

TAMPA RED

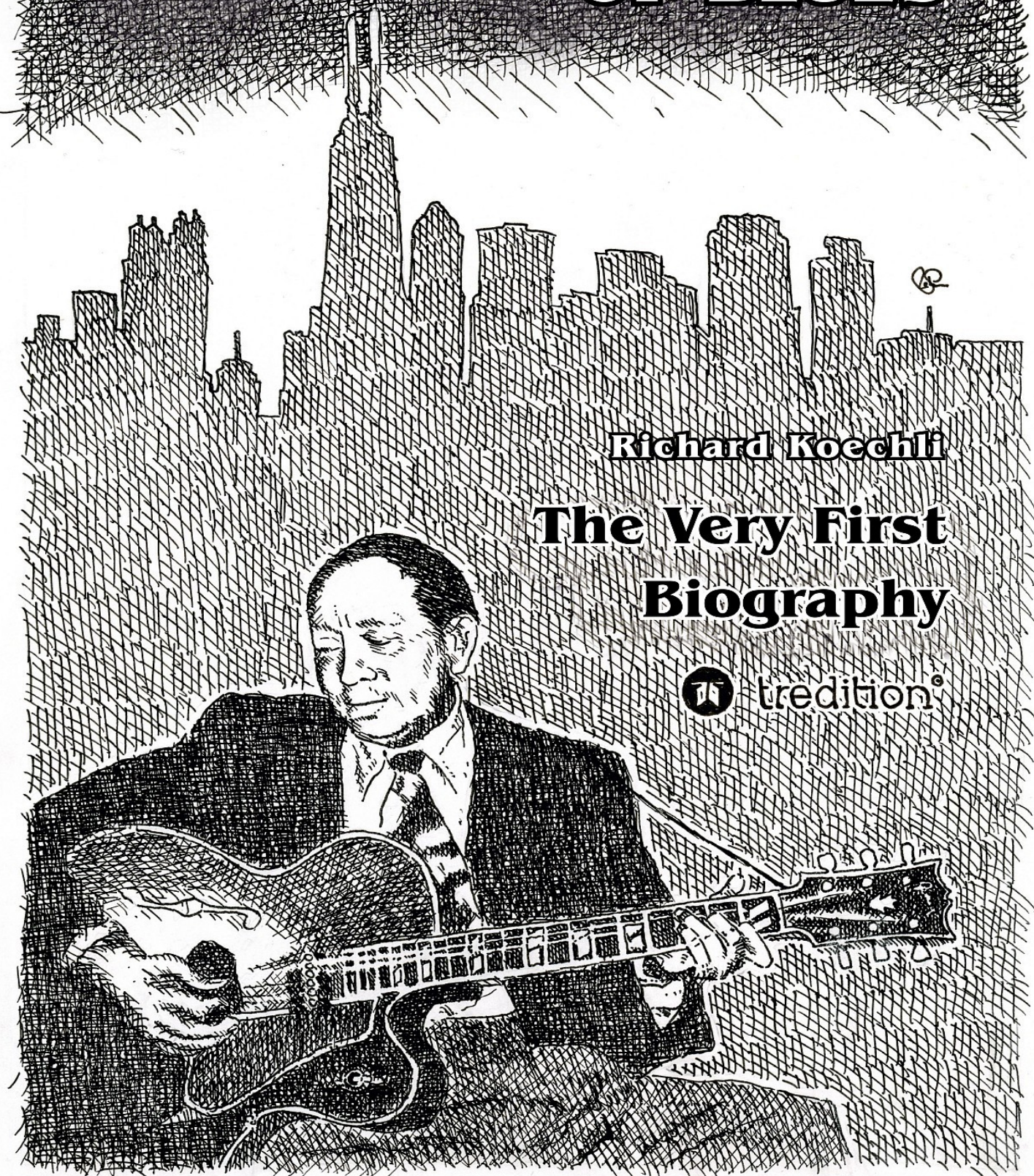
THE FORGOTTEN KING OF BLUES

Richard Koechli

The Very First Biography



tredition®



Imprint

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Chapter 1

The Strange in Room 24

Anna felt strangely unsettled as she drove through Chicago's North Side neighborhood on a chilly Monday morning in March. It was as if a mysterious and uncontrollable time machine was jolting her back at that very moment. To a spiritual place she could not choose. Everything from back then was suddenly there again, unasked. Exactly the same fears and questions as years ago, but also the stimulating mixture of childhood innocence and finely dosed adventurousness. This was where she had spent her youth. Anna slowed down so that the pictures in the right side window didn't flash by too quickly.

