

Street Music

Phineas Troutt

by Joseph A. Konrath, 1970–

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Street Music is my favorite story of any I've written. Phineas Troutt was the hero of my first novel, an unpublished mystery called Dead On My Feet, written back in 1992. It was unabashedly hardboiled, and it helped me land my first agent. The book never sold, probably because it was unabashedly hardboiled. Phin starred in two more unpublished novels, and then I relegated him to the role of sidekick in the Jack Daniels series, which did wind up selling. I'm intrigued by the idea of a hero dying of cancer, and how having no hope left could erode a man's morality. I wrote this story right after selling Whiskey Sour, and soon after sold it to Ellery Queen.

Mitch couldn't answer me with the barrel of my gun in his mouth, so I pulled it out.

"I don't know! I swear!"

If that was the truth, I had no use for it. After three days of questioning dozens of hookers, junkies, and other fine examples of Chicago's populace, Mitch was my only link to Jasmine. I was seriously jonesing; I hadn't done a line since Thursday. Plus, the pain in my side felt like a baby alligator was trying to eat its way out of my pancreas.

I gave Mitch's chin a little tap with the butt of the Glock.

"I really don't know!"

"She's one of yours, Mitch. I thought big, tough pimps like you ran a tight ship."

His black face was shiny with sweat and a little blood. Sure, he was scared. But he wasn't stupid. Telling me Jasmine's whereabouts would put a dent in his income.

I raised the gun back to hit him again.

"She went rogue on me, man! She ditched!"

I paused. If Jasmine had left Mitch, his reluctance to talk about it made some sense. Mack Daddies don't like word to get out that they're losing their game.

"How much money do you have on you?"

"About four hundos. It's yours, man. Front pants pocket."

"I'm not putting my hand in there. Take it out."

Mitch managed to stop shaking long enough to retrieve a fat money clip. I took the cash, and threw the clip—a gold emblem in the shape of a female breast—onto the sidewalk.

"You letting me go?" Mitch asked.

"You're free to pimp another day. Go run to the bus station, see if you can find some other fresh meat to bust out."

When I let go of his lapels, his spine seemed to grow back. He adjusted the collar on his velour jump suit and made sure his baseball hat was tilted to the correct odd angle.

"Ain't like that. I treat my girls good. Plenty of sweet love and all the rock they can smoke."

"Leave. Now. Before I decide to do society a favor."

He sneered, spun on his three hundred dollar sneakers, and did his pimp strut away from me.

I probably should have killed him; I had too many enemies already. But, tough as I am, shooting fourteen-year-old kids in the back isn't my style.

The four hundred was enough to score some coke, but not very much. I thought about calling Manny, my dealer, and getting a sample to help kill the pain, but every minute I wasted gave Jasmine a chance to slip farther away.

Pain relief would have to wait. I pressed my hand to my left side and exited the alley and wondered where the hell I should look next.

I'd already checked Jasmine's apartment, her boyfriend's apartment, her parent's house, her known pick-up spots, and three local crack houses.

To rule out other options, I had to call in a marker.

It was September, about seventy with clear skies, so I took a walk down the block. The first payphone I came to had gum jammed in the coin slot. The second one smelled like a urinal, but I made do.

“Violent Crimes, Daniels.”

“Hi, Jack. Phineas Troutt.”

“Phin? Haven’t seen you at the pool hall lately. Afraid I’ll kick your ass?”

My lips twisted in a tight grin. Jacqueline Daniels was a police Lieutenant who busted me a few years back. We had an on-again-off-again eight ball game Monday nights. I’d missed a few.

“I’m sort of preoccupied with something.”

“Chemo again?”

“No, work. Listen, you know what I do, right?”

“You’re a freelance thug.”

“I prefer the term problem solver. I keep it clean.”

“I’m guessing that’s because we haven’t caught you in the act, yet.”

“And you never will. Look, Jack, I need a favor.”

“I can’t do anything illegal, Phin. You know that.”

“Nothing shady. I just have to rule some stuff out. I’m looking for a woman. Hooker. Name is Janet Cumberland, goes by the street nick Jasmine. Any recent arrests or deaths with that name?”

There was a pause on the line. I could only guess Jack’s thoughts.

“Give me half an hour,” she decided. “Got a number where I can call you back?”

I killed time at a hot dog stand, sipping black coffee mixed with ten crushed Tylenol tablets; they worked faster when they were pre-dissolved.

