

# Dr. Hackenbush Gets a Job

Ginger Mayerson



*The Wapshott Press*

# Dr. Hackenbush Gets a Job

Published by  
The Wapshott Press  
PO Box 31513  
Los Angeles, CA 90031



*The Wapshott Press*  
www.WapshottPress.com

Copyright © 2002 and 2010 by Ginger Mayerson

First printing March 2010

All rights reserved. Being a work of fiction, any resemblance herein to persons living or dead is astonishing and purely coincidental. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system now known or to be invented, without permission in writing from the publisher, except by a reviewer who wishes to quote brief passages in connection with a review written for inclusion in a magazine, newspaper, or broadcast.

ISBN: 978-0-9825813-0-8

06 05 04 03    4 3 2 1

Wapshott Press logo by Molly Kiely

Cover design by Robin Austin

## *Author's Preface*

Long ago, in the mid 1980s, I was working a boring temp job at the old Red Cross building on Wilshire in Westlake. Nothing against boring temp jobs, they can be very restful, but this one was so boring, I began to mull over the story that would become *Dr. Hackenbush Gets a Job* and the other novels about Hackenbush and her milieu. I'd been playing the baritone ukulele to amuse myself and toying with the idea of starting a band. This never actually happened because writing chamber music was taking up all my spare time and energy. So I was living the Hackenbushian life of losing sleep due to working a day job and making music in every other possible moment, but not in nightclubs or at casual gigs. I had many of the same experiences of meeting people in offices who had been in the arts and were either relieved or regretful that they no longer were, or people who didn't really understand the life I was living, but were interested and sympathetic. They came to concerts and sometimes became friends. And so while I wasn't writing the Hackenbush saga, I was certainly thinking about it.

Around 2000, I ran out of things to say as a composer and stopped writing music, thought a few things over, and then segued into writing prose. Thank God for the internet because I was lucky to meet other writers online and learned the basics, wrote very bad things that got useful critiques and found the love and editorial support to write the Hackenbush novels and everything else. After writing the three Hackenbush novels I'd been mulling over for fifteen or so years, I began the long agent query quest. Dr. Hackenbush found a fan in William Reiss at John Hawkins Literary Agency, and bless him, Bill went above and beyond to find a publisher for *Dr. Hackenbush Gets a Job*. I've quoted a few of the editorial responses on the back cover. Having been in

music, I thrive on rejection, but I must say that at this level, rejection is damn near self-esteem boosting.

But, if you're reading this, you know that *Dr. Hackenbush Gets a Job* has finally been published, and there are many people to thank for that. The endlessly patient Jane Seaton, who's read and edited my work from the very beginning while offering nothing but good advice and encouragement. Laurel Sutton, who's read, edited, and was the wind beneath my wings in the agent hunt. Lynn Loper, the strictest, most patient proofreader in the world. More recently, thank you to Robin Austin for the beautiful Hackenbush.org website and the cover of this book, and Kris Anderson, Molly Kiley, and Kathryn L. Ramage for three (count 'em, three) more proofreads before publication. And last but certainly not least, Bill Reiss, my wonderful agent, who liked this novel enough to inspire me not to give up on getting it published somewhere, someday, which is here and now. Thank you, everyone, this book would not have seen the light of day without you all.

And if I did dedications, I would dedicate this book to anyone who's ever had to work a day job when they'd rather be making art.

Ginger Mayerson  
January 2010

Dr. Hackenbush  
Gets a Job

1988

Yeah, it was a bad night. Ended up that way. Started out a good night. No intonation problems, nobody late or too stoned to play right, Shorty was dancing like an angel, and even Wang the Bartender was in a good mood.

And then Hackenbush watched it all go to hell, even assisted it into hell. But what's a lady to do when some gorilla in a plaid shirt attacks your dance partner?

"Say, fella, you wouldn't hit a girl wearing glasses, would you?" Edging between a mountain of drunk and Shorty, Hackenbush pointed at her big, black horn rims. This brought out the buried chivalry in the drunk; he snatched her baritone ukulele and crunched it up instead of her nose.

It's always such a shame when one must sacrifice one's baritone ukulele to an enraged bar patron, but there are times when it's just fucking necessary. Either that or watch Shorty get his jaws busted.

The ensuing brawl was quick and to the point: the drunk, joined by other drunks, tore the Lotus Room bar of the New Hotel Watanabe to bits. Luckily, no lives, instruments, except the baritone, or musicians were lost.

"So, Wang," Hackenbush began after the police were gone, "see ya tomorrow?" She lit an unfiltered Pall Mall and picked a shred of tobacco off her tongue.

"I think not, Hackenbush."

Hackenbush followed Wang's gaze over her left shoulder and was face to face with her favorite club owner, the fabulous Mr. Hikaru Tanaka.

"Oh, Mr. Tanaka!" Hackenbush enthused with more energy than she felt. "How nice to see you."

Tanaka looked around at the wreckage, the musicians packing up, Shorty Smith and Hackenbush and raised his voice: "This bar is closed until further notice."

