

The Poplars



GARY MATSON

a short story by JOHN TAIT

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On the first night of our band's "Collingwood Tour," somebody broke into our LTD station wagon in the parking lot of the Snowdrop Motel. The next morning we gathered around the jimmyed door while my mother told the investigating officer over and over how relieved she was that the thieves had known so little about musical equipment. Otherwise they would have stolen her boyfriend Ken's Mesa Boogie amp instead of his beat-up MXR effects pedals, his vintage Les Paul guitar instead of his Takamine acoustic, our Shure microphones instead of our ancient mixer. Kids were responsible, she speculated: lowlife druggies, hurried and stupid, who'd grabbed what they could carry. Mom kept talking even after the officer had gone and her only audience was Ken, my older sister Caroline, and I.

"They did us a favor," Mom explained, stroking Ken's back. "We would have had to replace that mixer soon anyway. And those pedals were ugly. We can always upgrade."

Ken leaned on the LTD's fender, smoked, and showed no outward concern over what we'd lost.

An hour earlier, when I'd first looked over Ken's shoulder into our pillaged vehicle, I'd felt a brief, furtive hope that the thieves had also taken the white Fender Precision bass Mom and Ken had given me ten months earlier for my thirteenth birthday. Or maybe my Peavey amp, bought a month after the bass. But my instrument, in its gig bag, and my amp sat untouched where I'd put them after the previous night's show. Caroline stared at her untouched drums, and our eyes met long enough for me to suspect she was feeling the same.

"Didn't that boy you gave lessons to move up here from Toronto?" Mom asked Ken. "Sean? The one with the jazz trio? He had that nice little acoustic, and he might own a mixer too."

"I'm not borrowing from a former student," Ken said with mild indignation. He wasn't a man capable of major emotions, like rage, joy, or despair. He had minor-key emotions, diminished-chord emotions, nuanced and muted.

It took Mom an hour on the phone in our motel room to track down a friend of a friend named Paul, and another hour for Ken and me to drive out to Paul's in Orillia to pick up his acoustic guitar and mixer. I half dozed in the passenger seat for most of the trip, imagining huge scythes razing the farmhouses and warehouses we passed. I'd volunteered to go along not because I enjoyed Ken's silent company, but because I needed some time away from Mom and her pep talks and sunny optimism. By now she would be convincing us that the thefts were all part of some providential plan to help us improve and succeed.

It was Mom who had dubbed this our "Collingwood Tour," though, like all our other so-called tours, it was nothing more than a set of weekend gigs in a backwater town, at whatever venues she'd badgered into booking us. We'd driven up here Friday in a patchy drizzle after school, the station wagon's cargo area full of gear and our suitcases in a nylon rooftop carrier that lurched forward at each stop. We'd played our brief Friday-night show under a tent at the Blue Mountain Folks and Fun

Fest, where we'd been drowned out by the taped music of the teen baton-twirling team on the next stage. Afterward we'd driven back to the motel, dejected, while Mom had enthused about the two shows to come, the final Sunday-afternoon flea-market gig most of all.

Ken and I stopped at Burger King on our way back from Orillia and ate wordlessly in the car. Ken finished before I did and started the engine.

"Shouldn't we get something for Mom and Caroline?" I asked.

Ken turned and stared at me through his tinted prescription glasses. He'd been dating my mother for more than a year by then, and I'd become used to his dry, abstracted gaze, his gaunt face with its heavy jaw, his scant ponytail that he habitually tugged. I knew it was nothing personal when he stared through me, like he did now as he unfolded his wallet and handed me a five. He waited outside while I went in for the food. Ken was a man who always waited outside, smoking and pacing and staring down roads. He slept in snatches, getting up in the night to play guitar, watch horror movies, or smoke on our apartment's balcony. Mom explained that he had a restless nature and couldn't stay indoors for long without feeling "cooped up." She excused his odd behaviors in a way she'd never done with my father. Then again, my father was not a musician, not an "artist." Mom always made that clear.

When Ken and I returned, Mom and Caroline were sitting in the diner beside the motel. I offered them the stained bag of burgers, but they had half-eaten grilled cheese sandwiches in front of them. Caroline made a face and shoved the bag away. I sulked. Mom broke the silence: "Well, we've learned one thing: we know better than to park the car out of sight again."

If this was a reproach to Ken, it was a mild one. Mom even smiled after she said it, as if to soften the criticism.

The night before, after our disastrous craft-festival gig, Ken had parked around the corner in the side lot, instead of directly outside our motel room as Mom had urged. When she had insisted he bring the gear inside, he'd ignored her and gone to sleep. Now Mom stared at Ken with a beseeching look, probably waiting for some acknowledgment that she'd been right. None was forthcoming. She smiled grimly. "All that matters is we're back in action. It will take more than this to stop us. I hope those thieving kids get a hernia carrying that old mixer." She laughed wickedly. "I hope it blows up in their faces."

"They didn't steal it to use it." Ken's voice was quiet and authoritative. "They probably traded it for a few cases of beer."

