

Rock and Roll Heaven

A Trio of Uncollected Stories by T.C. Boyle

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MISE EN SCENE

A tree, center stage, its branches bare and withered. To the right a cluster of papier-mâché boulders, their crowns touched with white paint to suggest snow. A strip of yellowed meadow grass, a wilted wildflower. To the left stage front a solitary boulder, larger than the others, large enough to conceal a standing man. The backdrop is a mountain scene: Jungfrau, Matterhorn, Dufourspitz. THE STAG hangs from the tree by its rear hoofs, a puddle of stage-blood on the floor beneath its tongue. There is the sound of wind.

THE YOUNG MAN enters from stage left, in alpine gear. His face is smooth as glass, his eyes blue as bullets. The wind has tossed his flaxen hair, and he is breathing heavily. His makeup runs with sweat. He makes as if to throw himself down on the strip of yellowed grass, but starts at a sound from offstage right. Hallooing is heard in the distance. He drops THE BABY and darts behind the boulders in the rear, crouched on all fours. THE BABY wails in two quick bursts like an automatic weapon, then cuts to a gagging mewl and begins crawling toward the STAG. THE BABY comes to rest beneath the dripping tongue. It sleeps.

THE DWARF enters from right, his back bowed beneath a mahogany table. His face is as furrowed as THE YOUNG MAN's is smooth. His eyes are black. When he sets the table down just to the right of the tree, the legs screech. He lifts his Tyrolean hat and wipes his brow. Then hurries off stage right, like a man on an errand.

THE YOUNG MAN begins to emerge but ducks back when THE GIRL rushes in, her hair in braids. She looks wildly about her, then digs in her petticoat and produces a watch which she consults in great agitation. Then her eyes fall on THE BABY puddled in blood, and she faints, coordinating her movements so as to land behind the fringe of yellowed grass. All that remain visible are her bare legs, thrust through the vegetation. THE YOUNG MAN emerges and stares down at them. He kneels, begins to trace his finger along the legs, then his tongue.

At that moment a piping is heard. THE YOUNG MAN, flustered and ashamed, leaps to his feet and spins about, looking for a place to secrete himself as the piping grows progressively louder. Finally he rushes for the boulder, stage front. He drops THE ELECTRIC TOASTER in his excitement, but manages to conceal himself before PAN enters, piping, PAN's hocks are shaggy and lewd, his twin horns bald and phallic. He clatters to the tree and scrambles up into the branches as THE SHEPHERD appears, leading a flock of crouching extras in woolly capes. THE SHEPHERD dodders along, trembling on his staff, the odor of sheepshit enveloping the stage, wafting out into the first rows. He pauses before THE BABY, shakes his head, tsks his tongue, and shuffles off. The wind begins to howl.

THE YOUNG MAN peers around the corner of the boulder, his back to THE AUDIENCE. He is about to step forward when THE MURDERER enters, stage left, heaving for breath. Like THE YOUNG MAN he too is dressed in alpine garb, though

his shorts and blouse and lederhosen are ill-fitting—he looks like a black bear pinched into a boy scout uniform. He carries an axe in his hand, a sack of heads slung over his back. Noses, ears and chins can be seen protruding from the many rents in the sack's fabric. He sets his burden down and sniffs about the stage until he finds THE GIRL. He raises the axe. THE YOUNG MAN hesitates, does not fly to her aid. THE MURDERER's axe flashes like a mirror in the glare of the stage lights. His shoulders swell. But then a yodel sounds offstage right, and THE MURDERER lowers his axe with a craven sneer and slinks behind the cluster of snow-capped boulders.

THE DWARF enters from the right, THE IDIOT in tow. A mountaineer's rope joins them. THE DWARF is balancing a stack of chairs on his back. THE IDIOT carries a tea service for five, and a highchair. They proceed to set the table, THE IDIOT periodically blundering over the rope. THE GIRL wakes, shakes the grass splinters from her skirt, and sets THE BABY in the highchair before taking a seat at the table herself. Then PAN climbs down from the tree to join her, and THE YOUNG MAN steps from behind the rock and seats himself at her right. She smiles at THE YOUNG MAN. PAN pats her knee. THE DWARF sits and THE IDIOT pours the tea.

At the rear of the stage the lacquered rocks begin to quiver—and THE MURDERER stands, massive as an avalanche. The others ignore him, busying themselves with the tea things. THE BABY slaps a spoon on its saucer and rattles its cup. THE IDIOT crouches over THE TOASTER, stage center, working the lever, slaving into the coils. THE YOUNG MAN glares at THE MURDERER, righteous indignation in his eye. THE STAG bleeds. THE GIRL looks at THE YOUNG MAN. PAN looks at THE GIRL. THE DWARF looks at PAN. THE MURDERER glares at THE YOUNG MAN and opens his mouth to speak.

THE AUDIENCE leans forward.

