

GUT BUCKET BLUES

by MATTHEW ASPREY



“YOU’RE GONNA love Murray.”

“Am I?”

“Or maybe not. Maybe you’re too straight. This guy affronts the bourgeoisie. He’s bohemian. Lives by his own code: piano and pot and pussy. Shocking to a North Shore girl like you.”

“Shocking.”

“But so absolutely right. He’s figured it out. I see it, too. I’m not letting the suits bleed my soul any longer. I’m sick of having to play a record to remember who I am. ‘Corporation’ is a synonym for slow death of the soul, baby.”

“How much did you drink before I got here, Daddy-O?”

“I don’t know, not enough, that’s the whole point. Forget being sensible, following rules, ‘appropriate’ behaviour. I’m gonna play the piano again, create art, starve if necessary.”

“Live in a garret?”

Kenny put his schooner on the table. “Maybe that scares you, huh? You want the house in the ‘burbs. The SUV in the driveway with space for two point four kids and their bling.”

“Of course,” she said. “You better buy me all that or I’ll give you the flick.”

“I’ll be poor alright. But pure. I’ll have a boxer’s discipline.”

“And how will you afford your one-eighty gram Blue Note reissues?”

“Shoplift.”

“You’ll have to say goodbye to your bourgeois friends. Sell your bourgeois sports car. Move out of your parent’s bourgeois home.”

“Yes, us bourgeois Chinese with our money, money, money. It’s disgusting.”

He lit a cigarette and blackened the air between them.

Nelly rubbed her right eye. “That’s toxic.”

He tossed the blue packet onto the table. “I bought them on the Internet. Probably an illegal importation. Gauloise. French fags. No filter.”

“Do you have a death wish?”

“Bud Powell smoked them.”

“He died.”

“Not of lung cancer.”

Kenny lurched into the men’s room and took a piss. He spat the butt of the Gauloise into the trough. This would be a great night: the Murray Doyle Trio at the Bald Faced Stag in Leichhardt. It had been a long time since he’d seen Murray. Years. He used to take a train to Marrickville, cross a weedy lot rank with catshit, climb the backsteps of the flats, and find the old man at his piano. After the hour lesson, Murray would flare up a joint of hydroponic grass that plumed blue silk.

Back in those days Kenny had been seeing Rebecca Adler, a short Jewish girl whose hair was dyed all the colours of the rainbow. She studied trumpet at the Conservatorium of Music and read Bowles, Camus, and Kerouac in paperback. Manic depressive. Institutionalised in her teens. Volatile temper, but also a shameless nympho. She lived in a decayed Art Deco building in The Cross. Hard rain hit the panes. Looking out, you saw black roads sloping to Woolloomooloo beneath an iron grey sky. She had a thin mattress on the carpet for daylong fucking and Louis Armstrong on the CD player. Oh God, how did I fall out of that life? Try to connect the dots from jazz man to operations analyst at Barker & Wein. Impossible.

He soaped his hands and peeked at Nelly drinking an orange juice in the booth. Yes, a nice girl with fine cheekbones, rosy skin, and a hard white horserider’s bum. A privileged upbringing. She still laughs at her parents’ jokes, all very politically correct (Daddy sits on the committee of the Multicultural Business Association), as they welcome Kenny the Chinaman to the Sunday roast with glasses of

cab sav. Only Nelly abstains: never drinks, never gets high. She is high on "life". Of course she is. "Life" has given her beauty, intelligence, wealth, no failure, no demands, no humiliation.

Ergo: no character.

Rebecca Adler had character. Yes, she sometimes attacked me with blunt objects, but she wasn't smug. And she wasn't above getting down and dirty. Whereas I spend half my life on my knees pleasuring Nelly, my tongue just about to die, and she refuses to reciprocate. I hear *well, you don't have to, Kenny, of course I'm not going to tell you to stop but that doesn't mean I'm going to...*

Murray was at the bar sinking a schooner, standing six foot three with a white beard like Ernest Hemingway or Santa Claus. His T-shirt was spotted with dried soup. Veins lashed across the bones of his hands like guy ropes. Virile as a gladiator. A badass white man. Kenny strode across the pub, dried his hands on his jeans, and hugged the old man, who said, "Huh?"

"Five years," Kenny said. "It's Kenny Wong!"

"Oh hi, mate!" Murray patted his shoulder. "Here for the gig, hey?"

Kenny bought two shots of vodka and took Murray to the booth.

"This is Murray," he said to Nelly. "He's a real motherfucker on the piano."

Murray sat down and felt Kenny's tie. "Silk, is it? You're moving up in the world."

"No, I'm way down." Kenny unknotted the tie and stuffed it into a pocket. "Way way down. Barker & Wein. Insurance. Jacket and tie. Every day."

“That’s where I eat lunch in Newtown,” Murray said, winking at Nelly. “Jacket & Thai.”

“Might as well wear a *straitjacket*.” Kenny swallowed one of the vodka shots. “This corporate world, man, just forbids soul. No jokes. No ‘inappropriate’ comments. No sexual thoughts. Be very afraid of what your cock might make you do.” Kenny shook his head. “You never know, it might even lead a man to create something beautiful.”

“Like what?” said Nelly. “Two point four kids?”

“Like *art*, goddamn it.” Kenny turned to Murray. “Hey, tell Nelly what was the best moment of your life.”

“Me? I don’t know.”

“The best moment. You remember.”

“When I discovered your genius?”

Kenny turned back to Nelly. “He told me it was in Paris. Nineteen sixtysomething. He had a joint in one hand...” Kenny raised another brimming shot glass “...and Brigitte Bardot in the other. Fantastic.”

