



Ace Boggess
A Song Without a Melody (Excerpt)

THE SCENE

I didn't get drawn into the scene, the culture, the counterculture, the movie-of-the-week kind of chaos that emanates from small clubs with numbers for names, built around black lights and darkness. I didn't wake up one hazy morning with a blue-black misery from one too many hangovers and whisper, "What happened to me? What have I become?" as if the walls, the air, or my own superficial spirits offered up a care. No, that's not the way it went. Nobody shanghaied me or dragged me kicking and screaming into that a.m. asylum, that sunset commune lifestyle. I walked in with dignity and ease, head high, eyes forward, notebook in hand. I wanted it, hungered to be a part of it. It spoke to me in my own words.

The case with December Leigh was something else—a story I never expected to tell, and one perhaps that should never be told. What the hell. Everyone has at least one story that shouldn't be told, and it's the most entertaining. Even now, alone, I can see her dyed black hair dangling down over pale skin, dry lips, yellowish cat's eyes. I can smell aftersweat from a good show or heavy, emotional trip. I can feel calloused fingertips from her fretting hand brushing across my cheek or down my back like claws, grabbing for my buttocks and that extra bit of pull. She's a vision and a shadow, as much now as then. Times, lives, and personalities have

changed, but December's a constant, the same no matter how much she evolves.

I certainly didn't expect to spill out all my emotions or flick them away like dying cigarette embers left to flutter to the concrete in some back room after hours. I never planned to fall in love with my work. But why not? That's what it all comes down to. My work took me up. Why shouldn't I have given myself to it entirely, let it maneuver me, instruct me, plot my strategies and see them carried out? I existed for a headline on the *Life* page, so why not write a few new pages for my life?

December's band Cancer Moon had a gig at Club Zero, Pittsburgh's newest alternative hangout, though of course the owner preferred the term 'eclectic.' Zero was your classic Smoke and Toke: booze for those with identification, and smoke-filled black-light bathrooms filled with peddlers of other less acceptable indulgences for those too young to imbibe. Its newness and rich early business kept the eyes of the city temporarily deflected or enticed city officials to defer enforcing penalties for ordinance violations and other *mala prohibita* crimes, so long as they occurred inside and their perpetrators never staggered half-naked out onto the public streets.

I'd been to a hundred of these during my tenure at *The Domestic Chronicle*, and when I walked through the front door of this particular cultural niche, nothing surprised me. I took careful note of an energetic crowd expressed as a collage of bohemian believers ranging from the lost and forlorn to the naive and therefore fascinated. Straightening my tie, I smiled. "Welcome home," I mumbled, playing the Hannibal of this foreign land. "You've returned at last."

"I need to see some I.D.," said the serf behind the bar.

The request didn't offend me, but I became indignant just the same. "Yeah," I said with more cockalorum than a battle-weary Green Beret. "Surely you recognize *this* face."

"Sorry, Man," he said, leaning on the bar. Sweat-soaked sandy brown curls draped down around his cheeks, sticking to his skin. "Never seen you before in my life. Now show me some identification."

I drew my wallet like a pistol and aimed it, shooting from the hip. With calm, practiced leisure, I opened it one-handed to the spot where my driver's license slept in its plastic slot. I held it there for several seconds, making sure that sap saw the sleeve above with my carefully placed press card glowing neon purple under the haze from vast rows of black lights over the bar.

"Twenty-three." He mouthed the word, almost inaudible under blaring techno-pop pouring from manmade mountains of speakers arrayed along each wall.

"Have a good look, and don't forget. I'm a professional. I *will* be back."

He nodded, raising his hand in a mock salute as if to say, *Yes, your majesty. As you wish.*

I grinned, showing purple teeth.

After a brief pause, he smiled back. “What can I get you?”

“Give me something I’ve never had before, something I’ve never heard of.” It was an old trick I used to earn free drinks. Good bartenders love guinea pigs. They experiment, playing the mad scientist with different brands of booze. If they find somebody willing to taste their concoctions, nine times out of ten they’ll respond by making a gift of each.

