

# Singing the Blues

By Barbara Janusz

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Galvanizing the pedals on the floor with his boot clad feet, he tilts his head back, closes his eyes and belts it out. Deftly sliding his fingers along the frets of the neck, with his other hand armed with a pick, he strums, picks, and carries his audience to a place so exquisitely intense that only a highly disciplined taskmaster would have attempted such a feat. Mutating into a blues music machine, he sings as though he's all alone in the world. Emily feels like an intruder, but the angst of his lyrics snares her like an animal obsessively following a scent into a trap.

She momentarily shifts her gaze away from the musician, upwards, towards the fresco on the ceiling. She marvels at the painted canvas that extends across the vaulting of the old Catholic Church. Cracked and faded with age - save for the portrait of the Madonna with the Christ child in the centre, outlined in gold - the fresco defies the surrounding alpine frontier in which the church had been constructed. Looking past the blues man, to the curtained confessional

recessed into the wooden paneled wall behind him, Emily surmises that a parishioner, possibly of Italian extraction, had enthused about replicating the embellishments of his own church back in the old country. She imagines the congregation religiously attending mass every Sunday; the immigrant miners with their families, and the not so religious who queued up once a year on Holy Saturday in front of the confessional, one by one exiting with their meted out penance etched onto their consciousness. She visualizes the penitents kneeling in front of the pew, mouthing their entreaties of mea culpa - in the very spot where the blues guitarist soulfully makes love to his instrument.

Flinging his neck back and forth, his long curly hair falls like a curtain over his forehead and drapes his eyes. Emily rhythmically sways her body and taps her foot against the wooden floor in time with the beat, until the last bars of the song jacks up the crowd before gently dropping them back down to earth and rouses them to break into applause.

"Thank you. It's always gratifying to play for such an enthusiastic crowd and in such a small intimate venue. This place reminds me of my home back east on Cape Breton Island. We have a mining heritage back there too." He pauses for a moment, as though recalling something from his past, and clears his throat. "This next song is the opening one on my new CD. Hope you like it."

As he launches into the next tune, Emily looks out over the crowd. She recognizes many of the faces. From where she's seated alongside the makeshift stage, the kitchen and takeout counter behind her, she can see all the way to the rear of the coffeehouse and by the same token everyone can

see her. In a small community of only 6,000, a person can't go anywhere or do much of anything without running into someone they know. A transplant from the city, Emily prefers her anonymity, her privacy, and rightly or wrongly she can't help but sense that everyone is spreading lies, concocting malicious gossip and whispering about her behind her back.

She locks eyes with Rebecca, the lawyer's wife. A red haired, tall, handsome woman who hails from Belfast. Rebecca and Emily had rubbed shoulders over lunch a year earlier, but somehow their commitment to meet again never materialized. During the break, as Emily made her way outside to indulge in a cigarette, Rebecca had failed to acknowledge her. She felt a pang of rejection. At the start of the evening, while the blues man was still setting up his equipment on the stage, she watched Rebecca embrace Judy, the coffeehouse's proprietress. It was a girly-girly embrace, boisterous and theatrical in her mind, seeped in phoniness and pretence.

The audience's applause jolts her out of her introspection. Throwing her hands together, she notices Stefan leaning against the door jamb. The concert has sold out, but there are still plenty of seats upstairs on the balcony. Before the musician starts his next song, Emily strides to the back and stands beside him.

"Czesc."

Stefan's smile tends to be closemouthed. He's missing a few molars and presumably doesn't want to attract attention to the gaps in his mouth. A Polish immigrant from Krakow who's finally, after thirty years of working construction, earned the luxury of pursuing his passion for painting. Stefan has an artist's tendency to leave things to the last minute.

“*Czesc!* Do you have a ticket for tonight’s performance?”

