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## Sheet Music

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## Sheet Music

Jerry L. Harris

In the darkness, Lynnette stood naked and shivering. A speck of red on Michael's battery-powered smoke detector was all she could see. She had avoided "making love" as he put it, for the past six months, and during that time Michael had been very patient, very considerate.

She had met Michael through Emmett, her ex-husband, after Michael began playing in Double Take, Emmett's former country and western swing band. Michael knew how Emmett had left her and the band for a little bleach-blond slut of a singer who worked in an all-girl group called Hot Biscuits--and he knew what an egotistical S.O.B. Emmett was. Michael played a triple neck, pedal steel guitar and got along with the other band members, but he and Emmett hated each other.

Emmett played fiddle, and everybody knows fiddle players have got to have things their own way. "Jesus H. Christ! Michael can't improvise," Emmett had complained to her. "Who ever heard of a steel player that has to have sheet music in front of him before he can play? Leon never needed sheet music." Leon was Emmett's former steel player.

"Maybe Leon was so busy following your lead that he didn't have time to read sheet music," she had said. As the group's front man, its star, Emmett demanded that the band pay attention to him. He was always in the heat of the spotlight, always playing lead, always singing, always watching for audience reaction and always improvising.

Sometimes, during a show, Emmett's improvising meant changing the order of the playlist or repeating a chorus or verse; sometimes it meant setting up a wild backbeat, sawing on the fiddle, and jitterbugging across the stage.

He'd get cooking on "The Orange Blossom Special," and by the second chorus the whole crowd would be dancing right along with him, whether they wanted to or not. And it was hard to tell if their applause led to Emmett's improvisations, or if his squealing, squalling fiddling led to their applause. He had a devilish instinct for intensity and impulsiveness, and performing for a responsive audience seemed to excite Emmett more than anything. Sometimes Emmett would yell, "Key of G, follow me!" and begin playing a song nobody in the band had heard before. He'd play through a verse and chorus, the band trying to keep up, then he'd hog the microphone and begin to sing. He called this process "spontaneous combustion," and he swore he made up the lyrics as he went along. Lynnette remembered one song in particular. She could remember how Emmett shouted the first verse, almost taunting the audience:

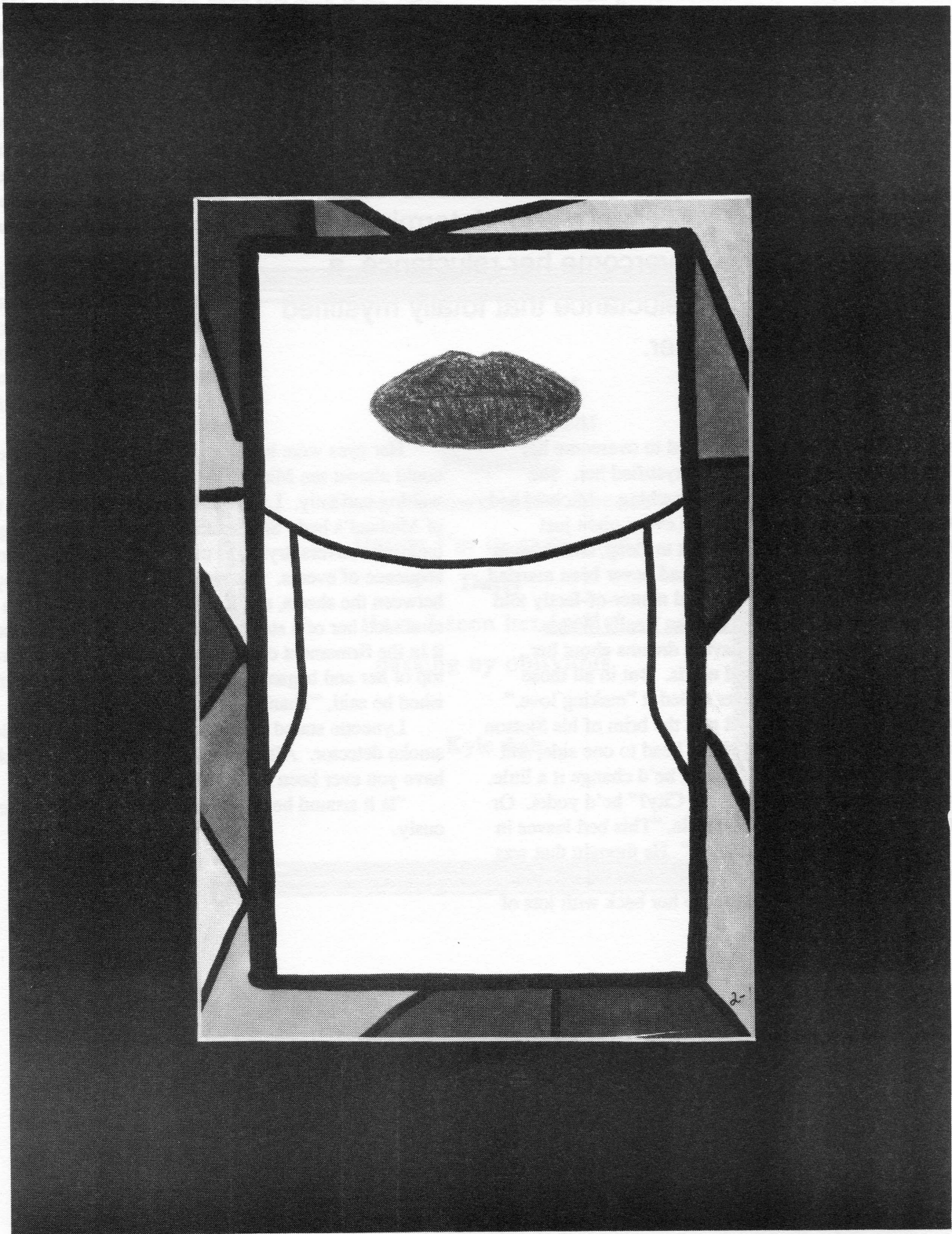
Have you ever been to New York City?  
Honey, it's a long, long way to go.  
I sure want to see New York City;  
I want to go there before I get old.

