



THE SIDEWINDER

(the devil & a blue note)

Jesse Malouf

It starts somewhere in the middle of nowhere, on a highway leading to no place . . . imagine that. Kicking tin-cans down the streets—the devil in a plaid coat. I could see my reflection in the windows; I wasn't wearing the dying expression of somebody still waiting for something that will never come.

I passed Felix in the street and we shook hands and said our hellos, took a swig off his flask, because there's nothing else like cheap bourbon. It's what you drink when you're hard-boiled. Felix was a strange brew, something in the way he walked, something in his manner. Like he knew that nothing could go wrong. But he knew sudden death could come through the windshield of an automobile at any hour. He wasn't the kind to fret over the highway. He was the kid you never wanted to dare to do anything . . . he liked a good bet & he liked a good challenge.

I was snapping my fingers, making my way down Emily Street, November 8th, 1963, the night Lee Morgan stepped into the studio in Eaglewood Cliffs, Jew Jersey because he had something to say. Like thinking of love stories when you first wake up, staring at the ceiling, love stories that never happened and the people who look in through all the wrong windows. It was a chilly evening to meet the devil in plaid. And just my luck, the carnival was in town.

Stepping up to the midway is like dreaming without sleeping, stepping out of an abstract town where everything is B&W and 99 shades of gray. I walked right up to the ticket booth and bought my 10¢ ticket. It was like pulling down the curtain of magic when all was lost and enough was enough. I saw it myself; I knew the magic. It was the magic of the Ferris Wheel . . . and the greasy food, brain food for the carnival imagination. Sugar candy for the senses. Cotton candy & popcorn. I'll meet you in basket #3 when it stops at the top.

It was a good day to be a villain. And then, like all good things, the Ferris Wheel stopped too soon.

It was a cold day in New Jersey, as Lee Morgan composed *The Sidewinder*, thinking of modern social outlaws. A hard-bop message with horn to mouth and breath through air to ear. A trumpeteer supreme . . . that night he had Billy Higgins beating his brains on the drum kit with a kick and Bob Cranshaw playing the upright. That night Lee Morgan had Miles Davis *himself* beat with his own rhythm section.

That night he was playing for the villains in a thousand varieties, just like me, just like you, dancing to the same cold look in the eye, under the same old moonlight, a jazz tune that could make you cry & giggle, make you dance, make your blood boil a little more than it already does. Smooth as a broken heart.

I wasn't looking for love when I stepped out of the gate surrounding the Ferris Wheel. I wasn't looking for anything. I was hardboiled, the devil in a plaid coat. Just as the trumpet broke through the madness I saw her . . . Citizen Lucy looking like an American Farm Girl lost in Paris with ten dollars in her pocket and a pair of well-polished boots.

There was static in her ears, as cathartic as poetry on the day of a full moon shining brightly down through the windows. Citizen Lucy ran with the crowd, she was a tough cookie, she didn't know how to behave, she made bad decisions and everybody who ever loved her had to turn their backs on her. She lived a storybook life. She wanted to tell me all about it.

She wanted to fall in love. She must have been a lonely, lonely little girl.

So I bought her a cup of coffee and she bummed a smoke and started asking questions.

“And what do you do?”

“I’m the devil his self.” I said

“*Really*,” she looked up at me like a silver screen starlet, “but what do you *do*.”

“I suppose I pen the postcards to the heartbroken and damned.” I said.

She was a ballerina, an anorexic girl of Eskimo descent; she had the most peculiar way of smoking a cigarette. She started up on her life story like most nice girls do, the kind of nice girls you run into looking hungry in the carnivals. Her religion was a lasting sin—designed since creation, between abusive fathers, and tight-ropewalkers.

Hers was the sad song of a poor girl and all the stupid boys who wanted to watch her fall. It was a Peter Pan dream game on a Friday night and all I wanted was a ride in basket #3 on the Ferris Wheel, but this girl was a blur of art and science, a complicated vision, waiting for the bridge between continents and centuries.

