

Could've, Would've, Should've

I grew up in Cleveland, Ohio. Cleveland, being stuck halfway between New York and Chicago, always had an identity crisis. It was always the city that “almost was.” Take sports; Cleveland considered itself a “sport’s town.” In the era that I gained my manhood, everyone still was talking about how the Cleveland Indians *had been* a champion baseball team before the “thirty year slump.” How they had won the series in forty-eight and the pennant in fifty-four, and they should’ve won the World Series, if it hadn’t been for Willie May’s incredibly lucky catch.

In football, the Cleveland Browns were always the team that could’ve or should’ve been the championship team if it hadn’t been for this or that particular misfortune or miscalculation. And, it was the same for basketball with the Cavaliers, and the Baron’s in hockey.

Amongst my friends, we would say someone “pulled a Cleveland,” when, even with all the odds in his favor, he just missed getting the golden ring, because of some stupid, unexpected screw-up. Like the guy who had this great job all sewn up. The boss loved him, especially his jokes. He’s chatting it up; he’s on a roll. The boss can’t get enough of this guy as he cuts everyone around him into ribbons. That is, until, well ... Let’s just say, he should have recognized the lady was the boss’s new wife. The next day, the guy’s out looking for a new job. He just pulled a Cleveland.

My own experience with sports reflected my hometown's. I remember once, when I played third string on our school basketball team, I had a shot at glory. Accidentally, I stole the ball from an opposing team member, and he fouled me. The clock was down to the last few seconds and we were down by one point. I was awarded a foul shot that would have kept us in the game. Now, even though I was third string, I was a good shot at the foul line. I barely missed in practice. That was in practice. Of course, I blew the shot, and we lost the game. No one even offered me a "Lifesaver."

Of course, I'm not a sportsman. I'm a musician. In music, Cleveland is also renown for its great spectator reputation. Rarely have any musicians from Cleveland made it big. I can't think of one, off-hand. But as with sports, Cleveland prides itself on its large fan base. Fans. They get to ride their team's dream, or share the stage with their bands, after hours and on weekends. They get all the glory without any of the mess, achievement with exertion. Who could ask for more?

The truth is, Cleveland would be a great city, if it could ever get over the stigma of being Cleveland. This was my hometown. It became a model for my life.

I finished the set. I was playing a gig at The Boneyard, a local club on Cleveland's East Side. It's a decent living, and I draw a decent crowd. If Billy Joel was the Piano Man, then I like to think of myself as Cleveland's "Guitar Man." Of course, despite a bit of talent, and a one-time desire, I never made it big. Being from Cleveland didn't help. Billy Joel might have been cheated by Motown, but he's not

feeling the pain any longer. I suppose, if I would've given them a chance to cheat me, my guitar would be gently weeping in the big time.

Oh well, no regrets. I propped my guitar on its stand and descended from the stage. My seat at the bar was waiting. The bartender had already poured me my drink. I offered him a mock salute, and he smiled in return. The smile was genuine. He was a friend of mine, a true Clevelander. There was no place he'd rather be. He points out the pretty girl at the other end of the bar, before he goes to attend to a paying customer. I had already noticed her watching me. She was cute, and very young. The bouncer must have counted the teeth of her pretty smile to determine her age. All twenty-two were showing.

I offered a nod and held up my glass, a very noncommittal acknowledgment of her stare. She blushed a shade of self-consciousness, and her smile widened even further. Immediately, her attention dropped to the floor. Considering our transaction concluded, I spun towards the bar and drew the Scotch towards my lips and drew it quickly into my mouth. I held it there for a moment before swallowing. The warmth of the alcohol felt good as it spread across my chest. Closing my eyes, I let my breath escape, from my nostrils, savoring the shot. It would hold me till the next set.

I removed the still lit cigarette from the corner of my mouth and rubbed my eyes. The girl was now standing by my side. Magic. I don't believe in magic.

I looked into her eyes and offered a closed-mouth grin. Sweet and innocent. This is a mistake. "Have a seat," I offered.

She continued to show me her pass into the club. It grew even wider. She fumbled nervously. She had forgotten how to perform the act of sitting. Finally, she allowed herself to commit to the act. She performed it like a pro.

“I really love your music,” she blurted, “especially your original stuff.”

