

Roses At His Feet

By Todd Robinson

Jay-Jay rehearsed the lines in his head like an actor, waiting to play his part. He'd close his eyes and imagine himself on a stage, the audience applauding, spotlight bright in his face, roses tossed at his feet. In his mind, he was the playwright, director and actor of the two-man show that was about to unfold. Only the second actor didn't know he'd been cast yet.

It was art. He was a performer

There's a tiny triangular park where Olive St. meets Metropolitan, then Orient Ave juts it off at an angle. He waited on the darkened side of the green, on Orient, around 3:30 each night and watch the bar crowd making their way home. He'd watch for men with flowers, specifically. He'd watch the night owls heading home with a discerning eye.

Jay-Jay lit himself another Kool and watched the two young girls clinging dizzily to one another. They passed him without a glance, giggling at their own sloppiness as they zig-zagged down the sidewalk. Jay-Jay squeezed his crotch as they went. A tingle ran from the base of his scrotum and up his spine as he stared at their tight little asses shifting under the fabric of their tight little jeans.

He wasn't no mad dog. He had rules. First off, nobody drunk. Drunks were too unpredictable. Besides, most of them had spent their money on the goddamn booze that had gotten them there.

Second rule, no women. Women tended to scream. Jay-Jay didn't need no attention.

It was all an art. It was all an act. Jay-Jay was an artist. He worked his fingers over the top of the chain-link fence, pretending the spaces were ivory keys on the grand piano at The Blue Note. He played *Five Spot Blues*, humming the notes as he jabbed at the imaginary keys. Shit, he'd been told a ton of times that he played it better than Thelonious Monk himself.

Crack or no crack, the times were hard. Jazz clubs were shutting down left and right. Those that were left had blacklisted Jay-Jay. Said his drugs were getting in the way. Making him fuck up. Making him fuck up? Shit, somebody needed to tell those rich white motherfuckers about *jazz*. Charlie Parker. Chet Baker. Billie Holiday. Even Mr. *Wonderful World* himself Louis Armstrong smoked himself enough weed to choke out the hardest hardcore rapper. Drugs were making him fuck up? Fuck, drugs were as much a part of jazz as the goddamn instruments. Maybe more. Jay-Jay was waiting for the day that some body, *anybody* could explain Bobby McFerrin to him.

Jay-Jay was starting to work his fingers around *Cool Walk* when he saw him heading up Metropolitan. Not too big. Carrying roses. Not the pricey boxed ones, but not the shitty deli roses, neither. He didn't look drunk. Perfect.

Jay-Jay walked the opposite side, crossed over about twenty feet ahead of the guy. He kept his knife pressed against the leg away from the dude. No need to show his hand early. As he got close, he saw that the guy was Asian, wearing a green corduroy coat. He thought for a second that it was another Asian guy he'd hit a month or so back. That cat had four hundred bucks on him. Jay-Jay was disappointed when he realized that it wasn't the same guy. Goddamn Asians all looked the same to him, anyway.

"Them's some nice flowers, my man." Jay-Jay smiled wide and friendly. The play had begun.

"Thanks." The guy smiled warily, but kept moving. This was Brooklyn, after all.

"Psst." The guy turned towards Jay-Jay again. Jay-Jay flashed the blade under the streetlight. The guy tensed, but didn't flake. That was all good, so far. "You got love, man. That's a beautiful thing."

The guy looked from the blade, to Jay-Jay, then back at the blade. Jay-Jay felt for a minute that the guy was a little under-intimidated. He went on with his lines. "So I'm asking you not to risk

that. All I want is the money in your wallet. You keep those flowers and you give them to your pretty lady. You hold her in your arms and you forget this happened. You don't, I cut you. I'm not playing."

The guy nodded, chewed on his gum, calm as a pond at dawn. This wasn't right. The five or six cats he'd pulled this hustle on shook, at least. One big guy started crying as he handed over his wallet. It didn't make Jay-Jay proud or happy to frighten those men, but it made him realize what a powerful tool their love was when turned against them. Except with this guy. Then he held out the roses to Jay-Jay. "Hold these a sec?" He asked as he reached behind into his rear left pocket.

Jay-Jay, stunned, took the roses. This guy was too cool. It was starting to freak Jay-Jay out a little. He had his arms full of the flowers before he realized that men tend to carry their wallets in their right back pocket, not the left.

Then the flowers seemed to silently explode up and out from Jay-Jay's grasp, red petals plumed into his face. He heard metal hit the concrete and saw his knife lying next to a hydrant. How the hell did that get there? Jay-Jay turned to see the Asian guy moving quickly, a flash of silvery light underneath the streetlamp again and Jay-Jay's legs weren't under him anymore. He slumped to the sidewalk and leaned against the hydrant. Sticky warmth rushed down

the arm that had held the knife. He couldn't close his hand. Rose petals were floating down around him, like fragrant crimson raindrops. His other hand pressed against his side. More warmth gushed from between his fingers. Had this little chink fucker cut him? He didn't even see him move!

"It was poor form, Jay-Jay," the Asian man said.

"How... How you know my name?" It was hard to speak. Jay-Jay's lips were growing numb.

"I know who you are, because you made it my business." The guy crouched down next to Jay-Jay. He wiped a wicked looking thin blade clean on Jay-Jay's pants leg. "One of the men you robbed? His father is an important man whom I work for. Your robbery insulted them. They wanted me to find you, so I did."

The warmth was escaping his body at an alarming rate. Jay-Jay felt strangely calm. He looked into his slasher's eyes and was surprised to find them warm. "It was that Japanese kid I mugged, wasn't it?"

The Asian guy laughed as he lit two cigarettes. "That's profiling, Jay-Jay. So un-P.C." He stuck one filter between Jay-Jay's lips.

"Besides, he was Chinese."

"Shit. I'm dyin', ain't I?"

"Yeah. You are. But you shouldn't be feeling any pain. I cut you cleanly."

"You're a fucking saint."

"I didn't have to." The guy stood. "It's a shame Jay-Jay. I saw you play at The Standard last spring. You were a great talent."

"Still am, for the next few minutes." Then he remembered his ruined right arm. "Shit. I'm not even that right now, am I?"

"Sorry."

"Tell me one thing..."

"What?"

"Did you think I was as good as The Monk?"

He shrugged. "I dunno. Never saw Monk play. But you can ask him yourself in a couple of minutes." Without a backwards glance, the guy walked back towards the L train.

Jay-Jay sat alone, his left hand tapping the bass of *Reflections* onto the concrete as he watched the rose petals floating by his feet into the gutter on a gentle river of his blood. He found it oddly beautiful as he died with a song in his ears.