St. James Infirmary Blues

By

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ACT I

Scene 1

DONIA

At first, he seemed really sweet and, like, genuinely interested in me. He'd ask me all these questions about my life, I thought he thought I was really interesting or something. He wanted to know every detail of my life, my family, my classes, my friends, shit like that. It felt good to feel wanted.

The first time we met, he bought me dinner and flowers and all that romantic stuff. On our third date, he took me to see a play downtown and at the end of the night, he walked me home. When I turned to say goodnight, he showed me his pistol and dozens of photographs of me and my family that I had no idea he'd taken. He told me that I was his now, and that if I ever hurt him or disobeyed him, he'd destroy everything I held dear. That was 11 months ago.

I feared for my life, and my family’s, so I did whatever he asked me to do. But every time he called me his "baby girl", I would catch a squirrel and cut off its ears. Whenever he told me I belonged to him, I would catch a rat and cut off its tail. And when he forced me to call him "daddy", I would find a bird and cut off its feet.

I bought hundreds of mason jars and filled them with formaldehyde I stole from my chem lab and put each piece of flesh in its very own personal display case. The jars lined the walls of my basement. I felt like a mad scientist. Or maybe I felt more like a doctor, trying to find the cure to a rare disease. My work was the only thing that could take my mind off the bruises on my wrists and ankles.

I worked on my little project every chance I got. It became reverential, almost obsessive. I stopped eating, hoping I'd eventually deteriorate into nothingness. But my body persisted. I felt weak, wanting nothing more than to fall asleep and never wake up, but I couldn’t close my eyes.

At first, the smell of the formaldehyde made me cry. But eventually my nostrils burned out and I couldn't smell anything. I couldn't taste anything. I couldn't feel anything. I stopped crying. I haven't cried for 7 months.
Scene 2

DONIA is working in her basement. She is surrounded by mason jars filled with various animal parts. She takes an empty jar, fills it with formaldehyde, pulls a body part out of a box, places it in the jar, closes the lid carefully, and sets it aside. She moves on to the next jar. As she repeats her process, she sings "St. James Infirmary Blues".

DONIA
I went down to the St. James Infirmary./
I saw my baby there./
She was stretched out on a long white table/
So sweet, so cold, so fair./
So Let her go, let her go, God bless her;/
Wherever she may be,/
She may search this wide world over/
but she'll never find a sweet man like me.

Scene 3

PAUL
Donia's been acting weird. I mean, she's fine, she's not being delinquent or disobedient or anything. And, I'm trying to be generous because I know she's tired because of finals and sorority recruitment and stuff but it's getting really old. I thought college girls were supposed to fawn over older guys, like come on. I give her security, guardianship, companionship, protection, what more could she want? What does she need that I can't give her?

She told me she's been spending her afternoons studying at her apartment, but I've checked the security cameras at her place. She always gets home around four and fiddles around in the kitchen for a bit, then she disappears for hours. Like, she's not on any of the camera feeds. She doesn't leave the house, I know because I have a camera on the door. She just isn't there for hours at a time. Then she reappears, goes to the bathroom, and then leaves. To come here. She comes here at 10:30 every night. And she's always freshly bathed.

I haven't mentioned it yet, but like, weird right? Do you think I should say something?
Scene 4

DONIA is talking to her MOM on the phone.

DONIA
I'm scared, Mom.

MOM
What? What's going on?

DONIA
I—I can't tell you. I just—I need help.

MOM
What do you need? What's wrong, baby girl?

PAUL (voice-over)
Come here, baby girl.

DONIA
Please—please, just—

DONIA breathes heavily as she looks down at the jar in her hand. It contains a pair of squirrel ears.

MOM
Honey, what's going on?

DONIA
Mom, I need your help. I can't tell you what it's about, but it's really important, okay?

MOM
Donia, I love you, please calm down, just tell me what's going on.

DONIA
I can't—not here, can you—can you just come over tomorrow around 4:30? I have class until then, that's when I get home.

MOM
Sure, of course, do you want me to bring you some food or anything?
DONIA
No, don't bring anything. Just come. I'll see you at 4:30 tomorrow. I have to go. I love you/bye.

MOM
I love you too.

DONIA hangs up.

Bye.

MOM sighs. She considers the bruises on her wrists.

DAD (OFF STAGE)
Honey? Honey where are you? Where’s my little girl?

MOM pulls her sleeves down over her bruises.

MOM
Coming, Peter!

Scene 5
PAUL’s apartment. DONIA is rubbing PAUL’s feet.

PAUL
I missed you last night. Why couldn’t you come over again?

DONIA
I told you, I uh, I was studying for my chem test.

PAUL
Oh. Right... Again.

DONIA
I really have to do well on this one. It’s the final. 30% of my grade. And it’s on everything from this semester, so there’s a lot to review.

PAUL
It’s fine.

DONIA
And I haven’t had a lot of time to study recently because of recruitment and my final project for French and—
PAUL
I said it’s fine.

DONIA
Oh. Okay.

PAUL
Whatever.

DONIA
(Quietly.) I’m sorry.

PAUL
(Losing his temper.) Donia, goddammit I said it was fine. Don’t you ever just- (He catches himself. Takes a breath.)

You look tired. Are you tired?

DONIA
Yes.

PAUL
Why don’t you spend the night? I don’t want you to drive home if you’re tired.

DONIA
I should probably go home and review my notes for a bit before tomorrow.

PAUL
I said why don’t you spend the night here? Come on, baby.

Silence.

You’re my baby girl, remember?

More silence.

