

## Bittersweet Lullaby

by Tom Purcell

Sit down and enjoy your Guinness and I'll tell you how I figured out who the killer was.

The murders date back to early January. You remember the cold front that settled over the city then? Well, it was killing business here at the pub. Even our diehard regulars stayed home.

That's when my manager came up with an interesting idea: Talent Night. Apparently, there's a pub in Weirton, West Virginia that runs an open mike for singers, comics, karaoke, whatever, and the place packs them in.

We gave it a try one Sunday night and, despite the cold, it was a big success. We drew in characters from all over to perform. Take one fellow, Rolly Polly. By day, he's a 350-pound postal carrier, but by night he does an Elvis impersonation that would make you think the King was here in the flesh.

Another standout was Antonio Mazetti, a retired construction worker. He sings Frank Sinatra tunes with such strength and clarity you'd think the old crooner came back from the dead. And one of my favorites was a retired economics professor from Pitt. He does a Henny Youngman impersonation that had the room in stitches.

Well, after only a few weeks Talent Night was a success. That gave us a better idea. We made some calls and arranged a Talent Night contest in which the winner would perform live at the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville in early March.

That following Sunday was well below zero, but the pub was packed to the gills. A line wrapped around the side of the building with folks waiting for their chance to get in and perform. I went out to give folks coffee and make sure they were all right.

That's when I met Sandy Miller.

She stood there with her two little girls, all three of them shaking in the cold. There's no way I could let those little girls suffer. I ushered all

three of them through the back door and seated them in my booth across from the hearth. I threw some extra logs on the fire and the hot coals quickly erupted into hearty flames.

"I'm Sean Brogan," I said walking back over to the table.

"I'm Sandy," she said, smiling, "Sandy Miller. These are my twin daughters, Mathilda and Madeline. They're both five."

She took the girls' coats and caps off and seated them in the booth. They were beautiful little girls, both with long blond hair and big blue eyes. When Sandy took her cap and coat off, I saw where the girls got their beauty. Her long blond hair danced over her small shoulders. She wore faded jeans and a white sweater that clung gently to her frame. No doubt about it, Sandy Miller was a beautiful woman.

I got them some vegetable soup and cocoa and it warmed my heart to see them devour that meal. After they ate, Sandy told me she'd come all the way here with the girls just to get a chance at singing in the Talent Night contest. I walked her right onto the stage, took the mike, and introduced her.

"Our next performer has two beautiful young girls who need to home to bed, so we're going to let her perform right away."

The crowd gave a generous applause as she walked onto the makeshift stage in the back of the pub. She nervously dropped her pick a few times but finally got situated. She reached out, adjusted the mike, and then began to talk.

"This song is called 'Young Wife,' a song I wrote myself."

It's hard for me to describe what happened when she began to sing. Her voice was low and steady, but powerful—as though all the pain she'd ever known was welded onto her vocal chords.

I don't remember her lyrics exactly, but they were about a seventeen-year-old girl who grew up in a coal-mining town. The girl's daddy drank and her momma was poor. But the girl had a talent. She dreamed of being a performer. She was an A student with a scholarship to Julliard, but she fell hard for a smooth talker. She got pregnant the first time with

him. She gave birth to beautiful twin girls and her duty was to them now.

When she finished singing, she didn't get the standard applause—the gracious kind that mediocre performers always got. It was so quiet in there at first, I wondered if anyone was going to clap. But then it came. A clap here and a clap there and then it grew into a burst of thunder so loud, I thought it might never stop.

The crowd demanded another and Sandy obliged.

"I call this song 'Street Angel, House Devil,'" she said in her soft, hearty voice. Then she began strumming and singing. That song was about a man who was the nicest man in the world on the street when sober, but he turned into the devil at home as soon as he got some whiskey in him. It was about his violent ways and jealous rages. How he beat his wife and sometimes ran off with his girls to spite her.

When she finished, I didn't know if the audience was going to cry or applaud. Suddenly, a thunderclap broke out again. It resounded long and hard. Everyone in the pub felt the pain in her performance and the way she was able to turn pain into such beauty.

Sandy smiled and bowed and nearly tripped as she left the stage. She buttoned up her girls and thanked me. I walked them to her car and helped buckle the girls into the back seat.

And then she looked up to me. Her eyes were burning so bright I thought she was going to explode. She hugged me and kissed me on the cheek, then got into the car, a beat-up old Chevy, and drove off.

She came back the next Sunday and the Sunday after that. It became routine for me to let her in the back door with the girls, so they didn't have to wait in line in the cold. I'd let her sing her two songs and send the pub into a frenzy. Then I'd walk her to her car afterwards and get my kiss on the cheek.