The phone rang eighteen minutes later.

“No one at the morgue matching that name, and her last arrest was three months ago.”

“Do you have a place of residence?”

Jack read off the apartment number I’d already checked.

“How about known acquaintances?”

“She’s one of Mitch D’s girls. Been arrested a few times with another prostitute named Georgia Williamson, street name is Ajax. Kind of an odd name for a hooker.”

“She one of Mitch’s, too?”

“Lemme check. No, looks like she’s solo.”

“Got an addy?”

Jack gave it to me.

“There’s also a note in Janet’s file, says her parents are looking for her. That your angle? Even if you find her, the recit rate with crack is over 95 percent. They’ll stick her in rehab and a week later she’ll be on the street again.”

“Thanks for the help, Jack. Next time we play pool, beer’s on me.”

“You’re on, Phin. How’s the—”

“Hurts,” I interrupted. “But my doc says it won’t for much longer.”

“The tumor is shrinking? That’s great news!”

I didn’t correct her. The tumor was growing like a weed. I wouldn’t be in pain much longer because I didn’t have much longer.

Which is why I had to find Jasmine, and fast.
She had to die first.

Georgia Williams, aka Ajax, lived on 81st and Stoney, in a particularly mean part of Chicago's South Side. Night was rolling in, bringing with it the bangers, junkies, ballers, wanna-bes, and thugs. None of them were thrilled to see a white guy on their turf, and some flashed their iron as I drove by.

Ajax's place wasn't easy to find, and asking for directions didn't strike me as a smart idea. Maybe in neighborhoods this bad, whole buildings got stolen.

Finally, I narrowed it down to a decrepit apartment without any street number. I parked in front, set the alarm on my Bronco, and made sure I had one in the chamber.

"You lost, white boy?"

I ignored the three gang members—Gangster Disciples according to their colors—and headed for the building. The front door had a security lock, but it was long broken. There was a large puddle of something in front of the staircase, which I walked around.

Ajax lived in 206. I took the stairs two at a time, followed a hall decorated with graffiti and vomit, and found her door.

"Georgia Williams? Chicago PD!"

Another door opened opposite me, fearful old eyes peeking out through the crack.

"Is Ms. Williams home?" I asked the neighbor.

The door closed again.

I kicked away a broken bottle that was near my feet, and knocked again.

"Georgia Williams! Open the door!"

"You got ID?"

A woman's voice, cold and firm. I held a brass star, \$12.95 on eBay, up to the peephole.

"Where's your partner?" asked the voice.

"Watching the car. We're looking for a friend of yours. Jasmine. She's in big trouble."

"She sure is."

"Can I come in?"

I heard a deadbolt snick back. Then another. The door swung inward, revealing a black girl of no more than sixteen. She wore jeans, a white blouse. Her face was garishly made-up. Stuck to her hip was a sleeping infant.

"Can't be long. Gotta go to work."

Ajax stepped to the side, and I entered her apartment. Expecting squalor, I was surprised to find the place clean and modestly furnished. The ceiling had some water damage, and one wall was losing its plaster, but there were nice curtains and matching furniture and even some framed art. This was the apartment of someone who hadn't given up yet.

"I'll be straight with you, Georgia. If we don't find Jasmine soon, it's very likely she'll be killed. You know about Artie Collins?"

She nodded, once.

"If you know where she is, it's in her best interest to tell me."

“Sorry, cop. I don’t know nothing.”

I took out my Glock, watched her eyes get big.

“Do you have a license for this firearm I found on your premises, Georgia?”

“Aw, this is—”

I got in her face, sneering.

“I’ll tell you what this is. Six months in County, minimum. With your record, the judge won’t even think twice. And say goodbye to your baby; when I get done wrecking this place, DCFS will declare you so unfit you won’t be allowed within two hundred yards of anyone under aged ten.”

Her lips trembled, but there were no tears.

“You bastards are all the same.”

“I want Jasmine, Ajax. She’s dead if I don’t find her.”

I gave her credit for toughness. She held out. I had to topple a dresser and put my foot through her TV before she broke down.

“Stop it! She’s with her boyfriend!”

“Nice try. I already checked Melvin Kincaid.”

“Not Mel. She found a new guy. Named Buster something.”

“Buster what?”

“I dunno.”