Lee Morgan’s trumpet could pierce through the heavens while battling it out with Joe Henderson . . . saxophone brass clashing with every random note that starts to preach to the spirit while shooting straight through the blood. The jazz speaks so intelligently, burning . . . if only we could all be so lucky as to hold something so dearly. I’ll drink to that. I’ll drink to something wonderful! Profound intercourse, to be special, individual & blessed. A perfect union of beautiful noise, an unstoppable backbeat, a scream and a moan, and through it all, it’s the relentless melody of the keys, chop-chop, just after the break beat, Barry Harris and the perfect twinkle of the piano prevails pushing the horns behind the bass and the chemistry between the dance and the drum was a positively rare groove.

Citizen Lucy was a lunatic. She was a sidewinder for sure

. . . she was a villain with a pretty face and long legs . . . skinny as a pole. She smiled when she blushed, telling a sad story about a sad girl . . . I didn't bother to ask her to pay me back for the cup of coffee. She kept a daisy in her lapel, she sat up straight and she looked me in the eye. I didn't know what her game was, I didn't know anything about the trick. Maybe she was the carnival's mistress trying to make a dollar . . . the stories out on Emily Street say she's a ghost that comes out once a season, an old folk tale told by the local liars. They say she could have been the pope of lust had lust been a proper religion. Her chambers were a liquid red . . . all floating and bubbling and warm and comfortable. The kind of room where you could slip away peacefully just to heal.

But Citizen Lucy had a scared look in her eye, like she was afraid of something, or guilty of something, believing that if she was good to the earth, she would spend forever in paradise. And every day to her was another day closer to paradise. You know the type . . . and I knew she wasn't a ghost.

It hadn't dawned on me that she might have been a spy until Ms. Juniper in sequins pointed a pistol in her face. There was an argument over a canister of film belonging to the fortuneteller, photographs of a scandal between her and the strong man. I tried to explain that I was only buying her a cup of coffee. I should have known she was a spy from the way she smoked her cigarette. We were led by gunpoint to the gypsy lady's caravan, but I wasn't looking for high adventure, I wasn't looking for anything of the sort. Everything was a blur, they could have been anywhere at all . . . they could have been everywhere, everybody the same size, all at the same time.

Citizen Lucy was the candy girl in another dream . . . I hoped they recovered the film before having to execute . . . there was something more to her, something beneath the surface, something as ugly as it was beautiful. I should have known better than to wander, I should have known not to push so hard. All the troubles from all the forgotten boys &

girls, they were falling through the floorboards, they were looking through the keyholes. They caught this girl in the middle of a lie. Everybody was naming their price, they couldn't take a joke. Eventually Ms. Juniper shot her pistol twice in the air, right through the roof of the gypsy lady's caravan, and Citizen Lucy finally handed over the canister in exchange for a ride in the magician's disappearing box. She wanted everybody to get their wish. I was scared to ask what might happen to the devil in his plaid coat. Ms. Juniper left with Lucy and apologized for the noise.

The fortuneteller, the gypsy lady, she looked into her crystal ball and looked up at me. She wanted to ask a question . . . she was clairvoyant, she wasn't fooled by my shined shoes. She was a mystic beauty, with her green eyes and olive skin, a dress that clung to her body like static electricity. Her hips like a trumpet flared. . . .

Lee Morgan, with pocket change rattling, and pocket watch glittering, in his shined shoes, played the theme that night for the lovers and the spies, for the devils and the daisies. Photographs of him show his murdered stare . . . he knew something we didn't.

I said, "What's your name?"

And she said, "Darling Rita."

I had a lasting premonition that Darling Rita could hear every note, every nuance, every curve and stop of the tune. All for the sake of luck and lust. If it was luck she wanted, it was lust she got . . . and if it was lust she wanted, then she would be sorely disappointed, even the devil's mother raised him proper. Not all of us boys are vandals. But with a flick of my wrist I could have turned her into a work of art.

That was the last time I ever saw Citizen Lucy. I figure she must have flown away or got lost in the magician's disappearing box. I didn't go back to the Ferris Wheel that day, I didn't go back to the gypsy's caravan. I bumped into Felix making my exit when the music started to fizzle, a final coda. I took a pull off his flask, wiped my chin and walked back out into the streets. I dug around my pocket for some spare

change, enough for a cup of coffee and another cigarette. I had a dime left over & bought a dirty novel off the newsstand. The devil in a plaid coat. It was a beautiful day to be a villain.