The park, a little further away the stage; Anna could not see any change. It hadn't been very long. Four years ago, she calculated, was the last time she and her classmates had run around these fields. Hanson Stadium had always been briskly used for all sorts of school sporting events. Today, too, a colorful group of warmly dressed kids seemed to be good-naturedly coaxed into physical exercise by their teacher. Soccer, lacrosse and football they had played back then, as well as track and field. „You don't *play* track and field,“ Anna contradicted herself. She never felt like a team athlete. The lonely struggle of middle and long distance running, that was the real thing for her. Here in the stadium she had experienced magnificent meetings of this royal sport, even with an international cast. She herself had also been to junior championships, as an 800-meter and 1500-meter runner. On this synthetic track here. A fantastic feeling!

But during the last few years, she had no time to train. She would not have had enough talent for a career as an athlete anyway; Anna had therefore decided on the nursing assistant profession. There were still two months to go before the state final exam. That gave her pause for thought. She had done well, but her future hung by the thread of that darn diploma, and Anna hated relentless moments of decision. Uncertainty always scared her, and it does now. A month-long internship was the end of her education. She was on her way there. The very first day at this nursing home. What would be in store for her? All strangers, maybe spiteful sick people, maybe senile and lustful old men. Of course, such challenges were part of her future job. She tried to stay positive. You can't avoid fear; you have to face it with your head held high. It is necessary to scare away this crutch of ego with the sincere plan of wanting to do good. Those who want to care for their fellow human beings to the best of their ability have nothing to fear. Anna knew it, but the realization was trapped in her head for the time being, could not penetrate to her whole being. Fear, on the other hand, did. And today, of all days, the time machine struck again. All the small progress of the last years, simply swept away. It seemed to her as if she were facing a situation today, in 1981 - as a person thrown back into the year 1977. Not a mere memory, no. The mind was locked at 1977, and she had no chance at the moment to turn the wheel forward again. God was stronger; he could tamper with this machine at will. She had to endure it.

Anna slowed the pace further. A few hundred more feet to her destination, 2450 NORTH CENTRAL AVENUE. The area seemed to belong to her; all the brick bungalows and wooden houses here, with their small front yards and deciduous trees. Up ahead, on the left side of the street, was the retirement home; in the same style of those typical red brick houses. The building was finished about seven years ago. Anna had only ever seen it from the outside - and over time had heard a few rumors about its inner workings. The reputation was not very good. Anyway, that didn't matter anymore. Anna parked the car, took a deep breath - and absorbed the glow of the white sign outside the front door: CENTRAL NURSING HOME.

Not much light, a gloomy room saturated with a musty smell waited behind the door. Two old men dragged themselves past Anna in slow motion, wordless and with blank stares. Their clothes were more like dirty pyjamas, and the fact that these frail men strolled out into the street alone didn't seem to bother anyone here. At the end of the corridor must have been the reception. Anna hurried to the counter; there was no time to lose.

„Two elderly men have just left the house,“ she sounded the alarm in a hastily timid voice. „Do you want to go for help, or should I go out to them?“

The man behind the counter demonstratively took his time, finally turning his suspicious pair of eyes boredly on the newcomer: „What do you want here?“

„Excuse me...“, Anna evaded the probing gaze, „I will introduce myself in a moment, but there are two elderly residents out there alone.“

„So what...? They won't run away from us,“ the man replied with a mocking smile. „Our ‚residents,‘ as you call them, can come in and out of here. As long as they don't bother us...“

Anna felt that her first appearance was about to fail. This is exactly what should not have happened! Why did she always have to project her own fear onto others? „Um, sorry, I don't want to stress you out. My name is Anna, I'm the intern.“

„I don't know anything about an intern.“

„Oh, sorry, you're just a temp here...?“ Anna tried not to let the feeling of being offended show.