It was that next Sunday night that I met her husband.

He was waiting at her car. He had greasy blond hair and hadn't shaved in a few days. He held a near-empty fifth of Jim Beam in his right hand, while leaning against the car to keep himself upright.

"This where you been goin' to?" he said, then drained the last of his bottle.

"Billy," she said, fire in her eyes. "You're drunk again. Just leave."

The girls pulled tight to Sandy.

"Who's this?" he said pointing to me. "Your new girlfriend?"

I felt the anger well up inside of me. He had a good five inches on me—a big man of 6'3 or more—but he had no idea how much danger he was in. I moved toward him.

"Sean, no, please," she said, putting her arm out to stop me.

He moved quickly for a drunk. He swung the bottle against the side of Sandy's head and she went down hard. He moved closer to kick her, but I slammed his head with a hard left that sent him sprawling.

The girls dove onto her, crying, and I knelt to her to make sure she was OK.

"It's OK, Sean," she said, as I felt her wound with my hand. Blood was everywhere. "It's OK."

Her husband got up and stumbled off laughing.

"There's more of that waiting for you back home," he said.

She refused to go to the hospital, so we treated her cuts back at the pub. I offered to let her and the girls stay in my apartment above the pub, but she declined. I offered to have a talk with her husband, but she refused that, too.

She was back at Talent Night the following Sunday. Despite a bandage on the side of her head, I didn't say a word about what happened the week before. She sat in the booth by the hearth shuffling through a manila folder. She was so consumed with her music, she didn't see me approaching. When she got up from the booth we collided. Her music sheets flew all over the floor.

I felt awful, as you can imagine, and went right to work helping her pick the sheets up. As I did, I could see she'd written music bars on regular notebook paper using a pencil. Every line was written with the care of a craftsman who worked and reworked every note.

I remember the names of some of the songs. One was titled “Drunken Daddy.” Another was titled “Diner Waitress Blues.” I think another was “No Matter Your Dad, Momma Will Always Love You.” There were several others, but I couldn’t remember all of them.

It took her a long while to get them all back in order.

Over the next few weeks, Sandy introduced those songs—each more moving and beautiful than the other. She sang of a mother worried about her girls’ future, terrified their lives would be as hard as hers. She sang of holding onto dreams despite poverty and fear and doubt.

The big contest was the following Sunday night. We had some heavyweight Nashville producers in attendance to judge the contest. But everybody knew who was going to win.

Sandy showed up that night. She wore a black silk dress. Her hair was done up nice. She wore makeup for the first time, and now she was off-the-charts gorgeous. She even dressed the twins in matching outfits.

When I introduced her, the pub went wild and then got deadly quiet. We all thought she’d perform one of the songs she had practiced, but not Sandy. No, she started off with a new song she just wrote. It was called “Birthday Love.” It was about two little girls who loved their daddy unconditionally, despite his drinking and carousing. Every year he promised them a special gift for their birthday. Every year they waited up late and he never showed.

As you can guess by now, the applause was longer and deeper than ever. It took the judges about two minutes to agree on the best singer of the night. Sandy won hands down. She was headed to Nashville to sing in front of the Grand Ole Opry the following Saturday night, and every person in the pub couldn’t have been happier for her and the girls.

It was the next day that she called me, frantic. She’d gotten into a fight with her husband. He ran off with the girls again. She went looking for them everywhere and needed my help; before taking over the pub I was a Pittsburgh detective for eleven years.

Sandy lived in a trailer park in Washington, PA, and I drove out to talk with her. I sat across from her in her kitchenette. It was a tiny little place, but she kept it nice.

"How long have they been gone?" I said.

"He left sometime last night. They were gone when I woke this morning."

"He's done this before?"

"Yes. He does it to strike back at me."

"Where did he take the girls in the past?"

"His mother's. She always covers for him."

"You call her?"

"She says she doesn't know where he is."

"He work anywhere?"

"No."

"Any friends or places he might be?"

"He's a regular at Bobby's Tavern. I stopped in there, but nobody will talk to me."

"You call the police?"

"Yes, but they know us all too well. They said he'll bring the girls back when his drunk wears off."

I went to his mother's house, a modest ranch home in an old mining town twenty miles outside of Pittsburgh. No one was home. I let myself in. There was no sign that he or the girls had been there. But when I played the answering machine, I heard his voice.

"Ma, I'm gonna fix Sandy up real good this time. I got the girls down here at Stoney's, and my buddy, Jimmy here, has a little cabin. I'm gonna head up there for a little while."

