

Baby's Body Shop

“Didi, come on in and eat,” her dad, Jake, called through the kitchen window. “Meatloaf with mac-n-cheese. Ketchup, too.”

“In a minute, Dad.” She leaned over the railing to see the moon rise, a silver disc cutting through wisps of cloud, casting speckled light through darkened leaves of the big sweet gum out back. Humming a tune in her head, she settled back in the rocker draped in a Hawaiian quilt of honeycreepers sipping ohia blossoms her mom had hand stitched when pregnant with Didi. She closed her eyes. The recurrent melody was stronger tonight, but incomplete, just a snippet really. It comforted and frustrated her at the same time. Continuing to hum the sound in her mind then her voice, she plucked a strand trying to pick up the thread and weave it into something more.

Strumming her ukulele, Didi tapped her toe lightly on the porch floor to blue notes in the purpling sky. Sundown was hard sometimes. Singing sad music made it better somehow, maybe dissipating worries or diluting troubles by releasing them into the vast universe. “The last word in lonesome is ‘me’,” she crooned softly to an old Roger Miller song she’d heard many times before from her dad’s record collection. Not that she was troubled or moody as a rule, but she wondered in some confusion about how her young, unfocused life would turn out. Then she would miss her mother.

“That’s real pretty, Baby Girl,” her dad said. “I like that tune, Didi, and your mother’s listening in heaven. I know she likes it, too.” Opening the screen door quietly, he moved an old chrome and yellow vinyl chair up near her. Although he didn’t play an instrument and sang off-key more often than not, he appreciated music. He was a record collector and admired musicians, as they “helped soothe the soul” her dad would say. While his compilation of black vinyl 33s and 45s ran the gamut of oldies from rock-n-roll to Mo-town and beyond, his favorites were country songs dripping with emotion on life’s hard knocks. As a kid, Didi had enjoyed watching him listen to

Johnny Paycheck belting out “Take this job and shove it” or Hoyt Axton lamenting “Work your fingers to the bone and what do you get? Bony fingers!” He’d break out a big grin, slap his knee knowingly, and give her a wink, and say, “Tell it like it is.”

* * * * *

After her mother, Rhonda, died in a freak commuter rail accident when Didi was three, she and her dad had been inseparable. He doted on her, planning birthday parties inviting kids from the neighborhood, decorating their modest two-bedroom ranch home bright and festive on all holidays. But most importantly his smiling inclusion and joy of being together filled in the little bits of space in life’s daily activities. Still, Rhonda’s absence left a hole—mostly on those sundowns when they weren’t busy with trivial demands or distractions of life’s commonness, that is, during the infrequent, irregular, quiet, lazy times. That’s when songs emerged from Didi as if they’d always been there waiting for her to release them. Or when Jake would put some sad country ballad on the turntable like a pipeline to his soul. Music was a comfort neither could explain, but simply felt as a healing salve when down, or a happy companion when up.

How many times had Didi asked him as a young girl, “Can you play that one again, Daddy?”

“Sure can, Baby Girl,” he always replied, inviting her into his lap to clap time and sing along. He had encouraged her singing and playing an assortment of musical instruments from kazoo and tambourine to recorder to a beginner’s guitar, then on to an electric keyboard. Using his camcorder, he recorded her childhood performances in various venues around the house. He announced her to large make-believe audiences at the Blue Note in New York City (living room), Tractor Tavern in Seattle (her dad’s bedroom), any number of music halls in Branson (her bedroom), Gilley’s in Houston (den), Bluebird Café in Nashville (kitchen), Red Rocks near Denver (porch), Summerfest in Milwaukee (back yard), and her favorite—driving the Blues Highway up from New Orleans,

Memphis, St. Louis to Chicago with throngs of roadside fans screaming for more (from the tailgate of the pickup in the garage). On her tenth birthday, she opened up his surprise present.

“A ukulele!” Didi shouted in gleeful curiosity. “I love it, Daddy, it’s shaped like a pineapple,” she giggled, immediately strumming the brown and yellow fruit with delight.

“We’ll imagine runnin’ through pineapple fields in Hawaii,” he said, “with you singin’ and strummin’ so sweet those honeycreeper birds can’t help but come whistle harmony to such a pretty tune.”

