

J E F F B E C K

B Y L E W I S S H I N E R

FELIX WAS 34. He worked four ten-hour days a week at Allied Sheet Metal, running an Amada CNC turret punch press. At night he made cassettes with his twin TEAC dbx machines. He'd recorded over a thousand of them so far, over 160 miles of tape, and he'd carefully hand lettered the labels for each one.

He'd taped everything Jeff Beck had ever done, from the Yardbirds' *For Your Love* through all the Jeff Beck Groups and the solo albums; he had the English singles of "Hi Ho Silver Lining" and "Tally Man"; he had all the session work, from Donovan to Stevie Wonder to Tina Turner.

In the shop he wore a Walkman and listened to his tapes. Nothing seemed to cut the sound of tortured metal like the diamond-edged perfection of Beck's guitar. It kept him light on his feet, dancing in place at the machine, and sometimes the sheer beauty of it made tears come up in his eyes.

On Fridays he dropped Karen at her job at *Pipeline Digest* and drove around to thrift shops and used book stores looking for records. After he'd cleaned them up and put them on tape he didn't care about them anymore; he sold them back to collectors and made enough profit to keep himself in blank XLIIIs.

Occasionally he would stop at a pawn shop or music store and look at the guitars. Lightning Music on 183 had a Charvel/Jackson soloist, exactly like the one Beck played on *Flash*, except for the hideous lilac-purple finish. Felix yearned to pick it up but was afraid of making a fool out of himself. He had an old Sears Silvertone at home and two or three times a year he took it out and tried to play it, but he could never even manage to get it properly in tune.

Sometimes Felix spent his Friday afternoons in a dingy bar down the street from *Pipeline Digest*, alone in a back booth with a pitcher of Budweiser and an anonymous brown sack of records. On those afternoons Karen would find him in the office parking lot, already asleep in the passenger seat, and she would drive home. She worried a little, but it never happened more than once or twice a month. The rest of the time he hardly drank at all, and he never hit her or chased other women. Whatever it was that ate at him was so deeply buried it seemed easier to leave well enough alone.

ONE THURSDAY AFTERNOON a friend at work took him aside.

"Listen," Manuel said, "are you feeling okay? I mean you seem real down lately."

"I don't know," Felix told him. "I don't know what it is."

"Everything okay with Karen?"

"Yeah, it's fine. Work is okay. I'm happy and everything. I just...I don't know. Feel like something's missing."

Manuel took something out of his pocket. "A guy gave me this. You know I don't do this kind of shit no more, but the guy said it was killer stuff."

It looked like a Contac capsule, complete with the little foil blister pack. But when Felix looked closer the tiny colored spheres inside the gelatin seemed to sparkle in rainbow colors.

"What is it?"

"I don't know. He wouldn't say exactly. When I asked him what it did all he said was, 'Anything you want.'"

HE DROPPED KAREN at work the next morning and drove aimlessly down Lamar for a while. Even though he hadn't hit Half Price Books in a couple of months, his heart wasn't in it. He drove home and got the capsule off the top of his dresser where he'd left it.

Felix hadn't done acid in years, hadn't taken anything other than beer and an occasional joint in longer than he could remember. Maybe it was time for a change.

He swallowed the capsule, put Jeff Beck's *Wired* on the stereo, and switched the speakers into the den. He stretched out on the couch and looked at his watch. It was ten o'clock.

He closed his eyes and thought about what Manuel had said. It would do anything he wanted. So what did he want?

This was a drug for Karen, Felix thought. She talked all the time about what she would do if she could have any one thing in the world. She called it the Magic Wish game, though it wasn't really a game and nobody ever won.

What the guy meant, Felix told himself, was it would make me see anything I wanted to. Like a mild hit of psilocybin. A light show and a bit of rush.

But he couldn't get away from the idea. What would he wish for if he could have anything? He had an answer ready; he supposed everybody did. He framed the words very carefully in his mind.