Do you remember, Donia? Do you remember who you belong to? Who’s going to take care of you?

DONIA
Yes.
PAUL
Who’s going to take care of you? I asked you a question.

DONIA
You are.

PAUL
You are, what?

DONIA
You are... Daddy.

PAUL
(Suddenly very happy.) That’s my girl! There she is! Alright, let’s get some take-out, I’m starving.

DONIA
Sounds good.

PAUL
You’ve made me so happy tonight, baby girl. I’ll remember that. It’s almost Christmas.

DONIA
It is? Ha, I almost forgot.

PAUL
Well, I’ve got something special planned for us. You’re going to love it. But it’s a surprise.

DONIA
Really? That’s – that’s awesome. I’m so excited. Thank you.

PAUL
You don’t know what it is yet, silly.

DONIA
Oh, I’m sure I’ll really like it.

PAUL
You will. You’ll love it.

PAUL goes to his desk and starts looking for the phone.

DONIA
(Suddenly smiling.) I have something for you too.
PAUL
Oh, really?

DONIA
Yeah, it’s really cool. I think you’re going to like it a lot.

PAUL
Well, I can’t wait to see it.

DONIA
Hah.

PAUL
(Doesn’t hear her.) What was that?

DONIA
I— uh, did you find your phone? I’m starving.

PAUL
Nah, I can’t find it. Can you use yours?

DONIA
Sure.

She hands PAUL her phone.

PAUL
Thanks, baby. Chinese okay?

DONIA
Anything you want.

PAUL exits. DONIA smiles and takes out a notepad and adds six tally marks to a page that is almost completely covered.

She laughs to herself quietly.

Scene 6

DONNA prepares for a kill in her laboratory. She hums.
Scene 7

DONIA's basement.

DONIA
There are sixteen cold black horses,/
Hitched to her rubber tired hack./

There is a faint knock on the door heard from upstairs.
DONIA does not hear it, wrapped up in her work.

There are seven women goin' to that graveyard,/ 
and only six of 'em are coming back.

Louder knocking.

DONIA hears it and goes upstairs. Muffled sound of 
talking upstairs. A door opens and DONIA and MOM head 
down the stairs, talking.

MOM
Okay, what did you want to show me? Is this a project for 
school?

DONIA
No, um. Well. Here it is.

DONIA turns on the light, illuminating shelves and 
shelves of mason jars filled with animal parts. MOM looks 
around in stunned silence. She slowly approaches the 
shelves, looking closely at each one.

MOM
What is this, Donia.

DONIA
It’s our way out, Mom. This is my – this is our chance. I’ve 
been working on this for a long time. And it’s almost done!

MOM
Donia, I don’t understand. What, is – what is in these jars?

DONIA
They’re my work. This is what I’ve been working on. It’s a 
gift. For you! And for me. It’s our Christmas gift. Do you 
like it?
MOM
I don’t know what it is.

DONIA
Oh! I forgot the best part! Let me find it.

DONIA looks through the shelves of jars, picks up three and brings them to her MOM. MOM screams.

MOM
Donia, what did you do? Is this? Are those human ears?

DONIA
Yes! They’re Dad’s. Or, I mean they were Dad’s. They’re your’s now. So are these!

DONIA hands her MOM a jar with toes in it and another with a penis.

MOM
(Crying.) How could you do this? Donia, what did you do? Oh my god, what the fuck. What the fuck is happening here? (Screaming.) Tell me!

DONIA
I saved you, Mom! I saved your life! Can’t you see that this is a good thing? This is so good for you! You’re finally free!

MOM
(Still hysterical.) How could this be a good thing? You killed your father! You — you cut off his dick! What the fuck, Donia?

DONIA
(Suddenly very quiet.) I thought you’d be happy. I thought you would like my present. You don’t like it?

MOM
What on earth would possess you to do something like this? You are insane!

DONIA
(Sternly.) I asked you a question, Mother. Do you like my present?
MOM

(Crying.) Donia... Donia what did you do? What did you do to Peter? Donia...

A knock is heard on the door.

DONIA

Shut up.

MOM

(Crying loudly.) Oh my god, Donia... Donia, why?

More knocking.

DONIA

(Losing her temper.) I said, shut up! He’s here.

MOM

Who? Who’s here?

DONIA

Paul. I told you, I need your help. I have to finish this goddamn project. To finally be free. It’s for us. It’s our fucking Christmas present.

MOM

You’re crazy! You’re fucking insane!

MOM tries to run away. DONIA grabs her and wrestles her to the ground. She ties her to a chair and gags her, muffling her crying and screaming.

DONIA runs upstairs.

Loud crashes and bangs are heard from above. MOM continues to cry. A gunshot is heard, MOM screams, then silence, except for MOM’s whimpering.

DONIA drags PAUL’s dead body down the stairs.

DONIA

Here we are. I guess I didn’t need your help, Mom. He went easier than I expected. Now, I really wanted to do this while he was alive, so he could feel it, but this will be just fine.
DONIA cuts off PAUL’s ears, penis, and toes. She follows her process precisely and meticulously, filling a jar with formaldehyde. She sings. MOM is still sobbing and shaking while she watches DONIA.

DONIA
When I die please bury me in my high top Stetson hat,/

DONNA places PAUL’s ears in a mason jar aills another mason jar.

Put a twenty dollar gold piece on my watch chain,/  

DONNA places PAUL’s penis in a mason jar and fills the final jar.

So the gang'll know I died standing pat.

DONNA places PAUL’s toes in a mason jar.

END.