Emmett's impulsiveness caused a great deal of anxiety for the band, though. They never knew for sure what he'd do next and had to watch for his quirky directions. Nothing could be taken for granted. A raised eyebrow, a wink, a nod, a leap in the air; these were signals meaning as much to the band as a conductor's baton-waving means to an orchestra. Everyone watched Emmett's performance, everyone except Michael: his eyes never left his sheet music.

In the darkness, Lynnette's emotions were jumbled and confused. Something about that tiny red light on Michael's smoke detector magnified her confusion. She couldn't understand it. She wanted to feel secure and happy; sleeping with Michael ought to be an enjoyable occasion. But their relationship so far had been tinged with an unshakable sadness. Sometimes Michael reminded her of the organist at church, the way he sat almost frozen behind his steel guitar, his hands methodically moving from one fretboard to another, feet efficiently working the pedals as he peered intently at his sheet music. His solos were heavy, almost hymnal. His favorite song was "Red Sails in the Sunset" and it always made her cry. She seemed drawn, however, to Michael's straightforward musicianship. He spent hours practicing.

"When I want to zig and zag, Michael wants to play it straight," Emmett had moaned. "What's he reading back there, The Christian-Science Monitor? The Baptist Standard?"

"What's wrong with playing it straight?" she had asked. "Maybe Michael knows more about how it's supposed to go than you do. Maybe he's playing it like it



Robin Thompson

ought to be played," she remembered telling Emmett.

She appreciated the way Michael took time to listen to her, and Michael seemed to enjoy the stories about her and Emmett's painful divorce and everything that went with it: about how she hoped and prayed Emmett would catch AIDS from Miss Hot Twat and die a slow, painful death, and then burn in the fiery furnaces of hell forever and ever, amen. However, the divorce was over a year old by now, and Michael was right: it was time for her to get over it, time to forget Emmett--time to make love.

She stood perfectly still, staring hard at the tiny red light above Michael's bed, determined to overcome her reluctance, a reluctance that totally mystified her. She could hear Michael's slow, steady breathing. Michael had told her that he stared at the red light every night just before he prayed, just before he went to sleep, and thought about her. He was twenty-five and had never been married, never had a steady girlfriend. He had matter-of-factly told her he'd been reading What A Woman Really Wants.

He said he felt guilty for having dreams about her.

She understood. People had needs. But in all those years of marriage, Emmett never called it "making love." When Emmett wanted her, he'd pull the brim of his Stetson to just above his eyebrows, cock his head to one side, and begin to sing "New York City," only he'd change it a little. "Have you ever been to New Hump City?" he'd yodel. Or he'd mumble, Humphrey Bogart style, "This bed leaves in three minutes, sweetheart. Be on it." He thought that was really funny. When she took a bath Emmett would come in, roll up his shirtsleeves, and scrub her back with lots of

soap. He'd wash and wash and wash and say, "You're so sweet I could drink your bath water." Then he'd be in the tub with her. Sometimes when she stood at the sink doing dishes, he'd sneak up behind her, put his hands under her blouse and nibble her ears and say, "This is a stickup, lady. Give me all you got." When she turned around, he'd Texas two-step her across the kitchen and into the bedroom. Emmett was always doing stuff like that.

Michael was right, though. This was no time for guilt. Emmett wasn't coming back, not to her, not to the band, and all that cavorting with him over and done with. Now it was time to make love.

Her eyes were beginning to adjust to the darkness. She could almost see Michael now. He was lying very still, waiting patiently. Lynnette forced herself to sit on the edge of Michael's bed. She waited a little while before getting under the covers, trying to concentrate on the correct sequence of events. She needed to do it right. Slipping between the sheets, she lost the tiny red light which reminded her of a star in another galaxy. As she looked for it in the firmament of Michael's dark bedroom, he rolled on top of her and began. He weighed a ton. And when he finished he said, "Thank you."

Lynnette stared at the wavering red light on Michael's smoke detector. After a while she whispered, "Michael, have you ever been to New Hump City?"

"Is it around here?" he asked, very patiently, very seriously.