Although Canadian born, she has maintained her fluency in her mother tongue. Stefan knows that whenever the opportunity presents itself, Emily prefers to converse in Polish. Her penchant to keep up her fluency in a foreign tongue, though, transcends her desire to exercise the grey matter in her brain. When they converse in Polish, she feels like she has Stefan all to herself and no one can eavesdrop on their conversations.

“*Nie.* Is it sold out?”

She zeroes in on Stefan’s earring before shrugging and pointing up the balcony stairs. It’s his earring that had endeared him to her from the moment she’d met him, almost four years ago. Few Polish immigrants in their sixties sport a pierced ear and she’s always wanted to ask him whether he’d had it pierced as an initiation, a rite of passage to embarking on a more bohemian lifestyle.

He follows her up the narrow staircase to the traditional bastion of the choir. The balcony is empty, save for one couple who don’t even look up as they claim two of the chairs in the middle of the row in front of the balustrade. She likes the privacy and insularity of the balcony. Downstairs, she felt like she was in a fishbowl. Sighing with relief at being able to settle into an observational groove, Emily surveys the crowd below, before homing in on the makeshift stage and the blues man belting out the lyrics of another angst ridden tune. It isn’t long, though, before her thoughts again drift and she begins ruminating over her recent confrontation with two ATV’ers, on the trail up from her house, when taking her dog for their morning walk.

A hunter’s paradise, Limber Pine Pass, particularly in the fall, teems with outdoor enthusiasts. Armed with hunting rifles, attired in camouflage outerwear, they mount their ATV’s on trailers hitched to their trucks and roar up the roads to designated “staging areas”, or parking lots, from where they get behind the wheel of their all terrains to conquer the bush. Even the mule deer instinctively know when hunting season opens. To dodge the hunters’ bullets, the ungulates gravitate out of the forest to graze on the hillsides of residential developments.

The pair of hunters Emily

encountered on the ridge a few days ago, had ignored new proscriptions against driving off-road vehicles within the residential boundaries of the municipality. Ordinarily she ignores ATV’ers, simply curses them under her breath as they roar past her, but that particular morning she felt inordinately feisty and irritated by the drone of the motors that nullified any chance of encountering wildlife. Raising her hand, she simultaneously commanded her dog to heel and gestured for the ATV’ers to stop. The two young men braked and dropped their hands into their laps. Despite the grey skies that morning, they were sporting sunglasses, but behind the dark lenses she sensed their eyes darting back and forth anxiously. Old enough to be their mother, Emily’s fit, robust physique yields her an imposing matronly appearance.

“You guys didn’t use the staging area.”

The heavier one laughed nervously. “What are you going to do about it?” The other man smiled condescendingly. Emily’s brain accelerated into high gear. She didn’t have a pen and paper to jot down the license plate number of their quads and regardless, it was against her nature to rat someone out to the authorities.

“I’m doing it. I’m confronting you.”

“And who are you to confront us?”

The heavier one shifted in his seat and leaned back a little.

“A nature lover. Out taking my dog for a quiet walk.”

A break in the music ushers in the hum of voices. It sounds like a lid on two dozen conversations has suddenly been lifted.

“I should go talk to Judy.” Stefan laboriously raises himself from his chair and heads towards the staircase.

Emily settles back into her chair. Before the blues man launches into his next ballad, she again conjures up the image of the two ATV’ers, gunning their motors and aggressively maneuvering their quads towards her, forcing her off the trail. Her dog started barking and wouldn’t move off the path. She had to call her. As soon as the trail was clear they roared off into the bush.

Not long after moving from the city to the rural community of Limber Pine

Pass, Emily had been rudely awakened to the fact that longstanding residents covetously claimed the best employment opportunities and even volunteer decision-making positions on community boards and committees. She’d been painfully grappling with the small town petty politics, chalking it up to fear of change and then swinging angrily to the opposite end of the speculative spectrum by concluding that the residents were plain and simple, mean spirited by nature. An idealist at heart, she’d vacillate again and justify their small-mindedness by tracing their roots to the indignities their forefathers had suffered as working stiffs in the area’s underground coal mines.

