
Michael Thomas. Borshuk

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Bye Bye Blackbird
A Collection of Stories

by

Michael Borshuk

A Creative Writing Project Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research through the Department of English in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts at the University of Windsor

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In memory of my father,
who first sat me down at the piano,
and first put words before my eyes.
“Music is essentially useless, as life is: but both lend utility to their conditions.”
—George Santayana, *Little Essays*
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The Piano Teacher

Standing before the dresser mirror in the bedroom, Milton Polk pinches the silk knot of his tie and slides it up into the overturned V of his buttoned collar. Observing the end result of this action in his reflection, he notices a flaw, an oblong quality to the finished knot that compels him to loosen the tie and perform the move again. This time the silk knot forms beautifully into a small round ball, perfectly centered and taut below his Adam’s apple. Satisfied, Milton smiles. Taking a metal comb from the dresser, he styles his hair, raking back his wavy grey coiffure into a tastefully manic pompadour—the sort of mad-genius fashion that he knows a scholar of his magnitude should sport. Kali pirouettes into the room, tiny and fine-featured, an eleven-year old flutter of soft wings in her taffeta dress.

“Daddy,” she sings. “Mummy says to hop-hop. The guests will arrive shortly.”

“Almost ready, love.” He turns his eyes to the mirror’s reflection of the girl’s lissome dance atop the Persian rug by the bed. Her ballet instructor says that she has an astounding natural grace. So poised, your daughter, the woman told Milton, a perfect angel, Dr. Polk.

Milton turns from the mirror and observes Kali’s dance head-on. She catches him watching and spins round and round, arms extended in an exaggerated flourish. “The dancing has come along wonderfully,” he says.

“Mrs. Diodati says that she would like to see me perform with her older students in a June recital.”

“That would be splendid. You’d steal the show from those ogres.”
“Oh Daddy,” she giggles.

“Is Alexander dressed yet?”

“Yes.” Kali spins the dance to a close, and then winced slightly, continues.

“Mummy told him to hop-hop, too. He was watching television again.”

“Oh dear.”

“I don’t see why we don’t just take it away, Daddy. He sneaks it always.”

“Maybe we’ll have to.”

She flutters across the rug to Milton and takes his wrist in her small hands. “Cuff links,” she says.

“Are they to your satisfaction?”

She inspects one wrist carefully and then the other. “Yes. But you did do them wrong last time.”

“That’s why I have you and Mummy, my sweet.”

She lets his wrist fall and looks into the mirror. “Oh Daddy, when are you going to take that silly thing down.”

She’s looking at a crayon drawing wedged into the corner of the mirror’s frame. It is a child’s facsimile, in blue and red and gold Crayolas, of Jacques-Louis David’s Portrait of Madame Recamier (1800). As in the original, quiet Madame Recamier stares sensitively towards the spectator, reclining on her chaise with patrician tranquillity. However, the young artist of the facsimile has made her own visionary amendment to David’s portrait—adding a wide-eyed cat, sketched in purple, to the peaceful scene.

“Kali!” Milton says. “I could never take it down. It reminds me of that Saturday
at the Louvre. We were delighted at how you plopped yourself down on the floor, and took out your scribbler—"

"Daddy is so sentimental."

Milton sighs. "And you so fanciful, my sweet."

"Well, I don't even like David's paintings anymore."

"Come, Kali," Milton says, resting a hand on her slight shoulder. "Let's go down. Before you break my heart anymore."

Downstairs, in the living room, Milton's wife, Mary, is struggling to have Alexander sit still on the chesterfield long enough to allow his hair to be combed. She's dressed him in a blue blazer and matching navy short pants. He wears ox-blood penny loafers and a red bowtie, the application of which was, for Mary, the day's greatest challenge so far.

"Sit still, honey," she says. "I want you to look good for Mummy and Daddy's guests."

Alexander squirms in his seat, and works a stick of chewing gum in his mouth with youthful disinterest.

"Dr. Gladstein's little boy always looks so sharp at their parties," she says to her son. "He lets his mummy put pomade in his hair."

Mary works the comb through the boy's knotted locks. He didn't remain still enough for her to blow-dry his hair after his bath, and as a result, his curly top has ended..."
up in a towel-shaken tangle.

“Ow,” he protests as she muscles the comb through the matted mess

“One more second, honey. Then you can go wait in the front hall with Kali. You are our perfect little host and she our splendid hostess.”

“Mummy,” he says.

“Yes?” she replies. “My lord, you have such a monster of a knot here.”

“I saw a good man on t.v. today.”

“You weren’t supposed to be watching, dear. You know that you spent your hours the other day.”

“Mummy, he was dead good.”

“Oh really?”

“Yes. And he had messy hair.”

“Well, he is not Mary Polk’s son now, is he?”

“I want to play the piano.”

“You told Daddy you didn’t want to learn an instrument.”

“The man played piano. He was dead good.”

“And you want to play like the man?”

“Yes. He messed his hair and stood up when he played the piano.”

“You would have to sit down, Alexander. You can’t stand when you play recitals.”

“I really want to learn. I want to take lessons and be like the man.”

Mary finishes working through the knots in Alexander’s hair. She takes his rosy,
cherubic cheeks between her hands and looks into his eyes.

"Are you sure you want to learn?"

"Yes. He was dead good."

"That’s splendid, Alexander," she says. "I’m glad you want to take up your own art. Daddy will be so pleased."