„Stop right there, young lady. I've been the administrator here since the place was built!“ the man replied. „Anna is a beautiful name, so are your eyes. But I still don't know anything about an intern.“

Anna was helpless against her blushing: „Okay, then something is obviously going wrong. I was sent here by the school to gain experience. It's part of the curriculum. A certain Mister Auvray is supposed to take care of me.“

„Robby..., another stupid idea from him,“ the man muttered, „and we have to pay for the shit.“

„Please, what...?“ Now the unfriendly man should quietly notice that Anna felt dabbed. „I want to be a nursing assistant, by vocation, and I’m glad to lend a hand wherever you need help.“

„It’s okay, it’s okay. I’m David Allman. Welcome to our pad. We’ll get along best if you don’t bother us. The staff can manage just fine on their own. So, try to keep busy, but don’t make it complicated.“

Anna had imagined many things - as usual with a hit rate of zero. „I don’t want to be a burden to you, Mister Allman. But what do you mean by ‚keeping busy‘? We practiced a lot at school, I can be useful here and learn more.“

„I’m sure you do, Anna.“ Now the man apparently wanted to bring out his friendly side after all. „Call me David. We need people like you. But everyday life in our profession often looks different than in those books. The old people here in the house can sometimes be really nasty, and ungrateful.“

„I know, David,“ Anna blossomed, feeling like something of an insider. „These are psychologically explainable aggressions and protective reflexes. You have to treat these people with love, and we learned some of the latest strategies at school.“

„It’s okay, Anna. I’ve got to get back to work here now, these damn lists.“ David rummaged through a bundle of papers. „Best thing to do is just look around here and go exploring. The boss has to be somewhere, too; talk to him about these strategies.“

David’s friendly side already seemed to want to crawl away again. No more eye contact. Anna made off, looking for doors or stairs.

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The table was set, the dinner was ready. In a few minutes, her boyfriend had to be there. He never had much time on Mondays because he always had to host that radio show in the evening. Anna and Eric had been a couple for two years; a few months ago they moved together to Andersonville, a small suburb north of Chicago. He was a few years older than her; thanks to his

job as a car mechanic, they could afford this two-bedroom apartment here. Anna waited impatiently. There was a lot to tell about that strange first day at the nursing home, and Eric was always a wonderful listener. There, finally, the bell. Anna hurried to the door.

„Heal me with a smile, darling,“ were his first words, as always. Anna loved the familiar smell of his lips. „How was your day?“ he asked curiously.

„Come sit down, Honey,“ Anna beamed, „dinner is ready, you don‘t have very much time.“

„Wow, you really made an effort,“ Eric remarked tenderly, „surely you must be tired after that challenge?“

„No problem, it‘ s always a pleasure to cook for you. There‘ s no reason to be tired anyway.“

„What is that...?“ he asked, astonished. „You didn‘t work today?“

„Oh yes, of course, I was there. But everything turned out differently. Nobody gave me anything to do. They just told me to look around.“

„Watch out, Anna, this may be a trick. They want to watch you or lure you into a trap. Tomorrow already they may show their true colors, accuse you of laziness and make you work hard.“

„Well, I don‘t know - I rather think they don‘t care about me. The nurses are quite nice, but nobody takes time for me.“

„So, how was the chief? What are the residents like?“ echoed Eric. „What‘ s the place like otherwise?“

Anna breathed a little deeper, her eyes gleaming in perplexity. „Bigger than I thought; over 200 beds, there are three or four residents sleeping in some rooms, others are alone. But somehow the house seems depressing to me.“

„Oh, why, darling?“

„That smell; it smelled pretty bad throughout the house. In one room it was hardly bearable. When I asked the nurse why, she just said the patient here in the bed doesn‘t want to be showered, he sometimes gets his panties in a bunch during days, and we should just leave him alone.“

„That‘ s rad,“ Eric marveled.

„Yes, and somehow the whole house seems to me like a place for poor people. Poor lighting, loveless decoration, and old people often go outside all alone to smoke.“ Anna’s expression brightened a touch. „Still, most of the residents are nice and friendly, although some seem rather frail and absent-minded.“

„And the boss?“

Anna grinned, „That was embarrassing. I had thought he was a homebody; scruffy, unkempt, he really didn’t seem professional.“

„So, how did he react?“

„He seems pretty busy, or at least he pretended to be. Exactly the same, by the way, the administrator. A bit grumpy, the two of them. They told me to leave em alone if possible, not to ask for advice, to watch the staff work and learn something in the process.“

„That’s kinda cool,“ Eric said with a grin, „looks like an easy job.“

„Yes, of course, but I don’t enjoy it; you know that I see this work as a vocation. I want to be useful, to help, to give sense.“

