her ukulele those nights off; a lute and uke sounded too much like some kind of Hawaiian hippie folk concert to her and she needed to concentrate on her singing too much to play competently. Mostly she just wanted to get through the night with as little hassle as possible.

Monday night was quiet. Arty's was filled with gourmets who just wanted a quiet evening of good food. Hackenbush and Friederman got a few dirty looks as they set up, but then became wallpaper, which had always been the plan. It was an okay gig; almost a dress rehearsal due to Dr. Friederman's nerves and fine tuning in a few places. Hackenbush had to hand it to him, though; he was a serious musician, even if she didn't care for lute music. Much to her surprise, because she was focused on singing and not the audience (it wasn't that kind of crowd anyway), they got a smattering of applause after each song. It was probably people who just had their hands free between courses, or it

might have been some real appreciation. Hackenbush didn't have a problem with the music; it was beautiful music, but just not something she could really connect with. She was a singer, so she sang as well as she could, which was very well indeed. Arty fed her one of the best steaks of her life and she was with Eddy by ten.

The job in Glendale was data entry, something Hackenbush could do in her sleep, so it was almost a restful four days. The accounting manager, Ms. Metzger, was a weird combination of grateful and resentful toward the three temps Solutionations sent out to deal with the backlog. She was grateful they were there and doing the work, but resentful that she couldn't manage her own staff well enough to get it done in the first place. Hackenbush could see why that might be so; Metzger was trying to be friends with everyone and was getting taken advantage of right and left. The silly woman had been by Hackenbush's desk three times the first morning to make sure she was comfortable, knew what she was to do, and to see if she needed anything. All this did was interrupt Hackenbush's rhythm on the 10-key and the answers were simple: yes, thanks, this office chair is just fine; yes, thanks, I'll just input this two-foot stack of two-month-old invoices and then start on the box of filled orders on the floor; yes, thanks, I need you to leave me the fuck alone, thanks. Okay, she didn't say that. She liked the people at Solutionations too much to do that to them. She'd been working there for years and would need to again someday. No matter how well music jobs were going, there were unpredictable dry spells where a temp job just had to tide you over.

Hackenbush was on this one as a favor to Valerie MacGruder, whom she'd been working for out of Solutionations for years. Recently, Val had been promoted to branch manager, which was a mixed blessing for her temps: it meant they'd have to break in a new temp wrangler. So far, the chick who'd taken over Val's workload, Anna Kodaly, was cool. Hackenbush hadn't talked to her that much because she'd been mostly making a living as a musician.

But Val was almost a friend and when, from her exalted new job title, she personally called Hackenbush to save a big account, how could Hackenbush refuse? After all the years of

being first call on the best paying jobs, she owed Val at least four days on an annoying job. It turned out that Val must have really been in trouble because Linda Lim and Sandy Garner, sculptor and pianist and two of the finest temps in greater LA, were on the job with her. This meant the lunches at the Pearl Café on Maryland Street were fun, at least.

“I hear you and Eddy Lee are shacking up,” Linda said over her burger on Tuesday.

“Next month,” Hackenbush said. “How’d you hear?”

“I heard from Suzy Reed, who heard it from Shorty,” Linda said. “So it must be true.”

“I heard it from Renee Soleil last night at the Oak Room,” Sandy put in. “She was singing with Lewis Lewis.”

Hackenbush shot her a wary look; Eddy and Renee had been lovers well before Hackenbush knew either of them. Renee was a pretty good singer, so being a vocalist and Eddy’s ex-flame made her double trouble in Hackenbush’s books. Although, she never asked Eddy about Renee, and he never brought her up, Hackenbush had learned from gossip that Renee had nearly sucked—literally and figuratively—the life out of Eddy when they were together.

“I’ve no idea where she heard it,” Sandy added, staring down Hackenbush’s scowl. “If Shorty knows, the whole dance scene knows, and you know how fast good gossip spreads.”

“What did she say?” Hackenbush asked.

“Well, the first thing she said was that she wanted to hear you at Arty’s because she’s always suspected you can sing when you don’t have to clown with Shorty and front the band.”