Milton descends the stairs then with upright majesty, while Kali whispers downwards like a baby’s breath behind him. Mary watches their movement from upstairs and sighs at the regal beauty of the two of them together.

"How is my boy?" Milton asks.

"We have splendid news," says Mary. "Alexander, tell Daddy."

Milton cocks an eyebrow and turns to his son who continues to work the gum in his mouth.

"Go on," Mary says. "Tell him."

"I want to play the piano."

"My my my my my;" Milton says, unleashing as much excitement as a man of his poise might allow. "That’s wonderful. We all knew you would catch up to the rest of us at some point."

"I want to play like the man I saw on t.v. today."

"Tsk. tsk."

"No more of that box for you till next week."

"He was dead good, Daddy. He messed his hair and—oh Mummy I forgot this part before—he lit the piano on fire!"

"My lord," Mary exclaims.
“Hm,” Milton says, unfazed. “Sounds like he was as skewed as that fool, Gould. You won’t be that kind of pianist, son. The role of the artist is not to carry on like a maniac.”

“I liked the man,” Alexander says.

“He was probably worse than Gould, Daddy,” Kali pipes in. “He might have been a rock and roller.”

“Oh mercy,” Mary exclaims.

“He was dead good, Dad.”

“Well, we’ll make arrangements later. Now I need the two of you to go wait by the door.”

“Remember to greet everyone politely,” Mary says.

“I’ll show him how, Mummy,” says Kali.

The Polk’s guests arrive in couples and small bunches, colleagues of Milton’s from Hillberry College with their respective husbands and wives. The group—numbering about thirty in total—is culled largely from the Faculty of Arts, with a select few invited from the university’s administration. Milton seldom fraternizes with the scientists or social scientists or business faculty. Despite a number of brave attempts in conversations over lunch at the Faculty Club, he is perennially unable to descend to the proper level at which he might find their particular pursuits the least bit engaging. Amongst his own crowd he jokingly concedes this shortcoming of his, and rationalizes it with a quote from Blake. “Art and Science,” he often says, scratching his chin, “cannot exist but in minutely organized particulars.”
“Dr. Polk!” calls a voice entering from the front hall. It belongs to Hammet MacKinley, an amiable and excessively chatty acquaintance from English. He has been cornering Milton at Arts faculty mixers for nearly 20 years. “Congratulations, my good man. Lise and I got the news from Gavin in Grad Studies just yesterday.” He claps Milton on the shoulder. Milton is on honeymoon still from a promotion bestowed upon him only three days ago.

“Why, thank you,” Milton responds with fit modesty.

“We were hoping that the first one to get it would be one of our boys or girls over in the department, but I can’t think of a better honouree.”

“Thanks again.”

“I mean the first to be titled University Professor from the college. And from Asian Studies!”

“Don’t rule us out, Dr. MacKinley,” Milton says with a sweet-tempered grin.

“Oh Milton,” McKinley says, stepping close. “Come on, let’s be frank. Between you and me. That whole department is really only you.”

“Well—”

“If it weren’t for your publications and lectures, my God, you know they would phase out the entire program in the twitch of a cat’s tail.”

“I’d like to think they wouldn’t.”

“Well, I think you hold them together.”

“Well, Hammett,” Milton says, hoping the consciously used first-name will lighten the mood. “Mary has prepared a lovely table. Come, let’s get our fill.”
Indeed Mary *hus* prepared a delectable buffet and wives coo with envious delight at the array spread across the table in the dining room. The Polks have seen that the guests will eat well throughout the afternoon. They nibble delicately on salmon trout with orange and lemon, grilled ham and gruyere sandwiches, egg and onion croquettes, pesto and cheese bruschetta. There are three kaleidoscopic platters of cruditées in zucchini green and carrot orange, each presented with baked brie, which in light of the other selections seem but a wondrous afterthought. At three-thirty Kali emerges from the kitchen with a tray of desserts that include an almond and hazelnut torte with raspberry filling, anise fritters and small glass dishes of coconut-mint sorbet.

"Oh dear." cries one professor’s plump wife. "Oh, I don’t know if I could eat one bite more."

"Please." Kali coos. "Mummy has worked so hard at this."

"Dear, you’re such an angel."

The wife concedes, snatching a fritter from the tray and consuming it whole. At the front of the large living room, Milton clinks his glass lightly with a dessert fork. Next to him stands a covered easel that has been wheeled in unobtrusively while the guests were eating.

"May I have everybody’s attention, please?" Milton says. He clinks his glass with a dessert fork, in paired eighth notes on the upbeat of a soft, unheard dance in 3/4 time. The guests turn to observe him, shyly adding to their full stomachs with samplings of Mary’s rich desserts. Milton’s waltz fades toward one last tinkling beat.

"With so many of our closest friends here this afternoon, I—*Mary* and I—thought
that today would be a fine time to present Mary's latest painting. It's a watercolour she's just finished from some sketches made when we were in Jaipur last March."

"The talents in this family are endless!" cries one happy guest in the crowd. Milton smiles and tips his head to the admirer.

"Now, are we all ready?" Milton asks. "I think you'll all be pleased."
The guests call out their affirmation resoundingly.

"Are we sure we don't want some more sorbet first?" he teases.
The guests cry out for the painting with more enthusiasm.

"Please Dr. Polk," MacKinley pleads from his stance by the bay window.

