



All That Jazz

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All That Jazz : a short story

The train zipped into Circular Quay station and Rusty Linden hopped off with her small suitcase in tow and ukulele slung over her shoulder in its carry bag. She caught the escalator down to the concourse and headed straight for the Manly ferry terminal. Rusty could hardly contain her excitement. As one of Sydney's top newspaper reporters her life was extremely busy. Days off work were rare but somehow she'd managed to wangle an extra long weekend and was intent on spending it at her favorite suburb across the Harbour.

She loved Manly at any time of the year but in mid-Spring with the three day Jazz Festival about to get underway her joy literally bubbled over. What added to her elation was the fact that she had been booked to perform a fifteen minute set onstage. Her masterful ukulele jazz renditions had seen her become quite acclaimed in local circles.

Rusty joined the throng of ferry passengers as they made their way on board for the thirty minute trip and headed straight to the outside front deck. She never missed taking in the sights as the ferry pulled away from the wharf. The golden rays of the sun shone down on the bobbing blue water and Rusty could feel its warmth seeping through her.

The cameras of the many overseas and interstate tourists were trained on the city's icons—the Harbour Bridge with its majestic gray arch and network of intricate steel and the Opera House with its curved white sails jutting out from its prime location on Bennelong Point. The city buildings too, towering in the background, proved to be popular with the photographers. One with an artistic eye even snapped Rusty as she leant over the deck because her flaming red hair and the sapphire sea below made such a striking contrast.

A number of passengers ran around to the other side of the vessel in order to photograph a famous rocky island situated in the middle of the sprawling harbour. In the early days of white settlement it served as a place of punishment for difficult convicts. They had christened it Pinchgut because any rations they were allocated were of starvation proportions. Later it became known as Fort Denison after a tiny sandstone fortress was built upon it as a defense against a possible Russian invasion during the Crimean War. Rusty's eyes soaked in the scene that she never grew tired of then she headed for the inside deck where she bought a fruit juice from the kiosk.

She sauntered around looking for an empty seat and found one near the

rear. Sipping her drink and gazing towards the windows across the aisle her gaze fell on a woman wearing dark glasses, a black peaked cap pulled down over her forehead, blue jeans and a white tee shirt. There was nothing remarkable about her appearance to arrest anyone's attention yet for some reason she arrested Rusty's.

Perhaps it was her reporter's trained eye or perhaps it was intuition, but Rusty felt that for some reason the woman was trying to appear inconspicuous. Her gaze intensified as she studied what little she could see of her face.

The woman seemed to sense Rusty's scrutiny and looked towards her for a brief moment before quickly turning away.

Rusty had a vague feeling of recognition. She felt certain she had seen her somewhere before despite the fact that most of her face was hidden behind the glasses and cap. But the feeling persisted.

Well what of it? she thought. *It's no big deal.*

The ferry was nearing the Manly wharf and the tourists were on the move again. The cameras began snapping the scenic beach known as Manly Cove.

Rusty dismissed the woman from her mind and got ready to disembark. She breathed in the air with its heady trace of salt and walked down the gangplank. After stopping to buy a doughnut in the ferry terminal she walked out into the Spring sunshine. Everywhere she looked there was evidence of the festival that was scheduled to get underway the following day. In a jubilant mood already, Rusty was buoyed even more as her gaze took in the stage buildings and the billboards promoting the forthcoming events.

She crossed the road and stepped onto The Corso, Manly's main street, which stretches from the ferry wharf up to the ocean beach a few hundred meters to the north.

Lined with shops on either side, the pedestrian plaza was bustling with activity. With the enticing aroma of coffee wafting in the air, Rusty stopped and bought herself a cappuccino. Spooning the chocolate topped froth into her mouth she thought again of the woman on the ferry. Her identity began to niggle her. She tried to visualize how she would look without the glasses and cap. But it was to no avail and she ostracized herself for brooding on it. She was here to enjoy herself, not to get weighed down with futile musings.