“That fucking bi—”

“It was a compliment, Mabel,” Sandy said in her no-bullshit voice. It was the voice she used on conductors who couldn’t find “one” and singers who needed a kick in the ass to stay focused. “We’re coming to see you tonight.”

“Oh great.” Hackenbush gave up on her Club sandwich and lit a cigarette. “What’d she say about Eddy?”

“She said she was impressed.” Sandy waved Hackenbush’s smoke away. “She never got that far with him, so you must really have it. She wondered about Eddy, she

said he was a little more skittish when they were together, but people change, and he must've found the right woman to settle down with."

"She said all that?" Hackenbush asked.

"Well, she also said 'God help Hackenbush, Eddy's ninety percent bastard and one hundred percent guitar player'."

"That sounds more like her," Hackenbush said, over Linda laughing so hard she choked on her coffee. "She really is a bitch," she added, whacking the sculptor between her shoulder blades. "Ow, Linda, you got a back like a rock."

"All those years of sculpture," Linda said, between coughs.

"Anyway, Mabel, Renee and I are coming to Arty's tonight and I told her, so I'll tell you: be nice," Sandy said.

"Me? I'm not gonna fuck with the Renee and Sandy show, believe me," Hackenbush said, already thinking of subtle ways to insult Renee without pissing off Sandy. "Besides, Arty's got the best food in town, there's no way I'm messing up that relationship with a catfight in his club."

"You? In a catfight? How interesting." Linda wiped her lips and accepted the Pall Mall Hackenbush offered her.

"Well, I haven't been in one since High School and I was the big loser," Hackenbush admitted. "The PE teacher had to rescue me."

"How humiliating," Linda said, looking at her watch. "Back to the data entry mines, girls."

"So, I'll see you tonight?" Hackenbush asked Sandy in the elevator.

"As far as I know right now, you will."

"Maybe me, too," Linda put in. "This sounds interesting and I like lute music."

"You do?" Hackenbush was a little shocked to hear this from the most modern of modern sculptors. On the other hand, Dr. Friederman's lute playing was growing on her. "By the way, the singing is pretty damn good, too," she added as the elevator doors opened.

Nobody ventured to crack wise; they were all in their professional temp roles, gliding back into data entry, word processing, filing and whatever the hell else needed doing.

Ms. Metzger stayed in her office all afternoon, and this was an extra blessing as far as Mabel, Linda and Sandy were concerned.

Inn Arty's was in a large, tastefully decorated storefront on a quiet street in west Pasadena. It was filled with white wood, dark carpet, soft lights and softer music. Although the carpet made it a dead room acoustically, even Hackenbush had to admit it was a lovely space. The little stage for musicians was barely big enough for Hackenbush, Dr. Friederman and his lute. It was too close to the kitchen door for Hackenbush to be happy. But she was not there to be happy: she was there to pay off a bet, sing well, and eat excellent food. That night Arty gave them buttery grilled shrimps, garlicky mashed potatoes, quiche with ham and broccoli, and spicy stir-fried green beans. Nothing was as good as getting paid to sing, but Hackenbush felt that this was pretty damn close.

The word seemed to be out that lute music didn't cause cancer and Hackenbush was singing like an angel, so every musician with nothing better to do was at Inn Arty's that night. Everyone except Eddy Lee, who'd not only had to listen to his babe learning these songs, but had had to listen to her bitch about having to learn these songs. He'd politely offered his opinion of her version of "Beau Soir" when asked, and was ignored. That song had gotten very old for Ed after the tenth hearing anyway. However, Hackenbush did hope he'd find the will to fall by to hear her sing at least one set and have a glass of wine with her.

Renee and Sandy blew in during the last set and ordered dessert. When the dessert cart came around, Hackenbush saw Sandy take a piece of pecan pie and Renee a slice of chocolate cake. Hackenbush knew the pecan pie was good, she'd had it on Monday, but the chocolate cake looked too rich for her. Renee only managed to finish half of her slice, so it must be very rich indeed. Renee Soleil was a big woman with a big voice and huge other appetites. And so, seeing Renee's experience, Hackenbush decided she probably didn't want anything to do with that chocolate cake, now or ever.