It was bad enough, but then Hackenbush had to take a

cab home because her ancient convertible Karmann-Ghia would start and keep running, but not move forward in any gear.

Tow trucks were not Hackenbush's enemy. The reason for calling a tow truck—that was the enemy. Or maybe just nemesis. Or bad luck. Or simply that the good luck that kept the wrecks Hackenbush drove running just finally did what good luck eventually does, which is pack up, and then you call a tow truck. So, Hackenbush called a tow truck the next morning to tow her car to her mechanic.

She thanked God for Auto Club even though, after the last tow, they had suggested her car problems were more than their organization could help her with. So even Auto Club comes to the end of its good will eventually. Auto Club and Mr. Tanaka had just about had enough Hackenbush.

'He'll get over it,' she thought, climbing out of the tow truck. She waved at Roberto, VW mechanic and sole proprietor. "Hopefully."

"What?" The tow driver was a stocky, swarthy bear of a man and thought he'd misheard.

"I said hopefully he'll get over it." Hackenbush handed him her AAA card.

"Who?"

"Vice President Bush." Hackenbush signed her trip sheet or whatever the hell it was one signed after a tow. "He seems so angry. Rich angry white guy who wants to be President of the US. Hopefully he'll get over it. How'd you vote in the last election?" She wrestled a cigarette out of the pack and lit it.

"Communist." He handed her back her Auto Club card.

"Really? What a shocking waste of time." She picked a shred of tobacco off her tongue.

"Not in Yerevan." The driver waved gallantly, speeding off to rescue the next paid-up Auto Club damsel in distress. A dead bug; old VWs were most of his business, so he liked them.

"Making friends, Hackenbush?" Roberto looked up from the back of her Ghia.

“I try to be a ray of sunshine in the life of everyone I meet,” she said, and then decided to stub out her cigarette in street, far away from the gas hoses Roberto was waving around.

“I think I have bad news for you, sunshine,” Roberto said, when she got back. “Looks like the tranny died.”

“Couldn’t it just be tranny fluid?” He showed her the suitably pink dipstick. “Ah. What’s a Ghia tranny cost these days?”

“A thousand and takes a couple of days.”

“It’s gonna take me more than a couple of days to get a thousand bucks together.” And pay the rent, and buy a new uke, and find a new steady money gig, and...

“How long?”

“If I can get a temp gig right away, couple of weeks; maybe more,” she said, after a review of her finances, which didn’t take long, and who she could tap for a loan, which took even less time. “What’ll you charge me for storage?”

“If you can get it outta here in three weeks, it’s on the house.”

“Ah, Christmas is early this year.” She gave his arm a grateful squeeze. “Four weeks?”

“Check back in three. See how I’m feeling.” Roberto closed the trunk.

“Give me a lift down to Wilshire?” Hackenbush tapped up a smoke and offered it to him.

“Sorry, my driver’s picking up parts in the valley.” He accepted the cigarette. “Bus that goes downtown stops across the street there. You can get a westbound at Wilshire and Fig.”

Get it, yes; like it, no. “Can you give me change for a five?” she asked politely.

“Well, that I can do.”

It was a shame that Hackenbush was unable to look down in a moving vehicle without getting nauseated. It meant she couldn’t read on the bus and had time to think.

Thinking while driving has a necessarily superficial quality to it. One is driving, after all, and crashing due to

thinking too hard doesn't go over well with the insurance company. Hackenbush never crashed her cars; they crashed internally or other cars crashed into them while parked. And it was hard to think in the go-carts she drove while part of her was willing it into continuing motion, moment by moment, mile by mile.

So she dreaded the bus. Not the company, nor the wasted time, nor the plastic seats, nor the scratched windows; none of that really bothered her. It was the hours she'd spend catching up on all the thinking she wasn't doing in the car or anywhere else.

How was Hackenbush, at age thirty-one, unable to pull together two thousand dollars on short notice? Or even fifteen hundred? Was her luck running out again? Why was she living on luck anyway? Savings: what a concept.

And the review went on and on. It helped to focus on the concrete. On the plus side, she had two hundred in the savings, a hundred in checking, about eighty in cash, a check coming for the past week at the Lotus Room (Tanaka was pissed, but he wouldn't hold up the band's money) out of which she would get five hundred.

On the down side she needed a grand for the car, two hundred for a new baritone ukulele, and then more money for rent, food, and transportation. And to get all this, she needed gigs, and lots of them, to keep her going. She couldn't gig until she got a new uke. Well, she could, but she got fewer just-singing jobs. Clubs and caterers hired *Dr. Hackenbush and her Orchestra* and that included a baritone ukulele, which she didn't have just then.

That left temp jobs. They were okay as long as they paid well and didn't go on too long. They were okay if there were any around. One thing in her favor was that it was only February and the students would all be in school or working nights and weekends only. That left a fairly good field of office jobs. Typing jobs. Jobs where you're worshipped if you can just get there on time. And if you can function, well, you might be elevated from idol to deity by lunchtime.