“And then we’ll have a fire and cook hot dogs on the beach and watch the stars come out,” Didi responded.

“You and me in hammocks strung up under the palm trees,” he continued, “listenin’ to a sea breeze whisper to a gentle surf pitchin’ cockle shells like cream-colored castanets up on the beach. I’ll say ‘Hush now, Didi’s gonna sing us a lullaby on her ukulele.’”

“Can we paint pretty paper lanterns like rainbows and light candles inside, then watch them fly up to mommy, too?”

“Yes, just like that.”

Wide-eyed and cradling her new ukulele in fanciful thought, Didi smiled then sang, “This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine; let it shine, let it shine, let it shine!” She added, “That’s for you, Mommy.”

“You know, she can hear best with her heart. Same’s true with singin’, when it comes from your heart,” he said with a soft, tender tap to her chest. “That makes your heart grow and your light shine clean and bright.” She snuggled closer in her dad’s arms.

* * * * *

At age fourteen, Didi was busy with middle school dynamics. Walking home from school with some friends, she could hear her dad's country music, the yodeling falsettos and piercing steel guitar trills, blaring a half block away at the corner. She rolled her eyes and groaned. Nowadays she asked him to turn off the music whenever her friends were coming over.

"How come your dad has that shit-kicking music cranked up so loud today, Didi?" asked a pimpled boy with greasy blonde hair over his eyes, who lived across the street.

"Maybe he's going deaf," offered another companion helpfully.

"Dunno, I need to check it out. Dad's not usually home this time of day. His shift's not over till 5 o'clock. See you later," she waved abruptly.

She found him on the Lazyboy in the corner of a darkened living room with his eyes closed. The amplifier seemed to shake the walls. Didi ran over to dial down the volume. When she turned to her father, "Got laid off today, Didi," was all he said opening his reddened eyes. He had a frightened look, which was disorienting to her. Only occasionally when she had scraped a knee or had a high fever did she observe a quickly vanishing glimpse of fear or anxiety. She never saw him as anything but her rock.

"Are you alright, Dad?" She sat on the arm of this chair, taking his hand and resting her head gently on his shoulder. "We'll be fine 'cause we have each other," she said.

Her dad looked vacantly out the window. His job situation at the Chrysler plant had been in dynamic flux, too, but she didn't know that. He protected her from his problems. After almost twenty years on the assembly line, suddenly he was among eight hundred factory workers laid off and abandoned in corporate downsizing. With his pink slip still in his hand, he had driven slowly through the factory gates for the last time going home for good that afternoon. A man sat in the driver's seat who seemed to be steering, accelerating, braking, using turn signals, merging and yielding as routinely as any other caution-minded motorist, but Jake had been absently detached,

oblivious to the familiar landmarks and route along the way. As if on autopilot, his truck had steered itself and him home. After stepping languidly through the back door in a daze, he had entered the living room and involuntarily put a tall stack of records on the turntable, turned up stereo volume, and had sunk into his recliner. Turning his head from the window he seemed pleasantly surprised to find his daughter near. Composing himself, "Yeah, things 'll work out," he answered in a steady voice. "We're gonna be fine, Baby Girl."

On the front porch later that evening, Didi sang to help console him. She sang the blues to soft ukulele chords as the red sun set beyond the sweet gum tree. After noting he was more himself again, she gave him a hug and went to bed late. Soon her dad sat at the kitchen table scribbling a list on the back of his pink slip. The light in the kitchen burned all night long, and the pink slip was buried, forgotten under a pile of notes and sketches.

Smelling strong, Navy coffee wafting into her bedroom the next morning, Didi awoke and entered the kitchen. She found him grinning and rubbing his hands together.

"You're my muse, Didi," he said, "you inspired me. I've decided to open up an auto body repair business. Gonna name it 'Baby's Body Shop'," he said in a determined, optimistic voice. "Look, I even drew a picture that'll draw 'em in," showing her a sketch of a young, smiling woman with lovely curves on a pole. "It's reminiscent of a single-minded thought at sea weeks on end that my Navy pals, me included, had before I met your mom," he laughed.

Glancing at the picture, Didi said, "The younger mechanics in the shop will like her, too."