"Alright then," Milton says. "Here we are." He pulls the shroud from Mary's painting and stands back to absorb the collective *ah* from the crowd in the room. The work is an intricate panorama in rust and olive and tan of the crowds gathered at the ghats by the Pushkar Lakes. The detail is astounding—tiny brown hands and faces on the people gathered by the dark lake. Stone steps, flying birds, glimmering water.

"This was during the Holi Festival," Mary offers from the back of the room.

"The triumph of good over evil. The children in Jaipur love it. They were wild by the lake there."

"It's absolutely lovely," says Hammett's wife, Lise.

"I was playing with the colour scheme a bit," Mary continues. "I used the olive to mimic the colours in some of the 18th Century Rajasthani miniatures we saw in the museum in Jaipur."

The group sighs at Mary's composition. They admire it quietly, staring wistfully.
at the work and sipping their drinks. Husbands long to have a woman like pure Mary with all her sundry charms. Wives will go to bed feeling miserably inapt tonight.

"Ah, my friends," Milton says to the party, beaming. "Our show is not over just yet though. The Muse of my other lovely Polk lady was touched by our trip as well." The guests all wonder what's in store. He turns to the room's other entrance--the French doors from the den, off to his right, "Okay, Kali. Come out now."

At some point, while the crowd has admired Mary's painting, Kali has changed her clothes. Now she bounces into the room at Milton's beck, barefoot in Asian garb. She wears a precious sari in pink chiffon, a flower in her hair, jingling ghungroos round her ankles.

"Well look," says Lise MacKinley, "even the bells on her ankles."

"Normally," Milton says, "Kali studies Western dance. But to compliment our unveiling of Mary's painting, my sweet said that she would improvise a dramatic classical Indian dance. The form she hopes to copy is nritva--a kind of mime, if you will--based on some videotapes I've been going over with her lately. Now, I give the stage to her."

The crowd applauds as Milton backs into a corner and allows Kali to step to the forefront. She takes a short graceful bow, and then abruptly leaps into motion, flinging herself across the carpet, arms spread, legs flayed, in a jump of five feet. The bells jingle as she flicks her ankles and stomps her bare feet on the floor. She has stepped into a character of sorts. Her eyes burn, her arms twist, snake-like. At times she stomps her feet hard on the floor, jingling the ankle-bells in vicious punctuation. To a silent
pounding in her head, the *pa-da-da-dum* of make-believe tabla drums, she builds the performance to a grand finish, like a whirling dervish, thumping, jingling, limbs extended, finally collapsing to the floor on her haunches.

"Tremendous," calls Hammet. The crowd applauds, silences, stands breathless for a moment, and then with a nod of approval from Milton throws up another round of clapping before returning to the dessert table.

Surreptitiously sliding cookies onto her plate, Lise MacKinley raves to Mary about the afternoon’s twin artistic displays.

"I can’t believe you *wonderful* Polks," she says. Mary blushes and smiles, silent.

"A painter, a dancer, an academic of great stature—" Lise says and then drops off into an absent-minded pause. She knows she has forgotten someone. In a moment it comes. "Oh!" she says, to Mary. "The little one. Alexander. What great talent does he have, Mary?"

"Alexander is a feisty one," Mary says. "You know how boys are."

"Of course." Lise slides a cookie into her mouth whole and chews it with gentle but insistent haste. "But hasn’t he been touched by the Polk muse as well?"

"We’re thinking that music may be his calling."

"Splendid! So he’s taking lessons?"

Mary looks around quickly. Milton has been cornered by a pair of colleagues from the department. "Actually, he wants to take up the piano, but, um, we’ve yet to find him a teacher that we... *esteem* enough to employ."

Lise has repeated her quiet consumption of another cookie. "Oh! Mary, let me
recommend somebody! Alice—Dr. Dewar’s wife—was just telling me of somebody only last week."

"Really?"

"Yes. A graduate student we have here at Hillberry in music. He’s doing an MA in performance, I guess. From what I’ve heard, he’s a beautiful pianist."

"And he teaches?"

"Yes, Alice said he’s made quite a performer out of their Suzette. And between you and me, that’s no mean feat. Suzette, God bless her, is such a stubborn child."

Mary thinks of Alexander’s feistiness. His constant refusal to spit out gum before dinner; the worn knees on his trousers; the time he forced the family cat’s head into a soup can. If Suzette Dewar was tamed by this teacher, then maybe—

"The boy’s name is Jonas something-or-other. Actually, he’s apparently giving a performance of some sort at Baden Hall next week."

"Well," Mary said, "I’ll have to pull Milton over there so we can see this young man. He may be just what our Alexander needs."

Just then, Kali jingles over to Mary’s side. She gives Mary’s skirt a discreet tug and cries “Mummy!” distressed but sotto voce.

Mary turns to the girl: “What?”

“I caught him watching television again.”

When Jonas Lingfelder takes the stage at Baden Hall for his recital, Mary is
surprised by his girth. She’s expected a thin, rubbery young man, with short cropped hair and earnest eyes. His shoes would be freshly shined and his tuxedo would hang off him like an adult’s clothes on a child. Jonas as it turns out is large: easily six and a half feet, with shoulders that, observed from Mary’s seat deep in the auditorium, seem to span a metre from blade to blade. His hair is long and thick, smoothed back on his head in wet-looking clumps—as with two hands not a comb. The tuxedo is a little tight in the jacket, but the pants are loose and sagging. If he unbuttons the jacket, Mary fears the tops of his undershorts will show. The MC for the evening, a professor named Harry Bartleby, steps to the microphone.

