

THE NEXT SONG

by

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Shirley turns the lights down and flips on the audio. Michael sidles up to the backstage microphone and announces "Terry Kerby! Columbia recording artist Terry Kerby!" then he picks up his guitar and follows Terry to the little stage. It is Wednesday, the dullest night of the week in this dull burg. Of the good burghers we have about twenty, each paying three bucks fifty, and fifty cents a cup for their coffee. Great days! Terry is up on the stage now, he's put his fake Irish accent on, starting his jokes while he adjusts the mike. He wasn't always an Irish folksinger on the coffee house route, my Terry wasn't, but Terry rolls with the tide. That is what he always says.

I first knew him when he was all swank and glitter, and I ran around with him and his crowd to the drum of the midnight smash and champagne cymbals midst the neon lights. But when he left, I didn't follow; I could see that velvet glove of steel ambition bearing down. And still, such charm! It made stones and old ladies melt like butter in his hands. Then he was gone, and I making my own life over. I changed my mind about a lot of things then, threw my glad rags on the dump, left all slap and worldly acoutrement behind, studied romance literature and joined a commune. All at once. As luck would have it, I had only just come to see the limits of that asinine ashram, when Terry rolled back into town. Still, I had my principles, and they were in fashion — his weren't. The tinsel town culture was going, and the times they were a-changing.

I went to his performance, took a seat on the aisle. It was a college crowd mostly, and Terry cut the pomp. He comes walking in with his instruments and a bit of retenue, dressed to an understated perfection, much of the glitter discarded. As the fashion page said, Mr. Kerby was wearing cherry brown shoes, a slim brown suit, single row of matching buttons going up to a flared high collar, ochre scarf held with an opal scarf ring. Then he puts his things down and looks around. He sees me, and I'm trying not to look hopeful or inviting or defiant or anything else that can pigeon-hole me. He walks down, all eyes follow him. And stops opposite me, saying nothing, eying my sweatshirt, army jacket, and jeans. Everyone around is watching him and me, and he says "So you don't need elegant clothes to look elegant, do you?" That charming smile flicks on, and he turns, undoing his jacket as

he walks up, putting it over a chair by the stage as he is announced. The opal goes into a pocket, the scarf over the jacket. Now we see the Russian shirt underneath, billowing and embroidered, but worn inside his belt. He pulls the shirt out, lets it swing free around his hips. Everyone around is looking and smiling at me.

Yes, of course; I followed him out, we went on the town like in the old days. And I could see the styles were changing on his scene too, and Terry rolling with the tide, saying they should get on to some spirituals and freedom songs. (Remember those days?) Telling me I would revolutionize his style, and how he was seeing the light, and taking me to bed while he told me. Well, perhaps I got ambitious myself about singing, and writing songs maybe — to conspire with love and mold my world nearer to the heart's desire. I was at a loss otherwise anyway. So I followed Terry and the sound of his not too distant drum, and we started travelling together.

But Terry changed just a bit too late, didn't come riding in on the crest of the wave, but rolling along after. And when he had to roll again, he was just a bit late again. He rolls with the tide when he sees it, but he seems to see it just a bit after everyone else. So now he is an Irish rover, and the coffee houses are dying, and Toronto is our big deal. The route is the same as it was a year ago, Sault St. Marie to Guelph to Toronto to Kingston, and on all the way to Charlottetown, P.E.I. And all I can see are his double chin and the flesh straining over his belt, and how the paddy vest holds no glamour and no ideals.

Well, it is time for my bit soon. We all do our bit here. Michael runs the coffee house, announces the performers, and helps out as guitar to Terry's banjo and pipes. Mike's girlfriend Shirley is waitressing. God, but she is goodlooking! Slim hips, and small breasts only just pointing up her sweater, and a smile so sweet you can hear brooks rushing in the woodland glades. As they say. I've seen Terry looking at her too, but there is small pickings for you there, Terry me boy.

Terry has gone on to his martial stage now, singing "The Man From God Knows Where" about the 1798 rebellion, and now he is explaining about Lady Astor, who called the Eighth Army in Italy the D-Day dodgers, and he is belting it out to the tune of Lili Marlene. "We are the D-Day dodgers, in Sunny Italy." Next will be the Scottish song about Bonnie Prince Charlie. At the chorus, Shirley and I have to get carried away and spontaneously join in near the backstage mike.

The Fiddlehead

Hatchie fo fo fo
Hatchie fo
Hatchie fo fo fofo . . .
Rise and follow Charlie!

Yes, he is striking his marching pose, here comes the Bonnie Prince now.

O.K., *Christ!* This is it. I am not going to do it. *This is it.*

Well, that was yesterday. Terry told everyone to join in on the chorus, and I said, loud and clear by the mike, "Why don't you sing your shitting songs yourself!" I didn't wait for the reaction. I just went into the back and got out my special hoard of Kentucky Bourbon. I needed a bit just then. Why didn't I go then? After the set is finished, Terry comes into the back, and stands there looking at me. He doesn't knock the Bourbon off the table to have me scrambling after it, hands and knees, like last time. "This happens once a year, doesn't it?" he says. I look up. Between the thickening chin and the thinning hair I see the cold hard lines and the jutting imbecile eyes. Very deliberately he says "So you feel like shit. So why don't you take your shit somewhere else?" Why didn't I go then?

And so we quarrelled, me trying desperately to get drunker. In the hotel room I throw the empty bottle against the wall, it doesn't even break. And he turns around, white with anger, and hits me in the stomach. He goes to bed, and I lie there on the carpet, feeling sick as a dog, and looking at the door. Why didn't I go then? He is on right now, and I hear the Lili Marlene tune that used to waken my dull mind, but can't anymore. And now he is talking about Scotland, I think. Yes. The next song is "Hatchie fo."