

The Weakened Worriers

John woke up feeling unsettled. He'd had a troubled sleep, which most likely meant he'd gone to bed upset. So he turned his thoughts to last night's gig—one of the musicians must have said something to him afterward. *No, wait! None of them said anything to him—that was it!* Nobody said, "Sounded great, man," or anything else nice like that, even though he'd made a point of saying it to each of them.

He must have sucked, yet again. Memories of past failures flooded him: Squeaky sax reeds, flat throat tones on clarinet, shrill high notes on flute, embarrassing wardrobe failures, and so much more. Why did Theodore keep hiring him? He wasn't good-looking—on the short side, not fat but definitely soft, prematurely gray, and pallid—and he didn't read or solo very well. Still, for some reason, he kept getting the calls. Maybe there just weren't any good wind players willing to play the gigs, and he was something inoffensive that Theodore settled for. That must be it.

He waited patiently for his wife to wake up. She was a singer, pretty good, a former pro with a music degree from a local college. One night, while hosting a vocal jam, she was overwhelmed by the skanky smell emanating from the mike. In her mind, it immediately became a thriving petri dish fed by the spat plosives of every singer before her. She dropped the mike, ran to the restroom, vomited in the sink, and didn't finish the gig.

Since then, she would perform only acoustically—no mike—which ruled out all but one of her regular gigs, a one-minute New Year's Eve show in a millionaire's mansion. She was one of fifteen singers he positioned throughout the house to make sure all his friends were serenaded exactly at midnight. That gig meant everything to her now; more than once, John found her staring at her watch and quietly practicing "Three, two, one. Should auld acquaintance be forgot. Three, two, one"

Now John prodded her with his feet. "What?" she mumbled, rubbing her eyes, easing into consciousness.

"Just say it."

"Oh, for Christ's sake," she snarled, suddenly fully awake. "Fine. Whatever. Honey, you played great last night. Okay? Now can I go back to sleep?"

Yeah, right, he silently sneered. Like you'd know the difference.

He needed to practice; he always needed to practice. For tonight's wedding gig, he would be playing tenor, flute, and clarinet, so he gave all three a good workout, equally distressed by his sound on each. Then, to clear his palate, he plopped down in his living room and spent a few hours listening to his idols, looking for insight into his own shortcomings.

Before he knew it, it was time to shower, get dressed, and leave. He'd cut it dangerously close, and when he grabbed his tux shirt on the way out, he realized he'd forgotten to wash it. He smelled the pits. *Nasty!* And that would be his starting point, ground zero, which, over the course of the night, could only get worse. He shook his head and half smiled: for once, he would actually be funky.

The gig, at the dreaded Westin hotel, promised to be a logistical nightmare. The star of the evening—like every bride at every wedding gig, ever—had declared it the most important night of her life, and the musicians would inevitably pay a price....

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