Murray nodded. “Oh, right. But it wasn’t Bardot. It was Jeanne Moreau.”

“Paris,” Kenny said. “*La Rive Gauche*. *Oo la la*. *Mon chéri*. Why’d you come back here, then?”

“I can’t stand all that cheese the French put on everything.”

Kenny put down his empty glass and looked into Murray’s bearded face. “I’m coming back to the piano.”

“Are you now?”

“Don’t say it! The jazz world has missed me.” Kenny lurched to the empty bandstand, lifted the piano lid, and played the head of “C Jam Blues”. A few people looked up from their beers. Kenny floated back to the table. “How’d you rate it? Honestly.”

“For a Chinese guy,” Murray said, “you play the blues just like a white man.”

“Fuck you. He’s a bastard,” Kenny said to Nelly, “but I love him.”

A waiter came to the booth with a bowl of pumpkin soup, a surf ‘n’ turf bloody rump steak with garlic prawns and ham, a runny fried egg, a mountain of mashed potato topped with gravy, carrot and mint peas, a square of asparagus lasagne, a basket of bread, a paper bucket of crinkle cut potato chips, and a tall wedge of almond and chocolate cheesecake with whipped cream, custard, and three scoops of Neapolitan ice cream.

“You ordered all that for yourself?” Nelly said.

“I could eat five times as much.” Kenny salted the chips, squirted tomato sauce, stuffed a hunk of beef into his mouth. “Have a chip, Murray.”

“No thanks,” Murray said. “The doctor put me on a low cholesterol diet.”

Kenny laughed and chewed. A young woman came to their table to borrow the salt shaker.

“She’s foreign,” Kenny said as she walked away.

“She sounded Brazilian,” said Nelly.

“Did you see her giving Murray the eye?” Kenny grinned, his mouth full of steak and cheesecake. “Fantastic.”

Murray started to laugh. “I always said Kenny was creative.”

Nelly rested her chin on her palm and looked at Kenny. “You’re eating too fast. What’s the rush?”

“I’m hungry. I could eat the whole world tonight.”

Murray stood. “My band is here. Gotta get ready. Great to see you, Kenny.”

"I'll see you after your set," he said, hunched over his food. "We have to talk. About resuming lessons. About jazz. About life. About a lot of things."

"I look forward to it."

Murray went to the bandstand to talk to the drummer.

"I suppose you don't want me to eat all this," Kenny said to Nelly. "I suppose you think I'm being a pig."

"Not at all. It's very charming."

"Because I'm hungry. And I'm not going to stop."

He ate it all, took pride in the sparkle of the plates once he'd finished mopping up the clotted gravy and cheese and custard with a ball of sourdough bread. He licked his knife clean, burped, and rocked to his feet. At the bar he bought two shots of whiskey. He gulped one down, lifted the other glass, gulped it down. He asked for a sangría. He remembered a drinking scene from some old French movie and asked for a glass of cognac. He got the glasses down on the booth table without spilling much. Nelly rubbed her temples and laughed softly. Kenny lay back, his belly bloated, and put his arm around her shoulders. He kissed her ear. "I'm a hungry bloke, alright."

"You are."

"And you're gorgeous." He put his hand up her skirt.

She laughed. "Not here."

He withdrew his hand, took her tall glass of orange juice and drank it to the last pulp. "Christ, you're inhibited."

"And you're drunk."

"Yes, yes, I am."

The trio began to play. Kenny beat the table in time. He couldn't remember the name of the tune but it inspired tears of nostalgia. He gazed around, filched a dozen cold spring rolls abandoned at a neighbouring table, also drank off the dish of sweet and sour sauce. Then the bar sold him a schooner of Guinness.

Halfway through the second tune he felt his stomach muscles convulse. He stumbled into the men's room. A short old man in a grimy baseball cap stood groaning at the trough. Kenny leaned over a toilet bowl and expelled an avalanche of ascorbic vomit.

The old man zipped his fly and stepped over. He rubbed the small of Kenny's back. "There y'are, mate. Open the floodgates."

Kenny threw up everything, then a stringy acid. He flushed the toilet and staggered to a porcelain sink. It held his weight. He stared into the cloudy mirror. "Oh, my God."

"Oh, your God," said Murray, who was coming into the men's room. Kenny stared at a huge wet patch in the crotch of Murray's trousers. Murray went into a cubicle and slung the soiled trousers over the door with a bang of the belt buckle.

"What happened to you?" Kenny said.

"I wet my bloody pants on stage."

"Why'd you do that, man?"

"Performance art, Kenny. Why the hell do you think? How bloody embarrassing."

The old man in the grimy baseball cap nodded. "No shame in it. Happen to anyone."

Kenny leaned against the cubicle door. "Oh, Jesus. Is there anything I can do?"

"Yeah," Murray growled. "Can I borrow your prostate?"

Kenny fell onto the cold floor. Murray came out in a fresh pair of oversized black slacks he'd borrowed from a bartender. He submerged his soiled trousers in a sinkful of water.

Kenny stared up at him. "That happened to you, man? You're Murray Doyle. Piano, pussy and pot."

"Right, on a pension."

"You know, I used to know this girl once in the Cross."

"Who didn't?" Murray said, wringing his trousers above the sink. "Look, we'll have a yarn about everything another time. I have to get back out there."

"Forget it, who cares? Let's go back to your place. We'll listen to Horace Silver. Get high."

"You look green, Kenny."

"I'm coming back to music, man. It's the life I want."

"I don't think you should quit your day job."

Kenny sighed and lit a Gauloise. "I gotta at least do that."

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