

*Fancy* – c. Brett Milano 2010

Wanda knew what happened to Bobbie Gentry, and she wouldn't tell a soul. The whole thing was a responsibility she'd never asked for; but when a childhood friend—one who she'd always worshipped from afar, if truth be told—came looking for solace, she was glad to open her home. That was thirty years ago, during which time the world had caught few glimpses of Wanda, to say nothing of Bobbie.

Taking care of a beautiful, damaged recluse for thirty years isn't easy, but Wanda knew what she was getting herself into, and she was already pretty good at hiding from the world. She's been the plain one, the one without talent or glamor, the one who'd never needed to leave this wood house on a dirt road. Nobody had ever suggested that she become a professional singer, though she grew up with an abiding love for music and a soft heart—both of which explained why she was willing to take on a caretaker position.

Besides, Wanda was in love, or something close enough to it to find the romance in this secret cohabitation. Since Bobbie's disappearance, Wanda got to be the shoulder to cry on, the hand to hold, the quiet companion on long nights listening to crickets and staring into the river, under those overhanging trees that she'd always found so scary as a child. That, more than the money she never felt much like spending, had made it worthwhile—all the time Wanda spent sifting through legalities, keeping the music catalogue in order, getting the royalties off to the proper charities. And most of all, dealing with Bobbie's cultists.

It took many years before they started showing up. Like the rest of the world, Wanda had been in awe when she saw Bobbie singing "Ode to Billie Joe" on TV, thrilled to see her flowing hair and smart prom dress, against a Delta backdrop that looked like the one Wanda knew. But it seemed the world's interest had ended there: Maybe the world wasn't ready for a song like "Fancy," one of her followup singles, in which a proud Delta woman escapes family poverty through prostitution. Bobbie Gentry made a few more albums, uneven affairs that alternated her own wise and nuanced songs with pop hits of the day. After that, by all accounts, she simply walked away.

When Bobbie disappeared in 1978, she hadn't had a hit in nearly a decade, and hadn't even recorded in years; the TV specials and the Vegas engagements had fizzled out. Wanda had remained a fan, and she thought that people didn't know what they had: Bobbie was a storyteller, a natural star with a soulful Southern voice, and people were writing her off as a one-hit wonder. She'd pour her heart into a concept album, and they'd still call to ask her what Billy Joe threw off the Tallahatchee Bridge.

Wanda still got that question; usually she's just say "His laundry" before hanging up. There were still DJ's who played "Billie Joe" on oldies stations, usually saying something like "Boy, I wonder whatever happened to her"—Wanda was only too glad to make sure they never found out. But she had to admit, the gentleman callers (and they were nearly always gentlemen) were getting more creative. As the years went by, they

got caught up more in the mystery of Bobbie Gentry; they played the records, found the video clips and fell in love. The albums that didn't sell first time around were now what they call "cult classics": Finally they were figuring out that Bobbie wrote most of her own songs and filled them with the mood of this strange, secluded place she lived in.

The intrepid ones consulted the internet and learned how about her disappearance in 1978, how she'd walked away at the height of her career, how there'd been no more music and hardly any sightings. There would always be young men who believed that they could rescue her; win her favor or at least an autograph. To them, Bobbie would always be the siren with the flowing dark hair and the layers of eye makeup; the one that lives on the 30-year-old alum covers. Wanda had a soft spot for these poor searchers, and she tried to let most of them down gently.

Finding the house wasn't hard—Anyone with some motivation and an Internet connection could find out where Bobbie grew up, and find the house deep in Chickasaw County where her family had lived, and where Bobbie was said to spend time when she wasn't being a star in Los Angeles. Wanda had to head them off, and sometimes she wished she didn't: They were getting younger and more charming; they wouldn't call in advance but simply show up, usually in the early part of a Saturday evening—in formal dress and bearing flowers, looking for all the world like they wanted to take Bobbie to a debutante ball. Wanda would have gladly sashayed off on the arms of a few of them,

Of course, they never paid attention to Wanda: She was plain and showed her age. Her accent was thick, her nasal voice decidedly non-musical. Usually she sent them off, told them the house belonged to a distant branch of the Gentry family, told them the famous singer had rolled through town in 1971 and they'd had a grand old time. She saw their faces fall and watched them carry their albums and their bouquets back to their cars. And yet...Once in awhile, it would happen. The most sincere ones—the ones who knew how much it meant, and the ones who wouldn't sell any stories to the press—would get a glimpse of Bobbie. This would be one of those nights, assuming the singer was willing to grant it.

