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I'll Cut Your Throat Again, Kathleen

by
Fredric Brown



She was beautiful, standing there in the moonlight

Johnny Marlin comes back after the long months he's spent in an asylum — to find his beautiful wife waiting. . . .

I HEARD the footsteps coming down the hall and I was watching the door—the door that had no knob on my side of it—when it opened.

I thought I'd recognized the step, and I'd been right. It was the young, nice one, the one whose bright hair made so brilliant a contrast with his white uniform coat.

I said, "Hello, Red," and he said, "Hello, Mr. Marlin. I—I'll take you

down to the office. The doctors are there now." He sounded more nervous than I felt.

"How much time have I got, Red?"

"How much— Oh, I see what you mean. They're examining a couple of others ahead of you. You've got time."

So I didn't get up off the edge of the bed. I held my hands out in front of me, backs up and the fingers rigid. They didn't tremble any more. My fingers

were as steady as those of a statue, and about as useful. Oh, I could move them. I could even clench them into fists slowly. But for playing sax and clarinet they were about as good as hands of bananas. I turned them over—and there on my wrists were the two ugly scars where, a little less than a year ago, I'd slashed them with a straight razor. Deeply enough to have cut some of the tendons that moved the fingers.

I moved my fingers now, curling them inward toward the palm, slowly. The interne was watching.

"They'll come back, Mr. Marlin," he said. "Exercise—that's all they need." It wasn't true. He knew that I knew he knew it, for when I didn't bother to answer, he went on, almost defensively, "Anyway, you can still arrange and conduct. You can hold a baton all right. And—I got an idea for you, Mr. Marlin."

"Yes, Red?"

"Trombone. Why don't you take up trombone? You could learn it fast, and you don't need finger action to play trombone."

SLOWLY, I shook my head. I didn't try to explain. It was something you couldn't explain, anyway. It wasn't only the physical ability to play an instrument that was gone. It was more than that.

I looked at my hands again and then I put them carefully away in my pockets, where I wouldn't have to look at them.

I looked up at the interne's face again. There was a look on it that I recognized and remembered—the look I'd seen on thousands of young faces across footlights—hero worship. Out of the past it came to me, that look.

He could still look at me that way, even after—

"Red," I asked him, "don't you think I'm insane?"

"Of course not, Mr. Marlin. I don't think you were ever—" He bogged down on that.

I needed him. Maybe it was cruel, but it was crueler to me. I said, "You don't think I was ever crazy? You think

I was sane when I tried to kill my wife?"

"Well—it was just temporary. You had a breakdown. You'd been working too hard—twenty hours a day, about. You were near the top with your band. Me, Mr. Marlin, I think you were *at* the top. You had it on all of them, only most of the public hadn't found out yet. They would have, if—"

"If I hadn't slipped a cog," I said. I thought, what a way to express going crazy, trying to kill your wife, trying to kill yourself, and losing your memory.

Red looked at his wrist watch, then pulled up a chair and sat down facing me. He talked fast.

"We haven't got too long, Mr. Marlin," he said. "And I want you to pass those doctors and get out of here. You'll be all right once you get out of this joint. Your memory will come back, a little at a time—when you're in the right surroundings."

I shrugged. It didn't seem to matter much. I said, "Okay, brief me. It didn't work last time, but—I'll try."

"You're Johnny Marlin," he said. "*The* Johnny Marlin. You play a mean clarinet, but that's sideline. You're the best alto sax in the business, I think. You were fourth in the Down Beat poll a year ago, but—"

I interrupted him. "You mean I *did* play clarinet and sax. Not any more, Red. Can't you get that through your head?" I hadn't meant to sound so rough about it, but my voice got out of control.

Red didn't seem to hear me. His eyes went to his wrist watch again and then came back to me. He started talking again.

"We got ten minutes, maybe. I wish I knew what you remember and what you don't about all I've been telling you the last month. What's your right name—I mean, before you took a professional name?"