Caroline gave a snort before her usual indifferent expression returned. Though she despised Ken, she allied with him whenever he opposed my mother. My father had always called Caroline a "shit disturber." He'd enjoyed this quality in her, this willful need to cause strife. Sometimes I enjoyed it too, for its entertainment value and for how she punctured people's hypocrisies and pretensions. I wasn't enjoying it right now, though.

My mother stiffened, and color appeared on her cheekbones.

"It'll be all right," I said, though my words sounded so dispirited that Mom gave me a look. I was annoyed that the burden of backing her up had fallen, as usual, on me.

Our Saturday gig was at a music store called Diamond Records. The owner, a stout Pakistani in stained dress pants and flip-flops, seemed totally unprepared for our invasion of his store, which was too small for a live band. He looked on, chagrined, as we set up our speakers and untangled our cords. Mom had likely convinced him over the phone what a great "promotional opportunity" this would be. I had heard her make many such calls in the breakfast nook off our kitchen, charming the owners of pizzerias, roller rinks, and shopping centers. Her pitch made "live music" seem like the ultimate business panacea. "Don't you think some *live music* would be a great draw?" she would say. "Wouldn't your customers love a little *live music*?"

I set up the amps, speakers, and monitors in a tight space between the register and the back door; then I helped Caroline with her drum kit while Ken fussed over the unfamiliar mixer. Mom arranged her pyramidal wooden stand with her maracas, wood blocks, castanets, tambourine, flute, and piccolo, all suspended from stainless-steel hooks. My father had made the stand for her years before in his basement workshop. It was ingeniously designed and rotated 360 degrees on its base, putting everything precisely within her reach. My mother had viewed my father's skill at building such contraptions less as an art and more as some idiot-savant trick.

Mom had a cardboard display of albums by Essentials, her old gigging band, and she placed it prominently before us at each show beside a poster-sized image of her in a diaphanous gown, standing on a circular rock in a pond. It was meant to look like some sylvan glade, but I knew it had been shot in the drainage ditch behind her drummer's apartment building. Our band, the Poplars, had no product of its own, though Mom promised the audience at each show that our debut album was imminent, "as soon as we get some studio time." She kept a half-page log of advance orders for it. She also kept a standard contract, just in case some vacationing record exec caught our act and wanted to sign us on the spot.

I waited for Ken to finish sullenly tuning the borrowed acoustic so he could tune my bass. He had perfect pitch, and my inability to tune my instrument struck him as some inexplicable handicap. My musical ability didn't impress him either. He had originally written simplified bass lines for me with the promise that he would come up with more-sophisticated ones later. He'd never bothered to, and I'd never reminded him.

Mom led us through a lengthy sound check, though the owner kept repeating, "Sounds good. Begin. Please begin." Then she stepped to the microphone and faced the tiny group of shoppers who'd watched us set up. Over the past couple of weeks, her introduction had lengthened incrementally with each gig: by a phrase, a joke, a musing. It was now so long that I felt, by the end, as if someone were slowly driving a knife into my gut.

"Hello, all. I'm Glynn Poplar. We've come up here from

Toronto to entertain you for the next hour or two. Now, some of you might recognize me from my former musical group, Essentials." She always paused here for recognition, never showing any sign of discouragement when there was none. "But this is, I must say, my *favorite* project." A fond glance over her shoulder now. "We call ourselves the Poplars, and we're not the Partridge Family, but we do hope you will 'c'mon, get happy."

I winced. I had pleaded with Mom dozens of times to remove that stale TV-show reference.

She went on. "This is my husband, Ken, on guitar, and on drums my daughter, Caroline Anne Poplar. And last but not at all least, our most recent addition: my son, Thomas Bertrand Poplar, who eagerly took up the bass this year to help us out."

I always kept track of the inaccuracies in Mom's introduction; today there were three: First, we were not from Toronto but from Mississauga, a suburb far removed from downtown. Second, Ken was not her husband, though she had campaigned for them to set a date for some time. They'd had two near misses: an announcement at Christmas that had gone nowhere, and more plans around Valentine's Day that also had never materialized.

But it was the last inaccuracy that pricked me most. I hadn't taken up the bass with any enthusiasm but rather had been forced into it through a combination of guilt-tripping, goading, flattery, bullying, and unkept promises. They'd begun the band with just my mother, Ken, and Caroline, but the sound was too thin; it had no bottom end. Ken's meandering solos sounded stranded, suspended like kites caught in telephone wires. I was a conscript, like Caroline before me, drafted shortly after her fourteenth birthday when Mom first came up with the idea for a family band. Caroline and I knew better than to reveal the true circumstances of our participation, though I suspected people sensed the truth. I'd seen a documentary about American POWs in Hanoi who'd blinked Morse-code distress signals to the camera, and I sometimes imagined the audience could read the same message of resistance in our faces.

When Mom had finally finished, she invited the audience to "share this time with us," which was our cue to begin.