She watches the musician adjust the harmonica stand. A tingle shoots up her spine as he blows into the mouth organ and spews out the first haunting bars of the next tune. Like the opening bars of a national anthem, harmonica riffs have the power to command an audience to attention and rein it in. It isn’t possible to defy the musician’s imposing self-possession. There isn’t even a remote possibility that one’s thoughts could wander, but Stefan’s return to his seat, nonetheless, severs Emily’s focus momentarily away from the stage. She smiles at Stefan and then remembers that he doesn’t have a ticket for tonight’s performance.

Stefan sits on the edge of his seat.

“There’s no more tickets?”

He shakes his head.

“Did you ask her why there aren’t any people up here?”

“She said all the tickets have been sold and that a dozen people haven’t shown up.”

“But she said you could stay?”

“Yeah.”

Emily suppresses the urge to smile. Stefan habitually pronounces “yeah” like “yuh”.

The song abruptly ends and before the audience breaks into applause, Emily catches the thud of the heavy wooden door downstairs being thrown open. The applause dies down and then she hears a barrage of loud voices. The latecomers have arrived and she has an uncanny feeling that it’s members of the Off Roaders – the local club that promotes all terrain vehicle use in the backcountry.

The blues man continues to strum

away at his guitar, but it's obvious that he's distracted. His playing lacks the same tightness and cohesiveness of his other compositions. It's as though he's prepared to give up the stage to someone else at a moment's notice. And indeed, one of the latecomers strides up to the stage and asks for the microphone. The musician leans towards the microphone. "I believe a couple of announcements are forthcoming. Please stay tuned." He stands aside to allow the stocky bearded man, sporting a baseball cap, to take the microphone from the stand. Loosely grasping the microphone, the intruder surveys the audience before taking his cap off and clears his throat. "Good evening. We're here to collect names for a petition. You've probably heard that our government wants to expand the National Park system to the wilderness areas bordering Limber Pine Pass."

"Hey, let's get back to the music!"  
"Yeah, this isn't a political meeting!"

Even from the balcony, Emily can see that the speaker's face has taken on a deep shade of red.

"Just a few minutes of your time, folks."

"Folks! We're not accustomed to being referred to as folks." Emily isn't sure whether this latest outburst is from one of the first two objectors, but it's obvious she isn't the only one who's connected the dots on the Off Roaders having purchased a hefty percentage of tonight's tickets for the sole purpose of sabotaging the event.

"Alright. Ladies and gentlemen."

The speaker's tone is laced in sarcastic contempt.

"Boo!" A unison of boos erupts from the audience. And then someone else yells, "We're not interested in your petition! Let's get on with the show."

A second member of the intruders takes the stage and seizes the microphone from the first man. "We don't want to take much of your time. We just want you to consider whether you want a National Park on your doorstep. You don't have to sign the petition tonight. We have brochures outlining our position. We've lived here a long time and feel we know what's best for the Pass."

"Yeah, like tearing up the landscape with your quads and spreading noxious weeds all through

the forest."

"Where's Judy?" Stefan asks.

As if Judy can do anything. She'd taken an enormous risk by purchasing the old Catholic Church and remodeling it into a coffeehouse. Some of the old timers thought that it was downright sacrilegious to convert the church into a venue for music performances. Emily was of the mind that had Judy known that there was little chance of her brainchild, the Raven's Nest Café, being frequented by the locals, she might have thought twice about pouring her life's savings into such a venture.

"Somebody call the cops."

"I already have. They're on their way." Emily recognizes Helen's voice, an older woman whose son is a musician and orchestrated not just tonight's gig at the Raven's Nest, but the previous three concerts, featuring talent from the big city.

"We bought tickets for this gig so we're not going anywhere." The second member of the Off Roaders who'd taken the podium defers using the microphone to speak. "Let's get on with the music," he adds, nodding towards the blues man and taking the seat that Emily had occupied before teaming up with Stefan to sit on the balcony.