I want to play guitar like Jeff Beck, he thought.

HE SAT UP. He had the feeling that he'd dropped off to sleep and lost a couple of hours, but when he looked at his watch it was only five after ten. The tape was still playing "Come Dancing." His head was clear and he couldn't feel any effects from the drug.

But then he'd only taken it five minutes ago. It wouldn't have had a chance to do anything yet.

He felt different though, sort of sideways, and something was wrong with his hands. They ached and tingled at the same time, and felt like they could crush rocks.

And the music. Somehow he was hearing the notes differently than he'd ever heard them before, hearing them with a certain knowledge of how they'd been made, the way he could look at a piece of sheet metal and see how it had been sheared and ground and polished into shape.

Anything you want, Manuel had said.

His newly powerful hands began to shake.

He went into his studio, a converted storeroom off the den. One wall was lined with tapes; across from it were shelves for the stereo, a few albums, and a window with heavy black drapes. The ceiling and the end walls were covered with gray paper egg cartons, making it nearly soundproof.

He took out the old Silvertone and it felt different in his hands, smaller, lighter, infinitely malleable. He switched off the Beck tape, patched the guitar into the stereo and tried tuning it up.

He couldn't understand why it had been so difficult before. When he hit harmonics he could hear the notes beat against each other with perfect clarity. He kept his left hand on the neck and reached across it with his right to turn the machines, a clean, precise gesture he'd never made before.

For an instant he felt a breathless wonder come over him. The drug had worked, had changed him. He tried to hang on to the strangeness but it slipped away. He was tuning a guitar. It was something he knew how to do.

He played "Freeway Jam," one of Max Middleton's tunes from *Blow By Blow*. Again, for just a few seconds, he felt weightless, ecstatic. Then the guitar brought him back down. He'd never noticed what a pig the Silvertone was, how high the strings sat over the fretboard, how the frets buzzed and the machines slipped. When he couldn't remember the exact notes on the record he tried to jam around them, but the guitar fought him at every step.

It was no good. He had to have a guitar. He could hear the music in his head but there was no way he could wring it out of the Silvertone.

His heart began to hammer and his throat closed up tight. He knew what he needed, what he would have to do to get it. He and Karen had over \$1300 in a savings account. It would be enough.

HE WAS HOME AGAIN by three o'clock with the purple Jackson soloist and a Fender Princeton amp. The purple finish wasn't nearly as ugly as he remembered it and the guitar fit into his hands like an old lover. He set up in the living room and shut all the windows and played, eyes closed, swaying a little from side to side, bringing his right hand all the way up over his head on the long trills.

Just like Jeff Beck.

He had no idea how long he'd been at it when he heard the phone. He lunged for it, the phone cord bouncing noisily off the strings.

It was Karen. "Is something wrong?" she asked.

"Uh, no," Felix said. "What time is it?"

"Five thirty." She sounded close to tears.

"Oh shit. I'll be right there."

He hid the guitar and amp in his studio. She would understand, he told himself. He just wasn't ready to break it to her quite yet.

In the car she seemed afraid to talk to him, even to ask why he'd been late. Felix could only think about the purple Jackson waiting for him at home.

He sat through a dinner of Chef Boyardee Pizza, using three beers to wash it down, and after he'd done the dishes he shut himself in his studio.

For four hours he played everything that came into his head, from blues to free jazz to "Over Under Sideways Down" to things he'd never heard before,

things so alien and illogical that he couldn't translate the sounds he heard. When he finally stopped Karen had gone to bed. He undressed and crawled in beside her, his brain reeling.

HE WOKE UP to the sound of the vacuum cleaner. He remembered everything, but in the bright morning light it all seemed like a weirdly vivid hallucination, especially the part where he'd emptied the savings account.

Saturday was his morning for yard work, but first he had to deal with the drug business, to prove to himself that he'd only imagined it. He went into the studio and lifted the lid of the guitar case and then sat down across from it in his battered blue-green lounge chair.