For a half dozen record shoppers, we played our usual first set: "The Girl from Ipanema," "Photographs and Memories," "Desperado," "Leaving on a Jet Plane," "Stardust," a treacly Essentials ballad called "The Promise of My Love," and a whitebread funk number co-written by Mom and Ken called "She's Got That Look Again," whose bass line I'd yet to master.

More customers entered but avoided eye contact with us, as if afraid they might unwittingly commit to something. One man hovered in the doorway a moment, then headed right back out.

During the break between sets, I sat in a folding chair against a wall and listened to Iron Maiden's *Number of the Beast* on my Walkman. I watched a group of kids my age in concert t-shirts peruse the new releases, including the Judas Priest album *Screaming for Vengeance*, which I'd coveted for weeks. A few girls were among them, plastic combs in the back pockets of their jeans. I half hoped they'd seen the first set, half hoped they hadn't.

Caroline sat next to me, a sheen of sweat on her throat, her bangs combed down to conceal the acne on her forehead. She was eyeing a blond boy across the record racks, but he seemed too timid to approach. I might have been frightened of Caroline too. She wore a pink halter top and a short black skirt with a slit partway up the thigh — a stage uniform Mom had approved. Caroline ran the bead of her drumstick along her cheekbone, crossed her legs, and stared at the boy with a cool expectancy that he had no answer for. I wondered where she'd learned this new talent. She'd changed over the past year. Not long ago we'd actually talked, schemed, and joked, even slid notes underneath each other's doors when we were supposed to be sleeping. Lately her few communications to me had been either criticisms or threats.

Mom spent the break hustling, as usual, holding up an Essentials LP to a middle-aged man in a tweed driving cap who kept his hands folded across his chest and far from his wallet as he stared appreciatively at her. Mom's blond Lady Godiva hair reached the small of her back, and she looked ten years younger than thirty-eight.

After a precise fifteen minutes she motioned for us to start the second set.

"Do you take requests?" the tweed-capped man asked, grinning. "I'd love to hear a little Carly Simon."

Though the man was just a few feet from her, Mom answered into the microphone. "I'm sorry, sir, but Carly and I are having a little disagreement. She refuses to sing my songs, and I refuse to sing hers." She laughed her bright laugh, but no one joined in. I pretended to adjust my volume knob. The tweed-capped man edged away.

My mind roamed during our second set, returning only in the middle of Ken's frenetic, jazzy outro to "Touch Me": I always enjoyed watching his pained expression, as if the guitar were an immense weight he had lifted incorrectly. I also tuned back in during my mother's flute solo on "Summer Wine," which I liked for its graceful runs and its finish, where she played a fluttering trill and gradually drew back from the microphone, eyes shut. Aside from those moments, I was thinking of the girls who were shopping. I imagined playing for them: not here but on a real stage, and not this music but something incredible and majestic of my own composition. I imagined this until I saw a smirk on one teenager's face, and then I stared at my feet, furious to be playing a Glen Campbell cover in my mother's band. I flubbed a few changes, and Ken's eyes lit on me. I felt sulky and chastened for the rest of the set.

To make Caroline and me view our performances more professionally, Mom and Ken had instituted a policy of fines. Our normal wage was five dollars per show, but for each obvious mistake we were docked fifty cents. If we were "caught napping" or made a serious screw-up, we were fined a full dollar. Other minor offenses included frowning, rudeness, gum chewing, giggling, and improper stage attire. I averaged three dollars per show, after penalties. Caroline did slightly better. She was more skillful and had a genuine feel for her instrument that I never had. Mom and Caroline joked that I played bass like my father would have: as if I were trying to wrestle it

into submission.

After the record-store gig, I received \$2.50 from Mom — until Ken corrected her and revised it to \$2.00.

Caroline complained when she got only three dollars.

"You spaced out twice when that blond boy walked by," my mother admonished. "We turn *their* heads, not the other way around."

Caroline stomped away, her body tight with fury. My sister looked dangerous, with her bony shoulders and gunmetal braces. She seemed to have some coiled menace within her to which our mother was oblivious. Sometimes I thought I should warn Mom.

On our way out of the store I picked up a *Screaming for Vengeance* cassette and surreptitiously made my way to the counter. Mom intercepted me at the register. "I thought you were saving your money for that nice hard-shell case at Steve's Music." I hesitated, nodded, then placed the tape back on the shelf.

"What if he doesn't *want* a nice hard-shell case?" said Caroline, who had returned and was leaning in the doorway. "Isn't it *his* money? Why can't he spend it how he wants?"

Mom studied her coolly. "Ken is giving both of you lessons for free," she said. "What if he charged you what he charges his students: twenty dollars an hour? Would you want to pay that? Would you be able to?"

"But we don't *want* lessons," Caroline said. "You can't force somebody to do something, then make them pay for it."

Mom laughed and said, "Welcome to the real world." This was a favorite expression of hers, though she often substituted the "grown-up world" or the "big, bad world." Whenever she said this, I imagined her standing at the gates to some joyless wasteland.

(end of excerpt)