

DYLAN WENT ELECTRIC

by

Josh Hartwell

Represented by Ron Gwiazda
At Abrams Artists Agency, New York, NY

Dylan Went Electric Characters

Norman — Late 20s-30s. A struggling folk singer and songwriter who adopts a musician persona in public.

Gina —30s. A lonely, unwashed lady with a young spirit. Hitchhiked to Greenwich because she wants adventure and romance. Left her children with their father to do it.

Petra —Early 30s. An intense and straightforward photographer and bar waitress, born in Czechoslovakia. Rarely lets her guard down.

Phil —30s. An intellectual, a beatnik, and probably a communist. Not an overly friendly kind of bartender.

Bartholomew —20s. A quiet black man who listens to the conversations around him. A comic book artist.

Edna —An eccentric old bar-fly, 50s-60s. A feminist and a drinker from long ago, and a staple in the Village.

Morris —50s. A clean, starched, and elegant bar-owner with magnificent posture and a quiet flare.

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act one

scene one

Lights come up on a garden-level tavern, early afternoon in Greenwich Village, June of 1969. The bar itself is stage right with an unpolished wooden surface, tarnished brass, and four stools—three flanking the stage left side, and one on the downstage side. Behind the bar is what's expected: liquor bottles, various styles and sizes of glasses, a cash register and beer tap. Center stage, are five round tables, two chairs, an unlit candle and dirty ashtray at each. The floor is a scuffed and dirty black and white 1' X 1' tiled checker board. The walls are exposed brick and wood paneling, with framed black and white photographs of former customers sitting in these very seats. A stairway begins at floor level Upstage-left and ascends seven stairs Downstage to a platform and the bar's entrance. A worn wooden railing lines the stairway; anyone can be seen entering the bar from the street above, and walking down the stairs. Down left, there's a payphone on the wall next to a doorway leading to the unisex restroom. Upstage-center is a raised stage, about seven feet wide and five feet deep, on which is a stool and microphone stand. Up-right of the bar is a door that leads to an unseen office, storage, and prep-area for performers. This place has been here for a long time, and was at one time much more alluring.

BARTHOLOMEW, a black man in his 20s sits alone at the bar, sketching and sipping beer from a glass—a pile of drawings next to the one he's working on. His short afro is visible from under his hat and he is in casual late-60s clothing.

PHIL is an intelligent-looking beatnik behind the bar, reading The Village Voice. He is in his 30s, tall and slender, and wears thick glasses. There's a Polaroid camera and an unfinished chess game on the bar beside him. He frequently pulls out a white handkerchief and wipes his nose with it.

NORMAN, 20s, is sitting at the table closest to the bar's stage, an acoustic guitar in his lap, the ashtray on his table full of butts. He writes in a notebook. GINA, 30, has lived a rugged life—long, unwashed hair, needy hangover-eyes, loose hippy clothes. She's at the table closest to the entrance to the restroom, crushing out a cigarette, drinking from a coffee cup, occasionally glancing over to see what NORMAN is doing. In public, NORMAN puts on a cool "musician" façade. He very rarely smiles, even when he when he wants to; GINA often smiles, even when she doesn't want to. He plucks a few chords on his guitar and sings to himself in a raspy voice.

NORMAN

While the gypsies dance for pity,
Cross the bridge into their city armed with wreaths.
Ignoring cues from grown-up jackals,
They're removing shiny shackles forged by thieves.
And the centipedes . . .
Hold flags in every hand.

He strums, scribbles something out and writes again. GINA musters the courage to talk to this stranger.

GINA

You ever met a . . . real live one?

He strums and writes, unaware that she's talking to him.

GINA

A real live gypsy?
(Beat)
Hey.

NORMAN

You hey-ing at me?

GINA

Who else would I be? Ever meet one?

NORMAN

Maybe. I don't know. Why, you claiming that's you?

GINA

I have qualities about me that might remind you of a gypsy. But I'm not a real live one, no.

NORMAN

Don't have to know somebody to write about 'em.

GINA

Didn't say you did.

NORMAN

I've wrote about pirates, too. Never met one a them. What qualities?

GINA

I move around quite a bit. Dance for all sorts of reasons. Don't shave my legs or armpits. How's that for gypsy?