I chucked a vase at the wall. The baby in her arms was wiggling, hysterical.

“I don’t have his last name! But I got a number.”

Georgia went for her purse on the bed, but I shoved the Glock in her face.

“I’ll look.”

The purse was the size of a cigarette pack, with rhinestone studs and spaghetti straps. A hooker purse. I didn’t figure there could be much of a weapon in there, and was once again surprised. A .22 ATM spilled onto the bed.

“I’m sure this has a license.”

Georgia didn’t answer. I rifled through the packs of mint gum and condoms until I found a matchbook with a phone number written on the back.

“This it?”

“Yeah.”

“Can’t you shut that kid up?”

Georgia cooed the baby, rocking it back and forth, while I picked up her .22 and removed the bullets. I tossed the gun back on the bed, and put the lead and the matchbook in my pocket.

She got my evil face when I walked past her.

“If you warn her I’m coming, I’ll know it was you.”

“I won’t say a damn thing, officer.”

“I know you won’t.”

I fished out three of the hundreds I took from Mitch D, and shoved them into her hand. It was a lot more than the TV was worth.

“By the way, why do they call you Ajax?”

She shrugged.

“I’ve robbed a few tricks.”

“Meaning?”

“Ajax cleans out the johns.”

When I got back outside, the three Disciples had multiplied into six, and they were standing in front of my truck.

“This is a nice truck, white boy. Can we have it?”

My Glock 21 held thirteen forty-five caliber rounds. More than enough. But Jack was the one who gave me this address, and if I killed any of these bozos she’d eventually get the word.

Dying of cancer was bad enough. Dying of cancer in prison was not on my to-do list.

Stuck in my belt, nestled along my spine, was a combat baton. Sixteen inches long, made of a tightly coiled steel spring. Because it could bend, it didn’t break bones.

But it did hurt like crazy.

The Disciples had apparently expected me to tremble in fear, because I clocked three of them across the heads before they went into attack mode.

The first one to draw was a thin kid who watched too many rap videos. He pulled a 9mm out of his baggy pants and thrust it at me sideways, with the back of his hand facing skyward.

Not only did this mess up your aim, but your grip was severely compromised. I gave him a tap across the back of the knuckles, and the gun hit the pavement. A second smack in the forehead opened up a nice gash. As with his buddies, the blood running into his eyes made him blind and worthless. I turned on the last two.

One had a blade. He held it underhanded, tip up, showing me he knew how to use it. After two feints, he thrust it at my face.

I turned, catching the tip on my cheek, and gave him an elbow to the nose. When he stumbled back, he also got a tap across the eyebrows.

The last guy was fifty yards away, sprinting for reinforcements.

I climbed in my Bronco and hauled out of there before they arrived.

“Hi, Jack, I need one more favor.”

“You already owe me a night of beer.”

“I’ll also spring for pizza. I need an address to go with this number.”

“Lemme have it.”

I read it to her, hoping Georgia was honest with me. I didn’t want to pay another visit to Stoney Island.

“Buster McDonalds. Four-four-two-three Irving Park, apartment seven-oh-six.”

“Thanks again, Jack.”

“Listen, Phin, I asked around about Janet Cumberland. The word on the street is that Artie Collins put a contract out on her.”

“I’ll be careful.”

There was a long pause on the line. I cut off her thought.

“I don’t work for mobsters, Jack. I don’t kill people for money.”

“Watch yourself, Phin.”

She hung up.

I stopped at a drive-thru, filled up on grease, and had ten more aspirin. My side ached to the touch. I had stronger stuff, doctor prescribed, but that dulled the senses and took away my edge. I thought about scoring some coke, but the hundred I had left wouldn’t buy much, and time was winding down.

I had to find Jasmine.

Buster's neighborhood was several rungs above Ajax's as far as quality of life went. No junkies shooting up in the alleys, hookers on the corners, or roving gangs of teens with firearms.

There were, however, lots of kids drunk out of their minds, moving in great human waves from bar to bar. The area was a hot spot for night life, and Friday night meant the partying was mandatory.

Even the hydrants were taken, so I parked in an alley, blocking the entrance. I took the duffle bag from the passenger seat and climbed out into the night air.

The temp had dropped, and I imagined I could smell Lake Michigan, even though it was miles away. There were voices, shouting, laughing, cars honking. I stood in the shadows.