Dr. Friederman cleared his throat; in her reverie she'd missed her cue. He improvised a four bar phrase, something



Hackenbush hadn't known could be done on a lute, and swung around to her entrance again. Dr. Friederman was turning out to be cooler than she'd thought and she found herself singing well because one should always sing well, but also to please him. She wouldn't miss this gig, but she wouldn't have any regrets when it was over.

After the gig, while Dr. Friederman was packing up, Sandy waved her over and bought her a glass of wine. Sandy looked a little nervous, causing Hackenbush to believe Renee might have been being bitchy. Renee was a bit too blasé, especially after all that chocolate, and Hackenbush was left to sip her wine and wonder if she and the singer were going to be ladies like Sandy, or if they were just going to ignore each other.

Renee cracked first. "You sound good up there, Mabel," she said, making eye contact and smiling politely.

"Ah, thank you, just shifting gears," Hackenbush said, also making eye contact, but smiling loftily as she imagined Maria Callas must have done more than once in her career.

"Were you trained?" Renee asked in an undertone, as if it was something to be ashamed of.

"As a matter of fact I did take a few lessons from a guy in Newport Beach to get ready for this gig," Mabel said, thinking this was awfully civilized for Eddy Lee's she-devil ex-girlfriend.

"What dedication. That's a longish drive, Mabel, what did Eddy do while you were gone?" the She-devil asked.

Hackenbush tried not to flaunt her happiness, but Renee had it coming. "Oh, practiced, watched TV, whatever guys do on their own. He did take the train down to Santa Ana and had dinner with me and my dad. Sort of a welcome to the family thing. My dad seems to like him as much as he likes anyone," she said, hoping her smile was smug and obnoxious.

It was both and then some. Renee's eyes got very cold on the other side of the table. "Oh? Will Eddy be converting to Judaism for you?"

"Oh, dear me, no," Hackenbush cooed, or hoped she was cooing and not snarling. "He'd have to convert to Zen Judaism and he's already that anyway."

"Tsk, oh, honestly, Hackenbush," Sandy sighed. "Bad

things happen to people who make up religions.” Sandy had the advantage of being able to ignore her Catholic background.

“Tosh, Sandy, this is a well-established, completely unorganized faith,” Hackenbush laughed at her.

“Oh yeah? Tell me a Zen Judaist joke,” Sandy demanded.

“Well, there aren’t any,” Hackenbush said. “And if there were, no one would get them.”

“Huh?” Sandy and Renee said in stereo.

“See?” Hackenbush folded her hands. She unfolded them to wave good-night at Dr. Friederman.

For Hackenbush, it was simple: she just wanted a God she didn’t have to work too hard to believe in. An abstract God she could reliably and quietly worship, Who didn’t make too many demands on her and upon Whom she returned the favor. If God would keep an earthquake from swallowing Los Angeles, Hackenbush would praise that God and take care of herself and her pals.

“I’ll have to think about that one,” Sandy finally said. Renee just nodded.

“Well, I have to go home,” Hackenbush said, omitting that Eddy Lee was waiting for her there. She figured Renee had had enough for one night.

On their morning break, Sandy told her she sounded pretty good on those art songs. “Hard work, eh?”

“Yeah, hard to sing and not much room for my personality,” Hackenbush admitted. Eddy had stood her up last night, claimed he was too tired to come over to her place, or for her to come to his. She was trying to keep the frown out of her voice. This was probably her punishment for flaunting her happiness a little to Renee, damn her.

“You and your personality were doing fairly well up there,” Sandy said. “But you’ve got nice color in your voice I never noticed before. You and that lute player ought to get it on tape while you can.”

Just to get rid of her, Hackenbush said she thought it was a good idea. But, because she understood Sandy’s compliment, she added it to her ‘To-Do’ list, albeit way down near the bottom of the list. “Hey, Linda! Where were-?”

“I’m coming tonight! I’m coming tonight!” Linda raised her very muscular arms defensively in front of her. As if anyone would ever take her on; she could press her own weight and crack walnuts in her bare hands.

“Oh yeah? Can you bring your tape recorder?”