He stood there solid and strong again. Along with him, she felt their future was born at the pink dawn of a new day. In the warmth of growing awareness from her dad's example, she also perceived a hint of an emerging focus to her own life. She thought maybe soon she could discover what she was meant to do; whom she was meant to be?

* * * * *

On Indian Trace Highway between the abandoned, dilapidated Sinclair station guarded by an extinct green dinosaur and an old Sonic drive-in thriving due more to retro-uniformed roller skating carhops than the food they served, Jake's business was easy to find. Clinging to a 60-foot tall, spinning candy cane barber pole, a buxomly, smiling cutie with sunglasses perched on her curly blond forehead and clad in blue jean short-shorts with a yellow and purple polkadot halter beckoned passing vehicles. She pirouetted gracefully atop a big circular, rotating sign that moved independently in opposite direction to the red and white barber pole. It rotated more slowly like a huge white-walled tire on a big monster truck in first gear at a demolition derby. With long, shapely legs wrapped around the pole, the lovely, bigger-than-life, plastic girl towered twenty-two feet tall and glowed radiantly, thanks to powerful LED lights installed within every inch of her body.

Hapless truckers and motorists in need of vehicular crash repair rejoiced when they saw her. They honked if their horns still worked and swerved into the parking lot spellbound. This beautiful siren had replaced those of the emergency vehicles that had so shrilly sounded the alarm of their automotive troubles. Somehow she would make their troubles vanish, forgotten. As the revolving sign upon which she twirled spelled out, they had arrived at **BABY'S BODY SHOP**.

Hopping down from the tow truck cab with their damaged, undriveable vehicle hulking chained or atop a flatbed, or emerging from their dented vehicle from a minor fender bender, the solace seekers gawked at the gyrating girl. In time they would turn their heads towards the door of the establishment. That's when they beheld a second sign indicating that all would be made right and whole again. In candy-apple red neon script emblazoned along the top of the street-side window of the auto body shop, a welcoming omen read, **I Changed Her Oil, She Changed My Life**.

The customers walked through the door where they were bolstered up yet again, this time by music. Jake had personally selected background music piped into the waiting room as being "good

for what ails you.” A restoring tonic of country tunes washed over them. Not surprisingly, his rollout included mostly songs about trucks. ✧

After checking in at the desk, initialing a repair estimate, and handing over the keys with sighs of relief, the grateful clients melted into deep, comfortable green naugahyde chairs. A fresh, bottomless pot of coffee greeted them. On the magazine rack there was a tattered, well-thumbed, ever-popular copy of *If Love Were Oil, I'd Be A Quart Low*, a redneck humor book by Lewis Grizzard. Lots of gun, sports, fishing, hunting, and, of course, trucking magazines filled in the rack and were strewn over several end tables. On the other side of the tracks, Baby's Body Shop attracted clientele far and wide by word of mouth. Steady customer Leroy Dinwiddie would say, “Not only is Jake a competent, country-boy mechanic, he's an honest proprietor. Hard to find these days. Serves good, free coffee, too.”

They received quality work for a fair price, but it was more than that, like “an oasis in the desert of damage and destruction” Jake would tell his customers. Pleasantly reassuring, they felt Jake understood them and their needs as clients and even as friends. He would ask them if they wanted perfectly good used parts from the salvage yard that could save them some beer money, or if they preferred new more expensive parts fresh from the factory, which might result in a “considerable dry spell.” His clients liked the homespun talk of his workingman's experiences on the factory assembly line, his embellished Navy escapades, love of trucks, NASCAR, country music, and raising a daughter as a widower. He had an ear for fun to lighten their loads. Jake often quipped lines such as, “When you wrapped my lunch in a road map, I knew you meant good-bye.”

Didi was now in high school. Of course, Didi's friends teased her about the girl on the pole and the other signage at her dad's shop, in addition to their longstanding, but good-natured ribbing about his love of country music. She'd shoot back with something like, “Got your attention, didn't it?” Beside, she knew all of them and their parents went to her dad's place for repair service.

* * * * *

Business was good. During summers, Jake hired Didi and a half-dozen of her girl friends as swim suit-clad car washers in cowgirl hats. That boosted the bottom line. On Friday nights after closing time in the parking lot, he fired up a gas grill and cooked burgers, brats and dogs for the girls and shop guys who didn't have family obligations. Sometimes, Didi would play her ukulele and sing under the rotating plastic cutie—now an icon in the local automotive world. During her senior year, he hatched another idea on one of those Friday nights.