“As Jonas is the true man of the hour tonight,” he says, “I’ll give him the honour of announcing the selection he’ll play. Welcome to tonight’s recital, and I hope you enjoy one of Hillberry’s finest young musicians. Jonas?”

The large young man lumbers across the stage—in creaking floorboards and thick-thudded footsteps—to speak into the microphone. His voice is booming, with a trace of something foreign. A German accent not so thick, not from Germany maybe, but something borrowed from old-country parents, an inflection garnered second-hand.

“Thank you for coming,” he says in his bassy voice. “To begin I will play two Debussy arabesques. They date from 1888, and both are in a simple ternary form.” He says this without expression, it seems read from a crib sheet inked on the back of his hand. He turns and plods monstrously to the piano.

“Charming stage presence,” Milton whispers.

Hovering over the piano, Jonas seats himself with a cannonball’s grace. Mary
anticipates the bench's break. Collapsed in place, he stares at the music before him for nearly thirty seconds. Silence but for creaking seats and shuffling shoes. With a grunt he places his thick hands over the keys and begins. The music is dreamy, ticklingly water-like and fetchingly gentle from a beast who appears so maladroit. The arpeggios unwind beneath his fingers like long, loose threads pulled from a tapestry's edge: unraveling softly across the stage and winding lightly, thin ribbons of melody, toward the audience below.

His presence is bewitching. The crowd can't help but stare in wonder at this trained bear who does these beautiful tricks. Jonas seems divided, possessed by an angel when his hands are at the keyboard, but a taciturn, brooding Caliban otherwise. His recital builds from Debussy through Haydn sonatas to a riveting torrent from Bach. Thunderous bass, lightning quick treble. He is technically wondrous, tempered with a calming, poetic touch for all he plays. The audience forgives his lack of charisma at the microphone, the curt, disinterested way he announces each piece. When he rises abruptly from the piano at the finish of his Bach finale, they are unabashed about revealing their new love. They stand with him, for him, applauding. Milton is pleased, Mary enraptured. This is the teacher they must get.

The Polks catch him at the wine and cheese reception that follows the performance. He stands in a crowd of jabbering admirers, a head in height above all. The tie has been loosened. He has a slight trace of a mustache over his thick, rosy lips. Ritz and cheddar sandwiches are piled on his plate and he chews with gusto as the group heaps its kudos upon him.
“It was lovely.”

“You are such an accomplished musician already!”

“Mr. Lingfelder,” Milton says, brushing his way into the conversation past the sycophantic many. “I’m Dr. Milton Polk from Asian Studies.” Jonas nods down at him, checks bulging with crackers. “That was a splendid show you put on tonight, young man.”

Jonas nods again and awkwardly fingers more into his mouth.

“My wife and I heard from a friend of ours that you teach piano to youngsters in the city, is that right?”

Another fat-cheeked nod. More crackers in fist, through lips, in mouth. He’s almost down to the crumbs. Milton had better get this in before the bear trods off to find more.

“Our boy Alexander is interested in learning the piano, and after tonight’s performance, son, we would be honoured if you would take him on as a pupil.”

Jonas nods again, brings the edge of the plate to his mouth, tips the crumbs in and swallows. He lets this last of the crackers go down—mere plankton in the belly of a whale—before speaking finally in that same deep voice.

“Fifteen dollars each half hour. I emphasize the practice of scales at the beginning. From there I move to a favourite book of mine: Bela Bartok’s Mikrokosmos. Then into the Conservatory books. You’ll need to buy those for your son.”

“Splendid,” Milton says, “so—”

“Here is my card.” Jonas interrupts, reaching into the tuxedo jacket and handing
Milton a small blank business card with a phone number on it written in pen. "If you call me tomorrow we can arrange a convenient time."

"That would be wonderful," Milton says, taking the card from the giant hand. "I really--"

"Excuse me." Jonas says, turning from Milton's hanging words and plodding off in search of more food.

Seated next to Mary in the car on the way to Hillberry's music building, Alexander stares idly out the window, working a new wad of bubblegum. It's rainy outside and the Volvo is silent within but for the whir of the wipers across the windshield. He kicks his feet to the rhythm of the rubber blades against the glass—the mechanized hum, the squeaky streak to and fro. The books Jonas advised are placed across the boy's lap. They are unbroken, with crisp covers: The Royal Conservatory of Music, *Volume 1*; Bartok's *Mikrokosmos*.

"Are you excited to meet Mr. Lingfelder?"

A bubble's blown from Alexander's mouth, the express of boy's breath into a pink translucent ball, then snapped suddenly by his own quick tongue. "Nope."

"Oh pooh. You'll love him. I'm sure he'll make a wonderful teacher."

"I don't wanna go anymore."

"*Alexander!* We'll have none of that. Daddy and I are sure that you will make a wonderful young pianist, and since you took this up with your own initiative, we are
certainly not going to let you..."

Her voice blubbers on next to him but she’s ceased to speak the language he understands. Alexander blows another bubble, a huge one, filling out softly, carefully—he doesn’t want it on his face—getting so big he knows he’s in trouble and then: "wup," a soft, slow burst of gum to be peeled off his chin. They pull up into the parking lot of the Hillberry Music Building and Mary idles the car.

