



# I'm a Man

Stories by Peter Johnson

# WHITE PINE PRESS

*A World of Voices*

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P.O. Box 236  
Buffalo, NY 14201  
(716) 627-4665 (Voice)  
(716) 627-4665 (Fax)

Email: [wpine@whitepine.org](mailto:wpine@whitepine.org)

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## Flamenco

"LEAVE HER ALONE," Dad said. "She's learning something this time."

"She learns something every time," I said, wanting to get under his skin.

"Just remember, Frank, this is my house." "And a man's home is his castle," I sang, almost adding that while the King was downing a few beers and wondering whether Roger Clemens could hold a two-run lead, El Cobra was in the back room of a West Side bar having his way with Patti. But I tried to be reasonable. "If she could sing, this might make sense, Dad."

"But she must have some talent."

"Have you ever heard her even hum along to the radio?"

"Just give me a cigarette."

I looked at him, seeing more of myself in his eyes than I wanted to. People always said we looked alike; they couldn't even distinguish our voices on the phone. I wanted to move, but someone had to hold things together.

"Go save her if you want to," he said. "But that bar can't let her in, anyway. She's only seventeen."

I gave him a cigarette. "Don't be so sure."

"I just want her to be happy," he said sadly.

"We're already doing a good job. Maybe we should start introducing her to guys. We know her type, divorced at least six times with weird occupations like dirt-bike racer or middle-aged rock climber. Maybe we should buy some fedoras and drive around in a shiny, pink Cadillac."

"What?" "Pimps, Dad."

He stood and threw the unlit cigarette onto the floor. "You talk like a pig about your sister," he said. "What's your problem?" He stuck a gnarled index finger into my chest, pushing me backwards. "You want me to go hammer what's his face?"

"El Cobra."

"Or break his goddamn fingers, so he can't play the gui-

tar."

"It's a penis, Dad. The guitar's a metaphor."

He took a run at me, grabbing my shirt and shoving me against the wall. "You're sick. You've always thought and talked like we got the wrong kid at the hospital, like you're the kid of some junkie because that's how you thinkjunk, crap, and more junk. You just make it sound better because you've got college. Did you meet this El Cobra, you big jerk? He was polite. He was a gentleman."

Every time he finished a sentence, he tightened his grip on my shirt, jerking my head back against the wall. He was a boxer in the Navy and could no doubt take care of himself, yet I wasn't afraid. I stood there, daring him to hit me, but he loosened his grip and collapsed onto the recliner.

"You're evil, Frank."

I adjusted my shirt. "Let me tell you something about El Cobra, alias The Dick."

He shook his head. "Do you know what I see, what I imagine?"

"I've been doing some checking," I said. "He's a Wop but tells everyone he's Spanish and owns a villa in Europe. He's been divorced twice, has three kids from those marriages, and he's currently shackled up with some poor wench who used to sing in his group. He knocked her up."

"Christ," my father said, resting his elbows on his knees, cradling his face in both hands.

"The guy's thirty-six, Dad."

"Jesus," he said, looking up at me. "He seemed like a nice guy. We've got to get her out of there, Frank."

On the drive to Toucan's, the club where Patti was singing, he thanked me for being honest about El Cobra, and I felt badly about that, though it wasn't as if I had totally lied. I was convinced that the truth about El Cobra was worse than anything I could imagine. Granted, I hadn't met him and didn't know if he'd been married, but I knew my sister's type well enough to realize my guesswork was solid. The important point was that if I wanted to rescue Patti, I needed some parental authority with me. I needed the Specter of Guilt, the ineluctable presence of The Father.

El Cobra was more popular than I thought because his performance was sold out, and the bouncer wouldn't let me in without a ticket. I had a notion to return to the car and tell Dad, who had decided to wait outside, that at this very moment Patti was baring her breasts on stage to assorted drunks, which would have agitated him into breaking down the door. But I didn't want to push my luck. I had gotten him to come; if he wanted to wait in the car, that was his business.

But I still had to deal with the bouncer, who had the biceps of Sylvester Stallone and the face of an iguana. I could have told him that he had a seventeen-year-old girl performing in the bar that night, but, instead, I calmly explained that I was the brother of one of the great flamenco singers of all time, who was currently performing with El Cobra and who had promised to leave me a ticket at the door. He looked at me as if I were some bug he was considering for dinner, then let me in, grumbling, "If you screw up, Jack, you're out on your ass."

On my way past him, I said, "If a stocky old guy looking like the Avenging Angel of Death storms the front door, tell him I'll be standing by that big speaker on the left." The bouncer looked at me, trying to decide whether I was ridiculing him. A muscle twitched in his left cheek; he opened his mouth, displaying a blackened set of teeth only a horse doctor could appreciate.