NORMAN

Captivating. Maybe the poem is about you and we didn't even know it.

GINA

And my great-grandma came from Romania.

NORMAN

Lucky her.

GINA

Does that meet your criteria?

He goes back to writing.

GINA

Have you ever met . . . any real live centipedes?

NORMAN

This morning outside my building. They're everywhere.

GINA

Oh. Oh, ok. I see what you just did there. The actual insects, or the people that remind you of them?

He puts his pen down and closes his notebook.

GINA

I'm distracting you. I shouldn't have even been listening. I'll shut up now.

She turns away and drinks her coffee.

NORMAN

They ain't insects, baby. Cause they don't have six legs.

GINA

Hm. Bugs, then?

NORMAN

Sure. They could be called bugs without being offended. And I don't mind nobody listening.

GINA

Why'd you call it a poem, if it's got music with it?

NORMAN

You talk funny. Where'd you escape from?

GINA

Originally Texas.

NORMAN

Don't sound like Texas.

GINA

You sound like Texas.

NORMAN

I never been to Texas in my life. What took you here, then? The Village is a far shout from Texas.

GINA

Wanted to get lost and noticed at the same time.

NORMAN

Yeah? And you think Sully's is the right tavern to do that in?

GINA

They have an expresso maker.

PHIL, who had apparently not been listening, suddenly takes a photograph of GINA with the polaroid.

PHIL

There.

She looks at him, puzzled.

PHIL

You've been noticed.

He smiles and goes back to reading as NORMAN starts a slower, more lonely-sounding song.

NORMAN

I'm parked out on the edge of town
Waitin' 'til the sun goes down
So I . . . can breathe with you.
Bewildered 'bout the plans I made
To the rhythm of the wiper blades
Hoping . . . to breathe with you.

GINA

My name's Gina, by the way.

NORMAN

By what way? You know, you should really let a fellow write when he's trying to write.

GINA

That wasn't the same song—poem, was it?

NORMAN

What can I say? I shifted. Changed my mind about which one I wanted to play around with.

GINA

You always do that? Break right out into song in the middle of a conversation?

PHIL

Yes. He does.

NORMAN is writing again. PETRA, a dark-haired, intense-looking lady in her early 30s, enters and hurries down the stairs.

NORMAN

I wasn't the one conversatin'. You were.

GINA goes back to her coffee. PETRA winds her way through the tables, drops her purse behind the bar, and quickly ties on an apron.

PHIL

Missed you yesterday, Petra.

PETRA

(with a distant hint of an Eastern European accent)

Yes, you did. That's because I wasn't here.

PHIL

Under the weather, or . . . ?

Nothing.

PHIL

Couldn't you have used a payphone or a neighbor's? Let me know you weren't gonna make it in?

PETRA

You figured it out. Survived without me.

PHIL

We got mobbed last night, though. The poets were here.

PETRA

(to the customers)

Does anybody want more coffee?! Anything . . .

Nobody answers.

PHIL

I took a photograph with your camera there.

PETRA

Of what?

PHIL

Of that gal over by Norman.

PETRA

How was she worthy of a photograph?

GINA looks up.

PHIL

She can hear you.

PETRA

I don't mean anything by it, miss. I'm very specific about what I take a picture of, that's all. As it turns out, I would have maybe, probably, taken a picture of you, too. See?

GINA smiles broadly and strikes a Hollywood pose as PETRA snaps another shot.

PETRA

I didn't remember about the poets coming, Phil. I'll somehow call next time. I was emotionally unprepared to be here.

PHIL

It was just a group of my friends, you know, declaiming whatever it was they were calling poetry.

GINA

(almost to herself)

I used to write poetry.

PETRA

Don't touch my camera anymore, ok?

He lets it go. NORMAN strums, and PETRA continues to get ready for her shift.

GINA

And I used to paint, too.

NORMAN

You used to paint? Paint what, houses?

GINA

No, silly. Watercolors. Well, yes, if you mean . . . I suppose I painted a picture of a house from time to time.

NORMAN

Well, who hasn't?