The blues man sits down again on his stool, but waits while the other intruders trudge up the stairs to the balcony. Emily's heart begins to race as each one claims a chair and she senses their heavysset frames hem them in. The quiet that descends is so absolute that she almost expects a cloud of incense to suddenly waft over the audience and up towards the domed frescoed ceiling. It's typically during the most intense segments of the Catholic mass - when the priest elevates the Eucharist over his head - that an altar boy swings the incense burner back and forth and the sweet, resinous scent permeates throughout the church.

The blues man taps out the beat with his foot before launching into a frenzy of strumming. Leaning into his harmonica, he releases a drawn out introductory riff to yet another blues composition. He sings about a lost love - a proverbial blues theme - pent up retributive sentiment, how sorry he is for not appreciating his lady love and that he's chased her away. But despite

the musician's efforts to mellow the sharpened mood, everyone's anticipation is palpable. Both sides await the arrival of the RCMP and are on their best behaviour, until someone behind them yells out, "Doug, is that you? You fucking traitor!"

Emily turns around and thinks she recognizes one of the ATV'er's who she'd encountered on the path the other morning. He stands and leans over the balcony, pointing at her neighbour, who she's seen at previous coffeehouse music soirees. Doug's neck shrinks into his shoulders and it's obvious that he's embarrassed about rubbing shoulders with the newcomers at the coffeehouse.

The musician rapidly wraps up his song, but this time, rather than prop his instrument onto his stand, he stows it inside his guitar case.

The Off Roaders' spokesperson, who'd taken Emily's seat on the main floor, stands up and turns towards Doug. "So you've crossed to the other side, joined the tree huggers and pansies."

"Sit down, Reg and wait for the police."

"You might be my kid's teacher, but you're off limits treating me like a child."

Helen is the Grade 2 teacher, and like many of the teachers in Limber Pine Pass, she's taught the parents of some of her current students. A contingent of longstanding residents, to avoid having to deal with their old schoolteachers, have enrolled their kids in the neighbouring municipal district's school. In the Pass, if your parents were miners, you were automatically labeled as thick, incapable, and unwilling to grasp the basics of the curriculum. More often than not, the miners' progeny fulfilled the self-fulfilling prophesy that they wouldn't amount to much, would drop out of school and fail to graduate. These high school dropouts, eager to give their children the opportunity to rise above their circumstances, arranged and pay for school bus transportation, twenty kilometers to the Piney Point School, east in the foothills. Reg obviously hadn't opted to have his kids educated in Piney Point.

Helen turns her face away from Reg and casually takes a sip of her beer. All eyes are now on Doug. Whenever their paths have crossed,

typically while heading out or returning from walking the dog, Emily has only exchanged formalities with Doug, like “Hi, how’re you doing,” but she’s sensed that her neighbour is a soft spoken, innocuous type of person, unlikely to counter the accusations that he’s a traitor, tree hugger, and a pansy. When Doug stands up, Emily is pleasantly surprised to realize that she might be wrong about him, but then again, the pressure of everyone’s expectations that he confront his bully might be too onerous for him to ignore.

“I’m not a tree hugger or a fucking pansy!” Doug growls. “I’m just here for the music.”

Some of the patrons who’d begun to put their coats on, freeze and do a double take while, Judy, still ostensibly in denial about the volatility that is brewing on her premises, begins making the rounds to all the tables to collect the tabs.

“Hey, no offence, Doug. You can’t take a bit of ribbing?” chides Reg.

“You apologize.” Doug’s clenched hands shake by his sides and Emily, even from the height of the balcony, notices that some of the patrons zero in on his quivering fists.

Before Reg has a chance to respond, several members of the Off Roaders head down the stairs and the front door creaks open. Emily recognizes Staff Sergeant Ludwig’s low, gruff voice. “What’s going on here?”

“Just a little misunderstanding, Sergeant.” Reg’s tone is exceedingly deferential.

Emily observes Helen roll her eyes in exasperation.

