

I GET **THE** BLUES  
WHEN IT RAINS  
(A REMEMBRANCE)



1980

**T**HERE IS ONE NIGHT in everyone's life that has to do with time and memory and song. It has to happen—it must spring up with spontaneity and die away when finished and never happen again quite **the** same. To try to make it happen only makes it fail. But when it does happen, it is so beautiful you remember it for **the** rest of your days.

Such a night happened to me and some writing friends, oh, thirty-five or forty years ago. It all began with a song titled “I Get **the** Blues When It Rains.” Sound familiar? It should, to you older ones. To **the** younger, stop reading HERE. Most of what I have to offer from this point on belongs to a time before your birth and has to do with all **the** junk we put away in

our attic heads and never take out until those special nights when memory prowls the trunks and unlocks the rusty hasps and lets out all the old and mediocre but somehow lovely words, or worthless but suddenly priceless tunes.

We had gathered at my friend Dolph Sharp's house in the Hollywood Hills for an evening of reading aloud our short stories, poetry, and novels. There that night were such writers as Sanora Babb, Esther McCoy, Joseph Petracca, Wilma Shore, and a half dozen others who had published their first stories or books in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Each arrived that evening with a new manuscript, primed to be read.

But a strange thing happened on the way across Dolph Sharp's front room.

Elliot Grennard, one of the senior writers of the group and a onetime jazz musician, passed the piano, touched the keys, paused, and played a chord. Then another chord. Then he laid his manuscript aside and put the bass in with his left hand and started playing an old tune.

We all looked up. Elliot glanced over at us and winked, standing there, letting the song play itself out nice and easy. "Know it?" he said.

"My God," I cried, "I haven't heard that in years!"

And I began to sing along with Elliot, and then Sanora came in and then Joe, and we sang: "I get the blues when it rains."

We smiled at one another and the words came louder: "The blues I can't lose when it rains."

We knew all the words and sang them and finished it and when we were done we laughed and Elliot sat down and rambled through "I Found a Million Dollar Baby in a Five and Ten Cent Store," and we discovered we all knew the words to that one too.

And then we sang "China Town, My China Town," and after that, "Singin' in the Rain"—yes, "singin' in the rain, what a glorious feelin', I'm happy again. . . ."

Then someone remembered "In a Little Spanish Town": " 'Twas on a night like this, stars were peek-a-booin' down, 'Twas on a night like this. . . ."

And Dolph cut in with "I met her in Monterrey a long time ago, I met her in Monterrey, in old Mexico. . . ."

Then Joe yelled, "Yes, we have no bananas, we have no bananas today," which cut the sentiment for two minutes and led almost inevitably into "The Beer Barrel Polka" and "Hey, Mama, the Butcher Boy for Me."

No one remembers who brought out the wine, but someone did, and we didn't get drunk, no, we drank the wine, just the right amount, because the singing and the songs were everything. We were high on that.

We sang from nine until ten, at which time Joe Petracca said, "Stand aside, let the wop sing 'Figaro.'" And we did, and he did. We got very quiet, listening to him, for we discovered he had a more than ordinarily firm, sweet voice. All alone, Joe sang sections of *La Traviata*, a bit of *Tosca*, and finished off with "Un bel dì." He kept his eyes shut all the way to the end,



then opened them, surprised, looked around and said, "For Christ's sake, it's getting too serious! Who knows 'By a Waterfall' from *Goldiggers of 1933*?"

Sanora did Ruby Keeler on that one, and someone else came in like Dick Powell. We were ransacking the house for more bottles by then, and Dolph's wife slipped out of the house and drove down the hill to bring up more booze, for we could tell if the songs went on, then the drinking would too.

We slid the long way back to "You were meant for me, I was meant for you. . . . Angels patterned you and when they were done, you were all the sweet things rolled up in one. . . ." By midnight we had worked through all the Broadway melodies old and new, half the 20th Century-Fox musicals, some Warner Bros., with bits and pieces of "Yes, sir, that's my baby, no, sir, I don't mean maybe," thrown in with "You're Blasé" and "Just a Gigolo," then fell off the deep end into all the old mammy songs, a baker's dozen of lousy sweet rolls that nevertheless we sang with fake tenderness. Everything bad sounded somehow good. Everything good was simply great. And everything that had always been wonderful was now superb beyond madness.

By one o'clock we had left the piano and sung our way out to the patio, where, a cappella, Joe tossed in more Puccini, and Esther and Dolph duetted on "Ain't she sweet, see her comin' down the street, now I ask you very confidentially. . . ."

From one-fifteen on, keeping our voices down, because the neighbors telephoned and said we should, it was Gershwin

time. "I Love That Funny Face" and then "Puttin' on the Ritz."

By two we were into some champagne and suddenly remembered our parents' songs sung in home cellars fixed up for birthday parties in 1928 or hummed on warm summer night porches when most of us were ten: "There's a Long, Long Trail a-Winding into the Land of My Dreams."

Then Esther remembered that her friend Theodore Dreiser had written the old favorite: "O the moon is bright tonight along the Wabash, from the fields there comes the scent of new-mown hay. Through the sycamores the candlelight is gleaming—on the banks of the Wabash, far away. . . ."

Then it was: "Nights are long since you went away. . . ."

And: "Smile the while I bid you sad adieu, when the years roll by I'll come to you."

And: "Jeanine, I dream of lilac time."

And: "Gee, but I'd give the world to see that old gang of mine."

And: "Those wedding bells are breaking up that old gang of mine."

And finally, of course: "Should auld acquaintance be forgot. . . ."

By that time all the bottles were empty and we were back at "I Get the Blues When It Rains," and the clock struck three and Dolph's wife was standing by the open front door holding out our coats, which we went over to and put on and walked out into the night, still whisper-singing.

I don't remember who drove me home or how we got there. I only remember tears drying on my face because it had been a very special, very dear time, something that had never happened before and would never happen again in just that way.

The years have gone, Joe and Elliot are long since dead, the rest of us have grown somewhat beyond middle age, we have loved and lost in our careers and sometimes won, and we still meet on occasion and read our stories at Sanora's or Dolph's, with some new faces among us, and at least once a year we remember Elliot at the piano playing on that night we wanted to have go on forever, that night, which was loving and warm and fine, and all the sappy songs meant nothing but somehow meant everything. It was just as dumb and sweet, just as awful and lovely as Bogie saying, "Play it, Sam," and Sam playing and singing, "You must remember this, a kiss is just a kiss, a sigh is just a sigh. . . ."

It shouldn't work. It shouldn't be magic. You shouldn't weep happy and then sad and then happy again.

But you do. And I do. And we all do.

One last memory.

One night about two months after that special fine evening, gathered at the same house, Elliot came in and passed by the piano and stopped, eyeing it dubiously.

"Play 'I Get the Blues When It Rains,'" I said.

He played it.

It wasn't the same. The old night was gone forever. What-



ever had been in that night was not in this. Same people, same place, same memories, same possible tunes, but . . . it had been special. It would always be special. Now, wisely, we turned away. Elliot sat down and picked up his manuscript. After a long moment of silence, glancing just once at **the** piano, Elliot cleared his throat and read us **the** title of his new short story.

I read next. While I was reading, Dolph's wife tiptoed behind us and quietly put **the** lid down on **the** piano.