"John Dettmann," I said. "Born June first, nineteen-twenty, on the wrong side of the tracks. Orphaned at five. Released from orphanage at sixteen. Worked as bus boy in Cleveland and saved up enough money to buy a clari-

net, and took lessons. Bought a sax a year later, and got my first job with a band at eighteen."

"What band?"

"Heinie Wills"—local band in Cleveland, playing at Danceland there. Played third alto a while, then first alto. Next worked for a six-man combo called—What was it, Red? I don't remember."

"The Basin Streeters, Mr. Marlin. Look, do you really remember any of this, or is it just from what I've told you?"

"Mostly from what you've told me, Red. Sometimes, I get kind of vague pictures, but it's pretty foggy. Let's get on with it. So the Basin Streeters did a lot of traveling for a while and I left them in Chi for my first stretch with a name band—Look, I think I've got that list of bands pretty well memorized. There isn't much time. Let's skip it.

"I joined the army in forty-two—I'd have been twenty-two then. A year at Fort Billings, and then England. Kayoed by a bomb in London before I ever got to pull a trigger except on rifle range. A month in a hospital there, shipped back, six months in a mental hospital here, and let out on a P. N." He knew as well as I did what P. N. meant, but I translated it for us. "Psycho-neurotic. Nuts. Crazy."

HE OPENED his mouth to argue the point, and then decided there wasn't time.

"So I saved my money," I said, "before and during the army, and I started my own band. That would have been—late forty-four?"

Red nodded. "Remember the list of places you've played, the names of your sidemen, what I told you about them?"

"Pretty well," I said. There wouldn't be time to go into that, anyway. I said, "And early in forty-five, while I was still getting started, I got married. To Kathy Courteen. *The* Kathy Courteen, who owns a slice of Chicago, who's got more money than sense. She must have, if she married me. We were married June tenth, nineteen forty-five. Why

did she marry me, Red?"

"Why shouldn't she," he said. "You're *Johnny Marlin!*"

The funny part of it is, he wasn't kidding. I could tell by his voice he meant it. He thought being Johnny Marlin had really been something. I looked down at my hands. They'd got loose out of my pockets again.

I think I knew, suddenly, why I wanted to get out of this gilt-lined nut-house that was costing Kathy Courteen—Kathy Marlin, I mean—the price of a fur coat every week to keep me in. It wasn't because I wanted *out*, really. It was because I wanted to get away from the hero worship of this red-headed kid who'd gone nuts about Johnny Marlin's band, and Johnny Marlin's saxophone.

"Have you ever seen Kathy, Red?" I asked.

He shook his head. "I've seen pictures of her, newspaper pictures of her. She's beautiful."

"Even with a scar across her throat?" I asked.

His eyes avoided mine. They went to his watch again, and he stood up quickly. "We'd better get down there," he said.

He went to the knobless door, opened it with a key, and politely held it open for me to precede him out into the hallway.

That look in his eyes made me feel foolish, as always. I don't know how he did it, but Red always managed to look *up* at me, from a height a good six inches taller than mine.

Then, side by side, we went down the great stairway of that plush-lined mad-house that had once been a million dollar mansion and was now a million dollar sanitarium with more employees than inmates.

We went into the office and the gray-haired nurse behind the desk nodded and said, "They're ready for you."

"Luck, Mr. Marlin," Red said. "I'm pulling for you."

So I went through the door. There were three of them, as last time.

"Sit down, please, Mr. Marlin," Dr. Glasspiegel, the head one, said.

They sat each upon one side of the square table, leaving the fourth side and the fourth chair for me. I slid into it. I put my hands in my pockets again. I knew if I looked at them or thought about them, I might say something foolish, and then I'd be here a while again.

Then they were asking me questions, taking turns at it. Some about my past—and Red's coaching had been good. Once or twice, but not often, I had to stall and admit my memory was hazy on a point or two. And some of the questions were about the present, and they were easy. I mean, it was easy to see what answers they wanted to those questions, and to give them.

But it had been like this the last time, I remembered, over a month ago. And I'd missed somewhere. They hadn't let me go. Maybe, I thought, because they got too much money out of keeping me here. I didn't really think that. These men were the best in their profession.

