

The Understudy

By Paul Wilborn

I blame my band, all of them - Ricochet, Lunar, Kumquat, Speeze. I mean *Saber Tooth* was my idea. And *Zoom My Heart* – MY song - was the closest thing we had to a hit.

"Askin' me how did this love start/One look at her and zoom my heart!"

We closed the show with *Zoom* every night.

I picked the teal satin jackets with the black shawl collars, I got the guys to do the matching feathered pompadours, and I found a mail-order source for those shiny, toe-pinching Beatle boots.

But here I was, dumped in Ybor City in an October that still felt like summer, left behind like the middle child at a gas station stop. I stood on Seventh Avenue watching the van, smoke belching from the tailpipe, pull away for a tour I had booked of North Florida bottle clubs.

I mean, 1985 was going to be our YEAR!

"Salvo, man, I'm sorry but we voted," Speeze said that morning over café con leche at the Silver Ring. "The future is guitars, man. Not keyboards."

What he meant was there are a few more shekels to go around with a four-piece version of *Saber Tooth* than a five-piece.

They chose Ybor as the dumping ground because they knew Sara would take me in. Sara Quell picked me up after our Rough Riders show in August. All that hammering *Saber Tooth* rhythm and the knowing sneer I wear likely did the trick. She had danced in front of my keyboard all night, and was waiting with a beer when we finally crawled off the stage at 2.

Back at Upstairs North, a building she shared with a half-dozen other artists and writers, we laughed and played like we'd been lovers for years.

The next morning, as I gathered my stuff to catch the van, Sara watched me, sleep still in her eyes, her body wrapped in sheets dotted with tiny flowers.

"You..." I managed to say, as I shook my head in some kind of wonderment.

"I'm thinking maybe we call this love at first night," Sara said.

“Zoom my heart!” I replied, tapping out a staccato rhythm on my chest.

Then I snatched the sheets away. Her skin was honey-colored in the morning light. I was still a solid member of *Saber Tooth* at this point and our next gig was three hours away.

The van would wait.

I started sending Sara vintage post cards from the road – *See Rock City!* – with a two-word phrase scrawled on the back, like “Surrender, Dorothy,” or “Knock Knock,” or “Zoom Zoom!”

I’d sign it with the big cursive “S” I’ve been perfecting for when we start doing autographs.

So sure, when I knock-knock, she lets me in, all giggly that I’m standing there. But I know that won’t last. Girls look at you differently when you’re between bands.

When we met, I was part of *Saber Tooth*.

Now, I’m just a fluffy-haired waif with a vintage Farfisa organ, a 400-watt Fender amp, and \$45 in cash.

Not counting the time we were asleep, Sara and I had only spent four hours with each other and most of that was in the dark. Now I saw that Sara was one of those in-between girls – not pretty, not plain – somewhere in between. I hadn’t noticed how she was always pushing her limp hair behind her ears. Or how a small constellation of leftover teenage zits lingered along her jaw.

But seeing her smiling in the doorway that day felt like someone had thrown me a lifeline.

It didn’t take long to tumble into her squeaky iron bed. Sara had a drama degree from USF and, as we curled up afterward, she told she had just played a lunatic in what must have been a very stinky production called *Marat/Sade* directed by some semi-famous visiting actor from England named Lynn Whitehall.

“To get the authentic feel of an asylum in 1808, Lynn didn’t let us wash our costumes the entire run. After the first week, the whole theater smelled like a wet gym shoe. It was incredible!”

I watched from her bed as Sara pulled on a T-shirt and jeans.

“I’ve got an audition downtown today. Wanna come?”

The audition was at a 1920s theater called The Falk. The Tampa Jewel Players, named after a cheap cigar made in Ybor, were moving up after the stinky success of *Marat/Sade* – renting a big theater for a full production of the musical, *Cabaret*.

As we pushed through the double doors off the street, a pudgy girl with a frizz of hair and very thick glasses smiled at Sara, scratched something on her notepad, and sent her through the lobby toward a hand-lettered sign saying “WOMEN. “

She looked eagerly at me.

“Name?”

“No, I’m just here...”

“For the audition, I know. We’re a little short of men, so I’m really happy you’re here. Name?”

“Salvo.”

“Excuse me?”

“Salvo.”

Her smile faded a bit.

“Like the dishwashing detergent?” she asked.

Salvo – and all the names in *Saber Tooth* – had appeared as if by magic on a night when a club paid us in tequila. I didn’t know much, but I was sure Bruce Jones wasn’t a proper New Wave moniker. Salvo - now that was a name with some power. I guess some detergent executive thought so too.

“It’s a stage name,” I told her.

“Love it,” she said, scratching more notes on her pad. “Go this way.”

In no time, I was standing alone on a bare stage in a single pink spotlight. I knew there were seats in front of me, but all I could see were two red EXIT signs floating in the darkness.

From somewhere out front a high tenor voice shouted, “Sing!”

I opened my mouth, planning to offer up a verse or two of *Zoom My Heart*, but instead out came something my mother used to sing while vacuuming our house in Parma Heights.

I looked down and my fingers were snapping out a swing beat.

“Pack up all my cares and woe, here I go, singing low. Bye, Bye Blackbird...”

“Thanks, mate,” shouted the high tenor voice, this time with a distinct British accent.

I almost skipped into the darkened wings, exhilarated by the song and the place – an actual theater with a wide wooden stage and an array of lights hanging from gridwork above, not a carpeted platform jammed in the corner of a concrete block bar reeking of cigarettes and yesterday’s beer.

Out of the shadows, a woman appeared. She was Greek or Persian or some combination of Mediterranean curves and curls with skin like a china plate. She moved very close. All I could see were oval gray eyes and a regal nose. She cupped her fingers on each side of my temple.

“Salvo, I’m Camille. You’re not nervous, are you?”

Pressing her fingers into my temples, she turned my head left, then right as we both mouthed “No.”

“Good. Just relax. Would you like to be in this show with me, Salvo?”

She moved my head up and down so I’m nodding as we both mouthed “Yes.”

“Good.”

Camille released my head and looked me up and down – like a butcher checking out a side of beef.

“So you and Sara?”

“Yeah...I guess...”

Camille smiled and slapped me gently on the cheek.

“You’ll do just fine,” she said, before she slipped back into the shadows.

That night, I was sitting at the kitchen table watching Sara open a bottle of wine, when the phone rang. Sara listened for a moment then held the phone in my direction.

I noticed a tightness around her lips I'd never seen before.

"They want you," Sara said.