He rubbed his chin with thumb and forefinger. “That’s a tough order,” he said. “How about something I came up with?”

“Ideal, Man. It’s casual. Go with it.”

He returned a couple minutes later, holding a styrofoam cup filled with sinister-looking liquid: thick, brown sludge with foam like steamed milk. “Drink up. You asked for it.”

“How much?”

“It’s on the house. I don’t get too many lab rats in here.”

I grinned like the devil after a good deal. “That’s cool,” I said.

“What is it?”

“I call it a Sausage Link.”

“Why? What’s in it?”

He laughed. “You don’t want to know.”

Staring at the cup of brown bile, I considered backing out. I couldn’t. It’d blow my con. Besides, I’d done worse things. “Praise the Lord,” I said, and swallowed it all in one gulp. Going down, it tasted like oatmeal flavored with turkey gravy, but the aftertaste was sharp and crisp, almost sweet like a custard pie. “Ideal. Now for something more conventional. Give me an Absolut Screw, and make it a stiff one.”

He appeared content. Nodding emphatically, he said, “Sure enough. Coming right up.”

As he went to work, I belched silently and turned to study the crowd. I saw a lot of familiar faces, a lot of clumsy legs dancing, a lot of sullen eyes—like mine—searching the room, staring with unfulfilled longing. My kind of people, all of them. They just didn’t know it yet.

When the bartender returned, I faced him, still flashing what I imagined to be a truly maniacal glare. Accepting my drink, I again asked how much.

He waved me off with both hands. “This one’s on the house, too. You’re a professional.”

“That’s unethical,” I replied, and took a hefty sip. “Thanks.”

“No problem.” He turned and went to serve someone else.

No discotheque, this place. The Zero enticed a darker, more somber clientele, covered in a hundred different shades of black. They came for

the madness, the abyss in which to lose themselves. On the wall behind the bar hung a pseudo-Picasso more than six feet wide: a colorful canvas displaying the twisted, tortured form of a green-skinned Aphrodite with triangular breasts, spiraling thighs, and bloody teardrops mushrooming out from square eyes—one pink, one orange. This macabre masterpiece could've been a self-portrait of Club Zero, with every element untuned, untamed, and way out of proportion.

As if confirming this, a dye-blonde doll, maybe nineteen, strolled by me with her face blurred by grease paint and clown make-up. In contrast, she'd dressed her near-perfect figure in a red lace brassiere and matching pair of crotchless panties worn on top of a black spandex body suit. She turned to look at me as she ambled by, offering up a comical smile. "Nice outfit," she said, as if I were the clown. I understood. She fit right in, whereas I was out of place.

Then again, even my conservative attire didn't blacklist me from any part of the Zero. My persona bought the ticket.

My eyes were unrelenting as I watched the clown goddess strut out the front door. They followed her all the way, even as she stopped to flirt with a heavysset bouncer leaning up against a wall under the neon *Exit* sign. Laughing to myself, I figured he probably was checking to see if she wanted him to stuff her in the back of a crowded Volkswagen with a group of his friends.

Crazy world. Cool world. Unconventional world. Crazy, cool, unconventional people, hanging out in this crazy, cool, unconventional world. I could circle the globe blindfolded and still find my way back here, or somewhere similar in New Jersey, Maryland, or West Virginia. Oblivious to the oblivion of these indulgent excessives, I've endeavored for that abyss, to stare into it longingly, tranquilly, valiantly, regardless should it stare back into me. I accept the humanity of these black shadows, wandering the wastelands of the Earth, unconcerned with precedents and politics, dancing in avoidance of the light. A Cheshire grin leads us homeward, wayward, skyward, every which way but the most direct: into the self, where we confront our thoughts alone. Far better to make the day on National Public Radio, or in clubs and newspaper columns, than to face that same day, exposed.

