

Bad Date

A Jane Yeats

BY LIZ BRADY

The following is an excerpt from Liz Brady's forthcoming novel, Bad Date: A Jane Yeats Mystery. The narrator, Jane, is investigating a series of murders in the sex trade following the death of her next-door neighbour (and prostitute), Tina Paglia. In this scene, she attends a party to celebrate the re-opening of Sweet Dreams, her mother's country and western bar. Jane's best friend, Silver (the character who briefly appears at the end of this scene), is a Native artist ...

Friday night I put the final touches to my makeup, carefully pencilling in two sable brows that hang like inverted smiles over my eyes and filling in my lips with a colour reminiscent of coagulated blood. I stood in front of the full-length mirror to check out my makeover.

Earlier in the day, I'd decided to celebrate Etta's Grand Ole Opening Nite by dressing as Cousin Minnie Pearl, the Queen of Country Comedy. Opryland's Minnie Pearl Museum is one of Mom's shrines, so I was confident she would appreciate the tribute. Minnie remains close to my own heart because she was the first woman to be named Billboard's "Man of the Year" for country music.

I briefly contemplated going as Shania Twain, but couldn't afford the facelift, breast augmentation and navel restructuring. Besides, if Shania really did show up, I could get sued for plagiarism.

Most of my outfit came from the Goodwill, which rarely disappoints my inner reluctant shopper. I looked

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startlingly like Nashville's endearing spinster in my flower-strewn, broad-brimmed straw hat, from which dangled the trademark price tag. My frilly, country-girl dress flounced down to just short of my nylon ankle socks and Doc Martens, more or less sparing me the necessity of shaving my legs. The Goodwill had also yielded my earrings and necklace, tiny masterworks of seashell art.

"HEE-HAW," I shouted at my image. I looked like a hundred bucks. No time to puzzle over why I feel more comfortable dressed like an Alabama clown than I do in your basic black cocktail dress.

Now in a fey mood, I kissed my dog and headed out to party. I decided that Cousin Minnie should ride Harley over to Sweet Dreams. Just past Broadview, we got pulled over by a traffic cop.

"HOW-DEE, officer!" Maybe I was running a big risk, assuming that Blue Boy had a sense of humour.

He grinned. "How-dee, m'am. You're not in any kind of trouble here. I just wanted to get a closer look. Not often I see a woman driving a Harley—let alone someone dressed like you. Hope you don't mind."

"Not at all. I'm flattered. As Minnie once said, 'I wear a hat so folks can tell me and Dolly Parton apart.'" I reached into my saddlebag and showed him my straw hat.

"Let me guess. You must be heading for Sweet Dreams. My wife's real upset I couldn't take her there tonight."

"Yeah, my Mom owns the joint."

He was wonder-struck. "Too cool. I can't wait to tell Gloria."

It's not easy, being the daughter of a celebrity.

Dayglo searchlights arced across the face of Etta's edifice. Two exterior speakers blasted an endless loop of "sweet dreams of you" at the waiting crowd. A couple were stepping out of a white stretch limo, the guy in a black Stetson, jeans so tight his jewels must be shrieking "please release me, let me go."

A woman packed close to the entrance frantically grabbed her girlfriend's arm. "Ohmygawd, Shirley, it's Garth ... GARTH BROOKS!"

Maybe Etta hadn't been lying about her all-star lineup. My mother is so good at what she does that if she owned a race track, I would have met the Queen Mother years ago.

I drove Harley around to the parking lot behind the bar and used my key to enter through the back door. Etta was standing a few metres away, giving last-minute instructions to her staff.

My mother, mistress of Canada's greatest juke joint, no less than regal in a knock-out white satin gown aswirl in gold sequins, plunging neckline, deep slits up the thighs, and five-inch gold stilettos. She could have passed for Dolly Parton en route to a White House dinner party. Only Etta, though, could carry off a beehive wig the colour of pink lemonade.

Her welcome seemed subdued. Couldn't be nerves—she doesn't have any.

She looked me up and down in a worried way. "Well, you got all the details right, dear, 'cept for the shoes, which

Mystery

should be Mary-Janes. But you had to choose Cousin Minnie, eh? Why not Loretta Lynn or Barbara Mandrell—a woman with some sex appeal, a little glamour?”

I launched into a deep-breathing exercise. “I’ve never been too good with the sexy details, so I thought I’d settle for an historical tribute. What’s the problem, Mom? I didn’t come here to get laid.” I was exasperated. Since I pulled on my first T-shirt and pair of jeans, Etta’s never stopped harping on at me about my clothes.