Ross and Cody also showed up that night. Either Wednesdays were naturally busy or the word was out the music was good. The food was always good, but some people need extra incentive. Arty sat down and had dinner with the drummer and bass player, something Hackenbush had never seen him do with any other customer. He was a gracious and considerate host, but kept his professional, restaurateur distance. However, with Ross and Cody, Arty relaxed and let himself enjoy his chef’s cooking and the classier part of his own wine rack. Hackenbush smiled and waved, but kept her distance so as not to interrupt their peaceful island of Negritude or whatever it was.

She and Dr. Friederman were in the midst of their own good dinner—lobster bisque, roast beef, glazed carrots, huge baked potatoes stuffed with cheese, broccoli, pressed garlic, ham, sour cream and chives, and they skipped dessert, that’s how much food it was—but she discreetly observed that Arty pulled out all the stops for Ross, Cody and himself. She wanted to ask Friederman if he thought that was duck they were eating—it was dim in Arty’s and Hackenbush didn’t have the best angle on the table—but he was off in some reverie, probably involving a lute solo, so she left him alone.

She sauntered up to sit with them on her first break. “Can a white girl get a seat at this table?” she asked. “How was dinner, cats?” She waved at Linda, just coming in, who was waving her tape recorder at her.

“Delicious! Especially the duck part,” Cody sighed. “That man in that kitchen can sure cook some.” He and Ross nodded happily at each other.

“Speaking of,” Arty said, rising. “I better get on with my chores.” He winked at Hackenbush and made his way around the room, tending his customers, many of whom were old friends.

“I hope the singing isn’t interfering with your digestion,” Hackenbush said pointedly.

“The singing,” Ross said, matching her tone, “is effete, decadent, and would destroy decent society if left unchecked.” He paused so Hackenbush could roll her eyes. “Puts you in a bind, Mabel, you have to sing what the composer meant, not your idea of what the composer meant, or it all falls apart. You might as well be singing in a straight jacket up there.”

“Oh, come now, Ross,” Hackenbush said. “I’d never get my ribcage open enough in a straightjacket, why else do you think I’m wearing this baggy schmata?” They laughed. “So, it’s not the singing, it’s the material you don’t like?”

“Yeah,” he said. “It’s not a secret you can sing, Mabel, and to tell the truth, I never knew you had so much voice in there, but it’s what you do with a song that makes it special and there is no room for that with this stuff.” He waved dismissively, which meant end of subject.

“I liked that one song,” Cody said.

“Which one?” she asked.

“The one around eight-fifteen.” Cody smiled serenely, but Hackenbush couldn’t tell if he was smiling at her, his own joke, or the dessert cart heading their way.

“Heard Renee was in last night,” Ross asked softly. “How’d it go?”

“Oh fine,” Hackenbush said as breezily as she could manage. “Watch out for the chocolate cake, even Renee couldn’t finish it.” She excused herself and went over to sit with Linda, and also to make sure there was a tape in the cassette player. Linda was a great sculptor, but only a so-so recording engineer.

Glancing over at Ross, she found him watching her. Cody was deep in some pecan pie, and her lightness had probably fooled him, but not Ross. If Eddy was too tired to come over last night, then he must have been at the place he shared with Ross, and that might have seemed as strange to Ross as it did to Hackenbush. Add in the fact that she, as well as Ross, knew Eddy wasn’t gigging much this week, and still hadn’t come to see her sing; it was bugging her and Ross could see it. This bugged her even more. “What, Linda?” she asked, realizing the artist had asked her something.

“I said, who’s that gorgeous guy with Shorty?”

Hackenbush followed her nod and, lo and behold, Shorty

Smith was being seated at an intimate table for two with a gorgeous older man. Hackenbush sketched Shorty a wave and got a stoney wink back. ‘Must be the new sugar daddy,’ Hackenbush thought, but said, “Must be the new boyfriend. I was wondering why he wasn’t around so much lately.”

“Don’t blame him,” Linda said, trying not to stare. “Shorty sure can pick them, can’t he?”

“Yeah, and they sure can pick him. It’s keeping them that’s the tough part.” Hackenbush caught Dr. Friederman’s eye and they both rose to return to the stage.

She sent a rueful smile Ross’s way and sang.