GINA

I lost it, though. Lost . . . not so much the talent. I never knew whether I had any of that. Probably not. Just the . . . I lost the concentration or the time to concentrate. And it wasn't because I was more busy. But my mind wandered so much, and not because I was getting high, although . . . And I got more tuned into the horrifying horrors happening

around the world, which I suppose should inspire an artist, right? But for me it took me away from it. Maybe that's what separates the dabblers from folks who stay with it, like you .

NORMAN

I got hindrances, keep me from concentrating, too, Gina.

GINA

Like what?

He looks at her.

GINA

Oh, like me? You mean me?

NORMAN

You got it.

GINA

Well. Well, I mistook you for a different type of person, then.

NORMAN

What, a meter-maid? Who, a guy who sits in a toll-booth? A . . . telephone operator?

GINA

In a way. Somebody who wants to discuss . . . Because you're here. Right? Writing and playing and creating here, and not at home.

NORMAN

Well, our neighbors would hate the Hell out of me if I worked at home. Ain't that right, Phil?

PHIL

(barely looking up from his newspaper)

They'd bust down the door—

NORMAN

Walls are rolling-paper-thin.

GINA

You guys are roommates, then, eh?

NORMAN

In a modest, nothing, two-room, underground dive 'round the corner on Jane Street.

GINA

I'm down on Leroy Street. Just moved in there.

NORMAN

I can glean that you just moved in.

GINA

Two roommates I barely ever see.

NORMAN

Lucky you.

GINA

One of 'em I knew back home in Austin? Just got back from Vietnam three months ago, now might have to go back again. He works at Penn Station. Smokes a preposterous amount of pot.

NORMAN

Sounds like good people.

GINA

He's not atrocious. So, you ever gonna tell me your name?

NORMAN

We're thriving without you knowing it.

GINA

But still—

NORMAN

Karl . . . or Groucho Marx.

GINA

So which is it?

NORMAN

Or Charlie Parker, Henry Miller, Mabel Dodge, Mo Howard, Lex Luthor . . .

BARTHOLOMEW *looks up, points at him and laughs.*

GINA

You hold yourself up to all those folks?

NORMAN

You even know who all of 'em are? They're just all on my mind these days. I'm actually Norman.

GINA

You ever get the chance to play on that stage, Actually Norman?

NORMAN

That stage? It's more for the old beatniks, you know?

GINA

And you ain't a beatnik.

NORMAN

Not of late. Phil is. Or says he is. Morris, the owner, hasn't let me play up there. Not yet. Not for money. He'll come to his senses one of these days.

GINA

I'll come see you when he finally does.

NORMAN

It's ok, though.

GINA

Or I can go hand out flyers, get you an audience.

NORMAN

I'm still putting my set together.

She gets up, with her coffee and ash tray, and moves over to his table.

GINA

Sounds like you got a mind-full. My son's middle name was gonna be Norman after his grandfather on his father's side. He just turned one this month. But we went with Robert instead. After Kennedy.

NORMAN

Not John?

GINA

Bobby died, two days before I had him.

NORMAN

Your husband have a problem with your hasty switch?

GINA

No, he didn't. But he's not my husband. But I wouldn't care if he didn't support it, 'cause he's a bastard. Ok if I sit by you?

NORMAN

Free country, Gina.

She sits.

GINA

We never got along, really. I mean, good enough to have two and a half kids together, but never good enough to consider getting married.

NORMAN

You got a lot going on for such a young lady.

GINA

I'm not young.

NORMAN

Now, how does one have half a kid?

GINA

I . . . miscarried.

NORMAN

Oh. Lot going on. Sorry to hear that.

PHIL

(from behind his paper)

All too common these days. Pesticides. Chemical warfare residue.

NORMAN

I believe my mother miscarried when she had me. I wasn't born into the right family, I think.

He plays and sings.

Bad luck, oh, and bad news.

Help a brother flee.

Fix him up with kind ferocity.

Burnin' soles on busted shoes.

Hollow is the key.

Purple-hearted, blind philosophy.

Give him courage. Give him sight.

Give him shelter from the night.

But give a little time to get it right.

GINA

I like that one. I like the way you . . . Anyways, who wants to bring another "John" into the world, you know what I mean? They're everywhere.

