



The Life and Loves of

Willie Wurlitzer

The Adventure Begins...

Chapter One

Professor Richard Feingold, acclaimed theoretician and self-proclaimed *bon vivant*, swung his feet out of the Packard, softly setting his scuffed wingtips into the mud. The recent and rare rain had turned the talcum-like dust that blew off the desert to a paste that mixed with the pea gravel of the parking lot. Each step made a *shlucking* sound, which he found amusing.

All that Thursday he had been doing peer-review on papers summarizing research on isotope decay rates, checking intricately-crafted equations and glancing at the legs of the new lab technician. He was now ready for a diversion. With the late afternoon sun now peaking out from the rapidly racing-away rain clouds, he opened the screen door of the Hillcrest Inn and ducked inside.



The low lighting in the roadhouse barely lifted a gloom that coddled the stale sweet beer and smoke-scarred air. The bottles behind the bar and the shelves of dusty sport trophies twinkled in the spare light. Feingold did not need to see to navigate, so familiar was this place. He ran his hand along the bar, which started at the front door and stretched the length of the room, about thirty feet, uninterrupted except for a gap at the far end.

A big jar of pickled eggs sat in front of one of the few windows and a hand-lettered sign read: "**Hard Boil'd Eggs 10¢ Each – 3 for 25¢**". Other paeans to beer and good cheer: "*Tables for Ladies*" and "*Men are like coolers, fill them with beer and you can take them anywhere*" were taped and tacked to the wall.



His eyes quickly adjusting to the dim interior, he found his way to his favorite barstool: the one in front of the ancient beer taps and, although the seat was crooked and rocked, Feingold liked it.

He eased himself up as the strains of “Old El Paso” warbled from the old jukebox in the corner. He hated that song and he jangled some change in the pocket of his tan corduroy jacket. He’d let the cowboy take the bullet deep in his chest and tee up the Platters’ “The Great Pretender”, his favorite. It always reminded him of happy hour gatherings at MIT back East. “Martinis and Motown” was his favorite theme night.

A thin reed—wearing jeans and a yellow blouse and an apron tied around her waist—emerged from doorway behind the bar. She recognized Feingold and gave him a wan smile. He was little surprised and not expecting to see her for she normally didn’t work Thursdays. Feingold and the girl had a past which each shared, but neither wanted to remember, much less repeat. At that moment, however, they shared a mutual chill.

Feingold rocked on the barstool. “Hello, Heidi” he said quietly. “Draft beer. And please honey, hold the sarcasm.”

Heidi sniffed at Feingold and reached under the bar for a glass. She picked up the big 20 oz glass without asking him. It was freshly washed and felt warm in her hands, a little soapy still. Out of habit, she pulled the bar towel tucked inside her apron string and slowly wiped the bit of water from around the lip of the glass. She had an urge to spit into it, but couldn’t, not with him watching anyway.

Pretending to inspect the glass, she held it up towards the window, turned it around and nodded. Her right hand reached to the tap and pulled it. It sputtered. Empty. She tried another one. More spurts of foam. She exhaled a disgusted sigh and set the glass down and put her hands on her hips. Her mood, if it was possible, darkened even more.

“Sorry,” she said, in a none-too-solicitous tone. “I’ll hafta get another keg brought around. Can you wait,” looking at him directly, “or do you want something else?”

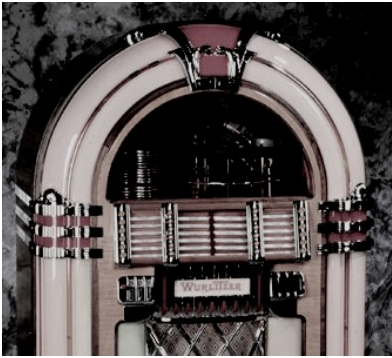
Feingold wagged his head. Just his luck. An end to an altogether unproductive day. And now this.

“Whatcha got in a bottle, dear?”

“Coors,” she said turn, “but it’s probably warm.”