There was a lull in the questioning. They seemed to be waiting for something. For what? I wondered, and it came to me that the last interview had been like this, too.

THE door behind me opened, quietly, but I heard it. And I remembered—that had happened last time, too. Just as they told me I could leave and they'd talk it over, someone else had come in. I'd passed him as I'd left the room.

And, suddenly, I knew what I'd missed up on. It had been someone I'd been supposed to recognize, and I hadn't. And here was the same test again. Before I turned, I tried to remember what Red had told me about people I'd known—but there was so little physical description to it. It seemed hopeless.

"You may return to your room now, Mr. Marlin," Dr. Glasspiegel was saying. "We—ah—wish to discuss your case."

"Thanks," I said, and stood up.

I saw that he'd taken off his shell rimmed glasses and was tapping them nervously on the back of his hand, which lay on the table before him. I thought, okay, so now I know the catch and next

time I'll make the grade. I'll have Red get me pictures of my band and other bands I've played with and as many newspaper pictures as he can find of people I knew.

I turned. The man in the doorway, standing there as though waiting for me to leave, was short and fat. There was a tense look in his face, even though his eyes were avoiding mine. He was looking past me, at the doctors. I tried to think fast. Who did I know that was short and—

I took a chance. I'd had a trumpet player named Tubby Hayes.

"Tubby!" I said.

And hit the jackpot. His face lighted up like a neon sign and he grinned a yard wide and stuck out his hand.

"Johnny! Johnny, it's good to see you." He was making like a pump handle with my arm.

"Tubby Hayes!" I said, to let them know I knew his last name, too. "Don't tell me you're nuts, too. That why you're here?"

He laughed, nervously. "I came to get you, Johnny. That is, uh, if—" He looked past me.

Dr. Glasspiegel was clearing his throat. He and the other doctors were standing now.

"Yes," he said, "I believe it will be all right for Mr. Marlin to leave."

He put his hand on my shoulder. They were all standing about me now.

"Your reactions are normal, Mr. Marlin," he said. "Your memory is still a bit impaired but—ah—it will improve gradually. More rapidly, I believe, amid familiar surroundings than here. You—ah—have plans?"

"No," I said, frankly.

"Don't overwork again. Take things easy for a while. And . . ."

There was a lot more advice. And then signing things, and getting ready. It was almost an hour before we got into a cab, Tubby and I.

He gave the address, and I recognized it. The Carleton. That was where I'd lived, that last year. Where Kathy still lived.

"How's Kathy?" I asked.

"Fine, Johnny. I guess she is. I mean—"

"You mean what?"

He looked a bit embarrassed. "Well—I mean I haven't seen her. She never liked us boys, Johnny. You know that. But she was square with us. You know we decided we couldn't hold together without you, Johnny, and might as well break up. Well, she paid us what we had coming—the three weeks you were on the cuff, I mean—and doubled it, a three-weeks bonus to tide us over."

"The boys doing okay, Tubby?"

"Yep, Johnny. All of them. Well—except Harry. He kind of got lost in the snow if you know what I mean."

"That's tough," I said, and didn't elaborate. I didn't know whether I was supposed to know that Harry had been taking cocaine or not. And there had been two Harrys with the band, at that.

SO THE band was busted up. In a way I was glad. If someone had taken over and held it together, maybe there'd have been an argument about trying to get me to come back.

"A month ago, Tubby," I said, "they examined me at the sanitarium and I flunked. I think it was because I didn't recognize somebody. Was it you? Were you there then?"

"You walked right by me, through the door, Johnny. You never saw me."

"You were there—for that purpose? Both times?"

"Yes, Johnny. That Doc Glasspiegel suggested it. He got to know me, and to think of me, I guess, because I dropped around so often to ask about you. Why wouldn't they let me see you?"

"Rules," I said. "That's Glasspiegel's system, part of it. Complete isolation during the period of cure. I haven't even seen Kathy."