She softened up as the gold acrylic nail on her index finger sliced through the wrapping on my housewarming gift. It was a critical moment: Etta’s life depended on her being intensely grateful. To raise the \$190 (plus tax) required to make this purchase, I pawned my sound equipment.

“How did you know?” she shrieked. “You must be a psychic.”

Like it was the Holy Grail, she clutched the newly-released ten-CD Hank Williams compilation to her ample bosom. The initial run had already sold out and been nominated for an album-notes Grammy. I love the guy’s music, but only a fanatic could appreciate the two volumes of annotations, more than 50 previously unreleased cuts, the 1949 radio transcriptions of his “Health and Happiness” shows (including Hank’s pitches for the patent medicine Hadacol), demo tapes and studio out-takes.

“How did I know what?” I asked.

“That me and Eddy are flying off to Montgomery, Alabama, in February. They opened up a museum to Hank in the old railroad terminal there. It’s even got the blue Cadillac he died in.”

Different pilgrimages for different folks.

“Eddy?” I queried apprehensively. My mother runs through men like shit through the proverbial goose, but she never actually sleeps with more than one at a time. I think the polite term for her carryings-on is ‘serial monogamy.’ She calls it smart. Since the night of the fire that almost wiped out the bar, she’d been dating Nikos, the grizzled old *ouzo*-maker who owned The Last Temptation right next door. Maybe the temperature had plunged on her erotic thermometer.

“I had to dump Nikos,” she confided, “with a bit of encouragement from his wife. But someone is watching over me, you know. That very night Eddy walked in here to catch a new band I’d brought in from Halifax. Love at first sight for both of us,” she beamed. “He’s working late

tonight, dee-jaying at the Silver Dollar, but I’ll be sure to introduce you soon as he arrives.”

She planted a wet kiss of thanks on my cheek and tottered off to greet her guests.

Etta’s regulars, most dressed in plaid flannel shirts, blue jeans and cowboy boots, mingled freely with members of local country bands (all of them praying to break into the big times), local celebrities, visiting refugees from Queen Street. A CITY-TV crew turned out to document the occasion for urban posterity.

In spite of the festivities, the emotional fall-out from Tina’s murder and from attending the vigil was weighing down my spirits. Because I didn’t feel much like socializing, I headed for the bar. When he saw me approaching, Kenny-the-bartender drew me a pint from the Smithwick’s tap. Tonight three other guys were working bar alongside him. Kenny grinned wide as a mail slot. “Jane, you’re looking like a *real* woman tonight. Should try it more often.” Etta writes his scripts.

I downed my pint, staring morosely at “Hank’s” tengallon hat, miraculously rescued from the ashes at considerable risk to life-and-limb by Etta herself (as she never wearied of telling it). Her replica of the original fake sat behind the bar in a Plexiglas display case.

Telling the truth, mom claims, is not what it’s cut out to be. Look where it got Jesus.

By the time things got really humming, I had drunk my way through the beer quota I’d assigned myself. Hell, it was a once-in-a-lifetime night. I stopped counting.

As I sullenly pondered the virtues of mendacity, some wise-ass came up behind me and tugged at the 69-cent price tag on my hat. “Does that buy me the hat—or you?”

I swung round on my bar stool, pissed that for the second time in 24 hours some jerk had mistaken me for a whore. My anger turned to astonishment as I glared into Michael’s laughing face. Instantly it dawned on me why Etta had been less than thrilled at my costume. She wanted me to look beautiful for this surprise, one she must have had a big hand in orchestrating.

“What’s the problem, Mom? I didn’t come here to get laid.” Since I pulled on my first T-shirt and pair of jeans, Etta’s never stopped harping on at me about my clothes.

Before I could recover from the shock and rally my comic defences, Michael swept me off the stool into his arms. "Just thought I'd drop by for a beer, Minnie," he whispered. His lips on my ear planted sinful thoughts in my head.

"Michael, what the hell are you doing here?" I asked, edginess sharpening my voice.

He brushed back the lock of thick black hair overhanging his bright green glasses. "You can run but you can't hide, Jane. To answer your question: I missed you." This man's emotional fluency makes me very nervous. I ran for shelter to another beer.

How easy it should have been for me to say, "Hey, I missed you, too." But the words would not come. His appearance had thrown me for a loop. Michael left alone for the West coast because I don't follow anyone anywhere, because I was running in the opposite direction, sheltering myself from feelings that, against all odds, he had managed to reawaken.

Feminist folk wisdom claims it's men who are frightened of commitment. Guess I underwent a sex-change without noticing.

He had stepped from a romantic chapter of my life I didn't want to reread.

A few weeks ago, when I told Etta that Michael was travelling off to his dream island without me (my choice), she griped, "You've always been a loner, my girl. Guess you want to stay that way." Maybe I do.

