



## **Stardust**

*Robert Gilberg*

“Put that picture up here, by the top, George.”

“Yes mam. I’ll put the front facing this way, toward the viewers.”

“That’ll be fine. He was always very proud of that picture with the rest of the Rhythm Kings.”

“How do you want the saxophone, Mildred, about here?” George asked, centering the beat-up brass horn below the photograph.

“No, a little lower, about here.” She said. “He always had it down around there so the mouthpiece would just fit right close to his mouth when he needed to blow on it.”

“Yes, that looks about right. And afterwards, do you want me to take both things into the parlor for you to get when you are ready to leave?”

“Oh no, George, I want them to go with him. You can still open it up, can’t you? I mean, later . . . .”

“Yes mam, it’s not sealed yet.”

“But nobody could open it if they wanted to have a last look . . . ?”

“Well, it’s so heavy I don’t think anyone could just walk up and flip it open, but, no, it isn’t locked or anything.”

“I don’t want anyone to ever see him in there, like that. The whole town would be talking about it for years. It’s . . . it’s . . . it’s just so . . . .”

“I know, I know. But don’t worry, I’ll be right here and no one is going to lay a hand on it. After everyone is gone, I’ll put those things inside and lock it down with a special tool and no one is ever going to see Harry like that.”

“That’s fine, George. You’ve been of great help and comfort to me all through this.”

“I’m glad that’s so and am pleased to help, Mildred.”

Mildred moved to George to give him a polite hug. “The last year has been hard, George . . . .”

He cut her off, saying, “I can only guess. To take himself out that way . . . there are no words . . . .”

There was a silence between them that finally ended with Mildred saying, “Harry hit bottom when the farm started to fail beginnin’ last winter. Bad crops, poor prices, a long winter . . . and then the bad flu he had for seems like months . . . .”

“I heard, Mildred, I heard some of it. Folks were saying that Harry was up on that windmill Saturday nights at sundown playin’ that saxophone. What was that all about?”

“It’s true. He’d hook that horn onto the string around his neck and climb up the windmill ladder to that little platform up there and play. Lord knows it’s a miracle he didn’t fall off there gettin’ carried away with his music. Might have been a better way to go than the way he did, come to think about it. But, either way, at least he had that horn he loved so much in his hands when it happened.”

“Did he ever talk about why he was doing it?”

“Sorta’. But he wouldn’t say if I asked him. I’d just have to figure it out ‘tween the little things he said when we wasn’t talking about it. Like, ‘My best years were playin’ with that band. Now I’m just marking my time, goin’ broke with this farm.’”

“Sounds like he got real bitter over things?”

“Yes, some years after we were married, he started second guessing himself, sayin’ ‘I coulda’ gone off with those boys to the big cities and played in front of big crowds like they finally did. But I just wanted to keep playing around home at the Crystal Ball, and Edgewater, or Green Acres, playin’ them same old tunes like “The Tennessee Waltz” and “Stardust.””

“That must have been hard for you to hear, knowing that would have taken him on the road for who knows how long and how far.”

“Yes, but a wife’s duty is not to question her man’s judgement; at least that’s what the pastor says.”

“Uuuu, ahem . . . hmmm. Yeah, I guess that’s so, but still . . . Well, bless you, Mildred. You’re holding up well through this.”

“That’s’ what you think, George. I’m a mess at nighttime, thinkin’ about what to do with the farm, the livestock, where to live, how to take care of myself, on and on. And worst of all, why did he have to do it that way?”

“That’s what the whole town is wondering. Everyone always thought he was a stable, even tempered guy.”

“But, truth be told, I know what it was.”

Curiosity overcoming reluctance to be intrusive, George asked, “Did he write a note, or leave some kind of sign? You don’t have to say, but trust me, as an undertaker, I know how to keep secrets.”

“Yes. I guess I can trust you, George. And I guess I’ll talk about it sometime later anyways.”

“Mildred, if it pains you to talk about it, you don’t have to . . .”

“No, sayin’ it might help me with it. This spring when the ground was still soft he decided he was going to get that hollow oak tree stump over by the barn out of the ground and hauled over by the pig lot where it would be out of the way to the barn. Don’t ask me why he decided old Betty could pull it out, but that’s what he tried to do. That old horse pulled and strained and yanked for all she was worth but she couldn’t do much but wiggle it a little. I yelled at him that he was gonna’ kill her and he said, ‘she ain’t worth nothin’ if she can’t pull that little stump out, and besides, the damn tractor won’t start. Well, dontchaknow that he kept eggin’ her on and on until she up and fell over on her side and couldn’t get up. She died right there by the stump in front of our eyes.”

“I heard about Betty.”

“Next morning Harry went out there with his saxophone and a stick of dynamite,

lit the fuse and sat down on that hollow tree stump. His note said, ‘put us in that grave.’”