Eddy was playing a solo cocktail lounge gig at Dino’s in East Pasadena that night. After the show, most of the crowd migrated over there. Hackenbush, Dr. Friederman and a few woodwind players sat in. Eddy seemed glad to see everyone, but it was such a wholesale invasion of his gig, he really had no choice but to be cool about it. Hackenbush only stayed until 11:30; she had to work the next day. She didn’t say anything about the previous night, just gave him a comradely slap on the back, said, “See ya,” and split. Unwilling to bet on whether he’d show up later, she went home and acted like it was any other night before a workday. So of course he showed up at 1AM, but that was just fine, if not more than fine, with Hackenbush.

Thursday was the last day on the temp job. Sue Metzger had gone out on stress leave so the office manager signed her time card and thanked her. “Wish we had a few more like you around here, Mabel,” she said. “If you’re ever looking for perm, don’t forget us,” she added, handing Mabel her card. To be polite, Hackenbush said she wouldn’t forget them, and then did well before she got home.

That night was also the last night of her gig at Inn Arty’s. She would miss Arty’s cooking and even Dr. Friederman’s lute playing, but she would not miss this crazy art songs gig. On the last break, Arty very casually sounded her about doing another week.

“Nah, but Dr. Friederman could carry this gig on his own,” she said.

“That’s what I thought, but he said I had to ask you anyway,” Arty said.

“What a gent! No, thanks though, I’m retiring from the art songs scene, but grab Dr. Friederman while you can.”

Arty said he fully intended to. Hackenbush wished him good luck—she was really going to miss the food on this gig, alas—and was about to remount the stage for the last set of the last night of the gig when Eddy and Cody came in. “Hey, guys!”

Cody split off to talk quietly to Arty and Eddy headed for his babe. “Mabel, we got called for a casual at the Biltmore,” he said, all business. “We have to be there in half an hour. I picked up your baritone ukulele on the way. Ross and Shorty are there setting up right now.”

Reflexively, Hackenbush looked at Arty, who nodded and gave her thumbs-up. She glanced at the oblivious Dr. Friederman, and Arty headed over to explain the situation. “Oh fuck, Eddy, do I have time to go home and change out of this dumb dress?” she asked, now that she could concentrate on important stuff.

“No, but I grabbed a dress for you at your place,” Eddy said, smugly, and pulled a few yards of satin from his shoulder bag.

“Ed, that’s a nightgown. But nice try,” she said, resigned to her modest and severe black dress. Oh well, it was just a casual anyway. She apologized to Dr. Friederman, who took it like a man; she hugged him and said she’d enjoyed working with him. In many ways she had; that gig wouldn’t be a bad memory, just an interesting one. And one she’d pretty much filed away by the time they got to the Emerald Ballroom at the Biltmore downtown. It turned out to be a great casual, in spite of her dress.

Hackenbush got to sleep in that Friday morning; the band’s new gig started that night and she’d wanted to rest up for it. So she breezed into Solutionations after lunch to talk to Valerie about her hiatus from temping.

She said hi to Anna Kodaly and handed her that week’s timecards for herself, Linda and Sandy.

“I don’t know how you people get clients to sign timecards in advance,” Anna said, checking the hours.

“Sandy and Linda inspire nothing but trust, Anna,”

Hackenbush said. “And the clients know they can take it out of Solutionations’ hide if the temps flake on Friday.”

“Which has never happened,” Anna shot back.

“And likely never will. We’re devoted little Solutionistas; we need you” Mabel said, figuring the next time she’d need Solutionations, Anna would have moved on. Between flaky temps and creepy management, turnover on temp agency personnel was shocking; anybody with a brain fled in six months, usually to a job that was just as bad, but the novelty made it bearable for a while. However, temp bookers usually took their list of A-list temps with them to the next job. This was how a good temp could end up working at half a dozen agencies, following their meal ticket.

Hackenbush figured she’d follow Anna to her next move, if and when she had to work temp jobs again. But, for the foreseeable future, Hackenbush was done temping, and this was great news for her, not for Valerie MacGruder, the branch manager, and Hackenbush was there to tell her in person.

Valerie was hardly a creepy manager. She did her best to keep the profits flowing up the Solutionations corporate ladder and keep her staff and temps happy. She had a reliable bunch working for her at the moment, so she was sorry to see Hackenbush go.

“How long did you say you think you’ll be unavailable?” she asked, trying to take it in.