CROSSINGS

for Julio Cortázar

On the second page the girl was murdered. Kelius read on. The murderer, as yet faceless, spread a plastic dropcloth over the tiles in the kitchen and drew a surgeon's hacksaw from the lining of his overcoat. He began to disremember the body. In detail. Kelius was sickened, recalled to himself that it was only fiction, and read on, oblivious to the jolting of the bus. The murderer wedged the torso into a suitcase, arranged the limbs around it, packed tight, before the stiffness began to set in. It was 4:51. The girl's father was due home at 5:00. Even now he was out in the street, striding along in the welter of heads and shoulders, handbags and briefcases. Kelius watched the glow of the kitchen clock as the murderer hurried to hide his traces. Suddenly the bus was stopping. Kelius looked up and his stomach clenched—they were at the border already. Half a page left in the chapter. His eyes rushed down the ranks of columns and letters. The murderer was rinsing his dropcloth in the shower, water running red against the porcelain. Then he rolled it up, jammed it into the suitcase, dropped the twin latches, hefted his burden and slipped out the door. "Señor." It was the bus driver. "Es la hora de bajar. Estamos llegado a la frontera." Kelius did not speak the language, but understood the gestures. He reluctantly folded back the page, tucked the book under his arm, and stepped out into the sun.

There were men in uniforms with mustaches and automatic weapons. A gate, a little brick building, two jeeps, a truck, an old Ford. Kelius could make out the river off to his right, a metallic glint caught in the tentacles of the cactus. He followed the others into the building.

It was absurd, he knew, but every time he went through this he felt that something would go wrong, that they'd somehow detain him, refuse to let him pass the border. He never dealt in contraband, and gladly paid duty on the things he brought back to sell in his tourist shop. And he had money. Still, he thought of the uniforms, the strange harsh language and arcane laws, the implacable yellow faces of the men with guns.

Inside he showed his passport. The man behind the desk made a notation in his ledger and stamped the document. "Pase por la puerta allá," he said, indicating a door at the far end of the room. Kelius followed the finger, beginning to sweat under the arm where he'd tucked the book.

The door opened into a larger room with a long table. The other passengers were there. They were spreading their luggage on the table for the benefit of the inspectors. Kelius observed that the inspectors wore uniforms identical to those worn by the men outside. They were young and relentless. They neither smiled, nor spoke. They pointed, poked, sifted, rattled Kelius waited his turn. He rested a foot on one of his bags, the silver *K* like a mirror, then opened the book and resumed his reading. The story rushed back on him. He saw the girl's father standing at the elevator, watching the numbers descend. And then the murderer brushing by him as the doors parted. The

irony. The father stepped into the elevator and the doors closed on him like the shutter of a lens. At the same moment the murderer hurried through the front door, down the steps and into the street. His gait was awkward, the suitcase tugging at his arm. Up the street, the bus. He hailed it. "Señor." Kelius looked up. His suitcase was on the table. The inspector motioned for him to open it. It was then that he became aware of the flies, then that the blood rushed to his bowels, then that he tripped the twin latches and pulled back the lid of the suitcase, stamped with flashing *K* and packed tight with the stiff, wet, hacked and already decomposing flesh of a young girl.

ROCK & ROLL HEAVEN

for Griff Stevens

I died and went to rock & roll heaven. It looked like Houston Street. This can't be rock & roll heaven, I thought.

A fat black man in a dirty white suit was sitting on a suitcase tootling on a saxophone. Other black men were lying on the sidewalk. They were asleep. I decided to ask the fat black man if this was rock & roll heaven. "This rock & roll heaven?" I said.

He stopped tootling. The saxophone was like a buttercup in his big black hands. "No, this be-bop heaven," he said. "You want two blocks down."

I passed a knishery on the way. The sign said: Yonah Shimmel, 97 Years in Business. I hadn't eaten since I'd died. The smell of hot knishes was a siren song to a man who has no qualms about mixing metaphors. I stopped in. It was dark, but non-threatening. After all, this was heaven.

Two men in open-to-the-navel shirts were sitting on a table, making music. One of them had an acoustic guitar, the other had a mouthharp. What they were playing sounded a lot like rock & roll. "Hey," I said, "that rock & roll you're playing?"

The man with the mouthharp stopped sawing the instrument across his lips. His hair was in ringlets, his eyes were blue. "Where's your ear, man? This is blue-eyed blues." He pulled a second mouthharp from a glass of water and shot through a series of high stops, sucking and puffing. Music filled the room.

I took a table in back and rested my axe against a chair. The waiter was bald. I ordered a kasha knish and homemade yogurt. The waiter held the steaming knish in his hands and sang "Lassù in cielo" from *Rigoletto*.

"I had the impression this was blue-eyed blues heaven," I said.

"This ain't my neighborhood," the waiter said. "I live over on the other side of town. In opera heaven."

