



Hank Kirton

THE CROONER

The Crooner sat alone in his dressing room. He'd draped an old, stained tablecloth over the mirror and had unscrewed most of the light-bulbs around the frame. Dressing room lights were always too bright and the mirrors captured too many hard memories. He wore his life on his face.

He lifted a pint of whiskey from his pocket. He wasn't supposed to drink anymore. Pancreatitis had nearly killed him, twice. But that was years ago, before he'd gained a sense of balance. A few nips wouldn't hurt him now. He uncapped the bottle and took a long slow pull, savoring the taste and burn as it filled his throat and washed warmth through his belly

Relief, finally.

A hard rap at the door and he heard Lou say, "You ready in there?"

"Just a sec. I'll be out in a sec," answered the Crooner.

He thought about Candy. He thought about his daughter, Ginger. He thought about Candy's funeral and how angry Ginger had been. She was unreasonable, that girl. Her husband, a big Irish cop named Bobby hated the Crooner. Ginger told him things, ugly, untrue things. At Candy's funeral, The Crooner was afraid Bobby was going to punch him or arrest him or something (the big palooka had worn his uniform to the service), but all he did was keep a cool distance and shoot the Crooner



dirty looks. If he wasn't a cop, the Crooner might have gone over and said something.

The Crooner stared at the worn yellow tablecloth and thought about these things. He noticed his hands were shaking.

He lifted the bottle again.

Lou opened the door. "Hey, let's go. We got people."

"Yeah?" said the Crooner, turning around in his chair. "How many?"

"Enough. Get your ass out there."

"I played with Connee Boswell," the Crooner said.

"What?"

"I played with Connee Boswell."

"I don't give a shit if you fucked all three Andrews Sisters in the ass. Get onstage. Now!"

The Crooner sighed and stood up. The whiskey had made him hot and wobbly. He looked at the cloth as if looking at his hidden reflection. Shit, he didn't need a mirror to see himself.

He was careful to avoid Lou's eyes as he shuffled out of the dressing room, down the small dark hallway, and onto the tiny wooden stage. He felt the creaks beneath his feet.

The three-piece band stopped playing when they saw him.

The room was dark, the air thick with smoke and the smell of whiskey and beer. Rhonda the waitress was checking the tables. The Crooner remembered when there were four dames working the floor. Now they were down to one. Pathetic.

He looked toward the bar. Mel, the bartender, was twisting spills from a gray rag, a cigarette pinched in the corner of his scowling mouth. The Crooner wished he could order a drink from the stage, like in the old days, but Lou had a strict policy against drinking on the job. Like most managers, Lou was a petty, vindictive little prick.

The audience was drinking, talking, smoking, laughing, coughing. The Crooner counted ten people. No, wait, two more in the back. An



audience of twelve. It was a banner night.

He hit his mark at the center of the stage.

And began to sing.

He sang, *The Day After Forever*, one of his favorite songs.

Nobody paid much attention. Conversations continued, drink orders were placed, jokes told.

The Crooner didn't bother to belt out the tune, didn't bother to engage in theatrics. What was the point? The only set of eyes on him belonged to Mel. Not even Lou was listening.

The Crooner stopped, coughed into his handkerchief, and then began singing, *Don't Forget Tonight, Tomorrow*.

When he started singing, *Alice Blue Gown*, a party of four stood up, preparing to leave.

The Crooner stopped singing. After a few seconds, the band slowed to a stop behind him. He grabbed the microphone and leaned forward, squinting against the lights, into the darkness.

"Hey you," he said.

The two couples didn't notice him. The men packed up their cigarettes and matches, one man began counting out Rhonda's tip. He dropped it on the table, and then pushed in his chair. One of the women was looking into a compact mirror, applying lipstick.

"You! Hey!" The Crooner yelled.

The couples stopped and turned toward the stage.

"Am I annoying you?" the Crooner asked.

The foursome just looked at him.

"I said, *Am I annoying you?*"

He removed the whiskey bottle from his pocket and took a long sip.

One of the men stepped forward. "What's your problem, man?"

"No problem. I just wanted to know if my singing annoys you. I'd be glad to stop if it does." He took another swig of whiskey. "The customer is always right. Right?"



The man dismissed the Crooner with an absent wave. “Ah, we’re outta here, man.” He turned to leave.