I called directory assistance and within a few minutes was headed over to Stoney's. I walked into that dark, smoky dump and yelled, at the top of my lungs, "Hey, Jimmy." Only one fellow turned around.

He was small and drunk, and it only took me one threat to get the directions to his cabin.

It was an hour up Rt. 40 in the mountains just beyond Uniontown. I put the truck into four-wheel drive and headed up a snow-covered back road. I drove a ways before I finally saw the cabin. I pulled in front and got out.

I could hear a television playing inside. I knocked. No one answered. I turned the knob and the door opened. The stove was still on and turned up full, probably the only source of heat. There were coloring books and crayons about, a couple of dolls, but no sign of the girls or their father.

Crushed beer cans were scattered on the floor—and an empty pint of Jack Daniels. That's when I began to worry. I left the cabin and looked down the road toward the pond. As I walked toward it, my heart sunk. My walk turned into a jog and then an all-out sprint.

I was fifty feet away when I saw the bumper of the car sticking just above the surface of the frozen water. As I got closer I saw the license plate. I got down on my knees and began to cry.

They pulled the car out later that day. Both girls were strapped into the back seat. Their father was nowhere to be found, but he turned up a few days later. They found him behind a barn, the backside of his head blown off by his hunting rifle.

He left a note apologizing for the accident. He said he'd been drunk and forgot to put the car in park. He loaded the girls in and then went into the cabin to get his booze. When he came out the car was rolling down the road toward the pond. He tried to save the girls, but the water was cold. He couldn't get to them in time.

As you can imagine, Sandy had no desire to go to Nashville the following Saturday. She had to arrange the funeral, for starters. We took up a collection at the pub to cover all the burial costs and the turnout at the viewing was sizable.

Everyone who ever performed on Talent Night came to pay respects. And as we looked down at those beautiful twin girls, lying in side-by-side coffins, there was not a dry eye in the place.

After the funeral, we had a reception at the pub. Sandy was quiet all week long. But we all knew what needed to be done. Sandy had to go to Nashville. She had to do it for her girls. We finally persuaded her to go.

The next Saturday, we pulled up the Nashville Channel on the satellite dish. The show's announcer told the story of Sandy winning the Talent Night contest in Pittsburgh, and we all cheered. (He didn't mention anything about the tragedy Sandy had just suffered.)

As she walked onto the stage, she looked radiant. She was dressed to the nines again and in a gown that would make Shania Twain look like a rag doll. Sandy approached the mike gently. All she said was this: "I call this song 'Bittersweet Lullaby.' It is dedicated to my daughters, Matilda and Madeline."

The song told of two little girls who, through no fault of their own, were born into an abusive marriage. She sang that despite the awful tragedy that took them the only thing that keeps her alive is her belief that they finally had peace in a better world, a peace that she was never able to give them.

When she finished the song, I thought all of Nashville was going to break apart from the applause. It was the same at the pub. There wasn't a dry eye in the place.

But I wasn't crying—the song hit me harder than anyone in the room.

Sandy returned to Pittsburgh the following day. She sat across from me in my favorite booth at the pub. It was cold outside, but I didn't light a fire that day. I didn't feel like doing much of anything.

"I got a contract," she said, excitedly. "They want me to move to Nashville!"

She expected me to congratulate her, but I didn't.

"I have such a mix of emotions rifling through me, Sean," she said. "I miss my girls. How is it that the worst thing in the world could happen to me the same week the best thing in the world could happen?"

"I think you know," I said.

The happiness drained out of her face. I looked at her hard and deep—deep into the eyes of a killer.

“How could you do it?” I said. “How could you kill those beautiful little girls?”

Her eyes began tearing up.

“I figure you found your husband drunk and then shot him with his own gun. That was easy enough. But the girls? What did you tell them? What does a mother say before she straps her daughters into a car and pushes them into an ice-cold pond to die?”

She was crying now, a deep agonizing cry that made me pity her. She confessed to the murders then. She said she’d lost her mind, that she did it to save them from this terrible world. Though now some think she did it to advance her little career. Who knows what motivates a person to commit such a heinous crime.

Still, you ask, how did I know Sandy was the killer? It was easy.

It goes back to that Sunday night I knocked her music onto the floor. As I said, I didn’t remember the names of all the songs I saw scattered there, but the night she performed in Nashville it hit me like a bolt of lightning.

“Bittersweet Lullaby” had been one of the titles I saw lying on the floor.

She wrote it weeks before she murdered her girls.