There were few stirrings from Bobbie's room nowadays; not like their early years together when Wanda would be able to give solace, before the withdrawal and the general ennui had taken over. But Wanda wanted to make a play for Keith from Massachusetts; whose pilgrimage should lead him to their house in precisely three hours. He hadn't called, of course; but Wanda read those internet sites too; and she knew that Keith began driving south nearly a week ago, that he was alone and single-minded; so much that he'd skipped the popular sidetrack to Memphis and Sun Studios. He'd been posting updates from his trip all week—He'd been to her birthplace, and spent hours driving in the country with the top down, as he imagined she'd done forty years earlier. According to his recent updates, he'd be getting into town in about three hours.

"Have you sounded him out?" came the voice. It was unquestionably the voice from those records Wanda loved so dearly, the one she'd consoled herself with over time.

And after all they'd been through together, the voice still made her heart flutter. Yes, she said, Keith was young and sincere; he wouldn't bring any photographers, and he'd know how much it meant. Okay, came the response from behind the locked door. I can do it one more time.

Keith arrived as expected—flowers in hand, earnest expression in tow. Unlike some of the callers, he didn't register and disappointment when the non-glamorous Wanda answered the door, so she liked him immediately; offering him some tea and slipping a bit of bourbon in without his asking. Hearing his story she felt for him and his frustrated affection. "I can't tell you how much Bob—how much Miss Gentry means to me. Nobody makes records like that anymore. Here, the band I was in with my old girlfriend...we covered "Morning Glory." It's nowhere near as good as hers, but it did well for us, got us gigs across the Northeast and even got us some airplay. Our singer was such a fan that she even copied the hairstyle. Don't worry, I have a good computer job now and haven't played in a couple of years. I don't need her to make us famous. I just always dreamed that someday she'd hear us play it."

"Oh darling, I wish I could hand it to her now," Wanda said. "Yes, we have seen her. But we never know when she'll turn up, and never for how long. Sometimes it's only an hour or two. She'll sign some forms, have a cup of coffee and then she's off again." "What does she do in between?" "Oh, she lives. Drives her car up and down the coast. Once she sang 'Billie Joe' with a bar band in Petaluma and came back laughing about it—Told them she was a retired rodeo singer and they had her back up doing Patsy Cline songs all night. Says she's been writing, but nobody's heard whatever it is. If you want to know, she seems much happier now than when she was famous"

"Does she have any boyfriends," he asked and Wanda just smiled. "That's a question a lady doesn't ask or answer. Now, I'd invite you to stay but I usually start getting ready for bed about now—I'm not as lively as I used to be, you know. Look, I'll make sure she gets this. You probably won't hear from her, but I can promise that she'll hear it. And I know she'd be grateful for your time and your courtesy. Anything else I can help you with before you go?"

By now Keith know he'd only get one more question is, and for years he'd chide himself for blurting out the most obvious one: "What did they throw..." Wanda cut the question off with a patient smile and a wave of the finger, as she had many times before. He ventured another thanks as he made his way out the door.

Keith had already heard about Wanda from the fans he'd corresponded with online—She was close to Bobbie after all, so he'd been looking forward to meeting her. Who wouldn't welcome a friendly face in the middle of a long pilgrimage? But he also knew what he might see if he was one of the lucky ones. He knew where the best vantage point was, across from the rear yard—If you thought you saw the light upstairs you could go ahead and wade into the pond; it would be worth getting soaked. According to the posts he'd read, the last person who'd gotten the glimpse was a good two years ago.

And, oh my Lord, the light was really on up there. His heart as he went running, not even bothering to remove the shoes—Of course Bobbie’s room would face out onto a pond. So, so much for staying dry: He ran into the waist-deep, tripped over a vine and covered the suit with mud. The one suit he owned was now totaled, to say nothing of whatever money was in his wallet. Not that he cared—The only thing that mattered right now was seeing what was up there.

At first glance, nothing was. The window looked only onto a wall that was barely decorated—some kind of photo maybe, or it could have been a mirror. But hold on, did something just move up there? He grabbed the opera glasses from his pocket, raised them to his eyes, and saw mud. Get hold of yourself, he thought, at least long enough to wipe the lenses.

And yes, he did see something move by the window, a flash of something red—a body in a gown, perhaps? A few frustrating seconds later it came back into view: A body swaying gently in time; there must be music playing up there. And then, if he maneuvered to catch the angle, a face reflected in a mirror.

It had to be her. The hair he’d know anywhere—those endless black curls he’d been so fascinated with as an adolescent—and that dress looked suspiciously like the formal, flowing one she wore on the cover of “Local Gentry”—Surely she couldn’t still have it after all this time? Her dancing was enticing to see—slow and slinky, the hips swiveling, the head swaying—Did it matter whether the music was really there or just in her head? Keith watched, intoxicated. What was he—eleven or twelve the first time he’d imagined seeing something like this?