„Of course, darling.“ Eric looked apologetically. „You have a huge heart, you’re a gem. But you should be more relaxed about it.“ He touched her hand tenderly. „Look on the bright side; they’ll give you some space, won’t watch you all the time. Maybe you can even push something on your own - a therapeutic project or something. Something the residents will enjoy.“

„You’re right.“ Anna’s eyes began to light up. „I just got an idea. Remember? I told you about it - the two Europeans our principal met at a convention.“

Eric nodded in agreement. „The Vienna psychiatrists?“

Anna was once again amazed at how interested her friend was in such intellectual matters. „Exactly, Stephan Rudas and Erwin Böhm, with their new care concept.“

„The biography work!“ Eric swallowed the last bite, wiped his mouth patiently, and neatly folded the table napkin again. He was anything but a typical mechanic.

„You name it. Memory therapy, I’m fascinated by this project.“ Anna’s eyes got even bigger. „Maybe there’s an opportunity to try this therapy in

that nursing home. I'm sure the residents will have a lot to talk about."

"Guinea pigs, why not...?"

"There's nothing to lose by doing this. Listening is the best medicine, with no side effects at all. These people are just waiting for it!"

"A fantastic idea, darling." Eric seemed almost apologetic as he stood up and pushed the chair toward the edge of the table as silently as possible. "I'm proud of you, tomorrow you're going to make the people at the home blossom."

"First I'm going to try to convince the boss. You know I'm not the bravest. Just yesterday I felt those old fears again."

"You can do it, darling. With your charm, you'll sell him on the idea." He softly caressed her hair. "Don't take offense please, I have to go. My blues freaks are waiting for the show."

The intimate goodbye kiss comforted Anna that she would have to spend the evening alone. "Good luck, honey. The audience loves you."

Anna didn't know much about music. She had no particular preferences; she either liked a tune or she didn't. Blues was a style like any other for her. But for Eric this music was like an elixir of life, she knew that.

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"Now I have a brief moment for you," the nursing home director approached Anna, "please come into my office."

Mister Auvray looked more dapper than yesterday. "Oh, wonderful, thank you so much," Anna replied excitedly as she followed behind him.

The office, on the other hand, looked pretty messy. "Sit down, please. Are you enjoying your stay with us, Anna?" the boss asked in a friendly manner.

The long seconds it took Anna to answer exposed her as a bad liar. "It's nice here. People are kind to me." She lowered her gaze. "But I don't know if I can really do anything useful. Excuse me, Mister Auvray, but yesterday I had the impression of being rather disruptive."

„The impression is deceptive. We must have been a bit rough with you; my staff is very busy, please understand.“

„Of course, Mister Auvray.“ Anna realized how obsequious her voice sounded; she hated that feeling. „I admire your staff. Please just tell me where to lend a hand - it can be dirty work.“

„Don't worry, you'll be able to get your hands dirty enough. Our people are just suspicious. The last intern was complicated as hell, she had all kinds of questions all the time. In the end, she knew everything better and wanted to tell us how to do our jobs.“ Auvray wiped the sweat from his brow. „We don't need that stuff here - everyone ends up coming to me to complain.“

„Oh, I would never allow myself to do that, Mister Auvray.“

„All right, all right,“ the handsome man triumphed. „You're a bright young woman with good manners, unobtrusive and helpful. I catch on pretty quickly to stuff like that. But now please tell me what you actually wanted to know from me.“

Anna sensed the challenging look on her counterpart's face and became uncertain, as usual. She thought of Eric, his encouraging words restoring her composure just in time. „Um, well, if you don't mind, I have an idea. I'm sure the residents have a lot to share about their lives.“

„Yeah, so what...?“ interjected Auvray suspiciously.

„Your staff doesn't have time for that, of course - but I could take on that role.“ Anna's eyes began to light up. „We had heard about a new psychobiographical model of care at school; it seems very promising. I really would enjoy something like that; I'm a patient listener.“

Auvray slowed down with a dry sigh. „Your predecessor had ideas like that, too; she wanted to make music with the old people. Sounds cool, but we're not a vacation home - there's hardly any time for entertainment here. Except maybe at Christmas, or birthdays.“

„Oh no, no trashy entertainment, Mister Auvray.“ Anna felt the rising ambition to sell the idea with strong arguments. She was sometimes really good at that; if fear left her alone, she could even enjoy rhetorical fights. „If

you allow me, I'd like to explain the concept briefly. It won't take long. Please, Mister Auvray." Anna looked her new boss in the eye.