"Okay, let’s go, my little virtuoso." She grabs her umbrella from the back seat and slips out into the rain, opening the umbrella with a quick clip in one deft motion. Splishing around to the passenger side of the car, she opens Alexander’s door and allows him to slip under the shade and skip with her up the steps of the music building. Jonas is waiting inside, tuxedo-less, but strikingly recognizable nevertheless.

He is casually dressed, in skinned khaki’s and a golf shirt from which his belly is bursting at the bottom. There is dark hair around his navel. He wears white-gone-gray sneakers that are split at both toes to reveal black socks underneath. There’s a fountain drink in one of his hands, in a giant foam cup, slurped up into his big mouth from a straw.

"Hello Jonas," Mary coos, shaking the rain from the umbrella into a puddle on the floor. "This is our Alexander."

Alexander looks up at the piano teacher. The man is huge. He looks like a wrestler. He could kill Alexander with one hand. Jonas looks down at the boy and twitches his eyebrows over the top of his straw. This is how monsters say hello. There is a Band-Aid pasted on the giant’s forehead—where maybe a knight tried to kill him.
Alexander takes a half-step back, quietly, not wanting to show fear before the beast. He clutches the crisp piano books to his chest.

"Alexander," Mary whines, "why don’t you say hello?"

"Hi."

The monster doesn’t say anything, and only continues to slurp the drink. The cup might be filled with the blood of other little boys.

"Now when should I come back to pick the boy up, Jonas?" Mary asks. She is holding the umbrella away from her, letting the last of the rain drip slowly off.

"4:30, exactly," the monster says in a Dr. Frankenstein voice. "I rarely take more than a half an hour." He looks down at Alexander again: "Follow me. The studio is down the hall." Jonas walks away from Mary, with his back to Alexander, and trundles down the hall. Fee-fi-fo-fum. With a push from his mother, Alexander follows.

Mary watches the boy pad down the hall after the larger man. This is the beginning of the boy’s brilliant career. He is another artist in the Polk tradition. He’ll play concert halls to standing ovations and thrown roses. She wants to buy him a white scarf today, to be worn over black tuxedo, with black tie. His hair will be like his father’s. Kali will dance to his accompaniment. Mary will paint the whole scene. The good things that will proceed from this moment are innumerable, she decides. Mary turns and steps out into the deluge again, umbrella snapped open on the outside steps. She makes another quick skip back to the car.

Later, when she picks up her son in the lobby of the music building at 4:31, Alexander is standing at attention, smiling, books in hand. Jonas is absent.
"Well," she asks. "how did it go? Do you like the new teacher?"

"He's dead good," the boy says.

"So you learned some new things then?"

"No," Alexander answers. "Not today. But he gave me a sip of his Coke."

At home, Alexander tries scales. Milton listens from the next room, sitting in slippers in an easy chair, reading Dante, tracing the do-re-mi-fa-- run of his son's fingers up the keyboard. At times the boy flounders, stepping on a wrong note in his attempt to race through each mode. Do-re-mi-fa-so...and then a bad note, then a slower pace, and then up to speed again. Alexander is determined. For a novice his mechanics are good. This is the maestro's first move. These are the unsteady infant steps that a great sprinter early on makes. Milton goes back to La Vita Nuova, pleased.

Alexander returns from his second lesson with a wobbly red check mark in crayon in the bottom left corner of his scale primer's first exercise page. He has mastered the easier scales, those in the keys of C and F and G. He can perform arpeggios in those keys with ease, using both hands, moving through more than one octave. If asked, the boy will gladly sit down and run through them; he is a born showman. His posture is good: small hands held as perfect little bridges over the keys, wrists up high, fingers bent at the knuckles. He holds his small head up when he plays, nose slightly up,
toward heaven, eyes on the page. Mary and Milton and Kali sit and watch him
sometimes when he practices. Alexander calls out the key, as if announcing a fugue like
Jonas might, and runs through the scale at breakneck pace. Applause, applause, the boy
is on his way.

The success of the easy scales aside, though, Jonas has asked him to move ahead
in the primer. It’s time to move to bigger things, the giant said after Alexander’s flawless
presentation at the second lesson. It’s time to play scales with more than one sharp or
flat: D and B-flat, and maybe A and E-flat by next week. But when Alexander sits down
at the piano to play these he stumbles out of the gate. His hands are trained to play only
those with one accidental or none and the newer ones throw him off. He thinks he knows
where the right notes will be, but when he looks away from the keyboard and goes into
his concert posture a wrong tone has jumped into the way. He tries to wrap his fingers
around these new modes, and he can almost play them slowly, but only when he really
tries to focus. Still, he can’t get the tempo going like he did the week before. He’s no
master after all. Discouraged, he sneaks away from the piano and goes to watch
cartoons, even though he’s already used up his quota for television earlier in the week.

At the third lesson, Alexander notices that Jonas has a small red mark on his head
where the Band-Aid was last week and the week before. In the tiny school practice room
where they meet, the big man collapses into his chair next to the piano, oozing over it
like The Blob, with a comic book in his hand. (It’s Archie Digest, the new one with
Jughead as a girl on the cover. Alexander has it himself at home.) Jonas snaps the magazine open to somewhere in the middle of the story and crosses his legs. Alexander sits on the piano worried, waiting. He never did learn the second batch of scales. By the middle of the week, the frustration became boring and he avoided the piano. He hopes he'll only be asked to play the first set again. The red checkmark at the bottom of that page.

A quiet moment passes before Jonas looks up. "I want to hear the scales."