Temp jobs: friend or foe? She'd worked jobs at big, monster companies where temps had been there as long as

eight years. They might yet still be there. After eight years, they ought to hire that person, retroactive by seven years. But it just didn't work that way. A temp stayed on her toes or she (or he) was out. Eight years is a long time to be on your toes with no benefits. Or maybe they had benefits; Hackenbush had heard of agencies that would let you buy some benefits after a while. Yeah, buy; they're making sixty percent on top of your hourly labor and you can buy something they ought to give you if they had a decent...

"Oh thank God," Hackenbush groaned as the bus jerked to a stop and she could stop thinking this bullshit.

"For what?" the driver asked.

"It's not raining." They watched a shower start. "Ah. It's so good for the crops."

"Right, lady. Have a good day."

"Yeah, thanks buddy, you too." She hopped off the bus and dashed for the minimal awning across the sidewalk. Architects in Los Angeles either didn't believe in wet weather or never rode the bus or both. Anyway, no point in waiting for it slack off; LA rain never did when you needed it to—it could always outwait you. Lucky that Temporary Insanity was close by; sometimes fate let you outsmart the rain. Ha ha.

Anna Kodaly ran Temporary Insanity out of a couple of hundred square feet in one of the more modest and elderly towers on Wilshire between Westlake and Korea Town. It was cheap and cheerful; the building being neither new nor sleek suited Anna and her clientele down to the ground. She dealt in other peoples' needs; understaffed offices and cash-strapped free-lance secretaries preferred to face their problems without the distraction of pretentious décor and a fashionable address. Unlike her clients, Kodaly didn't need much in the way of an office, just phone and file space mainly. She was glad to have it after trying to work out of her apartment where a bad case of cabin fever took care of that idea for good.

So, the sole proprietor of Temporary Insanity looked up at the damp and bedraggled Hackenbush pushing open the door and smiled. It was always nice to see Hackenbush. Nice for Anna, meant she'd make a few bucks off the Hackenbush secretarial magic; not so nice for Hackenbush, who was

usually in a jam.

Kodaly had worked for a big agency before opening her own. In that time she'd noticed a few things, such as the best temps were usually in the arts and not making much money there. They were the ones who could find the address, get there, do the job and even leave a good, often excellent, impression. But to leave was the important thing; these people did good work because it was a short-term thing and didn't completely demoralize them.

So Anna saved her money and opened Temporary Insanity, casually letting a few of her best temps know where they could find her. They did and they sent their friends. Anna was unusual in that she could handle a cash-strapped and frustrated artist with grace and charm, and the artists loved her for it. She built a steady little business on placing actresses on phones, which they answered with well modulated, dulcet tones; poets on word processors, where they typed like furies and composed grammatical letters; and dancers rising on their powerful legs to usher well-heeled clients into boardrooms and even glide cheerfully away to get coffee for eleven (hey, it beat the hell out of being a waitress). And all the while these efficient, overeducated, often brilliant people were dreaming of their own work and bringing the focus, brains and perfectionism of that creative work into offices all over Los Angeles. Such workers were impressive, appreciated and gone, gone, gone as soon as they'd saved enough to get the hell out there. Thanks for the dough and the free coffee, see ya. Too smart for their day jobs, but not smart enough or lucky enough or whatever enough to make a living at their real work.

But even among the best of the best on Kodaly's books, Hackenbush stood out. Her bosses not only liked her and her work, they respected her. Hell, most of them went to hear her sing at least once. Hackenbush was impressive; she got things done, she anticipated what was needed, worked well under pressure, could follow even the stupidest instructions, worked hard and long hours when needed and was reliable. She gave everyone she knew the feeling that it was all under control. And she was exactly what Kodaly needed at Withers and

Sons, and needed now.

So her smile was part pleasure, part relief and a splash of regret when Hackenbush settled into the interviewee chair before her desk. “Heard about the Lotus Room, Mabel; sorry.”

“Man, the word gets around, don’t it, Anna?” Hackenbush accepted the proffered cigarette and ripped the filter off. “That scene happened less than twelve hours ago.” A study in studied cool, she was tidying up the ripped end before she put it in her mouth.

“Your bass player’s wife called first thing and needs a job until he finds another gig,” Kodaly told her. “I hear it was Shorty’s fault.”

“Only that a mean drunk went after him.” Hackenbush blew out a lungful of smoke and pinched a piece of tobacco off her tongue.

“And you got in the middle of it.”

“I thought I could talk him out of it,” Hackenbush said, tired of the subject. “I didn’t know smashing up my uke was just a prelude to smashing up the bar.”

“You could have stayed out of it.”

“Yeah, well, and he hurts Shorty, who, like me, has no health insurance, and then smashes up the bar and I’m still out of work and a gutless coward to boot.” Hackenbush stubbed out her mutilated cigarette and lit one of her own. “Better this way. I can’t pay for the car with my guts, but I do sleep better at night.”

“What’s with your wheels?” Kodaly asked, mentally reviewing the bus lines between chez Hackenbush and Withers and Sons.