„All right, go for it. Prove to me that even a woman can be brief.“ He didn't want to let the intern run wild with boundless self-confidence after all.

Anna took a breath and tried to concentrate: „Our principal was recently at an international congress in New York. Two Europeans, the nursing director Erwin Böhm and the psychiatrist Stephan Rudas from Vienna, spoke there about a new nursing model. An essential element of this model is ‚biography-oriented memory therapy‘. Especially in the care of patients with dementia, biography work is extremely important. Firstly, it creates trust and makes it possible to better understand the needs signals of the resident. Secondly, it is hoped that this work will provide a key to the abilities that still exist, which can then be consciously promoted and maintained for as long as possible. For older patients, this therapy also helps them to retain their fading identity for longer. Remembering together strengthens their dignity and self-perception; they can thus better recognize their holism and uniqueness and reconcile themselves with their fate. In a society in which seniors hardly find a place anymore, such therapy is..."

„Stoooooop...!“ Auvray tried to make his abrupt interjection not seem too unkind. Satire is always helpful in this regard: „You want to be a politician? If you speak too intelligently, I won't be able to give you an answer.“

A hint of pride was unmistakable in her smile. „I didn't want to impress you, Mister Auvray. But I'm really convinced by this idea.“

„I'm sure you are, Anna. It looks like you chose this job by vocation, and I've already told you that you're very smart. I like both. I'm just afraid that everyday life will soon catch up with you.“ Auvray cleared his throat casually, as if it were necessary to back up his many years of experience acoustically. „I'm afraid we have to break off here, I have to go. Tell me very briefly how you imagine the whole thing in reality.“

Anna never reacted very confidently to impatience. „I'm sorry, Mister Auvray. I don't want to take up any more of your time. I haven't thought about it that much. Perhaps I could just do certain sessions with the

residents, ask them questions about life history, and above all, listen carefully.“

„Chatting sessions with Anna...! Our staff listens very often when the old people tell stories. Let the Europeans give it a new name now, I don't care. Go ahead with your ,memory therapy‘, you have my okay.“

„Oh, that's wonderful; a thousand thanks, Mister Auvray.“

„But please don't overdo it. Pick a home resident, so you can work with him in a concentrated way. Maybe an hour a day or so.“ Auvray rose and demonstratively opened the door. „There's plenty else to do. Today, for example, serving lunch - two of my staff women are sick right now. Report to the kitchen, Anna. I have to go now.“

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„There you go, darling, I told you, you could do it,“ Eric rejoiced.

Anna seemed happy. It wasn't just this conversation with the home's director. „I felt useful today. A couple of times I was able to lend a hand, in the kitchen, but also with small nursing jobs. One resident even said ,thanks, you're a sunshine‘ to me.“

„Of course, what could be better than being taken care of by Anna?“ smiled Eric. „Tell me, how did the boss react? When are you going to start therapy?“

„You're wonderful, Honey. That you're always so interested in me.“ Anna looked enamored. „Surely you'd have plenty to tell, too.“

„Oh, come on - I fiddle with broken cars all day, trying to calm down angry car owners. Nothing to tell, darling.“

„So how was the radio show last night? Sorry, I was too tired to listen in.“

Eric's eyes turned into those of an astonished child. „It was fantastic! I played mostly pre-war blues; a lot of old stuff by Blind Willie Johnson, Charley Patton, Son House, Skip James and all those guys. Some listeners were calling in excited.“

„That's cool. What would you do without music?“

„I'd still have you.“ Eric brushed her cheek gently. „But tell me now, darling, how was your first memory therapy session? Or when are you going to start it?“

„Oh you know, the boss wasn't that boundlessly enthusiastic.“ Anna became a little cooler. „At times I rather had the impression that he would make fun of the idea. Not in a mean way, but still. Just like a little macho.“

„Don't let him provoke you. That's just the way men are.“

„Except my Eric, of course - he's an alien.“ Anna gave him a tender kiss. „Well, the boss told me to pick a home resident and then work with him for an hour a day.“

„Sounds good to me. Have you decided yet?“

„Oh no, Honey - it doesn't happen that fast for me. I haven't even met all the home residents yet. Will give myself a few days, I decide these things intuitively, you know that.“

„I do, darling. But you already have a little idea in the back of your mind, I know that too.“ Eric smirked with pleasure.