While he was eagerly narrating his adventures in Canada's version of lotus land, the first band appeared on stage,

sparing me the necessity of maintaining my end of the conversation. Many of the performers Etta had encouraged over the years were present to pay homage and play a nostalgic tune. Before too long, folks were singing along, line-dancing and whooping it up. Suddenly everything went dead quiet.

From under the brim of my hat, I glimpsed a classy guy in a tux hop up on stage. I knew I'd gotten the gender wrong when she spoke. "A whole lot of us present tonight got our first break right here in this bar. Hell, without the support and encouragement of Etta Yeats, I'd probably be hustling commercials for the beef producers. And you know what a mad cow that would make me."

k.d. lang broadcast her wicked grin across the whole room, which broke into a wild cacophony of cheers and applause. She bowed from the waist, and continued. "Back in the early eighties, I strolled into Sweet Dreams in my cut-off boots and square-dance skirt to ask if I could sing a tune or two at one of Etta's famous Friday-night talent shows. Well, I hadn't finished the first verse of 'Hanky Panky' when she gave me the thumbs-up. I've never looked back and I've never stopped being grateful. Folks, this woman is pure gold."

She cajoled my reluctant mother up on stage. When k.d. got down on one knee, took Etta's hand and sang "Crying," I sobbed my heart out. For Etta, whose joy was palpable, and for me—who, somewhere along the way, lost track of joy.

Etta left the stage still holding k.d.'s hand and made her way straight for me. My chest hammered as I straightened my frock.

"HOW-DEE," I bleated out like a startled lamb, extending my damp hand at Etta's trophy. k.d.'s eyes wandered appreciatively from my hat to my boots, leaving me feeling dumber than an overheated groupie at an early Beatles concert.

"You must be Etta's daughter," she laughed. "Hi, Jane."

To my credit—my only credit that night, I resisted asking for her autograph. She kissed my cheek before moving off to attend to some people who couldn't resist. My knees went so wobbly I reached for my bar stool. I had forgotten all about Michael.

At this point I was drunk enough to honestly believe that the stage beckoned me. As I grabbed the mike, my muddled wits settled on a song: Hank Williams's last Number One hit during his lifetime, "I'll Never Get Out of This World Alive." I dedicated it to my mother, who was staring daggers at me from behind the broad shoulders of a huge old black guy. Like my grade-five music teacher, Etta thinks only people who can carry a tune should sing outside the shower.



Diana Dean, "The Chess Players," 58" x 54", Oil on Canvas, 1985.

Minnie Pearl sang off-key on purpose. I had no alternative. Some rude lout shouted up at me, "Keep singing like that, honey, and you never will get out alive."

As I rushed off stage, I tripped on the stairs. But for the stabilizing effect of my Docs, I would have fallen flat on my face.

Eddy, my mother's latest Hoochie Coochie man, unglued himself from my outraged mother to introduce himself. "Maybe you'd have more luck singing the blues," he consoled me. His clear eyes crinkled humorously.

Turned out he was from the Mississippi Delta. He told Michael and me that he had migrated north in Muddy Waters' tracks for the Chicago blues scene. Even though his back was a bit stooped, he still measured in at about six feet, four inches. Good-looking and a sweet man. Hope for his own sake that he isn't in love with Etta, who doesn't consider any boyfriend, except mine, a keeper.

Silver helped the crowd forget my performance by jumping up and belting out an old Sons of the Pioneers classic, "A Cowboy Has To Sing." She was dressed up like the other Minnie—Haw-Haw. "Hey, I'll do anything I can to improve race relations," she squealed. When she trilled a few bars of "This Land Is Your Land," I was sure she'd get pelted with beer bottles. But most folks took it as proof of her patriotism. Its perpetrator left the stage in stitches. Fortunately, she chose not to tell the joke about the Lone Ranger and Tonto.

Over the protestations of her guests, Etta declined to return to the stage. Kenny told me she didn't want to make

herself an easy target for Nikos' wife, who had staggered in from next door with a half-empty quart of *ouzo* in her paw.

Michael took me home in a cab. I fell asleep with my boots on.

Liz Brady is the author of Sudden Blow: A Jane Yeats Mystery (Second Story Press, 1998), which received the Arthur Ellis Award for Best First Novel from Crime Writers of Canada.

SUSAN SWAN

Goddess Oil

On a Molivos evening,
when Karolina hoses her garden
in the little square of town land,
like a big kid,
standing barefoot in the public mud,
knees bent, arms akimbo,
mouth open in girly surprise.
See! she grins, the silvery arc
that shoots from my right hip—
is goddess oil!

Susan Swan's poetry appears earlier in this volume.



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