“Alright, that’ll do.” Heidi walked to the back. The only refrigerator was in the kitchen, if you could call it that—a two burner stove and a greasy grill. When the summer lay in real well, all the machinery wheezed, particularly refrigeration, so from May to October, cold beer was a relative thing.

Feingold sighed and rotated on his seat and leaned back against the bar. Over on the jukebox, vinyl cowboy Marty Robbins had just expired, a bereaved Felina feigning sorrow over his corpse.



He rose from the stool and strolled over to the Wurlitzer “Bubbler” jukebox. She was new in 1946, and nearly ten years later, she had been all over the Southwest, bought and sold a half-dozen times.

The chrome had started to peel and the psoriasis of red rust showed through in spots. The bubbling didn’t work so well anymore and the neon was dim, but the sound was still clean and crisp—since becoming a regular, Feingold saw to that, checking the tubes and replacing the weak ones, even fiddling with the circuitry to get the tone the way he liked it.

He changed out the original speaker to get the bass just right and often had to adjust the mechanism so the records landed cleanly on the spindle. Back in the machine shop at Los Alamos, he made several new parts for the mechanism, improving the original design; it played flawlessly now and he thought that, if he could select another path in life, he would be happy making machines that made music, not war.

He tinkered with the Wurlitzer when he and Heidi were still an item, when she was *happy* to see his tall frame come through the door. Now, with the onset of winter, the mood between the two had chilled faster than the desert air after sunset. But he still held an affection for the Bubbler and Feingold stroked his hand along the curved, voluptuous top of the jukebox.

He slipped three nickels into the coin slot and queued up his favorite tunes. The triple-timed opening piano of *Only You* filled the room.



The pickup truck's low rumble reverberated against the wall as it pulled alongside the frame building. The driver killed the lights before coasting to a stop. As he switched off the ignition, he thought "I guess the exhaust needs replacing", for about the ninety-ninth time.

He didn't have the cash to fix the truck, even though his wife complained about the noise when took take the rare trip to town together.

Francisco Gepetto stepped down from the truck. He was a short man, no more than five foot six, and made a modest living as a janitor at the Los Alamos facilities. On the side, he gathered discarded scrap metal; sometimes he sold it, but mostly he kept his finds. He earned the nickname "Gepetto the Junkman", or just "Junkers", which he didn't mind. From where he escaped, rummaging for junk was a fine second career.

Francisco picked through some of the smaller trash bins at the back of Building A-9, a machine shop where metal was cut and bent metal for casings used in the centrifuges. Most of the stuff that went into laboratory did not come out because it got "hot" during the process and it was buried underground until the nuclear heat subsided. Occasionally, however, some material

found its way to the discard pile; Francisco would find such a piece.

Beneath the faded black lettering on the yellow “No Parking” lay a 1939 Ford bumper, a few dings and pockmarks, but it was still gleaming and shiny. Francisco lifted the bumper onto the bed of his truck, grunting a little under the sixty pounds of chromed steel. The brackets had been busted off. He could weld a few new ones on and sell the piece for twenty dollars, maybe twenty-five.

Turning, he bumped against one of the bins, knocking it over. A curved piece of metal clanged onto the floor, almost dancing across the ground and banging and ringing against the opposite wall. The sudden movement and noise caused Gepetto to jump, wrenching his vertebrae, giving him a twinge that would cause him strain until the end of his days. “Aye!” he cried out.

Grimacing and holding his neck, he walked and carefully bent over the curved, bluish shard, which hummed now like a tuning fork. He picked it up. It was warm to the touch. “Amazing,” he said under his breath. He stroked the smooth blue material and held it to his cheek. It wasn’t hot, just nice and warm, like it had been laying in the morning sun in a bay window.

“Perfect,” he said. “I know just who needs this.”



He walked around to the driver’s door, laid his find onto the seat and stepped up into the truck, trying not to bend his neck, the soreness now tightening and screwing into his shoulder muscles. The truck started noisily. Francisco Gepetto turned out onto the dark deserted road that led southwest towards Rubicon and San Ysidro, musing about his good fortune.

He would never regret, or forget, his find, although the twinge in his neck grew acute as he rattled over the darkening desert road.

To Be Continued...