When her cup was drained, Rusty continued her stroll along The Corso until she reached the ocean beach where one of the many stages had been erected for the festival. The deep blue hues of the water sparkled

with diamonds of sunshine. Waves trimmed with lace circled merry bathers while surfers in wet suits sped to shore on sleek boards. Couples ambled along the romantic promenade, arced like angels' wings and lined with majestic Norfolk pines. There were children too, and older folk, and people walking their dogs. Rusty was struck by the vibrant color and undercurrent of contagious excitement.

She smiled contentedly and walked the hundred meters or so to her hotel. Prominently displayed in the foyer was a program of festival events and she stopped to scan over it. A sense of exhilaration swept through her as she spotted her name on Monday's calendar.

When she reached her room on the tenth floor the view was as breathtaking as she had expected. It took in the whole sweep of the beach and promenade together with the distant cliffs. She spent the rest of the afternoon making phone calls to friends and rehearsing the numbers she was scheduled to perform.

After an enjoyable dinner Rusty went for a walk along the water's edge where the waves rushed to shore under a sky jeweled with stars. When the sea breeze became a little brisk she returned to her hotel and watched TV until bedtime.

Rising early, Rusty took herself and her ukulele down to the promenade which at this hour was almost deserted, apart from the odd joggers and dog walkers. As she strolled along she noticed a woman feeding the seagulls on the grassy reserve that ran parallel. *That's her*, thought Rusty. *The woman from the ferry.*

Today she was wearing the same cap but the jeans were black and the tee shirt royal blue. She had removed her dark glasses and was rubbing her right eye with a tissue. As she had done the previous day she sensed Rusty's scrutiny. Quickly she replaced the glasses and hurriedly turned away.

The gulls scrambled and squawked as they vied for the scattered crumbs but Rusty was oblivious to them. In the brief few seconds that she had glimpsed the woman's face her identity suddenly hit her. Her name was Clare Morello and her incredible voice had gained her numerous awards and several platinum albums. Her star had been high in the heavens. And then tragedy had struck and little had been heard of her since.

It was around five or six years ago, Rusty remembered. Her two year old daughter had been run over and killed in the driveway of their home by her husband. Three months after the horrific accident he had thrown himself under a train. The inquest was told how grief and guilt had left

him a shattered remnant of his former self.

Rusty took a step towards her and Clare Morello turned to run.

"No," Rusty called. "Don't run. Please don't run."

Clare hesitated.

Rusty could see the lines of indecision around her mouth. "Please, Clare," she said pleadingly, "don't run."

Clare turned to face her and to Rusty's immense surprise said, "O.K. Rusty. I guess I owe you that. You did me a favor once and I haven't forgotten it."

Rusty gave her a bewildered look.

Clare took a few slow steps towards her. "It was around the time of the inquest into my husband's death. I was ambushed by a media pack. They were pressing all around me. And then a young red-head came to my rescue. She saw how traumatized I was and screamed at them to get back. Coming from one of their own, they seemed to sense how monstrously they were behaving and did as she asked."

"I remember now," Rusty said. "It was the terror on your face that spurred me into action." She gestured to one of the benches. "Will you come and sit with me for a few minutes?" she asked.

Clare nodded.

Rusty brushed some leaves from the bench and the pair sat down.

"You here for the festival?" Rusty inquired.

Clare gazed out at the expanse of blue water with its white horse waves. "Yes," she said. "Music's the only thing that breathes life into me. It's the only thing that still matters. And I love hearing it played live out in the open." She turned to look at Rusty. "What about you?" She gestured to her ukulele. "Are you performing?"

Rusty's mouth broke into a grin. "I've got a fifteen minute set on Monday. I'm still pinching myself. I've only ever played at inner city bars and small-time concerts. Someone with connections to the festival heard me and asked if I'd like to take part."

"A lucky break," Clare said. "I'm sure you'll do well."

"Not as well as Clare Morello and her remarkable jazz vocals would do if she were to make a comeback," Rusty told her, then wished she hadn't when she saw the anguish spring into her eyes.

There was a bitter edge to Clare's voice as she said, "I hope you're not going to tell me it's time to move on and put what happened to my family behind me because it's much too trite. I can never just 'put it behind me'."