“The transmission died last night.” Hackenbush winced a little; Kodaly was a good lady, but you never want to be too much at anybody’s mercy.

“All at once?”

“They’re like men, Anna; sometimes they warn you before they go, sometimes they just go.”

“I must remember that.” Kodaly was grimly amused and recalled that Hackenbush had not been so blasé when Eddy Lee dumped her four years ago. Ah well. “When it rains it

pours,” she said, reaching the file she’d had on her desk for the past three weeks.

“Comes in threes,” Hackenbush said.

“Oh? The bar is closed, your car is dead; what’s the third?”

“My baritone ukulele got smashed.”

“Oh, yes, you did say that.” Kodaly looked up. “I could lend you a hundred or so for a new one.”

“Thanks, maybe later. Still got that job you called me about three weeks ago?”

“As a matter of fact, I do. Can you start this afternoon?”

“Ah. Progress,” thought Hackenbush. She was momentarily relieved, but then got suspicious. “Your client waited three weeks for me?” she asked.

“Not exactly. You’ll be taking over from somebody who wants to leave.”

“Why do they want to leave? Eleven bucks an hour is good money for a secretary job these days.” She watched Anna close the file folder and sigh. Hackenbush sighed too, just to keep her company.

“Here the scoop, Mabel: I’ve had seven temps in there in the past three weeks,” Kodaly said, looking right into Hackenbush’s deceptively bland eyes. It was her ‘listening to the deal’ look; it meant she’d take the job, but needed all the facts. “These guys are a little goofy at this place. Not really mean, but playful.”

“What kind of playful?” Hackenbush asked, figuring if she could handle drunks (sort of), club owners, guitar players...

“Well, they’re not ass grabbers,” Kodaly said. “They’re booby trappers.”

“That’s worse, Anna, now c’mon...”

“No, no, I mean they set traps around the office,” Kodaly quickly explained.

“They what?”

“Set traps, you know, snares. Like changing the character set to Chinese on the computer, putting envelopes so they fall when the cabinet is opened, taking the add key off the calculator, telling a dirty joke on the Dictaphone. Things

like that.”

“Huh. Weird.” Hackenbush sat smoking, mulling it over.

“Paula Dreisler is the office manager there,” Kodaly said at last. “She asked for you.”

“Oh, is that where she landed,” Hackenbush drawled just a little too coolly. “She hates me for replacing her as the best singer in town.” Then she choked on the smoke she was exhaling.

“Good thing she didn’t call you for your modesty, Hackenbush.”

“She quit.”

“She quit the clubs for a steady money job.”

“She chickened out.”

“Unlike you, she had a kid to support. She didn’t ask to be a widow.”

“Ah, thanks, Anna. I like feeling like a heel.”

“Only when you are one.” Kodaly stubbed out her cigarette and leaned over her desk. “Look, Mabel, take this job. It will accomplish many things for many people. You’ll make me a hero, you’ll rescue the poor devil that’s there now, you’ll help Paula out and fuck knows you need the money. So check your ego for a while and go make eleven bucks an hour.” She leaned back and opened the file again. “And just think, dearie, the sooner you make enough to get your car fixed, the sooner you can return to being the best singer in town. Before somebody usurps your crown.”

“Fuck you, Anna.” Hackenbush laughed for the first time that day. “Where is this place?”

“Catty corner from Otis on Wilshire.”

“Well, at least I can drink at La Fonda on my lunch hour if necessary.” She jotted the address in her notebook. “It’s a law firm? I’m not a legal secretary.”

“You’re not getting paid to be one,” Anna said, shoving time cards at her. “They just need somebody smart, reliable and with nerves of steel. You choose to live in Lincoln Heights, you drive an old, old VW and you fight drunks twice your size; that qualifies you on the nerves of steel part.”

“I live in Lincoln Heights because it’s what I can afford,

same reason I drive old VWs,” Hackenbush said. “I only fight giant drunks under extreme duress.”

Anna waved it off; she’d heard it before. “Speaking of money, do you need some cash for lunch and bus fare?”

“No thanks, I’ve got my share of last night’s tip jar.”

“An advance?”

“Not now, I’ve got a check coming from the club.” Hackenbush looked out at the rain. “Now that I’m a pedestrian, I could use an umbrella.”

Kodaly handed her a stubby black one and wished her luck.

“Well, I can always use that.” Hackenbush waved at her and headed for the eastbound bus. She could start this job just in time for lunch.

On superficial acquaintance it was hard to know whether Hackenbush wore big, black horn-rim glasses to hide the fact there was a pretty lady under there, or to obscure the fact that there wasn’t.

Dreisler was pondering this after Kodaly called to give her the good news. Well, it was good news. Withers Junior’s secretary had quit in a fit of pique and they were short-handed. This meant the office was in chaos. It wasn’t so much Hackenbush’s office skills Dreisler needed, it was the lady’s commanding, no-bullshit bandleader presence to keep the office in line until a new secretary could be hired. The last applicant had fled when Withers Senior chased the temp before this one through the office in his wheelchair. That Dreisler’s nineteen-year-old son, Bobby, had been pushing Withers Senior’s chariot jumped up the office manager’s anxiety, too. This was a good job; she’d even deal with a poseur siren like Hackenbush to keep it.