“Thanks.” I looked at her a moment. A fan. Just what I needed. She was obviously expecting me to say something more. I disappointed her. It would be the first in a series.

So she filled in the silence. She’d been a fan ever since I was with Left of Center. She had all of my CDs. She really liked the love songs. Then, I saw it in her eyes. She wanted to be in one of those love songs. Of course, she didn’t see all the ones that I had crumpled up and thrown away, tore apart or allowed to fade.

I should’ve just let her ramble away. I didn’t. I pulled another cigarette out of the pack. “Smoke?” I interrupted.

It caught her off-guard. “No. I’m trying to quit. I only smoke after ...” She caught herself too late. She hadn’t meant to be suggestive. She was just allowing her mouth to spill out the contents of her brain.

So, being a gentleman, I should've let it slide. Anyway, she was way too young, too fresh and unspoiled for me. And, I knew that if I said something, there'd be no turning back. I would be much better off not going there.

“Then should I buy you a pack or two for later?” I asked.

She looked at me a moment, not comprehending, before she caught the implication. The smile got even bigger. Her gaze dropped to the floor again, and her mouth returned to fumbling. Through the fumbling she revealed that she “kind of” had a boyfriend. It was obviously a stupid, foolish boy that allowed his girlfriend to go alone to see a musician she had a crush on.

“Kind of? Depends on your mood, huh?”

She didn't even realize I had insulted her. Women are like that. When they set their mind to something, especially in the area of love and relationships, it's nearly impossible to get them to change it. It's true, despite all the evidence to the contrary. No matter how much of a jerk, the guy turns out to be, they stand by their man till the very bitter end. They're much more faithful than the male of our species. The only way to get a woman to abandon her quest is to completely shatter her dreams. I'm an expert at this.

I knew I should just walk away. Let it go. If this continued, I'd be taking this young thing home with me. And I'd regret it in the morning. Of course, I reasoned, if I didn't take her home, I'd be regretting it at night, all night. But that kind of regret

tends to fade after a few days. If she woke up in my bed, she'd continually be calling me, or showing up at my gigs for a couple of weeks, maybe even months, trying to form a relationship out of a fantasy. No, I decided. I should kill this immediately.

My decisions are never what you'd call rock solid. "So, what kind of fool let's his girlfriend hang out in a smoky club with musicians."

"Well, he was suppose to meet me here, but he called me on his cell and told me he was too tired."

"Too tired, huh." I allowed myself another grin. This one was almost genuine. It used to be that when a man stood a girl up, he had to live with the fact that he was a jerk. Now, cellular phones have removed even that level of responsibility. Thank God for progress. "So, he must trust you completely," I said.

"Yeah, well, he told me you'd never talk to me anyway," she said.

"So far he's batting a thousand." He must be a local Clevelander. This time the smile was genuine. "Why's that?"

"I don't know. I saw the ad for your show in the News Herald, and he promised to take me. I wanted to ask, I mean..."

Things were getting interesting. She wanted something. What, an autograph? I turned to face her. "Go on, I don't bite." It's never wise to leave any evidence.

“Well, it’s silly, really.” She blushed for the hundredth time that night. “But, you know, you have to at least try, right? Otherwise you never know.”

I nodded. It hadn’t been my philosophy, but I encouraged her to continue just the same - not that she needed it.

She finally confessed. It came out in one explosive breath. It sounded like one long word. It took me a moment, but I was finally able to translate it into English. “Well, I know it’s silly, and probably everyone asks you all the time, but I’m a singer, well not a professional singer, I mean I’m good, I think, but I’ve never really performed and everyone says I’m just as good, and I really like your stuff and I was wondering if you’d let me sing a duet with you, once maybe, please.”

I could’ve laughed, but I held back. Of course, this would seal the deal. Singing a duet engenders a certain atmosphere of intimacy. It creates the fantasy of love. It was definitely a mistake. “Why not?” I said. There were a lot of women in the crowd that night, and duets go over big with them.

“Really?” she practically jumped into my seat. Her hug was warm and tight. She smelled great. “Oh, you won’t regret this.” She blurted.

“I’m sure I won’t,” I lied. “What do you want to sing?”

This stopped her for a moment. It was like a car whose clutch fell into neutral. She hadn't expected to get this far. Her mouth hung open as she tried to put her brain back into gear.