“Well, we’re booked through October, then the holidays are very busy, and then we figure after the new year there might be cruise ship work...”

“Six months?”

“More like a year, Val, this hotel chain likes us a lot, and they’ve got lots of places for us to gig,” Hackenbush said, knowing a year was a lifetime in Valerie’s business.

And Val knew this perfectly well, too. “We’ll miss you, Mabel,” she said, rising to shake her hand. “Anna will miss you a lot. You’ve almost got her trained.”

Hackenbush laughed politely and left. She liked Val; she’d been working for her since Val had had Anna’s job. It was nice to see her succeed: she’d been one of the few temp bookers to understand, if not exploit, the fact that not all the

best temps had a corporate mentality. This had paid off well for everyone; Val got promoted and Solutionations kept scores of struggling artists in all fields more or less solvent.

She said good-bye to Anna and headed for Hollywood and Shorty. There were a few errands she wanted to run before she picked up her dance partner. She was down to her last fifth of tequila and wanted to stop by Liquortopia on Fountain Street and pick up a case. Not that Hackenbush could drink a case of tequila by herself; she had lots of friends to help her and parties to take a gift bottle to. She was also in the planning stages of a housewarming for her and Eddy after they moved in together in June. It was also cheaper to buy it by the case, and Hackenbush economized wherever she could and whenever she had the money to do so. After she got Shorty and they had a very late lunch, she'd swing by her place and pick up her gown and ukulele for the gig that night. The plan was to meet at Eddy's place in Mid-Wilshire and go in Ross' van.

"... so, um, that's it, I'm done. Bye." Eddy hung up the phone and turned to find Ross standing in the doorway.

"Oh, shit, Ed, you gotta be kidding." Ross, standing in the doorway, stared hard at the suitcase, guitar case and then back at his housemate.

"Nah." Eddy brushed his greasy bangs out of his eyes and picked up his stuff.

"What about the gig?" Ross asked, standing in his way.

Eddy shrugged. "Sorry, Ross."

"And Mabel?"

He blew out a long breath. "She's why I gotta split," and looked Ross in the eye.

"We could get another singer."

"It's more complicated than that, Ross, so excu—"

"This has been coming on for awhile, hasn't it?" Ross didn't move out of his way. "Why now?"

"I waited too long, got too involved, and now I gotta go."

Ross argued with him a little longer, but eventually realized Eddy was not going to see sense, let alone do the right thing, and he stepped out of his way. He waited until the



car started up, pulled out of the driveway, and then waited some more. He wasn't waiting for anything, he was just letting some time go by before he had to call Hackenbush and break the news to her.

The phone was ringing when Mabel and Shorty got back to her place. "Get that Shorty, okay?" She had an arm full of tequila and the leftovers from lunch. Although she kept trying, she could never eat much before a gig.

"Oh, hi Ross," Shorty said and then he was listening very closely.

Since Shorty wasn't holding the phone out to her, Mabel pushed the play button on her machine.

"Hi, Mabel, look..." Hackenbush landed hard on her knees before the end of the message. The message looped in her head, repeating more slowly than what was on the tape, and every repetition coiled something inside her chest tighter and tighter until she was having trouble getting a full breath. Her body went limp and she slumped against the phone stand. A blurry darkness began to close in on her; she was barely able to focus on the bottle of tequila she was reaching for. All she knew was that she had to get the bottle open before she started to shake, and get as much tequila down before the darkness overwhelmed her. She just wanted to blunt the hard and final edges Eddy's message. It wasn't the words tearing her up, they were Eddy's usual bland words, but the vibe: it was over for him, done for him, he was walking away, and she was alone, on her own again, would never feel his touch, never hear his voice again except for this message, and that was more than she could handle sober just then.

"M- Mabel? It's Ross," Shorty said when the message finished. He held out the phone to her. He, too, was reeling from Eddy's message.

"Tell him to fuck off." She was too busy drinking tequila straight out of the bottle to talk to anyone just then.

Shorty in person and Ross and Cody in phone calls tried to get her to see reason, or at least save the binge for after the gig. Eventually the screaming and crying got on their nerves and they gave up. Shorty stuck around until she passed out, just to make sure she didn't hurt herself. Ross called Al