It was good news, of sorts, when Bobby came home far too late the previous night and told his mother that the Lotus Room was trashed and Hackenbush out of work. Little Bobby’s crush on Hackenbush was worrying for Dreisler, but economic necessity won out and she resigned herself to throwing them together (where she could keep an eye on them). Additionally, it might be sobering for Bobby to see his

goddess under fluorescent lights eight hours a day, and thus Hackenbush's sojourn at Withers and Sons might be doubly beneficial. So, in the swirl of chaos Withers and Sons had become, she was pondering the glasses question for the nth time when the object of her meditation walked in like she owned the joint. "Ah," Paula thought, rising from the reception desk to greet her, "how positively Hackenbush."

"So glad you could make it, Hackenbush."

"So glad it was here to make, Dreisler," Hackenbush drawled. "I thought you were the office manager, not the receptionist."

"I cover where I'm needed, Mabel," Paula said, leading her down the hallway.

Linda Lim practically fell at Hackenbush's feet when the singers strolled up to her desk. Linda was a sculptor and more acclimated to the silence of her studio. The Withers and Sons madhouse had nearly done in her delicate sensibilities over the past week. "Oh, thank God, Mabel," she said, "I nearly died of joy when Anna called and—" She cut herself off seeing Dreisler's stern face.

"Now, now, Linda," Dreisler murmured. "We don't want to frighten Hackenbush, do we?"

"No, of course not," Linda said firmly and equally firmly added that she'd do anything, anything at all, to get out of there so Hackenbush could take over.

Dreisler said nothing and, even though it was only Thursday, paid her for the whole week. It certainly wasn't Linda's fault she couldn't manage these incorrigible guys. Now, if she could have used her stone hammer on them...hm, well, it just didn't bear thinking about.

"Helluvan artist," Hackenbush said, watching Linda bolt for the elevator. "Her last show simply knocked me sideways."

"I saw the catalogue," Dreisler said. "Very impressive."

"So, why am I here, Paula?"

"Temporary Insanity didn't have any out of work lion tamers," Dreisler admitted. "You're as close as I could get."

"How bad is it?"

"Oh, not that bad. This firm makes a pile off its

corporate clients so there's either a lot of work or it's really slow. And when it's slow, like now, the lawyers get bored and, ah, feisty." Dreisler pulled up the client base and codes on the computer. "These guys are a little strange, but generous if you do good work."

"Strange, like, how?"

Hearing her son returning with sandwiches for the office lunch, Dreisler angled her body so he wouldn't see Hackenbush when he went by. That would have to wait; Dreisler wanted to get Hackenbush up to speed as quickly as she could. "Well, Charles Withers Senior has been in a wheelchair since before I came here," she said. "He no longer goes to court, but he's still sharp as a tack."

"And a shark?"

"Pretty much all of them are sharks."

"How many is all and how many do I work for?"

"Three. Withers Senior, Withers Junior and Withers Other, also known as Frank," Dreisler said. "You work for Withers Junior, but help us all out when you've got downtime. It's either feast or famine with Withers Junior. You'll either be dying of boredom or dying of overwork. We pay overtime and if you can calm this joint down, I'll try to get you a bonus."

"You're my hero, Paula," Hackenbush said, offering Dreisler a cigarette, lighting it and lighting one for herself. "What the fuck is a 'Withers Other'?" she asked, picking a piece of tobacco off her tongue.

"Younger, half-brother, to Junior," Dreisler paused to inhale deeply, relishing a decent, straightforward smoke for a change. "A nice guy, does more of the boring law; liaison with the patent lawyers, trademarks, wills, labor board actions, employee lawsuits against our clients—that kind of stuff."

"All law is boring to me so I'll take your word for it," Hackenbush said, rooting around the desk for an ashtray. She came up with nothing but a coffee cup so they flicked their ashes into that.

"Thanks." Dreisler tapped the ash off her smoke and noticed a few more gray hairs in Hackenbush's dark brown

mop that hadn't been there last time she'd seen her. "But I'm sure I have more and time goes by for all of us, even Hackenbush," she thought, mechanically explaining the hours and office guidelines to Hackenbush.

"Doctor Hackenbush."

Tones of awe. Bobby's voice. It was an act of pure will for Dreisler not to throw herself protectively between her cub and the diva. Or at least not claw at Hackenbush's face.

"Hiya, kid, howareya?" Hackenbush recognized him, but damn if she could haul up his name. "What are you doing here? Did the restaurant close, too?"

"Restaurant?" Dreisler asked.

"Yeah, kid buses tables at the Storm Hill restaurant and hangs near the bar on his breaks," Hackenbush said, picking out one of the remaining sandwiches proffered and declining Bobby's offer to run out and get her anything, ANYTHING, she wanted.

"Oh, really?"