So I closed it for her. I was feeling magnanimous. "How about 'We've Got Tonight?' Do you know that?" I'm a big fan of Bob Seger, and I figured the lyrics might just provide the right, not so subliminal message. Besides, if she was really lousy, or if she froze on stage, I could cover the whole song as a serenade.

"Um," she paused, "Yeah. You did it at your Blossom Concert last year, right?"

No mention of Seger, or even Kenny Rogers. She was a diehard fan. It doesn't get any easier than this. Well, I was going to have tonight. "You ready now?" I asked.

"What?" She was suddenly having trouble hearing. You could see the fear rising into her chest. She probably wouldn't even be able to get a single note past that pretty smile of hers. No problem. I could comfort her later. I'm also an expert in crash and burn.

I climbed the stage, with this nervous little girl following close behind. When we got onstage she looked out into the crowd with awe and terror. I pulled her close and whispered those magic words, "What's your name, sweetheart?"

She forgot for a moment. It happens to the best of us. Finally, it came to her.
“Janey.”

I gave her a look. One of my songs is called “Janey and Tony.” She shrugged, reading my suspicion. “Really,” she confirmed.

“Okay, stick close to me, Janey. Just have fun.” I strapped on my guitar and turned to the room. “Ladies and gentlemen, with your permission, I’d like to introduce you to a soon-to-be long time friend of mine, Janey. She’s going to help me out with this next number.” The crowd gave her a nice welcoming round of applause. It was a good sign. They’d be generous.

I checked the second microphone, adjusted the stand for her, and squeezed her arm. Then something happened. I’ve seen it before, but only with veteran musician. Suddenly as we started the number, she transformed into a performer. She was good. Her voice had range and quality. She loved the microphone. She loved the crowd and it loved her. This girl could go places.

When we finished the number, she was flying high. I whispered into her ear. “What else do you know?” I considered her voice. She could have given Sheena Easton a run for her money. Janey was feeling good too. She came alive. She was excited and exciting. Unfortunately, I was starting to like her. It was the first sign that things were going to end badly.

“Do you know any of my stuff?” I asked.

She nodded enthusiastically. An image of her singing along to my music as she danced around her bedroom in a nightie popped into my head. It was a nice image. I was already on line for tonight's show.

Of course, we did "Janey and Tony." You could tell she wanted to be the character in the song, a lonely girl who realizes her dream of true love in a local hangout. She was a natural talent. We had a lot of fun together. We finished with a cover of "Crying," by Roy Orbison.

After the set we went and sat down at the bar together. She could barely contain herself. The shy little girl that had approached me with hesitation was gone. In her place was a high-energy woman full of dreams and plans. Her enthusiasm was infectious. Fortunately, I was vaccinated. She couldn't stop talking about the future. Twenty minutes on stage and Janey was all ready for the big time. She loved being on stage. She loved the crowd. She loved singing.

Of course, there's no question she had talent. But I've learned that talent isn't what gets you famous. A lot of talented guys are waiting tables or pumping gas, waiting for their shot. More often than not they're still waiting as they collect their Social Security check. But, she wouldn't hear any of that. Janey was planning her career in rapid fire double-time speech, and weaving me into her dreams.

Of course, my only plans were centered around the upcoming performance of "Baby, It's Cold Outside."

She beat me to it. “So,” she began coyly. Her embarrassed smile returning, but now only a hint of its former self. Nothing was going to stop this girl. This time she didn’t look at the floor. He eyes locked on mine. “Do you have a stock of those cigarettes at home, or,”

I plastered an expression of mock shock, and she turned even redder. “What about that “kinda boyfriend” of ours?”

“He’s not here.”

I shook my head slowly. I had been looking forward to giving her some career coaching that night, but I was not into replacement theory. Her plans were setting the both of us up for a chain of disappointments. “I think you’re getting in over your head, darling,” I said. “I’m not looking for a partnership.”

I probably shouldn’t have let her go. Like I said before, I knew I would be regretting it the entire night. And, I did. But, then again, as a fantasy, she wouldn’t complain that I finished too fast or that I snored too loud. Maybe, I should’ve hitched a ride on her dreams. She did eventually make it to the big time. You might of even heard of her.

Oh well, no regrets. I still got my gig here in Cleveland.