"I'm watching you," he said. "I'm watching you."

I smiled, thinking I could take him if push came to shove. For one thing, I'm big and strong. I'm sure I would have been some big, strong, dumb jerk laying bricks the rest of my life if I didn't have all these strange ideas whanging around inside my head. I'm also invincible when I'm righteous, and I was feeling very righteous that night, being on a mission of some importance. I didn't want to save Patti from herself, which was quite impossible, but I was going to make clear to El Cobra and to any other fast dick in town that to fuck over my sister was to fuck over me. If I could make that point with my wits, all the better; if not, I was more than willing to fight someone.

I went to the bar and bought a Rolling Rock, then walked over to a large speaker, searching for a table. Unfortunately, the ones in front were reserved for flamenco aficionados, phonies who had decided it would be cool to be someone else for a night. I recognized a car mechanic I'd gotten stoned with a couple years before, an Australian, dressed in a white suit, his head topped with a white fedora. He was puffing on a huge Cuban cigar, but his impersonation of Juan Valdez was betrayed by his reddish tan and long, blond locks. He was the kind of jerk Patti liked. When he waved to me, I nodded my bottle his way. I decided to keep an eye on him, but he momentarily disappeared into the swirling smoke. In the four corners of the room, the management had set up miniature search lights that slowly scanned the audience, occasionally crisscrossing each other, cutting swaths of white light through the smoke.

The rumble of small talk quieted down, and, to my left, I saw El Cobra's entourage walking against the wall toward the stage. They were led by El Cobra himself, waving his guitar over his head, acknowledging the applause. Some patrons yelled out Spanish phrases they stole from old Carmen Miranda movies, and I joined in with a few yips and yaps of my own. Patti was the last of the performers, and it was going to be a vintage Patti night. She wore a lightweight, white cotton dress, so when the search lights discovered her, you could see the outlines of her bra and panties. Her long, blond curly hair danced on her shoulders as she hopped behind the other performers. I knew she would attract attention from the male clientele. I knew that when these phony Chiquita bananas saw her, they'd let out a collective loin sigh only her beauty could elicit.

She sat next to two other dark-skinned women on stage, and I had to admire El Cobra's taste. At their feet were instruments—pieces of metal and wood—that I had never seen before, and when the Snake Man started to play, the three women shook and banged the instruments, yelping like a bunch of wounded coyotes. El Cobra himself stood at the microphone fingering and smacking his guitar. He was shorter than I had expected and had hair the color and texture of Patti's. When he started chanting again, the women appeared drugged, glassy-eyed.

After a few songs, El Cobra asked Patti to join him,

introducing her as a new member of the group, kissing her paternally on the cheek. The car mechanic stood up, waving his fedora over his head, then bowing at the waist, as if in solemn respect. El Cobra smiled, but I wasn't fooled by these pleasantries.

He continued to speak about his home in Spain, explaining how the next song, which he had written for Patti, was inspired by the "untamed" women of the region. I laughed loudly, receiving a few stares from people around me. El Cobra tried to focus his eyes on the laugh, but the lights blinded him. Patti, too, looked concerned, probably locking onto the familiarity of my laugh, which she loathed more than a Friday night without a date.

There was a moment of silence, then Patti approached the microphone for her solo, while El Cobra began to pick feverishly at his guitar. She stood there, hovering, as if ready for flight, waiting for a sign to begin. She started to sing, to gyrate before El Cobra. I didn't know Spanish or flamenco music, but it wasn't necessary. What she howled was directed only at El Cobra, and the language he had given her sprung from water and dirt—from the muddy old rites of Dionysus. The audience seemed agitated by this musical intercourse, and I thought the whole room was about to erupt into fornication. Mostly, though, I was appalled that my little sister was somehow the source of this spiraling sexuality. I was trying to decide how to handle the situation when I was saved by the Australian, who was beside himself, standing, clapping his hands. And the sight of this ersatz flamenco neophyte enraptured by the orgiastic groans of my seventeen-year-old sister made me laugh. Try as I might, I couldn't stop.

At first Patti attempted to go on, El Cobra so intent on his instrument that no distraction could break his concentration. Then she lost her fervor, and the song came abruptly to an end. El Cobra joined her at the microphone, holding his guitar at his side like a staff. I could feel the growing silence on stage and in the audience, but as long as the mechanic was in sight, I couldn't stop laughing. I heard the audience's outraged comments, including a number of "What's your problem?" and one guy shouting over and over, "Get the asshole outta here. Get the asshole outta here."

