

A Blue Night

I leaned over the high wooden counter, staring up at the large clock on the wall. Tick. Tick. Tick. The second hand made its slow circulations around the clock face, moving ever so slowly towards six o'clock. It felt as if this Saturday had lasted forever. I'd been busy for most of the afternoon, showing stern mothers and bored children our rental pianos and brass instruments. Mr. Werlein kept a large stock of used starter instruments for the school children, who were either aspiring Louis Armstrongs or just had mothers who wanted them to be the next great parlor pianist.

The bell chimed over the door and I couldn't help but smile as my friend Patsy waltzed into the shop, a flurry of movement and grace as she twirled towards the counter.

"Let's go, slowpoke! It's quittin' time!" She crowed as she put her purse on the counter and peeled her white gloves off.

"It's not six yet, you know Mr. Werlein will give me heck if I punch out even one minute early," I tell her, smiling as she rolled her eyes.

"You're a goody two-shoes, you know that? I don't know how you can work in this dusty old place, when so much is happening out on the street. Just look out the window! See all those busy, beautiful sailors strolling by!" She gestured towards the large plate-glass window, and at that moment a pack of sailors in their white cotton jumpers and Dixie cup hats appeared as if summoned by Patsy.

"We're going to have so much fun tonight! I heard they've got a real hot set at the Blue Room. I hope you're wearing your dancing shoes." Patsy leaned over the counter and eyed my footwear. "Hmm... a little sensible for my taste, but I guess they'll do."

I looked down at my feet and clicked my heels together. My shoes were brown leather with a low heel. Not the most fashionable, but they didn't make my feet ache at the end of a work day.

"I'm sure our dancing partners won't care too much about what type of shoes we're wearing, as long as we're game on the dance floor."

"Right you are, Deb. Now let's go! I want to eat at the diner before we go dancing, I'm just starving. And they have the best roast beef." Patsy was thin, with curly brown hair bobbed just at her chin, and she ate as much as my twelve-year-old brother.

"If it even is roast beef. With this rationing, my father said half the restaurants in town are using horse meat."

"Oh Deb, really. That's ridiculous. Your father just thinks that if it wasn't made in Italy, it's not worth eating. And we all don't have Italian mothers who cook five course meals every night."

I smiled, thinking of the lavish meals my mother made, even with the ongoing rationing. It didn't hurt that she had planted a huge victory garden in our backyard, had a flock of fifteen chickens, and had a friend in Arabi who traded fresh milk for my mother's homemade ricotta cheese.

"Horse with brown gravy it is, then. Let me punch out and we'll go." I walked to the back of the store to punch the clock and collect my handbag. I flipped the sign from "Open" to "Closed" and locked the heavy front door. Out on Canal Street, passersby hurried past us. There was a cacophony of noise as streetcars clanged and rumbled by. I pulled on my gloves and adjusted my hat against the harsh summer sun. Patsy linked her arm in mine and we headed towards the corner diner. We made a fine duet, walking together, and it felt as if the crowd parted for us as we ambled down the busy sidewalk.

Our dinner at the diner was passable, though Patsy ate with more gusto than one would expect, considering the brownish hunk of meat, pale green peas, and sticky mashed potatoes on her plate. I had a grilled cheese, and we both ate red Jello for dessert. After we paid our bill, Patsy and I crossed Canal Street and walked to the Roosevelt Hotel. The sun was starting to set, and I was looking forward to spending the evening in the luxuriously air-conditioned Blue Room.

As we walked up the carpeted stairs and a bellman opened the door for us, we both twittered with excitement upon entering the block-long length of the lobby. Fashionable women in evening gowns and jewelry walked by with men in tuxedos, and as one would expect for a major port during the war, there were sailors and soldiers everywhere.

Patsy and I made our way into the closest ladies' room. I turned on the white enamel faucet and splashed my face with cool water. We re-applied our lipstick, smoothed our permanents, and gave each other a critical once-over. Patsy adjusted the white patent leather belt on my navy serge shirtwaist, and I made sure the seams on her silk stockings were straight. Our eyes met in the mirror over the sink and we smiled at each other with anticipation.

Out in the lobby, our heels clicked on the tiled mosaic floor as we headed towards the Blue Room. It was one of the most happening nightspots in the city, and we were thrilled to see that our favorite table at the edge of the dance floor was open. A beautiful woman in a slinky dress seated us, and a waiter in a white tuxedo took our drink order.

"Two cream sherries, please," Patsy requested.

I looked around the room. It was still early, and the room was only half full. The stage was lit but the musicians' chairs were empty; the first set would start at eight o'clock. I leaned in towards Patsy. "I heard this band is supposed to be really swell. They have a trumpeter who played at Carnegie Hall with the New York Symphony."

Patsy tossed her head. "Oh Carnegie Hall, who cares? I just want the drums to be loud and the improvisation to be hot! I'll take 'Fascinating Rhythm' any day over Mozart or

Beethoven or whatever dusty old European you like.” I sighed. It was no secret that most of my records at home were recordings of these dusty European composers; I knew that Patsy didn’t have much love in her heart for anything other than the current hits on the radio.

The room quieted with anticipation as the members of the band emerged on stage from behind the blue velvet drapes. Patsy looked around the room, and I knew that she was looking for potential dancing partners. The trumpeter stood. He brought his shiny gold instrument to his lips and played one long, high note. Then the drummer joined in, and the trombones, and within seconds the room was hopping to a lively tempo. Patsy grabbed my hand and we made our way to the middle of the parquet dance floor. We twirled and spun, kicked and hopped, and completely immersed ourselves in the waves of music that washed over us. I found myself in the arms of a smiling Marine, and we danced for what seemed like hours, though in reality it was only for a few songs. At a quiet interlude, when the band took their first break, the Marine walked me back to our table. Patsy was already there, being entertained by a sailor who was in the middle of telling an animated story. She looked at me and smiled.

“Say, fellows, we gals sure are thirsty.”

“Oh, of course! What can we order for you fine ladies?” My Marine asked.

“Cream sherry,” Patsy and I said in unison, and both started laughing. The Marine looked bemused, but dutifully raised his hand and called over a waiter to place our order. We drank our drinks, and politely listened to our dates as their stories of conquest in the Pacific and feats of heroism against the Japanese got more and more elaborate.

We listened to the two men for as long as we could, but eventually the siren call of the band lured us back onto the dance floor. It was just me and Patsy, and the music, and our bodies moving to the harmonies that surrounded us. The band leader announced the last song, and during the finale we really cut a rug. As the final notes faded, Patsy and I looked at each other and laughed. Her hair was a mess, and I had sweat dripping off the tip of my nose.

“I’ll see you here, next Saturday, same time?” She asked.

“On the dance floor, you and me.” I said, as we gathered our handbags, put on our gloves, and headed out into the night.