

QUIET CITY

He lifted it again, pressed the cool silver mouthpiece to his lips, closed his eyes...

“Dammit...” Not yet.

The evening sky was already a deep indigo directly overhead, a desperate, dying smudge of orange lingering on the horizon.

Leaning out the open window of the third floor apartment, he surveyed the other buildings. The air was vibrating crazily: radios, televisions, voices of husbands, wives, landlords and children, traffic, car horns, sirens...

He loved the city. It was a smothering son of a bitch, a damper that closed off the flow of oxygen to the brain. The city was a half-melted box of crayons with gooey colors running like mad to find low ground - a resting place. But there was no resting in this zoo of humanity, this hodgepodge of glass, concrete, asphalt, and smoke.

It was his home.

Windows looked up at him like giant eyes, their souls telling stories of sorrow and good fortune and conquest and violence and boredom. He scanned the glassy faces in search of sanity. Some nights, it took the form of a man returning home to his family. Other times, it came as an illicit rendezvous or an all-night cramming session.

He needed to see and be captured by the ballet-like struggle of suffering, pleasure, and survival in order for it to happen.

A family was gathered for dinner in an apartment directly across the courtyard, about two floors up from him. He enjoyed watching people eat. It was a sensual activity, intimate, gratuitous, unedited, alive.

After the family had consumed what looked - from his vantage point and distance - like roast, green beans, and some sort of Jell-O salad, they adjourned. For coffee and dessert, he hoped as he watched an elderly woman and what appeared to be her daughter clear the dishes. This fascinated him too: the aftermath. The high climax of satiation followed by the terrible letdown of conclusion. It was over. They had gathered hungry. Parted full. It was over.

He wondered about this and about why something so mundane and familiar had the ability to make him feel elated and also a little sad. Lifting his horn again, he licked his lips, put them to the mouthpiece, closed his eyes... But it still wasn't there. He was dry.

At night, the city was a wanton woman, an inquisitor, a funhouse mirror held too close to his face to make any damned sense. He lusted for it, was tortured by it. The bloody thing was a tease, a tramp, a backstabbing thief. If not for the realization that it owned him, he would have gladly left and gone West, North, away. There was America out there, another mystery, a bigger temptress, decked out with cheap crimson lipstick, spike heels, looking for a good time. But his heart belonged to this: indigo evenings, the rush of quiet that somehow invaded - pervaded - the marathon of noise, the loneliness of being boxed in by millions of other lonely beings, all striving like hell to get ahead, find peace, trade

their souls for a cure - however fleeting - to the curse of apathy that coated them all like a weeks worth of dead skin.

He realized that he was drifting toward a fit of melancholy introspection and took evasive action with a gruff: "Screw it..."

At the window, left hand still gripping his trumpet, he nodded at the blue coals smoldering in his gut, and turned his attention to them: the world, the people, the city, the wild things stalking the shadows below.

He released himself to the hot breeze, the stars, the falling moan of night and knew that it was time.

The first song was slow, tranquil, a funeral pyre at the feet of the infant century. It fit. He filled up like a balloon and began disintegrating, leaving bits and pieces of himself in each note. There was no before or after, no comparison in style or form to Davis or Baker.

He was a muscular tree on a horridly flat plain.

There were flowers on the crooked little dining table: three tulips given to him by a woman who wanted in. She didn't understand. He had thanked her, accepted the flowers, put them in a tennis ball can filled with water, and vowed never to let anyone in. There wasn't room.

After the first song, he sank into the easy chair. It was three-legged, ripped in several places, but comfortable as hell, especially when God was

speaking, delivering a relentless monologue that demanded attention and patience.

He sat with the trumpet across his lap, watching out the window as history hurried by, anxious, head-strong, scrambling along like some drunken teenager with a mad plan to conquer the world. Lights flickered on and off and he inched his feet forward, put them up on the window pane - dipping bare toes into the staggering march of time.

He raised the horn and sounded the alarm.