"No!" said Tubby. "They told me you couldn't have visitors, but I didn't know it went that far." He sighed. "She sure must be head over heels for you, Johnny. What I hear, she's carried the torch."

"God knows why," I said. "After I cut—"

"Shut up," Tubby said sharply. "You aren't to think or talk about that. Glasspiegel told me that, while you were getting ready."

"Okay," I said. It didn't matter. "Does Kathy know we're coming?"

"We? I'm not going in, Johnny. I'm just riding to the door with you. No, she doesn't know. You asked the doc not to tell her, didn't you?"

"I didn't want a reception. I just want to walk in quietly. Sure, I asked the doctor, but I thought maybe he'd warn her anyway. So she could hide the knives."

"Now, Johnny—"

"Okay," I said.

I looked out of the window of the cab. I knew where we were and just how far from the Carleton. Funny my topography hadn't gone the way the rest of my memory had. But I still knew the streets and their names, even though I couldn't recognize my best friend or my wife. The mind is a funny thing, I thought.

"One worry you won't have," Tubby Hayes said. "That lush brother of hers, Myron Courteen, the one that was always in your hair."

The red-headed interne had mentioned that Kathy had a brother. Apparently, I wasn't supposed to like him.

So I said, "Did someone drop him down a well?"

"Headed west. He's a Los Angeles playboy now. Guess he finally quarrelled with Kathy and she settled an allowance on him and let him go."

We were getting close to the Carleton—only a half dozen blocks to go—and suddenly I realized there was a lot that I didn't know, and should know.

"Let's have a drink, Tubby," I said. I—I'm not quite ready to go home yet."

"Sure, Johnny," he said, and then spoke to the cab driver.

We swung in to the curb in front of a swanky neon-plated tavern. It didn't look familiar, like the rest of the street did. Tubby saw me looking.

"Yeah, it's new," he said. "Been here only a few months."

We went in and sat at a dimly lighted

bar. Tubby ordered two Scotch-and-sodas without asking me, so I guess that's what I used to drink. I didn't remember. Anyway, it tasted all right, and I hadn't had a drink for eleven months, so even the first sip of it hit me a little.

And when I'd drunk it all, it tasted better than all right. I looked at myself in the blue mirror back of the bar. I thought, there's always this. I can always drink myself to death—on Kathy's money. I knew I didn't have any myself because Tubby had said I was three weeks on the cuff with the band.

We ordered a second round and I asked Tubby, "How come this Myron hasn't money of his own, if he's Kathy's brother?" He looked at me strangely. I'd been doing all right up to now. I said, "Yeah, there are things I'm still hazy about."

"Oh," he said. "Well, that one's easy. Myron is worse than a black sheep for the Courteens. He's a no-good louse and an all-around stinker. He was disinherited, and Kathy got it all. But she takes care of him."

HE TOOK a sip of his drink and put it down again. "You know, Johnny," he said, "none of us liked Kathy much because she was against you having the band and wanted you to herself. But we were wrong about her. She's swell. The way she sticks to her men-folk no matter what they do. Even Myron."

"Even me," I said.

"Well—she saved your life, Johnny. With blood—" He stopped abruptly. "Forget it, Johnny."

I finished my second drink. I said, "I'll tell you the truth, Tubby. I can't forget it—because I don't remember it. But I've got to know, before I face her. What did happen that night?"

"Johnny, I—"

"Tell me," I said. "Straight."

He sighed. "Okay, Johnny. You'd been working close to twenty-four hours a day trying to put us over, and we'd tried to get you to slow down and so did Kathy."

"Skip the build-up."

"That night, after we played at the hotel, we rehearsed some new stuff. You acted funny, then, Johnny. You forgot stuff, and you had a headache. We made you go home early, in spite of yourself. And when you got home—well, you slipped a cog, Johnny. You picked a quarrel with your wife—I don't know what you accused her of. And you went nuts. You got your razor—you always used to shave with a straight-edge—and, well you tried to kill her. And then yourself."

"You're skipping the details," I said. "How did she save my life?"

