

Ripping Blues From Your Womb

By Stephanie Renae Johnson

Jack watched for calluses on my fingers. Bass string imprints meant I missed home. He felt threatened. It wasn't my fault in the ten years I spent in New Orleans, I dated the same blues boy-turned-man for seven. But Mitch was a far off memory, a g chord I could never stop from fading. He and I were over—there's no repeat relationship when the limbs of your connection hang dead and shackled, like peeled gator skin. Nevertheless, I didn't blame my husband when he reacted to those bass lines through my fingertips like they were a lover's leftover clothing. There was no hiding it. It was almost as if blues and jazz had sewn themselves to my hands; Jack wanted to run scissors through the thread. Likewise, I'd been mentally refurbishing our two-year marriage, and most of the time, it sat in my mind a bare skeleton of wood.

"It's not that I don't love your musicality," Jack told me. "I just mind the fact you only do it when you're missing him." While Mitch had been a dizzying infatuation, Jack was a crush from high school rekindled. I was more in love with the idea of him when we married: his dallying, brown eyes, cowboy-strong convictions, abracadabrical smile. Before turning vegan, Jack was a rodeo boy. His body showed it.

One thing Mitch taught me was the blues—how to feel them. My jazz itch waxed with the moon; the more it peered over the Rockies, the more I felt trapped by the mountains and pines and longed for my bayou. Jack tried hard not to notice. He watched my fingers slowly as I served to-sushi and poured wine. Mine was fuller. I took a long gulp. After dinner, he pulled me into him like origami. I was wearing a silk nightgown. It became a pretty moment. Kisses lined across my neck like fireflies. He followed my veins down my arm, to my hands, sucking on my finger. For the first time in a while, my stomach flew up to my throat like a robin on a telephone wire.

Somehow, beneath the juice of tofu, soy sauce, and the particles of his own skin, he still tasted strings. His eyes were a box of matches, and flashing anger didn't take long to rise to the surface. Jack's face looked two steps away from lightning.

"Did you play today?" he asked. The ability to lie fell from me. His brown eyes sunk to my level on the couch as he kneeled. The diamond glittered on my finger like a reminder. Jack always bragged about how he'd compromised his anti-blood diamond morals to buy me princess dreams. I never told him the white shine of diamonds bored me. I wanted the deep blue of sapphire, the lusty sinking color across my peach and sunburn patchwork skin.

“Yeah,” I admit.

“Baby!” he admonished, snuggling into my skin. What new kind of revenge is this? I had expected words of anger, thick as summer rain, scented of swamp water. Instead, I found the mountains of his arms and pines of small goose bumps across his flesh.

“I just missed it.” I hate myself, but melting into his arms felt soft. My words slurred. It wasn’t the wine. It felt comforting to be held, and I could do it in worse arms than those of my husband. His fingers flitted over the ends of my Arizona-red hair, and my head was flowing rocky like the Colorado River. “I’m sorry, love. I’m sorry.” His lips blocked mine. Barricading has never felt so sexy.

Physically sweeping me off my feet has never been a problem for him. Jack is a mountain boy, born and bred. I was lowered to the bed around him like a flower arrangement. My nightgown was lifted, and a rain shower of kisses and moans later, he was inside me like Colorado air.

He wanted it slow tonight. I hate it slow. I never know where to look. His brown eyes always ask for my soul, and the ring of white gold on my fingers seems to demand it. It tightens on my finger, a small recalcitrant fist. I told myself this is delusional. My mind wandered, a moonbeam leading it out the open bedroom window. The slow way he loved me lead me to close my eyes. Where moments ago, every inch of my skin was receptive, I was shut. He hovered. I felt claustrophobic. His kisses were too wet, not limited to the small oh of my mouth, and leaked over onto my chin and cheeks. The moisture collected like dams. The room was dry with heat.

Mitch fell to my mind like he’d fluttered down from the wooden rafters. Whenever we made love, he did it with the windows closed, because he liked the smell. The sound of bullfrogs leaked into the room. We would fall asleep to the rhythm. Mitch’s love was smooth as the jazz his body carried like inheritance. His dark skin was never ebony, or even coffee colored, but mud, a wet brown with hints of red underneath. He used to joke it was my hair, my essence, getting under his skin. As Jack closed damp palms around mine, fingers holding me rooted like pine nettles, I missed the way Mitch knew never to hold my hands during sex. He instead held the back of my neck, like he was the sole thing keeping me from drifting out into the bayou. Once, we had done it on a dock over the river. We were both finding stowaway splinters for weeks. The moon was full and sweet.

Jack pistoned away at me, groaning. I was horrified at the phrase ballooning across my mind in bright red: get it over with. I nudged him faster with my hips. For a moment, his brown eyes lassoed mine, begging. I persisted. He sped up, crossing my legs over each other. I became a human tic-tac-toe figure. Then, sudden as summer thunder, he slammed through me.

“Ow. Jack, ow! Jack!” But he didn’t stop. His cum felt like fire when it finally shot through. He rolled off, glinting eyes shooting through the dark. “What the hell?” I asked, my neck burning like brushfire. When I sat up, my abdominal muscles were broken wood.

“You okay?” he asked, a dull level in his voice. I slumped off the bed. His eyes closed. Not moments later, his body was motionless, face slack. He started snoring and didn’t even notice as I hoisted myself down towards the bathroom tile, doubled over the broken china of my insides. I crawled inside the bathroom, my entire lower half burning. My palms grew cold against the hard, cobalt tile.

The douche had been a gag gift at a party I’d attended right after moving back to Colorado. No one there knew me, just a bunch of his friends. Jack’s friends had weather vane humor. It was worse that he never apologized for them. Southern women would never stand for this, but in the Rocky Mountains, the solution was to possess an etiquette just as graveled as the setting. Opening it, I had sat mortified, my face the same dirt red as my hair. I stared at the plates heaped with of bean humus. The strange faces around me offered no comfort as country twang choked out any sense of home. I longed for a barbeque with a six-piece big band, pink paper lanterns, and cicadas. All I found here was thin air.

Now, my shaking fingers rip open the box and throw aside the instructions. A half-Southern woman, I knew how to rid myself of unwanted things while smiling. In the dark, I douche. The liquid runs out of me like hallelujahs. In the next room, Jack’s dreams chase across his vocal chords. He mutters rodeo rumba. Quaking, I stand to stare at myself in the mirror. I look like a twisted elm dripping with kudzu. I gaze at the instructions and empty box on the floor and pinch them with fingers practiced for years on mosquitoes and love bugs. The semi-rape still stumbles through my legs, belly, and back. I drag myself, half standing, half crouched like a female Quasimodo. My breasts swing as I wobble into the room, the nest of my hips buzzing. A note from Victorian Literature class at New Orleans University pulses through my mind: it wasn’t called rape if you were married. I groan. Still, Jack sleeps, his back and shoulders a field of skin.

I push myself into jeans and a t-shirt I haven’t worn since the move. The tightness should feel like cardboard. Instead, it feels smooth as jazz. I plunk my wedding ring on the dining room table next to a note: “I hate diamonds.” Before I close the door behind me, I grab my bass, swinging the strap over my shoulder, across my chest.

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