The saxophone hadn't been touched, dusted, or moved in probably three years. It was leaning in the corner, next to the bookcase, beside Faulkner and Salinger and Kerouac and a host of art books holding in their flimsy pages the explosive genius of Pollock and Kandinsky and William Cooper and Bonnard and Stuart Davis and Matisse and crazy old van Gogh. The sax was part of the interior, a decoration. It was an ornament, just like the Underwood typewriter and the 1917 coronet. Museum pieces. Antiques.

He could feel himself being seduced by the past and had to fight the distinct and rather fierce desire to lay his trumpet aside and reclaim the sax.

"The road to perdition..." he reminded himself only half-jokingly, "is full of two-dollar potholes, redheads, and saxophones with decadent reeds."

The woman was beautiful, but it wasn't that. She was disrobing in front of the open window without even a hint of self-consciousness. He didn't care about

her naked body or her skin or the fact that she was perhaps the most perfectly shaped human being he had ever seen. What mattered was that she was real.

He played her a song about hope and disappointment and when he opened his eyes, she had drawn the shades.

The knife-edged voices rose from their ground-floor apartment and made their way up to him like perverted prayers: swearing, accusations, rage. She called him lazy and worthless. He said she was a cold bitch who couldn't be trusted.

He listened, not to the actual words, but to the tone, and he wept. Humanity was such a tragic condition, fraught with energy and heat and passion. Mankind - the citizens of planet earth who considered themselves civilized - couldn't seem to make up their minds whether to make babies or graves, to view others murderously or with long-suffering tolerance, to protect their kin and kind or ruin the whole damned world for everyone.

With the argument still blazing and things crashing and the evening progressing on schedule - she had begun to throw dishes and next he would beat the shit out of her, as usual - he wiped his eyes and used his instrument to consecrate their disunion.

At the end of this, he added a short but bright series of notes meant to breathe blessing upon them. Life.

He believed that humans were on the verge of self-extinction and also believed that somehow, the whole gloomy parade of hatred and bloodshed could

be turned around and made to march backwards, toward the light. The couple below might die tonight: she could use a butcher knife to end the man's abuse, or he could simply knock her through a wall. Or - yes, there was an alternative - they could miraculously, inexplicably manage to free themselves from the vicious current of decay, reach the shore, and find refuge in each others arms.

He stopped and let the notes fall through the barrage of fire and ice. Blending, corkscrewing, evaporating, they never hit the ground. Like rain, on a hot day, stolen by the blasted sun. Still, maybe a few - maybe one! - had penetrated the hellish canopy of despair and bitterness.

He crossed himself and committed the song - the blue notes - to the night.

The man lived alone. He seldom entertained company. And the woman was a obviously a hooker: stilettos, minuscule skirt, heavy makeup.

The man needed to extinguish the anguishing sense of isolation, meaningless, rejection. The woman needed cash. Maybe she was a cokehead. Or maybe she had kids to support. Whatever the reason, she quickly lifted her skirt and draped herself over the man. He trembled, began to sweat, clumsily tried to kiss her. She laughed, removed her clothing and pushed him back onto the bed. He was a novice, she, an expert.

He sighed at them, acknowledging their emotional poverty, the fleeting satisfaction both would gain from the tryst, and silently prayed that they would each, one day, somehow, find love. It was a tragedy to wander through life without it. A waste.

He played a single note, allowing it to grow, blossom, open wide-faced, like a flower addressing the sun. They were orphans of the night, lost children who didn't know how to treat their still-bleeding wounds.

He aimed his trumpet at the quarter moon, the note continuing, smooth, gentle - the stroke of a mother's hand on a son's brow - until they had finished.

The man, red-faced, already looking sheepish and ashamed, paid the woman. She put her costume back on and, without so much as a wave, left him to suffer his conscience.

The apartment was black and white: stark, or maybe decorated by someone who was color blind - like dogs were color blind. It was black and white: black sofa, white chair, black table, white appliances in the tiny kitchen, white walls, black and white photos in black frames hung in a perfect row.

There might have been a husband or a boyfriend, but he had never seen one. Only the woman, who, like her living area, was black and white: a black woman who wore black dresses, white dresses, black shirts, white shirts, black pants, white pants. Colorless.