The next block was choked with organ grinders and dancing monkeys. I was confused. I stopped to listen to thick-eared man in a Pinocchio hat. He ground out a rendition of *The Dance of the Sugar-Plum Fairy* while his monkey executed a tricky series of glissades and entrechats. When it was over the man handed me a quarter. I put it in the monkey's cup. "Tank-a-you," the man said.

I followed my ears. They took me through reggae heaven, disco heaven, punk heaven and mariachi heaven. In punk heaven people were cutting themselves with razor blades and amplifying air-raid sounds. There was dancing in the streets in mariachi heaven.

I heard a sound like thunder in the distance. It could have been rock & roll. I hurried toward it. Three blocks down I turned a corner and found myself in St. Celia's

Square. All the buildings round the square had organ pipes, bronze like the sun, instead of chimneys. In the middle of the square, just under the statue, a man in a periwig sat at an organ. His fingers made mountains quake, his feet toppled buildings in distant parts of the city. No one had to tell me. I was in toccata & fugue heaven.

In showtune heaven I met Frieda. She was wearing a peasant blouse, chamois jumper and patent-leather shoes.

I'd just turned down a street of sand-blasted brownstones, dejected, axe under arm, when a man in ducktail haircut came bounding up to me. He vaulted a fire hydrant and a phalanx of parking meters. His mouth was open. "I'm the luckiest guy in the world!" he sang. Shutters opened up and down the block. Faces leaned from them. "He's the luckiest guy in the world!" they howled. He spread his arms and threw his head back. "In love with the love-liest girl!" The faces retreated coyly, but reappeared on the upbeat to shriek, "He's in love with the loveliest girl!"

"I don't mean to be a wet blanket," I said, "but I'm really not all that interested in your private ecstasies or the state of your soul. Not that I have anything against ecstasy per se, but the fact is I'm trying to get to the rock & roll heaven."

"Rock & roll heaven?" he warbled interrogatively.

"Rock & roll heaven?" the faces returned.

He planted his feet and swelled himself with a titanic breath of air. "Neveerrrrrrrr," he began.

"Neveerrrrrrrr," echoed the faces.

"Heerrrrrrd...of it!"

"He's never heard of it!" sang the voices on high.

I sat down on my sturdy masonite axe case and buried my face in my hands. When I looked up, the street was deserted and Frieda stood before me. Her cheeks were stuffed with cotton, her hair was in braids.

"Looks like you stumbled into the wrong heaven," she said.

"I'm looking for rock & roll heaven," I said.

She held out her hand.

Frieda was not in costume. Actually she lived in polka heaven, but worked musicals on the side. Her outfit pretty much restricted her to *Fiddler on the Roof* and revivals of *Heidi*. She took me home with her.

Frieda's father weighed three hundred pounds. He was wearing lederhosen and a cap with a tassel. He played accordion. Frieda's mother played tuba. Neighbors roasted chestnuts, kartoffels and bratwurst, raised steins of black beer and stamped over the floorboards of the tiny apartment. I danced with Frieda. She took me into a corner and held a wet sausage to my lips. Then she drew the cotton from her cheeks and kissed me. It was all very gemütlich. And yet it wasn't rock & roll.

Frieda's directions led me straight to rock & roll heaven by way of turkey-in-the-straw heaven and bossa nova heaven. Rock & roll heaven looked a lot like the Felt Forum. There were lines of people outside. The people were drinking white port from the bottle and smoking dope. Some of them were hawking tickets. I heard the strains of *Jumpin' Jack Flash* and knew I was home.

I pushed through the crowd with my axe held high. A man in a *Vita Brevis, Ars*

Longa T-shirt stopped me at the gate. “Where you think you’re going?” he said.

“Inside,” I said.

His hair was like plant life. He was big enough to break the backs of normal people like breadsticks. “Oh yeah?” he said. “Well let me tell you something: I don’t recognize you.”

I unhoused my axe, plugged it into one of the hundreds of amps stacked up round the gate, and gave him a dose of *Treetorn Boogie* from our last album.

He folded his arms. “Still don’t recognize you,” he said.

“Lead guitar with The Toads.”

“Never heard of them.”

I was stunned. “Never heard of us? We cut eleven albums for Electra. Cover of the *Rolling Stone*, coast-to-coast TV. When I split up with Krista I got 20,000 letters in one day.”

“Sorry.” He struck a match on his bicep and lit a cigarette.

I lashed into *Serengetti Serenade*, our big single. The chords mounted like leapfrogging thunderstorms. I played the savannah, the spring of the springbok, the roar of the lion. I played the heat of midday, the solitude of the baobab, the deathscreech of the hyena. I played my heart out.

He was laughing. “You couldn’t even make a session man around here, brother,” he said. “I mean this is rock & roll *heaven*. We got the King here. And everybody else you ever heard of. What do you think, we let just any hack off the street in here?”

I stretched my axe on the blacktop like a crucified christ. Feedback hissed through the amp. Inside they were playing *Rock & Roll Never Forgets*. I turned my back on the gate and made my way through the crowd, wondering how long it would take to learn tuba.

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