“Didi, how about writin’ a song about Baby’s Body Shop we can use to advertise on the radio and stream on our website?” he asked casually as she was going out the door to the high school. “Think about it, OK? It might be fun,” he hollered to her at the sidewalk.

“Sure, Dad, but I’ve got a paper to write and some big exams coming up, and I’m late, gotta go,” she responded offhandedly blowing him a kiss.

He didn't push it. In a couple of months' time one evening after dinner, Didi came into the living room with her ukulele.

“Remember suggesting I write a jingle for the shop, Dad? Well, I’ve come up with an upbeat ditty to try on you. Here goes.” Didi improvised accompaniment on her ukulele and sang three verses of *Baby's Body Shop Jingle*.

Verse 1:

Does your car or truck have dings and dents?
 From unfortunate vehicular accidents?
 Don't fret about those broken struts,
 Hail-damaged hood or sunroof cuts.
 Take Indian Trail to the girl-on-a-pole and stop
 At Baby's Body Shop.

Verse 2:

Bashed in trunk or cracked out windows?
 Dented chrome or twisted fenders?

Peeling paint or chassis rusted?
Missing mirrors or tailgate busted?
For a tender tow and where to go,
Call Baby's Body Shop.

Verse 3:

Your friend tore out her oil pan and suspension,
Lost her favorite trailer wheel and its lynchpin,
And don't know how to ease crankshaft tension.
Poor broken rig—she needs care and attention!
For help at any time you know who to mention:
Baby's Body Shop.

That's Baby's Body Shop on Indian Trail at 501-GOT-DINGS.

Her dad listened in amused amazement and pride. "Baby Girl, that's a winner!"

"Thanks, Dad, glad you like it," replied Didi. "There's a few more, too, but they're more along the blues line."

"Lets hear 'em!"

Didi played and sang tunes and lyrics to twelve other songs she had written, using familiar country themes of honkytonking, cheating, loneliness, self-destruction and redemption, and, of course, trucks. At eighteen she decidedly preferred the blues, but all those country songs her dad played while she was growing up accumulated and soaked into her blues sound. Jake sat transfixed. After she finished, he swung her off her feet in full circle, exclaiming, "That's just the best, original sound I ever heard, Baby Girl. Straight from your heart, Didi, that's where those songs come from, and you set 'em free."

"You really think so, Dad?"

"It's not what I think, it's what those songs unlock in my soarin' heart. You have a gift, Baby Girl, to share with others that'll move 'em, open up their hearts. I know Rhonda and her winged buddies up in heaven are hollerin' praises and tappin' their toes, too. Praise Lord A'mighty!" he exclaimed, despite not being a church-going man.

Over spring break, Didi polished her repertoire and made some video streams of her singing and playing the ukulele, all recorded by a high school friend on a Sunday afternoon in the garage at Baby's Body Shop. Leroy Dinwiddie learned about the recordings from her proud father later that week. He asked if he could view them, with an eye and ear on potential commercial prospects, as he said he had connections to a "media enterprise." Jake invited him to sit at a computer screen in his office as he loaded and clicked the link. Through all nine tracks, Leroy watched and listened intently without comment. Pausing, then pushing back from the desk, his face erupted in a beaming smile as he turned to speak.

"Dynamite! I'm blown away," he said rising to his feet. "Fantastic for first cuts. With some orchestration and a back-up band, these originals are sure to skyrocket! Jake, your daughter's a natural born star."

"Not livin' on 'refried dreams', are you, Leroy?" Jake quoted from a Mark Peterson and Jim Foster song recorded by Tim McGraw.

"No," his friend replied in kind, "Didi's the real enchilada."

* * * * *

Two years flashed by like a runaway truck on a downhill grade. Invited customers and their families, and the shop guys with their wives and children, or girlfriends if single, all gathered eagerly in the parking lot at 6 o'clock. Jake had hired an events planner and crew to decorate the premises Hawaiian-style.