And then she came to the window, and now he knew it was her. The face looked out over the pond, swept the dark skyline and just for a second, looked directly at him. : Keith barely had time to register the face that looked toward him. Still beautiful, he was certain—pale skin, sculpted features, remarkably large and dark eyes. Damn, if only those glasses would stay in focus. But Keith could swear that their eyes locked, but for a second. Could she really seem him out here? Maybe not, but there was something knowing in that glance, something reprimanding but flirtatious as well—a raise of the eyebrows, a sly smile. Tghen he saw a her hand reach up, reaching for...a lightswitch. And just when he began to register the contact, it was over.

People he’d been in touch with had seen the same thing—One guy was certain it was a mirage, the others had assumed she was tragic, left alone with her reverie. But Keith preferred to think she was just stopping in between those adventures Wanda mentioned, still gorgeous and vital. You never knew about Billie Joe and you’d never really know about Bobbie, but seeing her there was good enough. Keith caught his breath and slogged back to his car. The drive to the next motel would sloppy and full of swamp water, but filled with the mystery of the singer he loved.

Was that really worth doing, the singer wondered, retreating to a dark room once again? But okay—Wanda liked the kid and she deserved any favors he could do for her.

Besides, the fascination with Bobbie needed to be fuelled. It's kids like this who will keep her memory alive. They all thought they loved her. But they'd never know who loved her the most.

The hair, at least, had been Bobbie's: She'd worn it on all the album covers over her own fetching, but much shorter hair ("just a little embellishment," she called it). The makeup was hers too, carefully preserved all these years in a specially commissioned refrigerator. And the dress...A dress fit for a debutante ball, or one of those TV appearances Bobbie loved. But it was the one she had been wearing that night in 1978—the night that had begun so beautifully with their talking on the phone, making plans for another wild escape together. The night when she went driving too late, too dark, maybe too much in love to pay attention. The night she went over the goddamn Tallahatchee Bridge.

A great voice of the South had been silenced that night. And another one had not, at least not by death. But when Bobbie died, he never wanted to sing again; he knew he never really could. He also knew that he wouldn't let anyone find out what had happened to her: Bobbie deserved more than an ironic end that echoed her song; she deserved to be the object of mystery and obsession—Let people search and think they could still see her if they deserved it. Once he came out of the initial shock, he made the plan that he'd stuck to ever since. Covering up her death was easy—greasing the right palms gets you everywhere—and faking his own was easier: People always like to believe that big stars had drug problems and overdosed in the bathroom. .

He'd loved Bobbie since he happened to tune into a TV show back in 1967—She was beautiful and teased-up like Priscilla, but with that wise sexiness that Ann has back when they did the movie. That night he sent the guys out to buy her record, and he's stayed up till morning playing it. Meeting her was the hardest part: She was never impressed by celebrity, not even her own. To win her over he rethought his career, his music, everything. Bobbie played her own guitar, set her own direction, wrote her own songs—He could listen to the records, as he did every night for months, and know it was all her. He strived to do something that good, to at least put across the feelings she'd stirred in him. She was on his mind when he took control and showed the world what he could do. "The 68 comeback," they all called it. "Any damn thing to get this lady's attention," he knew it was.

Sending the guys around to bring her to him did no good at all—This one did what she pleased. Finally she'd shown up in Vegas, just walked up to his dressing room and knocked—something nobody was allowed to do. "Heard you were looking for me?" was all she said. That's how it began, and for the next five years they'd been together. With each year it got more surprising that nobody found them—but nobody ever did;

They'd always met at Wanda's house, and she was good at keeping things secret. Their conversations were as intense as their lovemaking, she was the first to understand what celebrity meant and the toll it took. And they'd sung together, done that for hours—just the two of them with one guitar, sometimes just singing along with the records. It

was the best music he'd ever made and it was for them alone. Why sing for the crowd again when nothing could top that?

He took off Bobbie's wig and packed it away in its box—next to his guitar, her prize set of silver finger picks and the other souvenirs of their short, blessed life together. These days his long-supposed drug problems were real. The haze of Dilaudid wasn't as intoxicating as Bobbie had been, but it was as close as he could get. Diving into that well was the only real comfort he got, despite all Wanda's attempts to connect—she's a sweet lady but he couldn't return that love. What he wanted to do was sink into sleep once again, the room swirling, Bobbie's things all around him, her music still playing in his head. Bobbie, my angel, I hope you're really out there. I wonder if you're lonesome tonight.

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