



Iain S. Baird

## THE GULDEMEISTER

Ronny Jefferson's most prized possession is the carved walnut walking stick with the solid gold handle the shape and size of a cue ball. Well, maybe his second most valuable possession, if you consider the matching set of artificial legs given to him by the V.A. after his discharge from the Army in '73. But neither the legs nor the cane is with him now in Washington, D.C. They wait for him in a closet in the rear of a one-bedroom apartment off a vine-covered courtyard on Dumaine Street in the French Quarter. It'll be two more weeks until Ronny finds himself back in New Orleans.

In the meantime, this morning finds Ronny dragging himself up Washington's Thirteenth Street toward the corner of F where he'll set up shop for the day. He rolls his legless body on his homemade dolly to the northwest corner, all the better to catch the morning sunshine. He sets down his harmonium and an upturned battered fedora and begins to play the blues. He never begs, but, nevertheless, every hour or so he'll have to empty the hat of the crumpled dollar bills and loose change to make room for more. Sometimes, he sings along with his playing.

*My baby done left me cause I's three feet tall,  
Says I just too short to consider to ball.  
Say she want a big man in every way,  
I'd have to grow a foot or two to make her stay.*

*Blues? I gots the short man blues.  
Blues? Gots nothing more to lose.*

“Ronny, you nasty.” That's Baby speaking. Baby's a

receptionist who works at a think tank up on K Street and who always dresses a lot better than one should be able to afford on a receptionist's salary, even a receptionist on K Street.

"Baby, Baby. You looking fine today," he says. "When you gonna give ole Ronny a tumble?"

"I told you, you ain't my type."

"What, you don't like black men?"

"I don't like musicians."

"Well, you ever changes your mind, you know where to find me."

With a smile, Baby drops a dollar in Ronny's hat and sashays up the street. Ronny watches her for a moment. Elegance. He sighs and rolls his dolly a bit to the left to better catch the sun's rays.

And so the day goes. A dollar here, a handful of change there. At ten, the bald white dude, who works at one of the federal agencies, drops off the cup of Starbucks—tall, double-shot, skim latte. At twelve-fifteen, the shoe store guy with the marital problems on his way to the titty bar on Ninth, sets down a bag lunch. After taking a break to eat the ham and cheese sandwich, Ronny hefts the harmonium up onto his dolly and wheels himself across the street to follow the sun and to catch the afternoon rays.

*I'd walk a mile on hot coals if I only had feet,  
I'd crawl right up your driveway if I wasn't  
so damn beat,  
I'd climb the highest mountain, I would swim  
the deepest sea,  
But you can see without no legs that  
just ain't goin' to be.*

*Blues? I gots the short man blues.  
Blues? Gots nothing more to lose.*

A cool breeze stirs the dollars in Ronny's hat. He looks up to the sky and sees the sun just skimming the edge of the building across the way. Soon he'll be in shadow. Johnny Puke saunters up the street toward him. Puke ain't his real name, of course, but it's how Ronny thinks of him. He's called Johnny Pucker up on Fourteenth Street near Thomas Circle where he runs his whores, probably not his real name neither. Johnny drops a fin into the hat.

"Why, thank you, Mr. Pucker. Very generous."

"You got your ear out for me?"

"Always, Mr. Pucker."

"You hear anything I should know, you going to apprise me, right?"

"Right," Ronny calls after him as Johnny continues his pimp roll up the street. "Yeah, right, Mr. Puke," he mutters to himself.

The wind blows again, this time even cooler. The season's ending. Ronny packs up the harmonium, takes the last fistful of dollars from the hat, which he places on his head, and sets off for home back down Thirteenth Street toward the Metro. He grunts softly as he pulls his trolley along the pavement with his two muscular arms, inching along like a two-legged caterpillar.

Even before the Southwest flight touches down at Louis Armstrong Airport in New Orleans, the annual metamorphosis of Ronny has begun. Gone are the shabby clothes, replaced now by a well-tailored blue blazer and a pink shirt tied at the neck with a golden tie. The dolly is left behind in D.C. In its stead is a wheelchair with a black leather seat and a chrome finish, which in turn will soon be set aside. In place of the battered fedora, Ronny sports a jaunty bowler made from gold silk, which he tips to the pretty ladies as he rolls past.