„I have a little idea, yes. A man on the second floor, room 24. There are three of them there, the other two seem to be mocking him; they say he's a drunk, a loudmouth. To me, the man seems rather closed, completely unsettled. He hardly speaks, I see a sad yearning in his eyes. And when I introduced myself to him, something strange happened.“

„What, darling?“

„His face was suddenly completely transformed - and guess what, he began to sing. Yes, to sing. Do you know what he was singing...?“ Anna looked perplexed, at the same time admiring.

Eric shook his head wordlessly.

„Annie Lou, I want you for my own, Annie Lou. You got to be mine, no matter what you say or do.“ Anna sank into her thoughts. „How did that guy know my middle name? I had only introduced myself as Anna. But you know, it didn't sound like a cheap pickup line; when he sang it, somehow he didn't seem to be with me at all. He was far away, but he was smiling.“

Eric grinned appreciatively and exclaimed, „Wow, the old dude's really got it. That's what I call ‚spontaneous‘; the guy's a connoisseur!“

„What does that mean?“

„A woman calls her name - and the man immediately pulls the right song out of his hat. That's masterful, chapeau!“

„What song, Honey?“

Eric blossomed; now his background as a music connoisseur was called upon. „Hey, *Anna Lou Blues* is a classic; a Tampa Red tune. You can hear cool versions by Robert Nighthawk or Earl Hooker, too.“

„I see,“ Anna murmured with an innocent look, „there's a song about me? You never told me that before. But how does the resident know my middle name?“

„There are a lot of blues songs with female names, darling. I think the man just got a ton of luck that ‚Lou‘ fits right in with you, too. It's a wonderful coincidence, isn't it, a fantastic story!“ Eric pulled out his guitar.

„Yeah, for sure.“ Anna seemed absent-minded for a moment. „I don't know anything about music, but somehow the old man had a wonderful voice when he sang those lines. He seemed enchanted - almost as if the song was a part of him. He seemed happy.“

Eric picked a few notes on his instrument and sang the lyric line from *Anna Lou* to it.

„Yeah, that's it,“ Anna exclaimed enthusiastically, „that's exactly the melody!“

„It seemed too cliché to me, so I never sang the song to you before.“ He lowered his eyes. „And you know - I'm an auto mechanic, not a singer, nor a guitar virtuoso.“

„No you are, honey. I love it when you play!“

„I love you.“ Eric smiled with satisfaction. „Anyway, that guy on the second floor is class! Maybe he even knows my show? Why don't you ask him? I like the man, I'd do the biography work with him if I were you, darling.“

„You're right,“ Anna whispered with a grin, „I'll keep working on it. But now we should go to sleep.“

At precisely the moment when she left the room in an agitated state, Mister Auvray came to meet her. Now, of all times!

„Are you all right, Anna?“ the home’s director asked in astonishment. „The old folks weren’t rough with you, were they?“

„Oh, no, everything’s okay, Mister Auvray.“ Anna’s eyes reddened.

„You’re a bad liar, dear. Two of the men here from Room 24 can be quite mean - we know. Please tell me if there’s any trouble.“

Anna looked embarrassed. „That’s kind of you, thank you very much. But it’s not what you mean.“ Now there was additional sadness mixed into her expression.

„So what is it, Anna?“

„Um..., I decided to do the memory therapy with Mr. Whittaker. But then...“

„... then the other two were bickering stupidly and didn’t let Whittaker talk - right?“ Auvray interjected angrily.

„No. Or yes, of course, they both mocked him. But I could handle that, Mr. Auvray,“ Anna said with effortless confidence.

„Miller and Henderson are simple-minded loudmouths; don’t take them seriously. Whittaker, on the other hand, is a special person, original, very sensitive. He too is a drunkard, but the guy can talk like an educated man. Sometimes he doesn’t say a word for days. They say he used to be some kind of artist. Maybe only in his dreams. In any case, he never causes any problems here. Before he came to us, he had been in all kinds of institutions - I think the last one was Sacred Heart Nursing Home. Then he ran out of money. Anyway, no matter what people say, I like this man. You made a good choice, Anna.“

„Oh, I’m glad, Mister Auvray.“ Realizing that she had wrongly judged her boss to be macho immediately made her feel better. „I agree with you exactly. Mister Whittaker is a mysterious man. Frightened - yet I think he would have a lot to tell. However, something went wrong at our first meeting...“

„Don’t let this job get you down, my dear young lady.“ Of course, he saw Anna struggling with tears again. „What happened?“