"Yes, ma'am, that's as close as I can get to *Dr. Hackenbush and her Orchestra*." Bobby winked at Hackenbush, who winked back. "I work here days."

"Oh, how nice," Hackenbush said. "Paula Dreisler's a helluva singer. You should dig up some of her old records sometime."

"Oh, I know. She's my mom."

"NO!"

"Yes!"

"NO!"

"Yes. Bobby, you have things to do," Dreisler cut off whatever her son was going to say.

"See you, Bobby," Hackenbush said, filing the name away for future use. "Let's do lunch," she added with a wink. "So that's your son, Paula," she said when he was gone. "He's cute."

"No, he's not," Dreisler snarled.

"Okay, he's not cute." Hackenbush examined her sandwich. "Does lunch usually come with this gig?"

"Not always. Withers Junior finished the prelims on a merger today and was feeling big and generous." Dreisler

handed her a stack of tiny Dictaphone tapes. “You can start with these. I’ll introduce you around the office when everyone’s digesting their lunch and suitably mellow.” She exited on Hackenbush’s polite laugh and went to the mailroom, also known as Bobbyville.

Dreisler approached her son, who was approaching his ham on rye. “Bobby, how long have you been bussing tables at the Storm Hill?”

“Almost a year. Wang the bartender helped me get the job.”

“I see.” Dreisler leaned on the copy machine. “Why?”

“He got tired of tossing me out of the bar,” Bobby said around bites. “He was worried about the liquor license.”

“And all this just to be near Hackenbush.” Dreisler shook her head sadly.

“Be near her singing, ma. Y’ever heard her sing?”

“Once or twice.”

“She lights up the room.”

“Does she?”

“And I’ve been stealing her phrasing. You like the way I play *Stardust* these days; that’s the Hackenbush influence,” he said over his shoulder as he went out to collect files.

There was truth in this, Dreisler had to admit. Over the past year Bobby had gone from a competent guitarist to an inspired one. That this was due to Hackenbush made her wince, but oh well, the Hackenbush ought to be good for something other than annoyance factor.

Transcription from Dictaphone was one of the few typing tasks Hackenbush almost enjoyed. One had to stay focused on the work and the hours simply melted away. And when one gets paid by the hour, one wants them to melt away.

However, there’s no accounting for interruptions. Especially when they hover, expectantly, in the peripheral vision. Only waiters have mastered selective tunnel vision. Poor Hackenbush was merely a musician, used to noticing cues from other musicians and the odd conductor here and there, and had no control over her peripheral vision. She was doomed to look up, and look up she did.

Well, at least he wasn't hard on the eyes. Medium height, triangle build; creamy, coppery skin you could practically ski on. In a turban and embroidered vest he'd do for an Arabian nights fantasy (as if she could be bothered with fantasy any more). Or without them. He was cute with a kind of distinguished edginess that Hackenbush associated with a tenuous grip on your socio-economic status and a deep and abiding need to keep up appearances. Ah, here was someone who cared enough about what other people thought that he might even be able to see their point of view and weigh their opinion, but only as it pertained to himself.

Resigned to action, Hackenbush took her foot off the Dictaphone pedal and a headphone off one ear and generated an interested look on her face. He said, "Hi," in a soft tenor that she thought was kind of cute. It had just enough whine in it to sound like a request for tolerance, if not approval.

But this was not the basso voice on the tape, Withers Junior's voice, or so she was told, so Hackenbush had no idea who this person was. She said, "Hi," just to be polite and waited for things to develop.

"I'm Frank Withers," he said eventually.

"Ah, one of the Brothers Withers?" Mabel worked up enough interest to ask.

"Half brother," he said.

"Half full or half empty?"

"Excuse me?"

"Sorry, never mind; it made sense before I said it." Hackenbush knew she was tired of a conversation when wit, his or hers, both or either, failed her. She adjusted the headband of her headphones meaningfully, wishing he'd go away and let her get on with transcribing the utterly fascinating real estate deal on the tape.

Smart guy or maybe sensitive, possibly polite or just able to see when a lady doesn't want to talk, Frank seemed to get the message, but didn't move. "I just wanted to introduce myself."

"Thank you."

"Bobby said your name is Mabel, but everyone calls you Dr. Hackenbush."

“That’s true, Mr. Withers,” she said, wondering how she could scare him away before he could ask...

“What kind of doctor are you?”

She leaned forward and looked around suspiciously. “Bobby didn’t tell you?” she asked in hushed tones.

“No,” he hissed in enthusiastic hushed tones.

“Go ask him.” She leaned back and smiled.

“I did, he said he didn’t know.”

“Huh, well he might not,” Hackenbush admitted, tired of the game. “Here’s the story: when I was a little girl I saw “Day at the Races”, and in that one, Groucho is a vet named Dr. Hackenbush. I thought that was so great, I, all of five years old, announced to my father that I, too, would be a vet named Dr. Hackenbush.”

“And did you become a vet?”

“Nah, but the nickname stuck and it’s a good hook for the band. Dr. Hackenbush and her Orchestra is memorable for some reason,” she said.