Alexander sits upright and brings his small paws to the keyboard. Jonas has gone back to the comic book. Hoping he can sneek it by him, Alexander launches into the easiest scale from before, the one he knows best, in the key of C. Do-re-mi-fa-so-la- he can fly through this one. Jonas chuckles at Archie and company, a grunty dragon laugh, and turns the page.

Without looking up, the giant says, "No. The new ones."

"Don't you want to make sure I still know the old ones?"

"No."

"What if I forgot them?"

"You didn't. The new ones."

"Uh, okay."

Alexander puts his hands to the piano and stares at them hard. Please just play them right today. Jonas snorts again and continues to read. His lips are moving.

Alexander begins the scale in D, saying over and over in his mind, Two sharps, F and C. The scale begins okay; he takes it sort of slowly, and making his unhurried way through
it he clears the first seven notes: Do-re-mi-fa-so-la-ti. He hits the second do loudly, a
hard finish-line step, one octave gone. But Jonas wants them all in at least two octaves
and here’s where the boy trips up. He forgets the second F sharp, comes down too
confident on the note below it, and the obvious off-tone shakes Jonas from his comic.
Alexander tries to move on and forget the mistake but Jonas glares at him and waves his
hand.

“Start again at the beginning.”

Sullen, Alexander tries it again. He goes even slower the second time, with the
refrain of Two sharps, F and C, still in his head. He tries to look ahead up the keyboard
and stay mindful of the sharps he has to hit. On the second octave of the scale he drops
his guard a bit, thinking he’s made it through. Forgets the high C sharp, a wrong note, and
so close to the end. Jonas doesn’t look up this time.

“Again, from the beginning.”

A third time, he plays both octaves perfectly, but at such a slow pace it’s as if he’s
played them wrong. Jonas can see he hasn’t learned them. The boy plays with such
unsteadiness that he might as well be trying this for the first time. The piano teacher
closes his comic book and sits up a bit in the chair.

“I want them perfect again, but faster. This is important.”

Alexander begins the scale again—

“Faster.”

—and picks up the pace as told—

“Faster, faster.”
--he's sure to hit a wrong note--

"Faster!"

--oh, don't cry! the monster's voice is so loud--

"Faster!"

--and Alexander, worried about keeping the beast off his tail, tumbles on to F natural where he should play F sharp. Jonas sits back and relaxes again.

"Back to the beginning. Keep going till you get it right."

And so Alexander tries and tries, stuck on the key of D. After a number of stabs, Jonas stops shouting and even refrains from directing the boy quietly. Alexander is afraid to even look at the big man anyway. He keeps his eyes on his hands, trying to play the scale quickly and flawlessly. After one run where he hits a bad C sharp trying to get his speed up, he ventures a glance toward the piano teacher. Out cold, the monster has fallen asleep. Alexander looks at the watch around Jonas's thick wrist: it's almost half past four. Alexander gathers up his books and scurries out the door before the sleeping foe awakes.

Over the next week, Alexander avoids practising the harder scales. He is convinced that he is a failure, that like so many times before, with his mother trying to teach him to paint, or Kali striving to show him a dance step or two, he's just shown how dumb he is. He spends the six days between lessons outside, shooting off firecrackers and burning ants with his father's old eyeglasses. On those days when Mary forces him
to the piano, he plays the scales of C and F and G. Daddy is often at the university when
he practices, and Mommy is tone-deaf and easily fooled. He tells her he’s practising new
scales but sticks to the ones he knows so well. On the day of the fourth lesson he feigns
illness, but Mary, keen to the boy’s ways outside of music, recognizing a trick he’s tried
so many times before, to wrangle out of doctor’s appointments or visits to relatives,
packs him into the car and takes him down to the lesson.

When Alexander gets into the studio, Jonas is waiting, in the same skinned khakis
and ripped sneakers, eating fried chicken from a red-and-white striped barrel. He doesn’t
speak, but nods the shaking boy toward the piano. Each bite of chicken the piano teacher
takes is a lion’s snarl, bared teeth and ripping flesh, white meat devoured between his
mighty jaws. Dribble slips down his chin. He flings bone after finished bone into a
brown bag at his feet. When the chicken’s gone, Alexander is next, the boy knows. God,
how he hates the piano.

“Scales,” Jonas says, mouth full. “D first.” His eyebrows furrow, eyes zoned in
on Alexander. Play or be eaten.

Alexander takes a breath and puts his hands to the keyboard. It’s impossible,
what he needs to do. There’s no hope. His thumb slips and hits a key. Startled he darts
up, ready to run.

“Sit,” Jonas says, wiping chicken grease from his mouth with the back of one
meaty paw. “Play.”

“I can’t.”

“Play!” Another bone flung to the bag. So little time left for this naughty boy.
Alexander begins to play the scale of D, small hands dashing across the keyboard like his feet might across the pavement outside right now if the chance opened up. As he fears, his stupid fingers betray him and slap down on wrong notes—not just the sharps that he usually has trouble with but others, smacking flats where he shouldn’t, putting sharps in the scale that do not belong. He pulls his hands from the keyboard and covers his eyes. *Oh, just kill me fast.* In the darkness the boy hears a heavy sigh and another bone hit the bottom of the bag.

"Alexander," Jonas says. "Do you think I haven’t had lazy students like yourself before?"

Alexander opens his eyes but remains silent.

"I’ve taken worse little boys and girls than you and turned them into great pianists. Don’t you think you can be good?"