"Well, Johnny, you hadn't killed her like you thought. The cut went deep on one side of her throat but—she must have been pulling away—it went light across the center and didn't get the jugular or anything. But there was a lot of blood and she fainted, and you thought she was dead, I guess, and slashed your own wrists. But she came to, and found you bleeding to death fast. Bleeding like she was, she got tourniquets on both your arms and held 'em, and kept yelling until one of the servants woke up and got the Carleton house-doctor. That's all, Johnny."

"It's enough, isn't it?" I thought a while and then I added, "Thanks, Tubby. Look, you run along and leave me. I want to think it out and sweat it out alone, and then I'll walk the rest of the way. Okay?"

"Okay, Johnny," he said. "You'll call me up soon?"

"Sure," I said. "Thanks for everything."

"You'll be all right, Johnny?"

"Sure. I'm all right."

After he left, I ordered another drink. My third, and it would have to be my last, because I was really feeling them. I didn't want to go home drunk, to face Kathy.

I sat there, sipping it slowly, looking at myself in that blue mirror back of the bar. I wasn't a bad looking guy, in a blue mirror. Only I should be dead instead of sitting there. I should have died that night eleven months ago. I'd

tried to die.

I was almost alone at the bar. There was one couple drinking martinis at the far end of it. The girl was a blonde who looked like a chorus girl. I wondered idly if Kathy was a blonde. I hadn't thought to ask anyone. If Kathy walked in here now, I thought, I wouldn't know her.

The blonde down there picked up some change off the bar and walked over to the juke box. She put in a coin and punched some buttons, and then swayed her hips back to the bar. The juke box started playing and it was an old record and a good one—the Harry James version of the *Memphis Blues*. Blue and brassy stuff from the days back before Harry went commercial.

I sat there listening, and feeling like the devil. I thought, I've got to get over it. Every time I hear stuff like that I can't go on wanting to kill myself just because I can't play any more myself. I'm not the only guy in the world who can't play music. And the others get by.

MY HANDS were lying on the bar in front of me and I tried them again, while I listened, and they wouldn't work. They wouldn't ever work again. My thumbs were okay, but the four fingers on each hand opened and closed together and not separately, as though they were webbed together.

Maybe the Scotch was making me feel better, but—maybe, I decided—maybe it wouldn't be too bad—

Then the Harry James ended and another record slid onto the turntable and started, and it was going to be blue, too. *Mood Indigo*. I recognized the opening bar of the introduction. I wondered idly if all the records were blues, chosen to match the blue back-bar mirrors.

Deep blue stuff, anyway, and well handled and arranged, whoever was doing it. A few Scotches and a blue mood, and that *Mood Indigo* can take hold of your insides and wring them. And this waxing of it was solid, pretty solid. The brasses tossed it to the reeds and then the piano took it for a moment,

backed by wire-brush stuff on the skins, and modulated it into a higher key and built it up and you knew something was coming.

And then something came, and it was an alto sax, a sax with a tone like blue velvet, swinging high, wide and off the beat, and tossing in little arabesques of counterpoint so casually that it never seemed to leave the melody to do it. An alto sax riding high and riding hot, and with a tone like molten gold.

I unwound my fingers from around the Scotch-and-soda glass and got up and walked across the room to the juke box. I knew already, but I looked. The record playing was Number 9, and Number 9 was *Mood Indigo*—Johnny Marlin.

For a black second I felt that I had to stop it, that I had to smash my fist through the glass and jerk the tone-arm off the record. I had to because it was doing things to me. That sound out of the past was making me remember, and I knew suddenly that the only way I could keep on wanting to live at all was *not* to remember.

Maybe I would have smashed the glass. I don't know. But instead I saw the cord and plug where the juke box plugged into the wall outlet beside it. I jerked on the cord and the box went dark and silent. Then I walked out into the dusk, with the three of them staring at me—the blonde and her escort and the bartender.

The bartender called out "Hey!" but didn't go on with it when I went on out without turning. I saw them in the mirror on the inside of the door as I opened it, a frozen tableau that slid sideways off the mirror as the door opened.