Even an individual can lose himself in the masses.

I lost myself, offering no complaints.

Slamming my drink, I crumpled up the Styrofoam and dropped it onto the counter to drip out whatever residue remained. Feeling the call, I crept through the quilted crowd toward the restroom, taking note of all eyes I came into visual contact with. These friendly eyes, these lustful eyes, these hopeless, sad, dispirited eyes, these energetic amber eyes needing no escape, these serpent's eyes, cat's eyes, sorcerer's eyes, the eyes of future family men, funeral directors, and unsuspecting officers of

the law already building themselves the criminal pasts that will make them the best of cops, the mischievous eyes of plotters and planners, soon-to-be soldiers, or underworld attorneys on retainer, the gentle but critical eyes of potential youth league football coaches watching the first sprouts of a budding beer gut, the eyes of maniacs and fanatics, hipsters and wallflowers, dreamers and the objects of dreams, I gazed into them all and knew that they were human eyes, each pair offering insight toward a new tomorrow. I took careful note of them, as always, and continued on my way.

The restroom published volumes of libelous gossip about the Zero's clientele, including but not limited to names and numbers, call signs, tags, encyclopedias of graffiti from the sexually obscure to the soft, subtle philosophy of semi-famous porcelain poets. Each pen stroke glistened from freshness. Even before I entered, I knew what to expect by a quick glance at the door, where someone had scratched out 'MEN' and replaced it with a stick-figure prick and balls, poorly drawn but never faltering in its message: *You ain't got one of these, stay the hell out!*

Meeting the admission requirements, I pushed through the doorway into this blacklit dingy den of iniquities. By my calculations, Club Zero opened less than two weeks prior, but already these plastered walls were home to a hundred hieroglyphics, or a hundred thousand. I chose not to read them all, preferring to stick to my purpose. I headed for a free urinal on the far wall. Twin scents of pot and opium all but hid the typical reek. I took a deep breath, remembering.

As I relieved myself of a burden, I got that tingling at the back of my neck, that special sense that comes from being watched. Swiveling my head to the right, I saw two scrawny, roughhouse types in thick, khaki army coats. They were sitting up against a wall, staring at me with their faces bathed in blank expressions that made them look like prisoners of war just back from psychological torture.

Perverts? I thought. *No, not likely. They're more covert. Dopers, more like it, probably scared of a shirt and tie.* I considered blowing their minds by asking for a hit of whatever parcel they were passing. But, not that. Not yet. Not until I made my name and face a fixture at the Zero. Then my tie, or even a red power tie, wouldn't stand out any more than clown make-up.

Looking at them with the intensity of one who knows, I flashed a smile and mocked them by sucking imaginary smoke through pinched fingers holding nothing.

They flinched, but neither took their eyes off me.

"Enough fun," I said, barely audible amidst the heavy, rhythmic bass from a rap song blasting over the speakers outside in the club

proper. Zipping up, I flushed and fled the scene with a practiced *dégagé* strut. “Time for work,” I said to no one in particular.

As I approached the bar, I motioned with my left hand, summoning the barkeep. “Hey, Man,” he shouted, almost in sync with the beat of artificial drums, “ready for another shot?”

“Not now. I’m looking for Knox.”

“What?” he said, cupping a hand to his ear.

“Knox! I’m looking for Nick Knox.”

“What the hell for?”

“Business. He owns the place, right?”

“That he does.”

“So, where can I find him?”

He glanced down at the bar, reached for a soapy rag, and began to wipe up a small pool of spilled beer. He was buying time, allowing himself a moment to consider the consequences of betraying the boss’s whereabouts, and of the opposite action, denial. When he finished wiping the bar, he deposited the rag on a shelf down below, and then looked up, studying the intent in my eyes. Seeing no mischief in me, or just enough, he nodded. “Well, you’re not a cop.”

“No, Man. I’m a reporter.”

“That’s just as bad.”