"I'm sorry, Clare, that was really insensitive of me. But believe me, I

would never tell you that. Nobody could put what you've been through behind them completely. You've lost too much. But maybe, just maybe, you could let a little bit of enjoyment accompany the grief from time to time."

Clare stood up. "What would you know about it?" she demanded. "What would you know about my kind of grief?"

God, I've blown it, thought Rusty in alarm. She stood up now too. "Clare, I know nothing. Nothing. I admit that. I didn't mean to upset you. It's just that you said music breathes life into you. I thought that perhaps performing again would make that life blossom a little more. Maybe it's a crazy idea but I even thought that we could do a song together on stage on Monday."

Clare's face turned white at the prospect. "It's no good," she said at last, and there was a little cry in her voice. "I couldn't do it. I just couldn't do it." She turned to go.

"I'm staying in the hotel across the road," Rusty called after her. "Room 1016. It would just be one song. If you change your mind come and see me." She looked after the now running figure and returned to her hotel with sagging spirits.

Music was playing everywhere by lunchtime and everyone seemed to be in a holiday mood. Rusty, still somewhat dejected after her meeting with Clare, strolled down to the ocean front stage. A large colorful crowd and the towering pine trees swayed along to the strains of one of Sydney's most acclaimed jazz bands.

Rusty's mood began to lift. The warm sun eased the tension that had built up in the back of her neck and the salty air invigorated her. An hour later she walked along to The Corso stage to listen to some of the bands performing there. Spirits were high as each of the top-class acts delighted their audience.

The joyful strains of the music and the light-hearted atmosphere had by now intoxicated Rusty. She couldn't think of anywhere else she would rather be. It seemed as though all of her worries and those of the world at large had evaporated.

At a break in the proceedings she sauntered about to see what else was happening. She strolled down a side street and found herself surrounded by a group of four wandering minstrels. Clad in red and white striped shirts, black pants and black sequined waistcoats they danced around her as they strummed their guitars and blew into their silver saxophones.

She laughed out loud as the minstrels serenaded her all the way down to the coffee lounge where she stopped for some refreshments. She sat down at an outside table and ordered an iced chocolate. Her enjoyment of the day began to wane a little as she thought of Clare Morello. She'd become so absorbed in the carefree atmosphere that the morning's events had almost slipped from her mind.

Was Clare out here somewhere enjoying the music, she wondered, or had their meeting caused her too much distress? Had being recognized alarmed her so much that she'd taken off home? Rusty began to feel uneasy, concerned that she had added to the other woman's anguish. She was afraid that her actions may have denied her one of the small pleasures that she was still able to derive from life—the pleasure of listening to live music.

Why didn't I just leave her alone? she asked herself acidly. *After all, that's what she wanted. Why the devil couldn't I have respected that?*

The return of her somber mood made Rusty want to get away from the crowds for a while. She set off along the harbour foreshore and spent almost two hours walking through bushland reserves and past quiet coves. It was the cliff walks though that provided the highlights with their glorious harbour views. Her breath caught in her throat as she looked out at the lolling blue water illuminated by the sun's rays and surrounded by parks and headlands. Sailboats bobbed along with the gentle ebb and flow of the tide.

This is it, she thought. *This is the jewel in Sydney's crown. It's not the Bridge and it's not the Opera House. It's the exquisite beauty of the harbour itself.*

With his startling eye for color she would have loved to have seen Monet, the great French artist, recreate it on canvas. Few of the paintings she had seen so far had done it true justice.

Tired from the physical exertion Rusty was looking forward to a refreshing shower. She was surprised to be handed a note along with her key when she returned to her hotel. She opened the envelope as soon as she got to her room. It contained just one sentence: *I'll be feeding the seagulls again tomorrow.* There was no signature but none was needed.

A sense of relief swept over her. She hadn't after all scared Clare off as she had feared.

She was there. Same time, same place. And just like yesterday the gulls were squawking and squabbling around her. She acknowledged Rusty's approach with a nod.

"Oh Clare," said Rusty, "I'm so glad you're still here. I was afraid I'd scared you off. That I'd spoiled the festival for you."