The security door on Buster's apartment had a lock that was intact and functioning, unlike Ajax's. I spotted someone walking out and caught the door before it closed, and then I took the elevator to the seventh floor.

The cop impersonation wouldn't work this time; Jasmine was on the run and wouldn't open the door for anybody.

But I had a key.

It was another online purchase. There were thirty-four major lock companies in the US, and they made ninety-five percent of all the locks in America. These lock companies each had a few dozen models, and each of the models had a master key that opened up every lock in the series.

Locksmiths could buy these master keys. So could anyone with a credit card who knew the right website.

The lock on Buster's apartment was a Schlage. I took a large key ring from my duffel bag and got the door open on the third try.

Jasmine and Buster were on a futon, watching TV. I was on him before he had a chance to get up.

When he reached for me, I grabbed his wrist and twisted. Then, using his arm like a lever, I forced him face down into the carpeting.

"Buster!"

I didn't have time to deal with Jasmine yet, so she got a kick in the gut. She went down. I took out roll of duct tape and secured Buster's wrists behind him. When that was done, I wound it around his legs a few times.

"Jazz, run!"

His mouth was next.

Jasmine had curled up in the corner of the room, hugging her knees and rocking back and forth. She was a little thing, no older than Ajax, wearing sweatpants and an extra large t-shirt. Her black hair was pulled back and fear distorted her features.

I made it worse by showing her my Glock.

"Tell me about Artie Collins."

She shrunk back, making herself smaller.

"You're going to kill me."

"No one is killing anyone. Why does Artie want you dead?"

"The book."

“What book?”

She pointed to the table next to the futon. I picked up a ledger, scanned a few pages.

Financial figures, from two of Artie’s clubs. I guessed that these were the ones the IRS didn’t see.

“Stupid move, lady. Why’d you take these from him?”

“He’s a pig,” she spat, anger overriding terror. “Artie doesn’t like it straight. He’s a real freak. He did things to me, things no one has ever done.”

“So you stole this?”

“I didn’t know what it was. I wanted to hurt him, it was right there in the dresser. So I took it.”

Gutsy, but dumb. Stealing from one of the most connected guys in the Midwest was a good way to shorten your life expectancy.

“Artie is offering ten thousand dollars for you. And there’s a bonus if it’s messy.”

I put the book in the duffle bag, and then removed a knife.

Artie Collins was a slug, and everyone knew it. He had his public side; the restaurants, the riverboat gambling, the night clubs, but anyone worth their street smarts knew he also peddled kiddie porn, smack cut with rat poison, and owned a handful of cops and judges.

Standing before me, he even looked like a slug, from his sweaty, fat face, to the sharkskin suit in dark brown, of all colors.

“I don’t know you,” he said.

“Better that way.”

“I like to know who I’m doing business with.”

“This is a one time deal. Two ships in the night.”

He seemed to consider that, and laughed.

“Okay then, Mystery Man. You told my boys you had something for me.”

I reached into my jacket. Artie didn’t flinch; he knew his men had frisked me earlier and taken my gun. I took out a wad of Polaroids and handed them over.

Artie glanced through them, smiling like a carved pumpkin. He flashed one at me. Jasmine naked and tied up, the knife going in.

“That’s a good one. A real Kodak moment.”

I said nothing. Artie finished viewing my camera work and carefully stuck the pics in his blazer.

“These are nice, but I still need to know where she’s at.”

“The bottom of the Chicago river.”

“I meant, where she was hiding. She had something of mine.”

I nodded, once again going into my jacket. When Artie saw the ledger I thought he’d crap sunshine.

“She told me some things when I was working on her.”

“I’ll bet she did,” Artie laughed.

He gave the ledger a cursory flip through, then tossed it onto his desk. I took a breath, let it out slow. The moment stretched. Finally, Artie wagged a fat, hot dog finger at me.

“You’re good, my friend. I could use a man of your talents.”

“I’m freelance.”

"I offer benefits. A 401K. Dental. Plus whores and drugs, of course. I'd pay some good money to see you work a girl over like you did to that whore."

"You said you'd also pay good money for whoever brought you proof of Jasmine's death."

He nodded, slowly.

"You sure you don't want to work for me?"

"I don't play well with others."

Artie made a show of walking in a complete circle around me, checking me out. This wasn't going down as easy as I'd hoped.

"Brave man, to come in here all by yourself."

"My partner's outside."