When El Cobra asked the stage manager to shine a light on the blasphemer of flamenco, I was momentarily blinded,

he and my sister becoming distant silhouettes. Then I heard him— not El Cobra the famous flamenco guitarist, not El Cobra the Latin lover — but El Cobra the working-class Dago from Kenmore, N.Y. "What's the matter with you, Buddy?" he yelled.

"Snake Man," I yelled back, "can you repeat that in the native Spanish of your homeland?"

I was a bit surprised by what happened next. El Cobra, this pygmy-sized gaucho, dropped his guitar and charged me from the stage, with Patti close behind. The stage manager, noticing the action, shifted a different set of lights onto the streaking guitarist and his enraged concubine. When El Cobra got a few feet from me, I reacted instinctively, raising my leg and kicking him in the face.

He went down hard and I was a little worried, thinking flamenco guitarists probably didn't have the strongest neck muscles in the world.

He lay motionless on the floor, but instead of coming to his aid, Patti barreled into me. She wrapped her arms around my waist, trying to push me backwards. I raised my half-finished bottle over my head, holding her tightly to my chest with my other arm. She fought herself free and swiped a beer bottle off a table. I was a bit surprised when she hit me with it, but I knew I wasn't badly hurt, just a warm scar of blood snaking its way down my cheek. Instead of getting mad, I smiled, and I think she would have stabbed me with the broken end of the bottle if the bouncer hadn't intervened. He passed her to another bouncer, then rushed me. He obviously had been looking forward to this confrontation, but much to his disgust, I went limp. It wasn't that I was afraid of him, but I had accomplished my mission and didn't see any reason to fight.

A few minutes later, I was on my ass on the sidewalk outside Toucan's, my beer still in hand, blood trickling down my cheek, old Iguana-face smiling down at me as if he'd just finished his third Big Mac. "You're an asshole,

Jack," he said, acting very much the victor, which he would have been, if not for the crazed King of Reckio's Bowling Alley, alias Dad, who was at that moment charging him like a psychotic elephant.

It was no contest.

Dad and the bouncer went hurtling into the smoke-filled twilight of the bar. I saw the event from Dad's point of view: he's stewing in the car for over a half an hour when

he looks up and sees his son dragged out of a bar with a head wound.

Knowing Dad could take care of himself, I walked back to the car. Sure enough, about five minutes later, he came out of Toucan's dragging Patti behind him. He threw her into the back seat and we drove off. She cried all the way home, explaining what had happened. As she talked, I felt Dad looking sideways at me. I knew he would eventually discover that many of the facts I had related about El Cobra weren't exactly true, but I felt confident he would see the soundness of the rescue.

When we got home, he sat with Patti, half-chastising her, half-comforting her. I went into

the bathroom and closed the door behind me, working on my face with a washcloth and some peroxide. The door opened and Patti appeared. She stood before me, thigh to thigh, glaring at me, grabbing the washcloth and rubbing it deeply into my open cut. Although it stung mightily, I never blinked, never took my eyes off hers. When she threw the washcloth into the sink, she started to pound on my chest, so I grabbed her arms, pulling her toward me, stroking her hair, and when I looked up, Dad was in the doorway, a look of horror on his face.

"You're a bastard," he said.

I panicked for a moment, then slowly closed the bathroom door with one foot. In time, I knew he'd understand, knew he'd see that someone had to defend what little dignity we had left.

After the fiasco at Toucan's we didn't see Patti for about a week. One night I couldn't relax. It was just me and the Old Man watching a game on TV, making small talk. I left the house and drove to the lakefront, thinking I might take a walk and grab a hot dog from a local vendor.

After I ate, I climbed a tower overlooking Lake Erie. Off to my right, I could see the Niagara River beginning to form; to my left the lights of Pilot Field glowed. I tried hard to think back to happier times, knowing that there were no happier times.

About ten years ago, one damp morning in April, the cops discovered a middle-aged woman face down in the Niagara. As she floated close to shore, a tree branch had reached out

and hooked her by the rosary she wore around her neck. The woman was my mother; the rosary was from some shrine in Yugoslavia. The last person to see her, a clerk at Billy's Food Mart, said she had stumbled in drunk from the pouring rain and had given him a holy card of St. Jude. "Praise be to Jesus," she said on her way out. The police found no evidence of foul play; to them, she was just another drunk, another nut case. When my father went to identify her, in one of the dumbest moves of this century, he brought Patti with him. She was only about seven at the time, yet no one stopped her from following him into the room. "Unbelievable" is what I said to the nurse on duty. "Totally unbelievable."