"You almost did," Clare admitted. A small smile took the sting out of her words. "But in the end I decided to stay." After a moment she added, "I drifted around to the various venues and for a while the music took me out of myself. It breathed new life into me."

"There's another two days to go," Rusty reminded her. "Soak up every minute of it."

"I'll try," she said. "But Rusty, tell me this. Were you serious when you said that perhaps I could join you on stage for a song?"

Rusty blinked in surprise. "I sure was! Do you mean you want to give it a go?"

Uncertainty crept into Clare's eyes. "I don't know," she said. "I thought that ... " she faltered.

Rusty touched her lightly on the arm. "It wouldn't be easy for you Clare, we both know that, but it's not outside the realms of possibility."

"Do you think ... " her voice trailed off.

"I think you should come back with me to my hotel and we'll go through the songs together. That's all. You're not committing yourself to anything. If it doesn't sit well with you then we'll stop. How about it?"

Clare inhaled a deep breath. "Alright," she said at last. "I'll give it a go."

Rusty picked up her ukulele and played the songs she had chosen for her repertoire.

Clare removed her cap and the silky blonde hair that was bunched up beneath it tumbled down to her shoulders. She listened attentively to Rusty's renditions.

"Well?" asked Rusty. "Do any of them take your fancy?"

"I like the last one. Can I see the music?"

Rusty flushed with pleasure. "That's my own composition." She handed Clare a sheet. "The song isn't published so this is just a photocopy of my hand written original."

"That'll do fine," she said as she scanned the melody line and lyrics. "It's a good song. It's got a great jazz feel."

"Are you ready to try it?" Rusty asked.

Clare nodded.

Rusty began strumming her ukulele and the haunting tones of Clare's unique voice rang out through the room.

"What's wrong?" Clare asked in alarm as Rusty stopped strumming.

"Sorry," said Rusty, who had been momentarily overwhelmed at hearing the remarkable voice at such close quarters. "Can we start again? Let's take it from the top."

When the session had finished Rusty made them both a cup of tea.

"Was I alright?" Clare asked tentatively. "It's been a long time since I've done anything like this."

"You were wonderful," Rusty assured her. "And we can have another rehearsal tomorrow morning. We're not onstage until two thirty."

Clare placed her cup into its saucer with a clatter and Rusty could see the faint trembling of her hands. She bit her lip and tears sprang into her eyes.

"All those people," she whispered. "The thought of all those people looking at me, pitying me. The repercussions of being in the public eye again. The unrelenting glare of the spotlight being trained on my life. I don't know if I can do it." Her emotional upheaval got the better of her and she started to sob.

Rusty began to think she had placed her under too much pressure. Her efforts to stand up on stage and perform would cost her too much, she thought. She was a fragile human being whose life a cruel fate had left shattered and there was no easy way back. Yet on the other hand, Rusty mused, it might cost her more not to go through with it. She had to start somewhere and her appearance at the festival could be her first step on the road to recovery.

"Clare," Rusty began, "I can't even begin to imagine the trauma you're going through now or the repercussions performing with me tomorrow may have on your life. But there's an outside chance that something good may come of it. The odds may not be great but I don't think they're all that bad.

"Yes, people will stare, people will pity, that's normal human behavior. But eventually they'll go beyond that. They'll start listening to the voice that captivated them before and can't fail to captivate them again. A voice that like all this natural beauty that surrounds us," she gestured to the scene outside the window, "should be shared by all. A voice that was meant to be heard. Imagine if Judy Garland had never sang in public after her movie career had ended. Just think how much the world would have been deprived of."

Clare trained her penetrating blue eyes on Rusty. "I used to treasure my voice. I thought I'd been blessed with a wonderful gift. But now I wonder if it's nothing more than a wretched curse sent to cause me endless torment."

Rusty looked at Clare with frank intensity. "It may just be your salvation," she told her solemnly. "Don't keep it buried any longer."

Clare went over to the window and looked out.

Rusty wondered if she saw the scenic beauty in all its grandeur or whether to her eye everything was veiled by a drab gray curtain.

After some moments she turned to Rusty and asked, "What time do you want to meet tomorrow for our last rehearsal?"