As he stared at it he felt his love and terror of the guitar swell in his chest like cancer.

He picked it up and played the solo from "Got the Feelin'" and then looked up. Karen was standing in the open door.

"Oh my god," she said. "Oh my god. What have you done?"

Felix hugged the guitar to his chest. He couldn't think of anything to say to her.

"How long have you had this? Oh. You bought it yesterday, didn't you? That's why you couldn't even remember to pick me up." She slumped against the door frame. "I don't believe it. I don't *even* believe it."

Felix looked at the floor.

"The bedroom air conditioner is broken," Karen said. Her voice sounded like she was squeezing it with both hands; if she let it go it would turn into hysteria. "The car's running on four bald tires. The TV looks like shit. I can't remember the last time we went out to dinner or a movie." She pushed both hands into the sides of her face, twisting it into a mask of anguish.

"How much did it cost?" When Felix didn't answer she said, "It cost everything, didn't it? *Everything*. Oh god, I just can't believe it."

She closed the door on him and he started playing again, frantic scraps and tatters, a few bars from "Situation," a chorus of "You Shook Me," anything to drown out the memory of Karen's voice.

It took him an hour to wind down, and at the end of it he had nothing left to play. He put the guitar down and got in the car and drove around to the music stores.

On the bulletin board at Ray Hennig's he found an ad for a guitarist and called the number from a pay phone in the strip center outside. He talked to somebody named Sid and set up an audition for the next afternoon.

When he got home Karen was waiting in the living room. "You want anything from Safeway?" she asked. Felix shook his head and she walked out. He heard the car door slam and the engine shriek to life.

He spent the rest of the afternoon in the studio with the door shut, just looking at the guitar. He didn't need to practice; his hands already knew what to do.

The guitar was almost unearthly in its beauty and perfection. It was the single most expensive thing he'd ever bought for his own pleasure, but he couldn't look at it without being twisted up inside by guilt. And yet at the

same time he lusted for it passionately, wanted to run his hands endlessly over the hard, slick finish, bury his head in the plush case and inhale the musky aroma of guitar polish, feel the strings pulse under the tips of his fingers.

Looking back he couldn't see anything he could have done differently. Why wasn't he happy?

When he came out the living room was dark. He could see a strip of light under the bedroom door, hear the snarling hiss of the T V . He felt like he was watching it all from the deck of a passing ship; he could stretch out his arms but it would still drift out of his reach.

He realized he hadn't eaten since breakfast. He made himself a sandwich and drank an iced tea glass full of whiskey and fell asleep on the couch.

A LITTLE AFTER NOON on Sunday he staggered into the bathroom. His back ached and his fingers throbbed and his mouth tasted like a kitchen drain. He showered and brushed his teeth and put on a clean T-shirt and jeans. Through the bedroom window he could see Karen lying out on the lawn chair with the Sunday paper. The pages were pulled so tight that her fingers made ridges across them. She was trying not to look back at the house.

He made some toast and instant coffee and went to browse through his tapes. He felt like he ought to try to learn some songs, but nothing seemed worth the trouble. Finally he played a Mozart symphony that he'd taped for Karen, jealous of the sound of the orchestra, wanting to be able to make it with his hands.

The band practiced in a run-down neighborhood off Rundberg and IH35. All the houses had large dogs behind chain link fences and plastic Big Wheels in the driveways. Sid met him at the door and took him back to a garage hung with army blankets and littered with empty beer cans.

Sid was tall and thin and wore a black Def Leppard T-shirt. He had acne and blond hair in a shag to his shoulders. The drummer and bass player had already set up; none of them looked older than 22 or 23. Felix wanted to leave but he had no place else to go.

"Want a brew?" Sid asked, and Felix nodded. He took the Jackson out of its case and Sid, coming back with the beer, stopped in his tracks. "Wow," he said. "Is that your ax?" Felix nodded again. "Righteous," Sid said.