“Well, I’ll never forget it.” Frank smiled. It was a nice smile, interested without being overly nosy and somewhat on the timid side.

Hackenbush smiled back, suspecting this guy probably didn’t meet many musicians and why should he? Most lounge lizards didn’t have to work in offices. “So, anyway, Mr. Withers—”

“Please call me Frank. Mr. Withers is so formal.”

“And it takes so long to say, Frank,” she smiled at him. “And your brother? Should I call him Chuck or Charlie?”

“Well, he’s a little more formal than I am,” Frank said slowly. “You might want to start out with Mr. Withers and see where it goes.”

“Then I will. Is he coming to introduce himself, too?”

“He’s with clients all afternoon,” Frank said, waving a zaftig blonde over. “Won’t be back until tomorrow. Adela,” he said to the blonde. “This is Dr. Hackenbush.”

“Pleased to meet you, Doctor,” she said, handing a stack of papers to Frank.

“Oh, just call me Hackenbush or Mabel. I answer to either.”

“Lemme know if you need anything, Mabel,” Adela said. “Unfortunately, right now I need my boss to get on with his chores.”

“He’s all yours, Adela.” Hackenbush silently blessed her blonde-but-dark-at-the-roots savior leading the errant attorney back to his office as she sat back down to her typing. Ah, typing; just you and the machine and whatever bullshit was in the headphones.

Five o’clock seemed to come right away, so Hackenbush ignored it and worked until six thirty. There was plenty to do and the bus ride home might not be any shorter, but odds were it would be less crowded. She had to stand for most of it, which was fine because she was too tired to think heavy-duty thoughts and too busy watching her back. A French percussionist once told her French guidebooks for the Untied States advise visitors not to make eye contact in the cities. Well, Hackenbush made eye contact, tired eye contact with the tired eyes around her. These bus riders were just too damn weary after eight-plus-hour shifts to start anything. Rage and aggression were for those with the energy for it. And they were not on the eastbound Wilshire bus that rainy evening.

At Third and Broadway, she caught the northbound bus through Chinatown and into Lincoln Heights. She got off at North Broadway and Johnston, bought two packs of cigarettes at Big Saver and walked past the Post Office toward home. She lit a smoke out of habit, out of need from the long ride in the bus and out of the fantasy that if she were attacked, she might buy herself some time singeing her assailant. A kind of tobacco-Aikido. Mostly she smoked as she walked those last few blocks home to keep herself company. Nobody menaced her; in fact, she met no one on that evening. It was too early or too late, or all the action was over on Eastlake street that evening. Didn’t matter; Hackenbush finally relaxed when she got home and shot the deadbolt behind her.

There are lots of kinds of tired, but this was not them; this was drained, wrung out, dead-on-her-feet weary. It was what the first day of sitting on her ass typing did every time. Hackenbush knew she’d get over it, build up a tolerance to it, but, man, the first day of a temp job was pure hell. Well,

actually, the aftermath and letdown were hell; the job itself was just boring. Thrashed though she was, she cleared her answering machine out of habit. Anna Kodaly called to see how it went; Hackenbush would call her tomorrow, from work. Shorty called to see if she was still alive; she'd call him tomorrow from work, too. Bruno Carlos called about a gig at the Island Room weekend after next; him she called back.

"I don't have a uke," she told him.

"I hear," he said, *Meditations* blaring in the background. "I hear you don't have a gig either, 's why I can get you for a weekend gig, diva baby."

"Excuse me, Carlos, but can you turn the fucking Coltrane off while you talk to me?" she yelled into the phone. "I mean, if you were listening to *Coltrane Sound* or those recordings with Monk, okay, but this stuff just—" she cut herself off in the sudden silence. "Hello?" She listened intently. "Fuck! I hope he didn't hang up." She was relieved to hear a match strike and a wheezy inhalation. "Good thing you play the congas, Bruno, you couldn't play an oxygen mask on those lungs," she thought as she lit up herself, but assumed Bruno had something more interesting to smoke. Might have been nice, but she didn't have any interesting stuff around and tomorrow was a work day after all.

"Jus' bring your beautiful self and more beautiful voice down to the Island Room on week from Sa'day at nine," Bruno drawled.

"Saturday or Sunday?"

"Sa'day at nine, my goddess."

"The twentieth or the twenty-first?" she said, digging her calendar out of her purse.

"Week from Sa'day."

"Fuck." She'd call the Island Room tomorrow and find out. "What's it pay?"

"Fifty, plus tips."

"The usual," she thought. "Who else is in the band?" she asked

"Only people you like, Hackenbush," he wheezed. "Bring Shorty, he amuses me."

“Can you pay him to amuse you?”

“He can take a cut of ‘s tip jar, no?”

“I’ll ask.”

“See you on Sa’day, my diva.”

“Yeah yeah yeah.” Hackenbush rolled her eyes at the dial tone and hung up. “A gig’s a gig’s a gig.” It was merely the shank of the evening but, after making a quick to-do list for the next day and setting the alarm for the hellish hour of five forty-five am, she hit the sheets and slept the heavy, dream-free sleep exhausted secretaries sleep.

