



## **Jam Night**

by Juliana Rew

Darlene rolled to the curb in the Colorado night, stuffed a six-pack of microbrews, the price of admission, into her bag along with the music, and swung the heavy weight onto her shoulder. Popping the latch on the front seat, she twisted her stand out onto the street. Her last fingers were reserved for carrying the mandolin case into The Jam. This was a chance to play with the big boys and girls, and she drew a deep breath to dispel the butterflies. She'd sung at the top of her lungs on the long drive over, so her voice was warm.

Holding the screen door with a toe, she wrestled her gear into the bright room, already ringing with banjo rolls and tremoloing mandolin. Guys stood up and demanded hugs. Two dogs rolled over on their backs and prepared to snooze. Sweet dreams, poochies!

The group played Bluegrass and Americana music, along with liberal doses of macabre or non-socially redeeming songs, like "Bad Blood," by Bonzo Dog Doo Dah Band. "You can lick it, but it still won't go away," indeed.

Mando ace Blake called out the next song, noting "somebody's out of tune." That normally meant Ned, the banjo. Blake said, "What's the difference between a Harley and a banjo?" (Answer: You can tune a Harley.) Everybody grinned, except Ned, who countered with, "What's the difference between a banjo player and a proctologist? A proctologist only has to deal with one ass at a time." Best not to be too thin-skinned if you jam.

For about a year, the group met each week, their voices sounding better and better, especially after a few beers. They recorded their first CD, called "The Living Room Tour." They gradually grew brave enough to take the band on the road and got their first gig playing at the wedding of Tom the guitar player's daughter. They agreed to host an open jam at a local barbecue roadhouse. There they learned to step up to the microphone to play solos. They also learned that in a bar people talk so loudly that even nine of them couldn't drown out a happy Friday night crowd. An experienced fiddler who showed up at the jam noted that they'd sound better at gigs if they reduced the number of players. They decided not to take his advice. They liked playing with themselves--and anybody else who came along.

Last summer they joined other campers in the mountains to celebrate the summer solstice. They set up a roaring fire and used a cone-shaped hood dubbed "Sputnik" to "control" it, while they played tunes, sang, and ate marshmallows. A new acquaintance, Ron, was an experienced outdoorsman but was now fighting cancer. Near dawn, they heard strange sounds and peeked from their tents to catch their first glimpse of a rare nighthawk. After fortifying themselves with tall stacks of blueberry-studded pancakes, they hiked through meadows and up pine ridges. Then Ron keeled over. Ray and Tom helped him back to camp, where he settled in with a shawl around his shoulders, listening seemingly contentedly to an endless stream of fiddle tunes.

One jam night that fall, Ned tearfully announced that Ron had died peacefully in hospice.

Following Ron's funeral, Darlene went home, pulled off her snow boots, and sat on the bed. Faintly at first, she heard the noises. Someone was in the house! She went downstairs and saw a circle of people making themselves at home and harmonizing on "Play One More." Looking at her friends' dear faces, and reaching into the cooler for a longneck, she said, "This one's for you, Ron."

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