I must have walked the six blocks to the Carleton, through the gathering twilight. I crossed the wide mahogany-paneled lobby to the elevator. The uniformed operator looked familiar to me—more familiar than Tubby. At least there was an impression that I'd seen him before.

"Good evening, Mr. Marlin," he said, and didn't ask me what floor I wanted.

But his voice sounded strange, tense,

and he waited a moment, stuck his head out of the elevator and looked around, before he closed the door. I got the impression that he was hoping for another passenger, that he hated to shut himself and me in that tiny closed room.

But no one else came into the lobby and he slid the door shut and moved the handle. The building slid downward past us and came to rest at the eleventh floor. I stepped out into another mahogany-paneled hall and the elevator door slid shut behind me.

It was a short hallway, on this floor, with only four doors leading to what must be quite large suites. I knew which door was mine—or should I say Kathy's. My money never paid for a suite like that.

There was a leather case of keys in my pocket. One of them, I felt sure, would have fitted that door. But I didn't want just to walk in somehow. I rang the bell instead.

IT WASN'T Kathy who opened the door. I knew that because she was wearing a maid's uniform. And she must, I thought, be new. She looked at me blankly.

"Mrs. Marlin in?" I asked.

"No sir. She'll be back soon, sir."

I went on in. "I'll wait," I said. I followed her until she opened the door of a room that looked like a library.

"In here, please," she said. "And may I have your name?"

"Marlin," I said, as I walked past her. "Johnny Marlin."

She caught her breath a little, audibly. Then she said, "Yes, sir," and hurried away.

Her heels didn't click on the thick carpeting of the hall, but I could tell she was hurrying. Hurrying away from a homicidal maniac, back to the farthest reaches of the apartment, probably to the protective company of a cook who would keep a cleaver handy, once she heard the news that the mad master of the manse was back. And likely there'd be new servants, if any, tomorrow.

I walked up and down a while, and

then decided I wanted to go to my room. I thought, if I don't think about it I can go there. My subconscious will know the way. And it worked; I went to my room.

I sat on the edge of the bed a while, with my head in my hands, wondering why I'd come here. Then I looked around. It was a big room, paneled like the rest of the joint, beautifully and tastefully furnished. Little Johnny Dettmann of the Cleveland slums had come a long way to have a room like that, all to himself. There was a Capehart radio-phonograph across the room from me, and a big cabinet of albums. Most of the pictures on the walls were framed photographs of bands. In a silver frame on the dresser was the picture of a woman.

That would be Kathy, of course. I crossed over and looked at it. She was beautiful, all right, a big-eyed brunette with pouting, kissable lips. And the fog was getting thinner. I almost knew and remembered her.

I looked a long time at that photograph, and then I put it down and went to the closet door. I opened it and there were a lot of suits in that closet, and a lot of pairs of shoes and a choice of hats. I remembered; John Dettmann had worn a sweater to high school one year because he didn't have a suit coat.

But there was something missing in that closet. The instrument cases. On the floor, there at the right, should have been two combination cases for sax and clarinet. Inside them should have been two gold-plated alto saxes and two sleek black Selmer clarinets. At the back of the closet should have been a bigger case that held a baritone sax I sometimes fooled around with at home.

THEY were all gone, and I was grateful to Kathy for that. She must have understood how it would make me feel to have them around.

I closed the closet door gently, and opened the door next to it, the bathroom. I went in and stood looking at myself in the mirror over the wash bowl. It wasn't a blue mirror. I stu-

died my face, and it was an ordinary face. There wasn't any reason in that mirror why anyone should love me the way my wife must. I wasn't tall and I wasn't handsome. I was just a mug who had played a lot of sax—once.

The mirror was the door of a built-in medicine cabinet sunk into the tile wall and I opened it. Yes, all my toilet stuff was neatly laid out on the shelves of the cabinet, as though I'd never been away, or as though I'd been expected back daily. Even—and I almost took a step backwards—both of my straight-edge razors—the kind of razor a barber uses—lay there on the bottom shelf besides the shaving mug and brush.