A grass skirt and haiku lei adorned the swaying girl on the pole. A dozen tiki torches flamed in a wide circle around her like Pele emerging joyously from a fiery volcanic eruption. Strings of bamboo lanterns lit in bright colors illuminated the parking light, and hundreds of ribbons of silver and gold paper streamers crisscrossed the ceilings. Yellow and brown pineapple-shaped helium

balloons with spiking green crowns sprinkled amongst a troupe of 12-inch inflatable hula girl dolls that festooned large blowup palm trees created a gala tropical night. Several tall, massive (paper mache marble) vases containing fresh, long leafy stems of fragrant white ginger with a splash of orange and blue bird-of-paradise flowers enhanced the magic.

A gold-glittered, five-by-three-foot live concert photo, along with six other dazzling images featuring *Didi and the Blue-It Band*, adorned an immense red, white, and blue sequenced banner sprinkled in seashells and surfer figurines. It hung gloriously on high from the garage bay door. On the other end of the shop, a 20-foot projection screen covering an entire wall in front of the mechanics' workbenches stood wired and waiting for the live cable broadcast at 8 o'clock.

All the employees and guests gravitated towards six large, metal washtubs brimming with crushed ice and beer arranged conveniently at various locations under the palms. They were enjoying the luau-style banquet feast catered for the occasion. At a quarter till eight, Jake stood up in front of the big screen.

"Thank you all for stopping by tonight," he said. With a line Phil Thomas wrote and Johnny Paycheck sang in 'Colorado Kool-Aid', he shouted, "We're 'havin' ourselves one of them real good times'. On this night of nights, it means a lot to me that you've come here to watch Didi and the band sing the title track of the country album of the year!"

The metallic roof rose up a foot or two with delirious shouts reverberating off the walls. Next to Jake, Leroy pumped his left arm rapidly in the air with an extended finger signifying "number one," then deftly leapt up to click his boot heels and bellowed, "By God, that's no BS!"

"You all know Leroy," Jake said, "so it could indeed be BS! But in this case, the 'BS' stands for 'Body Shop', as in '*Baby's Body Shop Blues*'!" The crowd thundered applause.

"You know," he continued, "Didi called me last month from Nashville with the good news and about tonight's award show. "She told me, 'Daddy, it would make me really happy for you to

throw a big party on Indian Trail and invite all your employees, clients, and our friends to the shop, even Leroy', she joked, 'and give them all a big hug from me'." Another roar erupted as the tikis burned brightly.

"Are you going to let me say a word about the talent I discovered and lifted off the hydraulic jack in this here garage?" asked Leroy. A voice near one of the ubiquitously popular washtubs shouted, "Yeah, he's now batting one for a hundred, getting a hit launching Didi, so let him have his say, Jake. She's his grand slam!" The crowd nodded agreement lofting foaming beers in salute.

"OK, but keep it clean, Leroy, I'll be watchin' you dance around the bases." Jake said to his friend, who was his daughter's local agent. Just for fun to throw him off balance, Jake added, "You know, whenever I see five toes, I know something's a foot!" Jake hollered. Gesturing to shoo Jake away from center stage, Leroy countered with words from an old Dan Hicks' recording, "How can I miss you if you won't go away?" Like listening to two favorite uncles with the gift of gab, the garage audience ate up the banter.

Feigning touché, Jake said, "Ladies and gentlemen, close your eyes and cover your ears, for Mr. Leroy Dinwiddie's here!" With another round of chiding hoots and hollers, the crowd rose up with frosty bottles clinking and frothing to toast the unlikely star maker.

"Truth be told," Leroy began. This invited immediately a tumult of genial, guffawing catcalls. Unfazed, he continued, "I knew Didi had star quality before I heard that first unpolished track right over there in her daddy's office. He didn't know it, but just before closing time at the end of the week a couple of summers ago, as I was backing up my newly painted F150 under the barber pole to leave, I caught wisps of soft, sweet sounds pretty as a meadowlark's song in the evening come drifting out of the garage. I put it in park and switched off the engine to listen with the window down. It was Didi singing and playing her ukulele real gentle-like to no one in

particular, just enjoying herself, I guess. Someone came over and started a conversation. Her music stopped, and I left.”