"You know any Van Halen?" the drummer asked. Felix couldn't see anything but a zebra striped headband and a patch of black hair behind the two bass drums and the double row of toms.

"Sure," Felix lied. "Just run over the chords for me, it's been a while." Sid walked him through the progression for "Dance the Night Away" on his 3/4 sized Melody Maker and the drummer counted it off. Sid and the bass player both had Marshall amps and Felix's little Princeton, even on ten, got lost in the wash of noise.

In less than a minute Felix got tired of the droning power chords and started toying with them, adding a ninth, playing a modal run against them. Finally Sid stopped and said, "No, man, it's like this," and patiently went through the chords again, A, B, E, with a C# minor on the chorus.

"Yeah, okay," Felix said and drank some more beer.

They played “Beer Drinkers and Hell Raisers” by ZZ Top and “Rock and Roll” by Led Zeppelin. Felix tried to stay interested, but every time he played something different from the record Sid would stop and correct him.

“Man, you’re a hell of a guitar player, but I can’t believe you’re as good as you are and you don’t know any of these solos.”

“You guys do any Jeff Beck?” Felix asked.

Sid looked at the others. “I guess we could do ‘Shapes of Things,’ right? Like on that Gary Moore album?”

“I can fake it, I guess,” the drummer said.

“And could you maybe turn down a little?” Felix said.

“Uh, yeah, sure,” Sid said, and adjusted the knob on his guitar a quarter turn.

Felix leaned into the opening chords, pounding the Jackson, thinking about nothing but the music, putting a depth of rage and frustration into it he never knew he had. But he couldn’t sustain it; the drummer was pounding out 2 and 4, oblivious to what Felix was playing, and Sid had cranked up again and was whaling away on his Gibson with the flat of his hand.

Felix jerked his strap loose and set the guitar back in its case.

“What’s the matter?” Sid asked, the band grinding to a halt behind him.

“I just haven’t got it today,” Felix said. He wanted to break that pissant little toy Gibson across Sid’s nose, and the strength of his hatred scared him. “I’m sorry,” he said, clenching his teeth. “Maybe some other time.”

“Sure,” Sid said. “Listen, you’re really good, but you need to learn some solos, you know?”

Felix burned rubber as he pulled away, skidding through a U-turn at the end of the street. He couldn’t slow down. The car fishtailed when he rocketed out onto Rundberg and he nearly went into a light pole. Pounding the wheel with his fists, hot tears running down his face, he pushed the accelerator to the floor.

KAREN WAS GONE when Felix got home. He found a note on the refrigerator: “Sherry picked me up. Will call in a couple of days. Have a lot to think about. K.”

He set up the Princeton and tried to play what he was feeling and it came out bullshit, a jerkoff reflex blues progression that didn’t mean a thing. He leaned the guitar against the wall and went into his studio, shoving one tape after another into the decks, and every one of them sounded the same, another tired, simpleminded rehash of the obvious.

“I didn’t ask for this!” he shouted at the empty house. “You hear me? This isn’t what I asked for!”

But it was, and as soon as the words were out he knew he was lying to himself. Faster hands and a better ear weren’t enough to make him play like Beck. He had to change inside to play that way, and he wasn’t strong enough to handle it, to have every piece of music he’d ever loved turn sour, to need perfection so badly that it was easier to give it up than learn to live with the flaws.

He sat on the couch for a long time and then, finally, he picked up the guitar again. He found a clean rag and polished the body and neck and wiped each individual string. Then, when he had wiped all his fingerprints away, he put it back into the case, still holding it with the rag. He closed the latches and set it next to the amp, by the front door.

For the first time in two days he felt like he could breathe again. He turned out all the lights and opened the windows and sat down on the couch with his eyes closed. Gradually his hands became still and he could hear, very faintly, the fading music of the traffic and the crickets and the wind.

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