“What kind of misunderstanding?”

Sergeant Ludwig moves towards the stage and stands facing Reg.

“We just wanted to collect some names for our petition, but the crowd here isn’t interested.”

“That’s putting it mildly.” Again from the isolation of the balcony, Emily can’t see who interjected with this last remark.

“Who called the detachment?”

“I did,” Helen confesses, raising her hand. “These guys came storming in and interrupted the performance. I was afraid it could get ugly.”

Officer Ludwig nods and then turns back to Reg. “You guys bought tickets for tonight’s performance?”

“We sure did.”

“Did you speak to Judy about your intentions to collect names for your petition?”

“Not exactly.”

Ludwig doesn’t say anything in response, but the way that he looks at Reg it’s obvious he’s waiting for more of an explanation.

“We left the petition with Judy when we bought the tickets. It’s about the extension of the National Park, Officer. These folks here probably don’t know what that means to us. We don’t want to lose our freedom to enjoy the backcountry. We want things to stay the same.”

“Where’s Judy?”

“Here.” Judy calls out from the kitchen and stands tentatively in front of the take-out counter, clutching the tabs in one hand and a bunch of bills in the other.

“Did you know that this group would be soliciting signatures for their petition during tonight’s performance?”

Sergeant Ludwig is putting Judy in an awkward position, asking her to choose between her regular, steady customers and the old timers who could defy stereotypes and begin frequenting her establishment. From time to time, country and western singers tour the narrow valley within which Limber Pine Pass is nestled. Country and western music is more up the Off Roaders’ alley, and although the regulars might be less enthusiastic about that genre of music, they attend those soirees as well, just to support live music in the community.

Judy, after a few moments, replies sheepishly, “I can’t remember.”

Doug, in the meantime, has thrown his coat on and stands in front of the counter, presumably to clear up his tab.

The ATV’er who’d initially called Doug a traitor, grabs Doug by the arm, and says something to him. Pulling his arm out of the man’s grasp, Doug pivots towards his aggressor and punches him in the face. The bully staggers backwards, and shakes his face as though to stop himself from falling into a daze. While those who’ve witnessed the assault, cry, “Whoa!” Sergeant Ludwig promptly intervenes by placing his hand on Doug’s chest.

“He was provoked!” cries Rebecca.

“Yeah!” another female voice chimes in. “They called him a traitor, pansy and a tree hugger.”

Blood pours out of the assaulted ATV’er’s nose. Serves him right, Emily thinks. Judy, who’s been in a quasicatatonic state, finally springs into action and comes around the counter clutching a towel.

“Do you have any ice?” Helen asks, stepping behind the counter and into the kitchen.

“Someone take him to Emergency,” Ludwig commands.

“Doug, I’m afraid you’ll have to come with me. Everybody else, clear out of here. I don’t want to have to call in for back up.”

Snow falls early in the elevated slopes of Limber Pine Pass. With the wind howling, breaking down the drifts and blowing ice crystals across the highway, polishing its surface into a black ice sheen, the road conditions were likely becoming treacherous. Ludwig would need every available man on shift to respond to traffic accidents.

“Well, ...tonight’s performance should give the blues man something new to croon about.” Stefan’s pronunciation of “croon” is too bizarre for Emily to resist breaking into nervous laughter.

Oh yeah, the blues man. Whatever happened to him? Emily spots him nonchalantly lingering alongside the makeshift stage, no doubt waiting to settle up with Judy. What must he be thinking about his audience, who for the most part, is over fifty, but one wouldn’t know it by the pettiness of the squabbles that had erupted. Somehow, Limber Pine Pass had come to epitomize the clash of the past with the present and the conundrum of the present defying definition. Stefan hit the nail on the head. His artistic sensibilities had cut through all the emotional chaos, the fear of isolation and exclusion, being left behind as a new era of blues was poised to rise, like the early morning sun, over the craggy horizon of a coal mining town in - twenty-first century transition.