“Only if I’m not on your side.”

He grinned, sly but serious, the way a serial killer might grin at a potential victim. “Through that door,” he said. He pointed to a short wooden portal into a closed-off room jutting out halfway between the bar and stage. Large square mirrors circled the room, showing off the club like surreal, living art. Two-way, I guessed. “Knock first,” the bartender added.

“Thanks.” I headed toward the door, stopping for a moment in the midst of the crowd as another colorful character caught my eye. Tattoos covered his entire body, or at least every inch of visible flesh, highlighting him in rainbow colors standing out against a backdrop of deep black. It was a mural of the cosmos, a map of constellations and solar systems, suns, stars, and all the other somewhere else of space, carefully etched onto his skin. Even his bald head housed a portrait of a planet on a black background. Jupiter, I later found out. The same name by which this sublime spaceman chose to be known. I watched him as he danced with a relatively normal-looking girl in a tight black mini-dress and high heels. I found it an intriguing combination of companions: the common sex-queen type ruling her personal universe, dancing with the heavens, occasionally reaching down to caress secret stars. I could’ve spent the night composing sonnets to such a scene, but I had more important images to portray, with more specific topics about which the

paper kept paying me to write. By comparison, the universe was a trivial thing.

I reached the door and knocked.

No answer.

I knocked again, louder, harder, longer.

No answer.

No rush, I thought. *Take your time*. I knew the deal. They were sizing me up, checking out the threads from the other side of the two-way mirrors. Also, it's likely they were hiding their drugs. *Cool*, I thought. *It's cool*. I understood the rules.

After a lengthy pause, I knocked again.

This time, the door shot inward. "What?" this aging burnout on the other side screamed at me. He was an absurd display of ambivalence to social custom, dressed in a faded tie-dye with clashing striped suspenders holding up his bright white jeans. "What's your problem?"

I didn't know whether to recoil in fear or laugh in his dirt-crusted face. I chose neither, instead breaking into my Respectable Journalist routine. "Are you Nick Knox?"

"No!" he spat back with a shower of saliva. "Who are you?"

"Collin Hearst," I said, offering a hand to shake, "reporter for *The Domestic-Chronicle*."

He ignored the hand. Without looking over his shoulder, he groaned, "Knox, there's a *catfish* here to see you!" The cords in his neck were bulging, ready to explode from his scarlet skin. My impulse was to say, "Whatever drugs you're doing, they're the wrong ones." Instead, I waited for him to take a breath, at which point he said, "What do you want, bottom fish?"

"Answers to a few questions."

"Questions? What kind of questions?"

I shook my head and then tried to stare him down. "I'm not looking for a Pulitzer Prize. I have questions. Everyday, run-of-the-mill, who, what, when, where, why, and how kind of questions. I'm not here to steal your thoughts. I'm after stories. Chaos stories, vibe stories, stereotypical sex, drugs, and rock'n'roll kind of stories. I cover the scene, Man. Now, unless you have more questions of your own, I'd like to get some answers to mine."

This tirade numbed him faster than *Novocain*, with all his rage not so much dying as simply fading for a while with a false feeling of death, skin tingling, thoughts strained, emotions grayed or in hibernation. It left him speechless. He hesitated. Voice calmer, he said, "Wait here. Nick's got to play the next disc. He'll be out in a minute."

"It's casual," I said, and watched as he staggered around me, out onto the dance floor, disappearing in the masses. While I waited, I turned momentarily and caught a glimpse of myself in one of the mirrors,

gazing at the round, cadaverous face staring back at me from underneath prescription sunglasses—a solemn portrait painted under waves of bourbon brown hair filled with more hot air than a zeppelin. The face said Journeyman Beatnik, but the body, less than fit, said Never Been Far From Home. I wasn't sure how to take this character, dressed all in black save for a red and gray tie. *What's your deal?* I thought. *What crazy god spliced your patchwork parts together?*