"No," Alexander ventures.

"Of course you can. You just need the proper fire behind you. That’s why your parents pay me. Only practice and a stern teacher make little boys and girls good. Don’t you think I can make you good?"

"No."

Jonas frowns. "You don’t want to know what happened to the last little boy that thought that way."

Alexander’s curiosity is piqued. "What happened?"

Jonas claps his hands loudly. "Boom. I fixed him."

"What do you mean?"
Jonas leans in close, pressing his face into Alexander’s breathing space. The smell of fried chicken pervades. “You’re going to find out, young man. If you don’t begin to practice.” The ogre sighs. “Alexander, I am a concert pianist. I should not have to sit here and listen to rotten playing, week in and week out. Every student I’ve ever had has been successful, and all it ever took was practice.”

Jonas claps his hands in Alexander’s face. The loud smack and the wind from the man’s big hands makes the boy blink. Jonas leans back and sighs once more.

“Go now,” he says.

Alexander sits still and looks at the giant.

“Go,” Jonas says again. “And practice. Next week you’d better know the scales.”

“I don’t think I can—”

“Next week or else. Now go!”

Alexander gathers up his books and scampers away, out to the courtyard where he waits for Mary, heart thumping, breath catching, his life spared for seven more days.

“Daddy,” he says, creeping into the den, later that night, sneaking up on Milton immersed in the Dhammapada.

“Ah, Alexander.” Milton lays the book neatly in his lap and looks over at his son.

“I don’t want to take the piano anymore.”

“And why not?”
"I hate the piano."

"You’ve hardly given it a chance."

"I really hate it."

"You’ve probably reached a stumbling block. It happens, son. At your age I remember my own adversity trying to pick up the oboe after spending so much time on the clarinet. But they’re both woodwinds; my own father said to me. Well, yes, they are, but the reed is played differently on both. Surely he should have known that. But nevertheless I did tough it out, as I expect you will too with your keyboard training, and one day, after months of rigour, I found that—"

Alexander skulks away. It’s truly hopeless; he’ll be dead within the week.

The day of reckoning comes too soon, following six long, sleepless nights, after thirteen aborted, wrong-note-heavy afternoon sessions at the Polk’s piano. Alexander stifles a tear leaving his mother’s car that afternoon, when he waves his brief farewell. If she and Daddy had known what was to transpire they’d have saved him. Alas, they refused to believe each desperate warning. Jonas is going to kill me, he’ll crush me with his hands! His father’s laugh, his mother’s pat on the head, Kali taunting, “Stop being such a baby.” They’d all be sorry later. They’d all hate the piano too.

When Alexander wanders into the studio he finds Jonas sitting still, sans comic book, fried chicken, fountain drink. His hands are free for murder; they lie waiting in his lap: so big and strong. Alexander will never escape that grasp.
“Ready?” Jonas asks.

Alexander nods.

“Sit down and play.”

“I don’t think I can.”

“You can.”

“Okay.”

Alexander takes his seat on the bench, sitting tall, chin up, hands placed over the keys. He waits and waits. Maybe it won’t happen; maybe he’ll be excused again.

“Play.”

Alexander does the scale, staggering from D to D like a cowboy with an arrow in his back. His attempt is half-hearted, the pace uneven. Clumsy steps through do-re-mi, a small pink hand slapping at a note here and there, trying to remember the sharps, knowing it’s really just too late. Before the third D, he gives up, smashing his hands down on the piano in a train wreck of jumbled notes.

“I hate the piano.”

“You were supposed to learn this.”

“I can’t.”

“You can. I told you to learn this.”

“I don’t want to. I hate the piano.”

“You love it!”

Jonas stands quickly and seizes the chair in his hand, sweeping it into the air and hauling it over to the door of the room. He jams the back of it under the handle, blocking
the way like villains do on Batman after school, to keep out the chivalry—to keep the hero in their lair while they rough him up. Securing the chair, the piano teacher snaps the lock. Nobody can get in from the outside to save Alexander now.

"Do you think you can learn those scales by next week?" the giant snarls.

"No."

"Why not?"

"I dunno. I just don't think I can do it—"

"You have to!"

"I can't."

"By next week!"

"I can't."

Jonas stands full height, with his huge shoulders heaving up and down, weights suspended on mighty lungs. He pounds his fist into one meaty palm. Turning away from Alexander, he growls. He throws his arms in the air.

"By next week, you must."

"I can't."

"You have to! I cannot sit here and listen to this mess anymore. It is not my calling in life to listen to bad playing on the easiest of exercises, week after blasted week!"

Jonas stomps to the wall and thrashes his head against the plaster. The wall shakes. The sound is so loud, a huge crash. He'll knock the whole building down with his huge skull. Alexander can't believe it. Another butt against the wall, whack! The
beast spins and faces Alexander. There’s a huge red mark on his forehead—where the Band-Aid had been before, there was no knight after all.

“I ask you again, do you think you can learn those scales by next week?”

“I-I-I,” Alexander is shocked to find his voice has disappeared. He can hardly breathe.

“Do you think if I told you, for the last time, to learn them for next week, that you would?”

“I-I—” the boy catches the voice in his lungs and spits out a response: “I dunno.”

“Do you think that if I said you’d better learn them by next week or I’d blow down your house, you would?”

He takes a step closer to Alexander. There’s smoke coming from his nose.

“I-I-“

“Do you think that if I said you’d better learn them by next week or I’d eat your mother, you would?”