“But it hung there in my mind that Friday night. Then later, when that old geezer over there,” he said, pointing a longneck bottle at Jake, “invited me to listen to his daughter’s recording at his office computer, that’s when that sound came back to me. Of course, this time, Didi had filled in the melodies and lyrics, which we all now know by heart. All I did was simply listen, then hit speed dial to a producer friend in Nashville. The rest, as they say, is history. She’s more than worthy of the honor she’s receiving tonight,” he said turning to his friend in a cracking voice, “We’re real proud of her, Jake, and happy for you. Good on you both!”

Leroy turned to the assembled faces and shouted, “let’s make Didi hear us way over yonder in Nashville!” At the top of their lungs, everyone there boomed her name repeatedly as Leroy and Jake bear hugged by the big screen. The prophetic red neon sign in the front window shone radiantly and the plastic cutie rotated on the pole outside with her broadest smile. The vibration of Didi’s dad’s cell phone interrupted the embrace and happy hullabaloo. “Guess who?” asked the caller.

Leroy shushed the room with a finger over his mouth and the palm of his other arm gesticulating ‘quiet’ in a rapid up and down motion. “Didi’s on the phone now from Nashville!” he said. “She surely heard us!”

“Baby Girl, we’re all here pullin’ for you. Make that pineapple purr!” her dad spoke clearly into the phone, now on speaker to the room’s rapt attention.

“Thanks, Dad, I’m back stage and go on in two minutes. I just wanted to hear your voice.”

“I’m right here, Baby Girl,” he said.

“Tell everybody how this would never have happened if you hadn’t stayed up all night after being laid off at the factory. Know that when I’m out there singing tonight it’s for you, mom, and

everybody at Baby's Body Shop. Gotta run, Dad, they're calling me. I love you." She clicked off without time for his reply. A bemused silence filled the shop.

In Nashville, Didi stood next to the microphone, lifted her ukulele, and paused, waiting momentarily for the announcer to introduce her and the band. Meanwhile awaking as from a daze, Leroy shouted, "Hey, turn on the TV projector, the show's starting!"

In finishing his introduction, the broadcast announcer added, "Also in the works, she has a brand new album, 'Rocker Panel', coming soon for all you car mechanics, drivers and music fans out there."

◇ Jake's **Waiting Room** song list at Baby's Body Shop

- 'Born To Be a Trucker' written and recorded by Red Simpson
- 'I Love My Truck' by Steve Hardin, recorded by Glen Campbell
- 'Six Days on the Road' by Earl Green and Carl Montgomery, recorded by Dave Dudley
- 'Pickup Man' by Kerry Kurt Phillips and Howard Perdue, recorded by Joe Diffie
- 'Truck Driving Man' by Terry Fell, recorded by Buck Owens
- 'Semi Crazy' written by Ron Avis and Junior Brown, recorded by Junior Brown
- 'Truck Driver's Blues' by Ted Daffan, recorded by Ferlin Husky
- 'Truck Driver's Blues' [different version] by Merle Haggard and Tim Howard, recorded by Merle Haggard
- 'Truckin' Man' written and recorded by Dale Watson
- 'Caffeine Nicotine Benzadrine (And Wish Me Luck)' written and recorded by Jerry Reed
- 'Drinkin' and Drivin'' by Gary Gentry, recorded by Johnny Paycheck
- 'Beer Run' by Todd Snider and Keith Christopher, recorded by Todd Snider
- 'Convoy' by Chip Davis and Jeff Fries, recorded by C.W. McCall
- 'Big 'Ol Truck' written and recorded by Toby Keith
- 'Eighteen Wheels and a Dozen Roses' by Gene and Paul Nelson, recorded by Kathy Mattea
- 'Somethin' Bout A Truck' written and recorded by Kip Moore
- 'This Time I'm Gonna Beat You to the Truck' by Susannah Clark, recorded by Sissy Spacek
- 'Uneasy Rider' written by Charlie Daniels, recorded by the Charlie Daniels Band
- 'Honky Tong Song' by Mel Tillis and A.R. Peddy, recorded by George Jones ['She took my keys away, and now she won't drive me to drink']
- 'Backwards' by Marcel and Tony Mullins, recorded by Rascal Flatts ['What do you get if you play a country song backwards? — You get your wife back, you get your dog back, you get your truck back']
- 'Blue Bayou' written by Roy Orbison, recorded by Linda Ronstadt [Didi's favorite oldie]