She was standing at the window looking out, looking down. She always seemed to be looking down, as though waiting for something. Someone.

He played her part of "So What" - loose, hardly recognizable, jazzy, willing her release from whatever prison she was living in. More than anything, he wanted her to be happy. With no idea what her name might be, he dubbed her, Miss Liberty.

The night couldn't make up its mind whether to jump or sleep. It was faithless, wink-eyed, tight, and on the prowl for trouble, on its knees before God, on its face in the gutter.

He felt the moment: cantankerous and immoral and overflowing with righteousness. It was a ripe peach daring him to take a bite.

Voices and music came to him in the darkness: a nun saying her vows, an organ, words of charity and encouragement. Hope.

He knew them to be an illusion, part of a fantastic wish he wanted to make. He raised his trumpet and blew out the candles of the city: "Let them find peace."

There were five empties on the coffee table, another bottle in his hand. He was working hard to get sloshed, but didn't seem to be making much progress.

Using the remote, the man continued to surf the channels, pausing only on women with big breasts and exposed legs, and sports.

Cable, he decided, watching the man's panicked, anemic quest for entertainment, was a rip-off. However the hell much it cost a month, it was too much, especially for a distraction that didn't work, was impotent, didn't quench the fire. In fact, it seemed to make it worse - like handing a thirsty man a sack of salted peanuts.

The man finished the sixth beer, went to the fridge for another, sat back down and made the rounds of stations.

He played a march, though rather half-heartedly, as he was not himself convinced that any power on earth or in heaven - military or spiritual - could stop the manic flow of modern culture: a question without an answer.

She was an old woman who liked to listen to Benny Goodman. Her collection included Miller and Krupa and Ellington and perhaps a dozen others. He had heard them all coming at him - fast and hard, slow and sultry, with that unmistakable, undeniable, irascible swing beat - from across the courtyard. But her favorite was Goodman and she played him every night before bed.

We meet/and the angels sing/the angels sing the sweetest song I ever heard...

The woman listened, rocked in her chair, and he listened too, thinking that the scratchy quality of the records - she had a phonograph and had probably never even considered swapping it for any more modern form of audio equipment - was magical and also, somehow, more genuine. He wanted to play along. But to do so would be sacrilege, an adulteration of history.

“And the Angels Sing” ended and before the woman could rise and attend to the player, “St. Louis Blues” erupted. She lifted the needle and carefully, shakily guided it to “In a Sentimental Mood.”

He sat listening, wishing he was a clarinet player, wanting desperately to join in.

Halfway through the song, the woman switched off the phonograph. In the heavy, sad silence that followed, she shuffled around the room, turning out the lights, then shuffled - a mere shadow now - down the hallway, toward the bedroom.

Muting his trumpet, he played her a tranquil, bluish lullaby.

Drapes began to close, blinds were snapped shut, lights extinguished. The evening was dying, and with it, life.

He could hardly bear this part of the night. It was a slow, terrible goodbye that made his chest ache. He felt frail: close to God, connected to his neighbors, in humble synchrony with the universe. It was a momentary state and would leave him even more barren than he had been before. But while it lasted, he was overwhelmed with it all.

Yanking out the mute, he played - loudly at first, with brash disregard for anyone who might already be asleep, unwilling to even imagine that some might consider the notes a nuisance.

As he allowed the volume to diminish and fell into a slower, more subdued melody, he heard a voice from below holler: "Shut the hell up!"

Laughing, he paused, then continued in a tone so mellow that no curmudgeon could possibly object.

Aiming the bell at the floor, he let the notes become fat and full and heavy.

It wasn't long before they ended, seemingly of their own accord. He was breathless, without enthusiasm or ambition. A thick lethargy quickly settled over him, as it always did, and he laid his horn in the chair.

It was over. He wanted to cry, to mourn the conclusion of beauty and hope and fire. Instead, he stumbled to bed, broken, bankrupt, uncertain that any force - even the quiet city - could rescue him from the darkness.

He slept.