PETRA crosses to the payphone, picks up the receiver, inserts coins, and dials.

GINA

Well, my apologies for disrupting you, Norman. I should leave you to your melodies.

PETRA *speaks into the phone receiver, mostly in Czech.* NORMAN *quietly strums.*

PETRA

Maminko? . . . Dostala si muj dopis? . . . Ne. Ne, that is still the last I heard from him . . . Jak je na tom Tata? . . .

NORMAN

Truth is, though . . . Um, I can compose with or without you sitting here. Hovering over me.

GINA

I'm sorry. Talking about my sons . . . I get the blues. That song, what's it called?

NORMAN

Nothing yet.

PETRA

Prijedu az budu mit cas. Nemuzu ted; musum jeste vydelat . . . Stejne na to nemam . . . Taky mam o ne obavy . . . I hope you are correct . . . I thought it was the mother's job to worry. I am working now, I will call you again next week . . . Diki, Maminka . . . Ahoj . . . Papa.

She hangs up.

GINA

Beautiful language. Is it Russian?

PETRA

Czech.

GINA

It's beautiful. I can tell you're talking to your mother. I get the same way when I talk to mine.

PETRA

(*Curt*)

May I get you anything?

GINA

I'm not quite finished with this. It's ok if I loiter awhile, isn't it?

PETRA

That's all anybody ever does. Make yourself happy.

GINA

Thanks, I will. And I wasn't listening to your conversation, I just . . . Are you hiring?

PETRA

I suspect not. But I also would not be the best one to ask.

GINA

Is he?

PETRA

Phil? No. The owner—

GINA

Morris.

PETRA

That's right. He'll be in later.

(The exchanges with PETRA and Norman and especially NORMAN and PHIL are swift and familiar. Automatic.)

Norman, you want more?

NORMAN

What's the time?

PETRA

3:30.

NORMAN

Let me switch to liquor, then.

PETRA

Phil.

PHIL

Yeah?

PETRA

(pantomiming drinking)

Norman.

PHIL

Cool.

He grabs a bottle and makes a drink for NORMAN.

GINA

You find it harder or easier to make music when you're on booze?

NORMAN

Depends on the music I'm making. And on the booze I'm drinking.

GINA

I haven't been among a great deal of artistic people even in my widespread travels. I met dozens of musicians and people in the business.

NORMAN

Dozens, huh?

GINA

Some sorta famous, most already forgotten. But artistic ones are more difficult to stumble on.

NORMAN

I'm not artistic. I just try to tell it like it is. Or how I think it is.

GINA

And how is it?

NORMAN

You tell me. Hone in on that painting part of you, and tell me how it is in your world right now.

GINA

I wouldn't know how to start.

NORMAN

Give it a go. You ain't headless. You can see what's going on.

GINA

Well, my friends back at home were all freaky long-hairs. The students or the non-students who protest and gripe about the war, say their trying to make a difference, standing up to crazy old suits who peddle their bullshit. Love everyone, stuff flowers into the barrels of rifles.

NORMAN

See that, Gina? You are a gypsy, after all.

GINA

I wasn't one of them. Just with them . . . for the drugs and the sex. Went along with it. Met people, had a fun time. Too much fun.

NORMAN

So you were disappearing and getting noticed right where you were. No real reason to move.

GINA

Where'd you come from?

NORMAN

Me? Oh, I don't know. I'm one of many refugees from middle-America. Cleveland, Ohio.

GINA

Norman, I'm sure you got your reasons to be a refugee, just like I do. Sometimes having no good reason is the very best reason. How long you been here?

NORMAN

Here, like sitting here in this chair? About a century.

GINA

No, here in New York City. Greenwich Village.

NORMAN

It's been beckoning to me, reeling me in for four or five years. But I finally just arrived last November.

GINA

What took you so long?

NORMAN

I crawled my way here. You ask too many questions.

GINA

And hardly get any straightforward answers.

NORMAN

You printing this interview in a newspaper?

GINA

You have nothing to be afraid of from me.

NORMAN

Who said I was afraid?

GINA

I thought we were making small-talk, but you don't have much to say. Small or otherwise.

NORMAN

Maybe I don't talk to strangers.