„It was my fault; I guess my first question wasn't the right one.“ Anna gave up the fight. „I was trying to find out about his childhood...“ she said, sobbing quietly, „when suddenly he became petrified and couldn't get a word out. He cried like a child.“

„It's all right, Anna. Old people become children again - and you are still half a child.“ Auvray seemed to want to go back to male strength after all. „If you want to survive in this job, my advice is to set clear boundaries. Why do you think I sometimes play the bad guy and the cold one here? You can't do without it!“

„I know, Mister Auvray; they told us about setting boundaries in school. I just wasn't prepared for the man's reaction. And I don't know how to continue working with him now.“

„Don't worry about that. Old people forget quickly; tomorrow you'll be talking to Whittaker as if nothing had happened.“ Auvray made it clear that he had no more time for Anna now. „But try to talk to him in another room, without the ridicule of Miller and Henderson. Maybe in the cafeteria; there's never anyone there at this hour.“

„Thank you very much, Mister Auvray,“ Anna called after her hurrying boss. „Is there anything else for me to do?“

„On the third floor, the last three rooms. The masseur was in the house, that always puts everything behind schedule.“ Now he disappeared into the stairwell.

Anna noticed the time machine creeping up unbidden once again. The corridors seemed as gloomy as the first day, the air was stifling. It must be possible to create a more pleasant smell here. With essential oils or scented candles, for example. Tomorrow she would talk to Mr. Auvray about it. But at the moment she felt thrown back; not just by a few years this time. It was a feeling she knew very well, since she was a child. By now Anna knew that she had little influence on the length of such moments. She had to endure them. And to cushion them as best she could - with a prayer on the one hand, with naming the experience on the other. It felt like a paralyzing mixture of guilt and defenselessness. Eric would surely help her tonight,

too. But she wanted to be strong, to be able to give something to her boyfriend, not just feed off him.

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„How can I be happy darling - without your smile?“ greeted Eric with a worried expression. „Don't kid me, Anna, you've got something on your liver. But let's try kissing it away first.“

„You're wonderful, Honey,“ Anna sighed with relief.

„What's been going on today? Come, sit down and tell me. I'll make you some tea.“

Anna dropped down on the sofa, feeling a ton of weight. „Don't worry about it. The day brought good things, too. I guess my boss isn't what I thought he was after all. He can observe quite sensitively, and we quickly agreed on the choice of candidate for memory therapy.“

„That's wonderful, darling. Then it's definitely the blues freak on the second floor?“ Eric's eyes shone excitedly.

„Yes, Honey, it's Mr. Whittaker.“

„Fantastic! So, how was the first session...?“

Anna's look changed. „Oh, you know, actually, I have very little idea how to properly begin such biography work.“

„Come on,“ Eric interjected encouragingly, „you intuitively do this kind of thing right.“

„I don't know. It seems important to me to build some trust first. The man is cagey. Somehow you get the impression that he doesn't even exist anymore. That he's ashamed of himself.“

„You're doing wonderfully, darling. With your nature you will enchant him, help him to perceive himself differently, to reconcile with his life.“

My darling could have become a pastor as well, Anna thought in wonder at such moments. „I'll make every effort, Honey.“ Her face began to tighten.

Eric hugged her and massaged her back comfortingly. „When things go wrong with you, it hurts me too. What happened that was so bad, darling?“

Anna tried to pull herself together; she didn't want to give in to tears in front of her boyfriend. „No, nothing bad. I just thought it would be best to proceed chronologically. So I asked him to tell about his childhood. He said something about a bicycle accident that gave him foot problems for life. Then I asked about his parents. And suddenly the man began to cry, without a word...”

„Oh God, maybe something terrible had happened for him.“ Eric wiped Anna's eyes gently with a handkerchief. „You couldn't have known that. The man just needs patience now, then -maybe he'll suddenly want to talk about it. You didn't do anything wrong, darling.“

„Maybe you're right. But in any case, I embarrassed him - in front of his two roommates. Two scofflaws, apparently known throughout the house.“ Anna took a deep breath.

„That's mean. What did the man do to deserve that room assignment?“

„Yes, I can hardly understand that either; it's probably a space problem. I'll talk to him in the cafeteria in the future; we'll be alone there. That's what Mr. Auvray said, too.“

„Very good, darling.“

„It hurt me so much - those two were laughing at him. Of course I rebuked them, but it was already too late.“ Anna became increasingly indignant. „They must have been drunk. One of them was babbling incomprehensibly something about ,look here, our Guitar Wizard is whining like a dog'...”