"Same as today," Rusty told her, with quiet admiration.

At midday on Monday they walked to the ocean front stage together and sat down to enjoy the traditional and contemporary jazz being performed. Clare listened attentively but sat very still.

At two fifteen Rusty put her hand on her arm. "Time to go backstage," she said. She felt the sudden stiffening of Clare's muscles.

In a series of leaden movements, Clare eventually got to her feet. She followed Rusty without speaking.

"Just focus on the song," Rusty told her. "Don't think about the crowd. Don't think about the repercussions. Keep all other thoughts at bay and you'll get through it."

Clare nodded but without much conviction.

Rusty was introduced and received a warm reception when she appeared on stage. As it had been over the past couple of days, the audience was large. And as before, in exceedingly good humor.

Rusty's own nervousness turned into exhilaration as her first two songs brought loud applause and many cheers. She turned her head to the side to look at Clare who was waiting in the wings, hoping that some of her elation would infect her too.

But Clare's face was tight with tension. Rusty tried to give her some encouragement by flashing her a beaming smile but it seemed to have no effect.

Rusty bantered with the audience before launching into her second last song in the hope of buying some time. Precious moments that might give Clare a chance to settle down. When she couldn't delay any longer she began strumming and singing again. And then it was time. Time for the final song that she had rehearsed with Clare.

She glanced towards the wings again.

Clare was looking at the sea of upturned faces and her eyes were filled with naked terror. Her whole body began to visibly shake.

Rusty stared at the microphone in front of her then looked over at Clare hoping she would give her a cue as to whether she could manage to go on or not. But Clare's gaze was still fixed on the eager crowd who were waiting for Rusty to continue.

Rusty spoke slowly. "For this last song," she began, "I'm going to be

joined on stage by ... " But before she could finish she caught sight of Clare's retreating figure. To her despair it disappeared from view altogether.

The audience waited expectantly.

"I mean," Rusty said into the mic, "I had hoped to be joined on stage by someone with a voice far superior to mine but it seems she wasn't able to make it so you'll just have to suffer my vocals for one more song."

There was a burst of laughter and a round of good-humored applause.

Well, thought Rusty, there's not going to be any fairytale ending. But worst of all, how much damage have I done to the poor woman by setting her up for such a fall?

The song finished. The performance was over. The euphoria she had experienced earlier was replaced by sinking despair. She thanked the audience and was about to take her leave when she glimpsed someone advancing from the side.

Clare Morello took Rusty's arm and spoke into the microphone. "I'm the one," she said apologetically "who was supposed to join Rusty in that last song but my nerves got the better of me. But I think I'm up to it now. Will you all bear with me while I give it a go?"

The audience clapped encouragement, not recognizing at first who the woman was. But then Rusty heard the startled exclamations emitting from members of the seated crowd.

There were shouts of, "It's Clare Morello! It's Clare Morello!"

And the doubts that were in the minds of others evaporated as soon as she had sung the song's first line.

She faltered from time to time and when she did Rusty gave her an encouraging smile. When she hit the final note the cheer of the audience seemed to lift her up on a wave of air. She laughed and cried and laughed again. And then she sang some more.

When the audience finally let them leave the stage a radiant light illuminated Clare's eyes.

"I never thought it could be like this," she said, hugging Rusty. "I didn't think the joy I used to feel singing would ever visit me again. I know it's just a small step and that there's a long way to go yet, but you've given me strength Rusty. You're a miracle worker.

"No," Rusty protested. "The strength was in you all the time. You just needed someone to help coax it out. You're the miracle worker, not me."

Clare's voice shook a little as she said, "Rusty I'm still afraid. You won't desert me will you? I'll need plenty of help if I'm to travel the long road back."

"I'll be there," Rusty assured her. "Now, let's make the most of what's left of the weekend."

"You know," said Clare, as her gaze swept across the ocean, the pines and the picturesque promenade with fresh eyes, "old Manly has quite a bit going for it with all its beauty and carefree atmosphere."

"Yep," agreed Rusty. "And to top it off there's all that jazz. So let's take a seat and enjoy the rest of the festival."

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