“I played with Connee Boswell!” The Crooner yelled at them as they headed toward the door.

“Hey! Come back here! I fucked the Andrews Sisters in the ass!” he screamed and laughed as Lou and Mel grabbed his arms and bum-rushed him out the back where they dropped him in the alley. The Crooner fell to the ground.

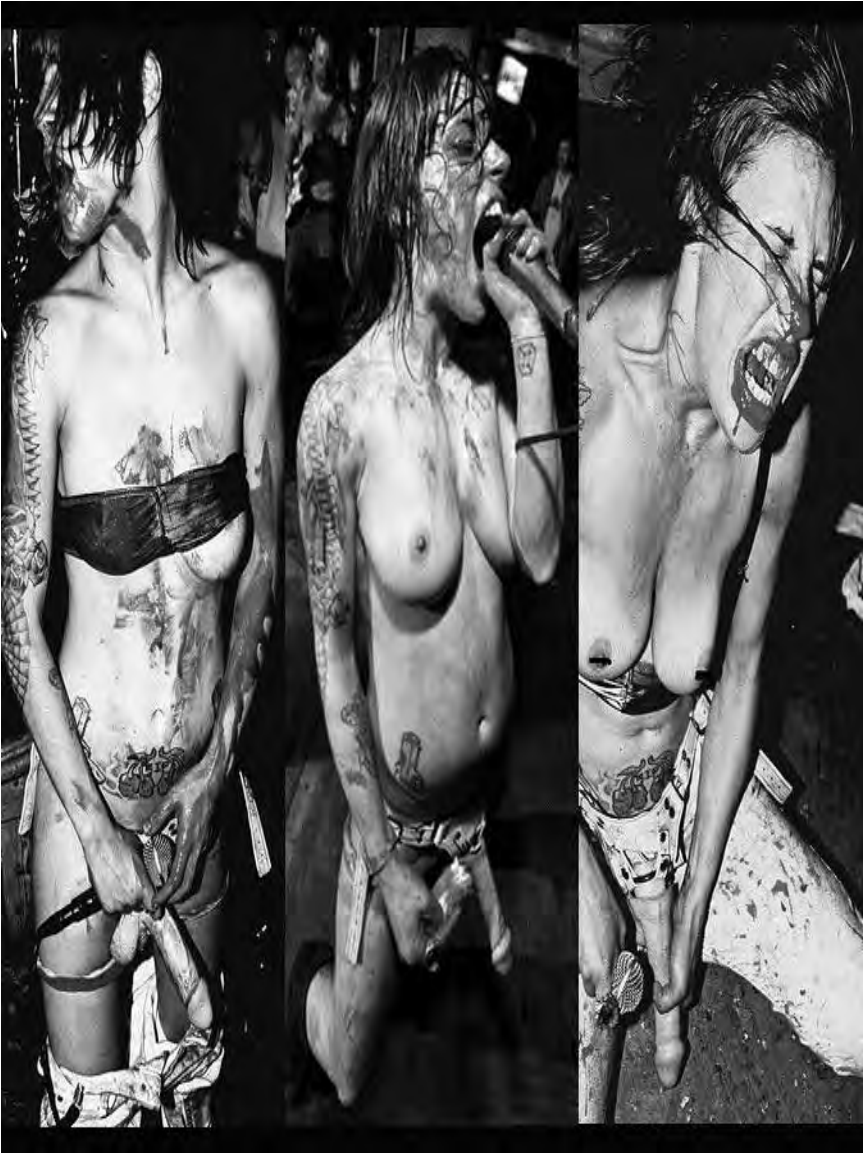
Lou tossed a crumpled twenty at him. “I’m done with you,” he said. “You wanna work? Go dig up Connee Boswell, ya stew-bum.”

Lou and Mel went back inside.

The Crooner struggled to his feet, dusted dirt from his pants and then took a long choking swallow of whiskey, emptying the bottle. He threw it, smashing it against the metal door.

He opened his hand and looked at the balled-up twenty. He had two choices; give it to his landlord or buy some wine.

It was no choice at all. He’d buy some wine and flop at Skeet’s. Skeet was always good for a few laughs. He lurched down the alley, thinking about what had just happened, savoring what he was starting to regard as the greatest performance of his life.



Stephanie, vocalist for the band "Tinsel Teeth"