Eric had just gotten up to fetch the teapot. Jerkily he turned around, as if Anna's last words had struck him like a bolt of lightning. His eyes grew bigger and bigger.

„Did I say something wrong, Honey,“ Anna asked, startled.

„Can you please describe him briefly, darling...” he replied with a probing look.

„You mean the roommate - or our man, Whittaker?“

„What's his name...?!“ shouted Eric, stuttering.

„Is this an interrogation now, Honey?“ Anna looked slightly annoyed. „I told you Whittaker was his name.“

„Sorry, I guess I wasn't listening to you carefully before.“ Eric's face went pale. „Please, darling, tell me, what does Mister Whittaker look like?“

Her friend's sudden alarm left Anna perplexed. „What do you mean ? A little black man; he looks slight and rather broken.“

„And his hair color?“ asked Eric excitedly.

„The hair... has turned gray and a little thinning, especially on his forehead. They might have been reddish at one time - just like his skin tone.“

Eric winced and paced around the apartment like a hyperactive child. „This can't be true,“ he gasped, „this is madness, a sensation! If it's really him, then...“

„What, then? Honey, please.“ Anna tried to get her friend to sit down. „I don't understand anything at all. Can you please explain what's going on?“

Eric swallowed empty, waited two steady breaths, and asked mysteriously, „Does the man's first name happen to be... Hudson?“

Anna pondered for a moment. „That could be true, yes. I'm not quite sure, to me he's just Mister Whittaker.“

„Listen, darling,“ Eric spoke in the tone of a privy secret agent, „it's Tampa. You know what I mean? Your man is probably none other than Tampa Red. That's unbelievable, just completely crazy!“

„And who's this Tampa Red? A former president of the United States?“

„Anna, please, don't make fun of me.“

„No, honey, I'm not. I just really have no idea who he is. I guess it must be a former musician, knowing you.“

„Yes, darling. But not just any.“ Eric waxed effusive. „The two scofflaws referred to him as the ‚Guitar Wizard.‘ That's exactly what he was called - and not without reason. Tampa was one of the most brilliant blues musicians; his slide guitar is epochal, and so are his songs. And there were an insane number of songs.“

„Don't be mad, Honey. But the name really doesn't ring a bell. You know I don't know many blues musicians. Just the big stars, B.B. King or Eric Clapton - oh yeah, and the Rolling Stones.“

Eric did not make a happy impression. He would have been pretty angry with anyone else right now - not with Anna, of course. „Darling, I love you anyway. We don't want to talk about the Stones now when it comes to the blues; B.B. and the other Kings are real stars, of course, and the talented Brit has got it, too. But Tampa Red is one of the very old, a real pioneer. His heyday was before and shortly after the war. He was one of the most successful back then - and one of the most important for the history of our music culture here. It's a shame that hardly anyone knows him anymore!“

„I admire your background, Honey.“ Anna looked embarrassed. „I'm so sorry that I'm now also one of those philistines who don't have a clue.“

„It's okay, darling; not your fault. That's just the way the game goes. Tampa all almost disappeared from the scene, well before the great blues revival of the sixties. He wasn't welcome grub for the media and mythmakers.“ Eric lowered his eyes in equal shame. „I had almost forgotten about him, too. Go figure, I didn't even know for sure if he was still alive. Some rumor he's in a mental institution - for others, he's already dead.“

„So if I understand you correctly,“ Anna said in amazement, „this Tampa Red they called the Guitar Wizard, his real name is Hudson Whittaker. And this Mister Whittaker is now living in room 24 at Central Nursing Home?“

„That's right. Well, of course, I'm not quite sure of that. It could also be that your guy is just making it all up in a pipe dream - sort of like an impostor running from his own reality. But he certainly seems to be a blues fan.“

„Hmm, I don't know, Honey. My gut tells me nothing about an impostor. After all, he didn't talk about Tampa Red on his own - he hardly says a word at all. The man seems too modest rather than too boastful.“

„I'll take your word for that.“ Eric beamed like a little kid again. „If it's really him, you must realize what that means - it's a sensation! At least for blues freaks. We've got to find out, darling.“

„Should I just ask him tomorrow?“

Eric pondered. „No, I don't think we'll get absolute certainty that way. If he's an imposter, he might as well say yes.“

„We have to ask him a trick question, right?“