With minimal assistance from the airport cabby, Ronny

exits the taxi and gets into his wheelchair in front of the French Quarter building on Dumaine and, with his one piece of hand luggage on his lap, rolls himself under the wrought-iron balcony, past the massive carriageway doors, and into the courtyard. There, he inserts the old skeleton key into the lock of his apartment. The Guildemeister is home.

The whole thing had started with the shoes. He'd just been Ronny Jefferson on that day some ten years ago on a visit to New Orleans to see his sister, a sometime-jazz singer on Frenchmen Street. He'd strapped on his legs and was taking a stroll up Magazine Street looking for a place to grab a beer and an oyster po'boy when he saw the shoes in the window of Bertha's Vintage Emporium. Shiny gold shoes that looked like they just might slip right onto his prostheses. And damned if they didn't. He thought how nicely they'd go with the gold-handled walking stick presented to him by the members of his platoon as a talisman of hope after the Bouncing Betty took both his legs in the Delta north of Can Tho. The golden bowler and tie soon followed. The 24 karat grillwork for his teeth were a later addition, a year or two after he'd already been baptized at Sonny's Bar one night in a river of Abita beer.

"Who you trying to be, Ronny?" asked Monkey Man, named not for the way he looked but for how he danced. "What's with the shoes and shit?"

"He trying to be that guy from the Bond movie. Goldfucker or something," said Renée, draped across the bar only a nod or two from oblivion.

"Just trying to add a little class to the joint," said Ronny, tipping his gold bowler.

"You Gold, Ronny. Solid Gold," said Monkey Man, trying to stay on Ronny's good side, seeing that he was doing the buying.

"Ya, you ist de Guildemeister, all right," added some tourist from Holland decked out in shorts and walking shoes.

He'd made a left when he should've made a right and ended up in Sonny's Bar on the wrong side of Rampart Street too drunk to notice that he was the only white person in the place. The Guildemeister. Or at least that was the consensus on what the Dutch guy had said when everyone sobered up a bit the next day. The Guildemeister. Yeah, that would do.

And so it came to pass that every fall when the breezes grew nippy up north, Ronny Jefferson would wheel himself down Thirteenth Street in D.C. for the last time and emerge a couple of days later from his French Quarter apartment with his legs strapped on, sporting the gold shoes, tie, and bowler, swinging the gold-handled walking stick, and flashing his 24 karat smile. In April or May, when the air in New Orleans grew sultry, the Guildemeister would disappear and the blues-singing, harmonium-playing destitute would take up his position behind his upturned fedora on the corner of Thirteenth and F Streets in D.C.

It's a good living. During the summer months in Washington, Ronny takes in a surprising thirty to forty thousand dollars. It's amazing how those dollars in the fedora added up, hour after hour, day after day, week after week. And overhead? What overhead? Adds up enough to support the Guildemeister's wintering in New Orleans, that's for sure. Wintering in New Orleans. How he loves the sound of that. Reminds him of the rich white folks who winter in Miami and summer in the Hamptons.

Around New Orleans he cuts quite the figure, and this in a city known for its figure cutting. Either strolling down Royal Street on Sunday mornings, admiring the window displays of Louis Quatorze chairs and cracked Dalton china and listening to the street musicians, or stumbling up Bourbon Street at four in the morning, trading quips with the hookers looking for a last john, one and all hail the Guildemeister. His notoriety grows to such an extent that two years ago he sat on a throne in a mule-drawn cart to lead the Krewe du

Vieux parade as it opened the Mardi Gras season, wending its way through the narrow streets of the Quarter. For that occasion, he'd donned a shiny gold lamé suit and cape to complement his other golden accessories. He looked like the Sun King himself as he waved to his screaming, sloshed subjects along the parade route. The suit and cape now hang, cleaned and pressed, in his closet. One day he plans to be buried in them.

Yes, it's all pretty sweet. Six months sitting in the sun in D.C. singing and smiling and watching his hat fill with dollars, then six months drinking and partying in the Big Easy. Oh yeah, there's partying. The Guildemeister strikes quite the figure decked out in gold, but that's not all; he's also an oddity. A man with no legs. How would that work? And New Orleans seems to attract just the kind of women determined to find out. Yep, pretty sweet, all things considering. Pretty sweet, until Baby shows up.

"I know you."

"Huh?" the Guildemeister says, looking up from his beer.

"I know you. You Ronny. You that legless guy up on F Street."

"I think you're mistaken," says the Guildemeister, flashing his golden grillwork and standing up from the table. "I think you've mistaken me for someone else, Miss."