Was Kathy crazy to leave them there, after what I'd used such a thing for? Had it even been one of these very razors? I could, of course, have had three of them, but—No, I remembered, there were only two, a matched pair.

In the sanitarium, I'd used an electric razor, naturally. All of them there did, even ones there for less deadly reasons than mine. And I was going to keep on using one. I'd take these and drop them down the incinerator, right now. If my wife was foolhardy enough to leave those things in a madman's room, I wasn't. How could I be sure I'd never go off the beam again?

My hand shook a little as I picked them up and closed the mirrored door. I'd take them right now and get rid of them. I went out of the bathroom and was crossing my own room, out in the middle of it, when there was a soft tap on the door—the connecting door from Kathy's room. "Johnny—" her voice said.

I thrust the razors out of sight into my coat pocket, and answered—I don't remember exactly what. My heart seemed to be in my throat, blocking my voice. And the door opened and Kathy came in—came in like the wind in a headlong rush that brought her into my arms. And with her face buried in my shoulder.

"Johnny, Johnny," she was saying, "I'm so glad you're back."

Then we kissed, and it lasted a long

time, that kiss. But it didn't do anything to me. If I'd been in love with Kathy once, I'd have to start all over again, now. Oh, it was nice kissing her, as it would be nice kissing any beautiful woman. It wouldn't be hard to fall again. But so much easier and better, I thought, if I could push away all of the fog, if I could remember.

"I'm glad to be back, Kathy," I said.

Her arms tightened about me, almost convulsively. There was a big lounge chair next to the Capehart. I picked her up bodily, since she didn't want to let go of me, and crossed to the chair. I sat in it with her on my lap. After a minute, she straightened up and her eyes met mine, questioningly.

The question was, "Do you love me, Johnny?"

But I couldn't meet it just then. I'd pretend, of course, when I got my bearings, and after a while my memory would come the rest of the way back—or I'd manage to love her again, instead. But just then, I ducked the question and her eyes.

Instead, I looked at her throat and saw the scar. It wasn't as bad as I'd feared. It was a thin, long line that wouldn't have been noticeable over a yard away.

"Plastic surgery, Johnny," she said. "It can do wonders. Another year and it won't show at all. It—it doesn't matter." Then, as though to forestall my saying anything more about it, she said quickly, "I gave away your saxophones, Johnny. I—I figured you wouldn't want them around. The doctors say you'll never be able to—to play again."

I NODDED. I said, "I guess it's best not to have them around."

"It's going to be so wonderful, Johnny. Maybe you'll hate me for saying it, but I'm—almost—glad. You know that was what came between us, your band and your playing. And it won't now, will it? You won't want to try another band—just directing and not playing—or anything foolish like that, will you, Johnny?"

"No, Kathy," I said.

Nothing, I thought, would mean anything without playing. I'd been trying to forget that. I closed my eyes and tried, for a moment, not to think.

"It'll be so wonderful, Johnny. You can do all the things I wanted you to do, and that you wouldn't. We can travel, spend our winters in Florida, and entertain. When France is normal again, we can live on the Riviera part of the time, and we can ski in the Tyrol and play the wheels at Monte Carlo and—and everything I've wanted to do, Johnny."

"It's nice to have a few million," I said.

She pulled back a little and looked at me. "Johnny, you're not going to start *that* again, are you? Oh, Johnny, you can't—now."

No, I thought, I can't. Heaven knows why she wants him to be one, but little Johnny Dettmann is a kept man, now, a rich girl's darling. He can't make money the only way he knows how now. He couldn't even hold a job as a bus boy or dig ditches. But he'll learn to balance teacups on his knee and smile at dowagers. He'll have to. It was coming back to me now, that endless argument.

But the argument was over now. There wasn't any longer anything to argue about.

"Kiss me, Johnny," Kathy said, and when I had, she said, "Let's have some music, huh? And maybe a dance—you haven't forgotten how to dance, have you, Johnny?"