Before the face in the mirror could respond, I sensed new movement at my peripheral and turned in time to see this carrot-top, anorexic type head my way. His eyes, only partly shielded by John Lennon spectacles, were glazed, sterile, but far from sad. His jaw hung open about twenty degrees, closing every few breaths to push out straying strands from his lengthy orange curls. He was dressed in maroon Bermuda shorts and a gray tee on which someone had handwritten the word 'Mugwump.' I couldn't tell from this guy's demeanor if the word referred to the long-dead political party or the slimy creature from a Burroughs novel that ejaculated intoxicating fluids. At a guess, I presumed the latter, it likely being some sort of pseudonym, or perhaps a coded invitation to young girls.

"Nick Knox?" I said.

"True enough." He flashed me a peace sign with his fingers. "And you are?"

"Collin Hearst. I believe we spoke on the phone." I offered my hand.

He didn't speak right off, but after a brief pause his face lit up with far too much excitement. Taking my hand in both of his, he shook it vigorously, violently, coating my fingers with thick sweat. "Cool, Man," he said. "Cool. I forgot you were coming. No, I didn't. That's not it. I didn't forget, but I didn't really expect you to show. It's cool you did, though. I'm glad you made it." His words came so fast and frantic with anxious energy that they made me feel like some stunning doll he'd just asked out, never expecting an affirmative answer.

"You're going to love this band," he continued. "Without a doubt. Hey, you did come to check out the band, right? Well, this chick, she's explosive fucking gorgeous. She's got a voice to make you cry and come back to back in perfect synchronicity, and a face to make you beg for more of both. It cost me a couple grand to bring her here but, Man, she's worth every penny. The band sparkles, too. It'll be a great show."

"That's casual. I know they're good."

"You've seen them?"

"No, but I've heard about them."

"Cool," he said. "That's so cool. So you're here for a review?"

I shook my head. “Sorry, Nick. The paper’s full tomorrow. I’m just here to kick back, have a few drinks, and catch the show. If it works for me, I’ll do a preview next time they’re in.”

He looked at me quizzically, but his mood brightened fast. “That’ll work. We got ’em booked again next month.” He paused. “Listen, we’re setting up the sound board now. Why don’t you come inside? We can talk about it while I work.”

“Good, Nick. You can tell me what you’ve got lined up, so I can plan my schedule.”

“Cool.”

“I think so.”

“Cool. You have many bands lined up?”

“You could say that. A lot of bars, a lot of gigs. Punks, hicks, metalheads, rappers, alternative angststers, even the occasional gospel Godsquadder. You better believe I’m busy.”

He grinned from ear to ear with comic-book glee. “Cool,” he said. “Cool.” His redundancies drew my attention to a fact I’d thus far overlooked: Knox was my age, though maybe a couple years older. What made this kid so special, unique, enterprising? Owning his own cult-classic club, plopping down a couple thousand dollars in one night for a trendy but not yet superstar music group, giving orders rather than taking them—these were signs of someone who’d lived the life and learned how to succeed. I wondered if he’d gone to college and gotten a degree in business, economics, or maybe juvenile psychology. Or had he taken a trust fund from Dear Old Mom and Dad and spit it straight into the wild wind of contemporary culture? Would he make his mark on the scene for months before burning out with an ounce-a-day heroin habit, two broken legs from unpaid debts, and a six-inch stack of subpoenas from the IRS? Would he steal a quick glimpse of the good life, only to reminisce from a vantage well below? Or would he succeed, perhaps transforming the Zero into a landmark for the city and the scene? I didn’t know the answers, but I looked forward to finding out.

*Ace Boggess’s novel [A Song Without a Melody](#) is available on [Amazon](#). He has published poems in *Harvard Review*, *River Styx*, *RATTLE*, and elsewhere. His other books include [The Beautiful Girl Whose Wish Was Not Fulfilled](#) and, as editor, [Wild Sweet Notes II](#), an anthology of work by poets living in West Virginia.*