"What the fuck," says Baby, looking up at the tall man standing in front of her. "Jesus, you know you got a double up in D.C."

It might have ended there, a few more polite words and she would have been her on way, if at that exact moment the Monkey Man hadn't shown up.

"Ronny, my man, you ain't goin' believe the shit that went down today. Who's this fine lady? Ain't you goin' to introduce me to your friend, Ronny?"

"It is you," says Baby. "What the fuck is going on?"

Where'd you get them legs? Shit, if you ain't the sight."

Ronny, or the Guildemeister—frankly, he doesn't know who he is at the moment—grabs Baby by the elbow and steers her over to a corner table away from the prying eyes and cupped ears that lined the bar.

"Where'd you get them legs?" Baby asks.

"Nam."

"What you mean 'Nam'? Like Namin Marcus, the department store?"

"Neiman Marcus. No, 'Nam,' like Vietnam."

"Before my time."

"I guess."

"What was you doing there?" Baby asks, checking out the Guildemeister from head to toe and back up again.

Ronny looks across the room. "I don't talk about it." He never talks about his days as a sniper, blowing the heads off VC big shots from five hundred yards out—the pop of his rifle followed a second later by the head vaporizing into a red mist that sprayed the surrounding jungle. He never talks about how he climbed down one evening from his perch in a banyan tree to step on the mine buried in the rotted leaves and tangled vines below.

"Let's get out of here," the Guildemeister says, pulling a thick roll of greenbacks out of his pocket and dropping a twenty on the table.

Baby's eyes widen at the sight of the wad of bills, and she looks left and right. "Jesus, Ronny, ain't you ever heard of a bank. Don't you got a credit card?"

"No credit cards, no checkbooks, no banks. Don't trust 'em."

"Well, I got a Platinum American Express card."

"Ain't that nice."

Ronny wakes to the sound of an engine slamming into a line of freight cars. He hears the train sound its whistle as

it reverses direction to begin the long haul north, carrying coffee or steel or one of the other hundreds of commodities unloaded at the Port of New Orleans. Out on the river a tanker sounds its foghorn. Ronny looks at the clock. Three twenty. He rolls over wondering if Baby might be ready to go again. He has a few other legless tricks to show her. But Baby's gone. He raises his head and looks toward the bathroom. Dark. Damn, she has gone. Maybe he's losing his touch. Maybe she'll come back. Baby's special. Elegant. And talented. The Guildemeister smiles with the memory of just how talented Baby can be.

Bracing himself on the night table and the arm of his wheelchair, he swings himself onto the seat and rolls across the room to the toilet. When he reenters the bedroom, the first thing he notices is that one of his legs has fallen to the floor and is no longer propped up next to the chair where he left it. Then he sees his trousers lying crumpled in the corner. Shit. He shakes his head as he searches each pocket, knowing already that the money's gone. More than two thousand dollars. As he tilts his head to the right, considering if she had been worth it, he notices the closet door ajar. The closet where he keeps the rest of his stash.

He sits looking out at the night sky. All his money gone. Thirty-eight thousand dollars. He thinks about heading back up to D.C., putting his hat out again. But it's winter, and he hates the cold. In the cold his whole body aches, even the phantom legs that have been gone so long. He wheels around back into the room just in time to see his door explode inward, and there in its frame stands Johnny Puke.

“Where's the Bitch?”

“Who—”

The blow catches Ronny by surprise high on the left cheek and his chair spins around.

He never expected it. Who'd hit a cripple?

“Don't play stupid with me. Baby. The Bitch. Where

is she?”

“Baby? What Baby got to do with you?”

This time Ronny raises his hand in time to deflect the blow, but he can feel the pain jolt down his left arm.

“Don’t fuck with me, you legless creep. Where’s Baby?”

“She’s gone. Robbed me. Took all my money.”

The wind seems to sail right out of Johnny Puke. He takes a deep breath and sits on the edge of the bed. “She rob you, too, huh?”

Things fall into place for Ronny. “Baby. She work for you?”

“Of course she work for me. How’d you think she get all them fancy clothes and jewelry and shit, by answering the phone up on K Street? So, where’s Baby? Where’d she go?”

“I don’t know,” says Ronny, still dazed by the blow to the head and the onslaught of these new developments.

“You don’t know. Well, I know one thing. I’m going to find her, and you’re going to help,” says Johnny Puke, rising to his feet.