She jumped up from my lap and went to the record album cabinet.

"Some of mine, will you, Kathy?" I asked. I thought, I might as well get used to it now, all at once. So I won't feel again, ever, as I had when I'd almost put my fist through that juke box window.

"Of course, Johnny."

She took them from one of the albums, half a dozen of them, and put them on the Capehart. The first one started, and it was a silly gay tune we'd once waxed—"Chickery chick, cha la, cha la. . . ." And she came back, holding out her hands to me to get up and

dance, and I did, and I still knew how to dance.

And we danced over to the French doors that led to the balcony and opened them, and out onto the marble floor of the little railed balcony, into the cool darkness of the evening, with a full moon riding high in the sky overhead.

Chickery chick—a nice tune, if a silly tune. No vocal, of course. We'd never gone for them. Not gut-bucket stuff, either, but smooth rhythm, with a beat. And a high-riding alto sax, smooth as silk.

And I was remembering the argument. It had been one, a vicious one. Musician versus playboy as my career. I was remembering *Kathy* now, and suddenly tried not to. Maybe it would be better to forget all that bitterness, the quarreling and the overwork and everything that led up to the blankness of the breakdown.

But our feet moved smoothly on the marble. Kathy danced well. And the record ended.

"It's going to be wonderful, Johnny," she whispered, "having you all to myself. . . . You're *mine* now, Johnny."

"Yes," I said. I thought, I've got to be.

THE second record started, and it was a contrast. A number as blue as *Mood Indigo*, and dirtier. *St. James Infirmary*, as waxed by Johnny Marlin and his orchestra. And I remembered the hot day in the studio when we'd waxed it. Again no vocal, but as we started dancing again, the words ran through my mind with the liquid gold of the alto sax I'd once played.

"I went down to St. James Infirmary . . . Saw my *baby* there . . . Stretched on a long white table . . . So sweet, so cold, so—"

I jerked away from her, ran inside and shut off the phonograph. I caught sight of my face in the mirror over the dresser as I passed. It was white as a corpse's face. I went back to the balcony. Kathy still stood there—she hadn't moved.

"Johnny, what—?"

"That tune," I said. "Those words. I remember, Kathy. I remember that night. *I didn't do it.*"

I felt weak. I leaned back against the wall behind me. Kathy came closer.

"Johnny—what do you mean?"

"I remember," I said. "I walked in, and you were lying there—with blood all over your throat and your dress—*when I came in the room.* I don't remember after that—but that's what must have knocked me off my base, after everything else. That's when I went crazy, not before."

"Johnny—you're wrong—"

The weakness was gone now. I stood straighter.

"Your brother," I said. "He hated you because you ran his life, like you wanted to run mine, because you had the money he thought should be his, and you doled it out to him and *ran* him. Sure, he hated you. I remember him now. Kathy, I remember. That was about the time he got past liquor and was playing with dope. Cocaine, wasn't it? And that night he came in, sky-high and murderous, before I did. And tried to kill you, and probably thought he did. And ran. It must have been just before I came in."

"Johnny, please—you're wrong—"

"You came to, after I keeled over," I said. "It—it sounds incredible, Kathy, but it had to be that way. And, Kathy, that cold mind of yours saw a way to get everything it wanted. To protect your brother, and to get me, the way you wanted me. It was perfect, Kathy. Fix me so I'd never play again, and at the same time put me in a spot where I'd be tied to you forever because I'd think I tried to kill you."

I said, "You get your way, don't you, Kathy? At any cost. But you didn't want me to die. I'll bet you had those tourniquets ready *before you slashed my wrists.*"

She was beautiful, standing there in the moonlight. She stood there tall and straight, and she came the step between us and put her soft arms around me.

"But Johnny, don't I win?" she said.

She was beautiful, leaning back to look up into my face. Yes, she'd won. *So sweet, so cold, so bare.* So bare her throat that even in the moonlight I could see the faint scar, the dotted line. And one of my crippled hands, in my pocket, fumbled open one of the razors, and brought it out of my pocket, and up, and across.