



Michael Bertea

The Vagabond Madonna...

It was somewhere between his rented room and the bar that he had his epiphany. The Madonna had taken the form of a homeless woman in tattered clothes. When she spoke, the light from the open door surrounded her like a holy aura. When she spoke, it was like the voices of a thousand angels speaking at once. As she held out her hand for the spare change, that was meant to buy his cheap whiskey, she asked, “What if this is as good as it gets?” With these words, Frank Harrison decided that maybe it was.

As he sat at the bar, Frank could not shake the words of the vagabond Madonna, on the stoop of the YWCA. The voices of the angels still rang in his ears, “What if this is as good as it gets?”. He tried to drown the voices of the angels with cheap whiskey and selections from the jukebox, but still the words of the vagabond Madonna echoed deep into his whiskey soaked soul.

“Do you believe in God?” Frank asked the bartender.

“I will as soon as you pay your fucking bar tab.” The bartender replied.

“Have you ever asked yourself, is this as good as it gets?”

“What’s with these philosophical questions? Have you been reading the Gideon’s Bible, in your room before you black out in that hovel you reside?” the bartender inquired.

“Just asking, asshole. Speaking of my tab, add another whiskey to



it. My check comes on Wednesday.” Frank said.

“I tell you what, you stop with all this religious crap and not only will I pour you another whiskey, on the house, I’ll punch you up some credits on the jukebox and we can hear the gospel according to Willie, Waylon, Hank and Cash.”

“That sounds good to me. Since it’s on the house, make it a Jack Daniels”

“Don’t push it. And for the record; Yes, this is as good as it gets” The bartender said as he handed Frank his drink and punched in the free credits on the jukebox.

With these words of conformation, Frank knew that the vagabond Madonna had indeed been sent to him. He drank his drink slowly as Hank Williams sang about love lost. With every word the country crooner sang, he felt as if he had written every word about him, even though Hank Williams had been drug dead out of a hotel, in Knoxville, nearly a decade before Frank Harrison had been born.

The afternoon had faded into twilight and Frank Harrison had sunk to the bottom of the whiskey bottle. He stumbled from the bar, to the door and out into the night. Frank Harrison was an inebriated, nocturnal creature that had emerged from his lair of iniquity, to prowl the streets of the city. The most prevalent thought was to find the vagrant Madonna and ask why she had been sent to him.

Frank Harrison wandered aimlessly up the crowded sidewalks. He had went to the YWCA, where he had first encountered the vagrant Madonna, but had been thrown out after only minutes of his inquiry about the woman who had the holy aura and the voice of a thousand angels. Still, he searched the streets and alleyways, looking for his vagrant Madonna. He would not stop until he found her.

While on his quest, Frank had stopped in various bars that would still serve him. The question of the vagrant Madonna haunted him more with every glass of cheap whiskey that he consumed. What if it really was as good as it got? What if life was this never ending cycle of



inebriation and shared loneliness with cheap prostitutes? He emptied his glass and stumbled back out into the night.

In an alleyway, Frank's vagabond Madonna lay amongst the trash of the city, dead. The rats crawled over her eating away at her now rotting flesh. She had come to this city with dreams, but the city had crushed them. Her small-town aspirations had been to be an actress, but the only part she got was pretending that her life had not come to this. She filled her empty soul with cheap wine and the accompaniment of strangers for an hourly fee. She died thinking that life had got as good as it would get; that she had meant nothing to anyone. She had no idea that she had been someone's vagabond Madonna.

Frank Harrison passed the alleyway where the vagabond Madonna lay, on the way back to his rented room at the Riverfront Hotel. As he passed the alleyway, he vomited. He had forgotten his quest and was now in search of the comfort of his rat infested dwelling.

As he approached the steps of the Riverfront hotel, a prostitute asked if he had any money. He told her that he got his check on Wednesday. The prostitute ignored him and perched against the light post, the remains of her last date running down her leg.

Frank Harrison made it to his room and fumbled for his key. After a struggle with the lock, he went into the room and fell up on the bug ridden bed. On his bed laid the Gideon's Bible. Frank opened it and searched for the story of the Virgin Mother. He didn't know why. As he began his downward spiral into sleep he said aloud, "This IS as good as it gets..."

It was three days before the hotel manager found Frank Harrison's dead body. It was Wednesday and he had brought Frank's check to him. The room stank of stale smoke, spilt whiskey and death. On the bed, beside Frank's corpse, laid the Gideon's Bible, opened to the book of Matthew. The manager closed the eyes of the now dead Frank Harrison and pulled a sheet over the corpse, like a proverbial shroud Turin.