"Partner, huh? Let's say, for the sake of argument, I had my boys kill you. What would your partner do? Come running into my place, guns blazing?"

He chuckled, and the two goons in the room with us giggled like stoned teenagers.

"No. He'd put the word out on the street that you're a liar. Then the next time you need a little favor from the outside, your reputation as a square guy would be sullied."

"Sullied!" Artie laughed again. He had a laugh like a frog. "That's rich. Would you work for a man with a sullied reputation, Jimmy?"

The thug named Jimmy shrugged, wisely choosing not to answer.

"You're right, of course." Artie said when the chuckles faded. "I have a good rep in this town, and my word is bond. Max."

The other thug handed me a briefcase. Leather. A good weight.

"There was supposed to be a bonus for making it messy."

"Oh, it's in there, my friend. I'm sure you'll be quite pleased. You can count it, if you like."

I shook my head.

"I trust you."

I turned to walk out, but Artie's men stayed in front of the door.

If Artie was more psychotic than I guessed, he could easily kill me right there, and I couldn't do a damn thing to stop him. I lied about having a partner, and the line about his street rep was just ego stroking.

I braced myself, deciding to go for the guy on the left first.

"One more thing, Mystery Man," Artie said to my back. "You wouldn't have made any copies of that ledger, maybe to try and grease me for more money sometime in the future?"

I turned around, gave Artie my cold stare.

"You think I would mess with you?"

His eyes drilled into me. They no longer held any amusement. They were the dark, hard eyes of a man who has killed many people, who has done awful things.

But I'd done some awful things, too. And I made sure he saw it in me.

"No," Artie finally decided. "No, you wouldn't mess with me."

I tilted my head, slightly.

"A pleasure doing business with you, Mr. Collins."

The thugs parted, and I walked out the door.

When I got a safe distance away, I counted the money.

Fifteen thousand bucks.

I dropped by Manny's, spent two gees on coke, and did a few lines.

The pain in my side became a dim memory.

Unlike pills, cocaine took away the pain and let me keep my edge.

These days, my edge was all I had.

I didn't have to wait for someone to leave Buster's apartment this time; he buzzed me in.

"Jazz is in the shower," he told me.

"Did you dump the bag?"

"In the river, like you told me. And I mailed out those photocopies to the cop with the alcohol name."

He gave me a beer, and Jasmine walked into the living room, wrapped in a towel. Her face and collarbone were still stained red from the stage blood.

"What now?" she asked.

"You're dead. Get the hell out of town."

I handed her a bag filled with five thousand dollars. She looked inside, then showed it to Buster.

"Jesus!" Buster yelled. "Thanks, man!"

Jasmine raised an eyebrow at me. "Why are you doing this?"

"If you're seen around here, Artie will know I lied. He won't be pleased. Take this and go back home. Your parents are looking for you."

Jasmine's voice was small. The voice of a teenager, not a strung-out street whore.

"Thank you."

"Since you're so grateful, you can do me one a small favor."

"Anything."

"Your friend. Ajax. I think she wants out of the life. Take her with you."

"You got it, Buddy!" Buster pumped my hand, grinning ear to ear. "Why don't you hang out for a while? We'll tilt a few."

"Thanks, but I have some things to do."

Jasmine stood on her tiptoes, gave me a wet peck on the cheek. Then she whispered in my ear.

"You could have killed me, kept it all. Why didn't you?"

She didn't get it, but that was okay. Most people went through their whole lives without ever realizing how precious life was. Jasmine didn't understand that.

But someday she might.

"I don't kill people for money," I told her instead.

Then I left.

All things considered, I did pretty good. The blood, latex scars, and fake knife cost less than a hundred bucks. Pizza and beer for Jack came out to fifty. The money I gave to Ajax wasn't mine in the first place, and I already owned the master keys, the badge, and the Polaroid camera.

The cash would keep me in drugs for a while.

It might even take me up until the very end.

As for Artie Collins... word on the street, his bosses weren't happy about his arrest. Artie wasn't going to last very long in prison.

I did another line and laid back on my bed, letting the exhilaration wash over me. It took away the pain.

All the pain.

Outside my window, the city sounds invaded. Honking horns. Screeching tires. A man coughing. A woman shouting. The el train rushing past, clackety-clacking down the tracks louder than a thunder clap.

To most people, it was background noise.

But to me, it was music.