There is a particular kind of raw chill in the winter air at five forty-five am in Los Angeles. Cold with a touch of some acetone-like vapor that leaves the skin stripped and slightly burning. At least Hackenbush thought so, as she fought off the alarm clock and the almost overwhelming urge to roll back under the covers. But she was strong, she was invincible, and she had to get to work. And get there on the bus, which could take a while. She turned on the space heater by her bed on her way into the bathroom.

It was more trouble than it was worth to light the ancient gas heater in there. It usually gave her a headache before it warmed her up and the Gas Company warning sticker that they were not, absolutely not, completely not responsible if the “occupant(s)” asphyxiated their own stupid asses because they had been warned was also discouraging. Well, it was true, Hackenbush had been warned, so she let the water take the chill off and the gas heater stayed cold. The Department of Water and Power might despair of others, but they could be proud of how much Hackenbush took their drought warnings to heart. The singer put a bucket under the faucet to catch the water until it was warm enough to get under the shower, she’d use to water for plants or cleaning later, thereby conserving at least some gallons of city water over the course of the year. Possibly it went deeper than DWP’s pamphlets; possibly, simply deep down Hackenbush knew that when there isn’t enough, one conserves so there is some for everyone. Wasn’t that being a good neighbor? Do unto others as you would... She showered quickly and rushed back into the electrically

warmed bedroom to finish toweling her hair, which was well below her shoulders and needed to be cut, which would have to wait a while.

What a number of things would have to wait awhile until the rent and utilities were paid, the car fixed, a new ukulele purchased. She added a note to call around for prices on a baritone uke and see if she could get a brunette discount. Sometimes that worked, but usually in person. So she'd need a haircut to negotiate. "Oh well," she thought, filtering a cup of coffee and moving her insufficient funds around her expanding expenses like valet parking attendants moving Ferraris on a Friday night. She liked that metaphor even though she'd do almost anything not to pay for valet parking because that was something else she couldn't afford. In a city of cars, paying for parking was a little like being charged for oxygen. It pissed her off so much, she only did it under extreme duress and in certain parts of town, the more dangerous parts.

Hackenbush took a sip of coffee and lit her first cigarette of the day. She liked to wait until she could take that first blissful drag with a cup of coffee because it was especially divine that way. The rest of the day's smoking would never quite recapture the pleasure of the first half of the first cigarette, but the memory and nicotine withdrawal kept her trying and trying and never succeeding. But sometimes chemical necessity takes precedence over pure hedonism and Mabel Hackenbush was a realist down to her two-inch heel office pumps. Actually, she put the office shoes in a totebag, along with a book to read at lunch and her to-do list and some sheet music she was arranging for her combo, and marched off to the bus in a pair of cheap tennis shoes. She could face anything if her feet didn't hurt and was enough of an RTD rider to know that LA buses were dismal just-fucking-get-me-there vehicles and nobody cared about your shoes. She also wore a long, ratty overcoat to keep the grime off her second hand navy blue serge dress that the more pretentious observer would call 'vintage'. It was used clothing; good fabric, good styles and right in her price range. She could never afford this stuff new, so she went for vintage hip, not pricey status.

Vintage hip was more affordable and you could haggle better in a downtown rag house than at Chanel.

It wasn't raining, but she kept Anna's umbrella handy as she bopped over to Griffin and Ave 28, where it did start to rain. She took the RTD into Chinatown where she hopped a DASH bus, for variety, down to Wilshire and then another RTD west to MacArthur Park. It was two fares instead of one and a bus transfer, but seemed a little faster to her. She'd try different routes, just to break up the monotony and so as not to have too much time to think about why she was riding the fucking bus at all. Even if she could afford to rent a car, she'd have to go to Enterprise, who, bless them, took cash deposits in lieu of credit cards, because she didn't have enough steady income for a credit card. So, okay, she had no debt; well, that was good. And if she had a credit card, it could be for emergencies like getting the car fixed or a new uke or all those records she'd been eyeing at Rockaway and a couple of new evening gowns from Saks Fifth Avenue, where you have to pay retail, for casual and country club gigs and... Okay, it was better that she didn't have a credit card; her life would become a continuous emergency if she did. But didn't Saks have a revolving charge account? "Aw, shit!"

"S'matter, miss?" the bus driver asked.

"I spaced my stop," she said, scanning in the rain for the next one.

"Don't tell anybody I did this," he said, opening the front door at a red light. "And don't get hit."

"You're a prince, daddy-o," she said, checking traffic and bolting for the curb. She decided the bus driver's compassion was a good omen, indicating that her luck was changing and it was blue skies and smooth sailing from here on out. It was pouring rain and her shoes were soaked by the time she got to the office. But her luck was changing; fuck her shoes.

She dashed into the building and was even able to get into an elevator just as the doors were closing. And found herself in a small space with a tall, slim, gorgeous male type of man with lovely blue eyes and just enough gray in his dark hair to set him squarely on the dishy side (to Hackenbush,