The next evening in Sonny’s, the Guildemeister addresses the League of Lushes. “You all remember that girl who came in here last night?”

“Yeah, the one who knew you from somewhere. ‘F’in Street’ or something. What was that all about?” asks the Monkey Man.

“Was I here last night?” asks Renée, lifting her head, widening her eyes, and blinking around the room.

Sonny pours the Guildemeister a shot and rests his massive forearms on the counter.

“Forget that F Street stuff. Anyway, I need to find the girl.” Everyone resumes their drinking, except Sonny, who takes his soiled dishrag farther down the bar and wipes at a

decade-old stain.

“Her name’s Baby,” says the Guildemeister. Still nothing. “I got a thousand dollars.”

The Monkey Man’s eyes pop open, and Renée looks like someone has hit her with a defibrillator—full voltage. For the first time in weeks, Sonny has something to say besides ‘What’ll it be?’

“Huh?” asks Sonny.

And so the search begins. Ronny and his cohorts put out the word through their connections in every dive and flop house in New Orleans. Meanwhile, Johnny Puke hits the cribs and sends out the call through the International Brotherhood of Pimps and Perverts.

With every other person in the French Quarter combing the alleys and hidden courtyards, who would think it would be Renée on a visit to her sister in Uptown who’d spot Baby getting off a streetcar and crossing St. Charles Avenue to enter the fashionable Lafitte Bed and Breakfast.

An hour later, when Johnny Puke and the Guildemeister enter her room, Baby’s conveniently counting the money on the brocade bedspread of the canopy bed.

“Here, Baby, let me give you a hand with that,” says Johnny Puke.

Baby looks like a child caught with her hand in Daddy’s wallet. “Ronny, I’m sorry,” says Baby, turning to gaze up into the Guildemeister’s eyes. “I’m so sorry. I just had to get away. I was scared. I never wanted to hurt you. Don’t let him take me back.”

Johnny Puke backhands her, knocking her off the bed and slamming her head against the night table. “Shut the fuck up, Baby. Just shut the fuck up. Now, let’s see what we got here.”

With his lips moving with every number, Johnny Puke fingers the pile of money spread out before him. “I makes it

out to be just under thirty-five grand.”

“Yeah, I had thirty-eight thousand. She must have spent some of it.”

“You had thirty-eight? What about my money? What about my seventy-five thousand?”

“I never took no money from him, Ronny. He’s lying,” says Baby, crouching in the corner.

“I thought I told you to shut the fuck up, Baby. Look, I’m a reasonable man,” says Johnny Puke, turning to Ronny. “What say I give you one thousand and we call it even?”

“But that’s what I owe Renée. What about my thirty-eight thousand? This isn’t right.”

“Hum. You got a point. What you say I give you shit? That sound fair?” asks Johnny Puke, opening his jacket just enough to display the pearl-handled forty-four stuck into his waistband.

“Mr. Pucker, this ain’t—”

“Get the fuck outta here before I blow your goddamn head off.”

“Don’t leave me with him, Ronny. I can’t go back. He’ll hurt me.”

“Shit, I ain’t goin hurt you, Baby, at least not much. You too valuable to me.” Then turning again to Ronny, Johnny Puke asks, “You still here?”

Getting a gun in New Orleans is about as difficult as picking up the clap in Vegas, even a high-powered rifle with a scope and silencer. Finding Johnny Puke is even easier. With Ronny’s money in his pocket, Johnny Puke is acting the big man, throwing money around the French Quarter like there’s no tomorrow. And for Johnny Puke that’s true.

Ronny’s surprised at how it comes back so easily: the butt of the rifle pulled snug against his shoulder, the controlled breathing, the gentle squeeze to the trigger, the soft pop of the silenced round speeding from the barrel. Johnny Puke’s

standing on the balcony of his hotel, watching the sunset over the Mississippi and smoking a celebratory cigar. Then the evening turns redder, a cigar tumbles nine floors to the parking lot below.

Soon the Guildemeister is seen once again strolling up Royal Street, flashing his golden grillwork at passersby. The gold bowler is perched on top his head, the shiny shoes glide along the narrow sidewalk, and the golden-handled walking stick taps out a syncopated rhythm on the pavement. But now, he has a lady on his arm. A lady dressed in a shimmering gold dress, sporting sparkly shoes with solid gold stiletto heels. An elegant lady. A lady he calls Baby.