One more giant step closer. It’s all over.

“I—” Alexander squirms on the bench. There’s no window in this room. He’ll never make it out alive.

“Do you think,” Jonas lunges toward the boy and seizes him by the T-shirt, “that if I said,” the grip tightens, he’s being strangled! “that you’d better learn those,” --I can’t breathe— “damn scales by next week or I’ll grab you,” --you ARE grabbing me!-- “and shove a stick of dynamite up your skinny little ass? Do you think you would? Would you learn them then?”
“I-I-I...”

“For the love of God in heaven, would you learn those Christ-forsaken scales then?”

The beast’s grip is tight. His big eyes are in Alexander’s face. His mouth is open, with a massive tongue and bits of food caught between his fierce, yellow teeth.

“Would you then?”

“I’d learn them, I promise,” Alexander whimpers.

The grip loosens. The boy is released, and placed back on the bench softly. Jonas turns.

“Good. Now go.”

“Go!”

“Go!”

Alexander, to his surprise, is alive. He wrestles the chair from the door, undoes the lock and runs, dances, runs to the sunshine and birds chirping and freedom without.

Six months later, in December, Harry Bartleby takes the mike on-stage at Baden Hall again, wearing a Santa Claus hat and a smiling face.

“‘To close today’s Christmas program, friends, we have a bit of a treat. This is a first for us, but truly a pleasure. A student of a student here at Hillberry, making his debut for all of you.’”
A few stray claps and cheers fly up from the crowd.

"You saw this young man's teacher, Jonas Lingfelder, perform earlier in the afternoon, and at Jonas' suggestion, we decided to let this youngster, not one of our students but certainly part of our family here, play as well. Please help me welcome, at the piano, performing Erik Satie's 'Gymnopedic Number One', Mr. Alexander Polk."

Applause, so wild, for the young man who comes out in bow tie and suspenders, with pomade in his hair. He smiles and takes a short bow and then pads over to the piano, hoisting himself onto the padded bench and placing his hands over the keys. The crowd hushes. The music that ensues beneath the boy's small fingers is dreamy and fetchingly gentle, a song that pours rich from a vase of imminent talent. A natural artist in the formative years.

Deep in the crowd, Hammet McKinley sighs. His wife Lise smiles and closes her eyes to the soft sounds of this familiar tune. Beside them, Kali shuffles, restless with jealousy, while Mary cries gently, small proud tears for another family triumph. Milton beams and accompanies in his head on oboe and clarinet and voice; he conducts the music and leads the cries for encores; he takes the boy in imagined arms when the song is finally through.

"Splendid," Hammet McKinley whispers across the aisle to Milton.

Lise opens her eyes at this and nods. "Truly splendid, Mary," she calls sotto voce.

"Outstanding. I just can't believe you wonderful Polks."
But I Don't Want Her to Think I'm Like That

My new apartment has a secret hole carved into the living room wall that I found today by accident. I was going to take down the painting of fruit that hangs over the t.v. and put up a poster or something in its place, but when I moved the painting I saw that there was a small square box cut into the wall behind it. It's about a foot wide and high, and six inches deep. It's cool that I found it. I'll use it like a safe. I'll stick the things that I don't want to lose there, like my money and a spare key, and a few photos that I have of my sister and me when we were young.

The guy who lived here before me left a tie rack hanging in the closet. So today I took my ties from one of the green garbage bags I hauled my stuff in from Chatham and hung them up. I also took some shirts out and put them on the few wire hangers that they left in the empty closet. I have more shirts than hangers, though, so I'll have to finish that job another time, after I buy some more. I'll do that on Monday, after the weekend.

Tonight I'm doing a gig again, finally, filling in for somebody in the horn section in an R and B band downtown. I'm a little nervous because I haven't done any playing dates in probably a year or more, but Bobby, this guitar player who I used to know, who called me to do the job, said it's mostly three chord stuff and I shouldn't have any trouble with it. He told me he could pay me fifty for the night, and maybe kick in a few free beers if the bartender he knows is working. I told him I need a ride, but he said that that isn't a problem, he can pick me up on his way, around 8:30. I said I'd see him then.

Yesterday I checked my case to make sure that I still had some good reeds. There
were four or five in the case and only two of them were slightly cracked, which is good because I didn’t feel like taking the bus to any music stores then. On my first day in this new apartment, and my first day back in town. It was funny, only back from Chatham a few hours and I already had a job. That was the whole reason I moved back here, anyway, so it was a good thing. I want to find a steady job in the day, but I like playing, and I can make some money at it.

Yesterday I put the horn together and blew some scales and arpeggios for a while. I’ve lost a bit of my chops from not playing much but I should be able to handle three chord stuff. Bobby said there’s a tenor player and a trombone in the band, so if I don’t want to take any solos I don’t have to.

Today, after lunch, I am going to do some more scales and then run through some old tunes, just to get my tone up a bit to play tonight. On alto I’ll have to take most of the top parts in the horn section. My sound needs to be clear on the melody. When I practiced yesterday I squeaked a bit in the upper register. I need to run over some high-note stuff this afternoon.

Outside it’s a bit cool, but it’s basically a nice day. It’s taken a long time for June to get warm this year but you can feel that summer’s on its way. There are some boys playing football on the other side of the street, two against two. One of them tries to pass it to his partner but he throws it too far and the ball bounces past the curb onto the road. Since I have to cross the street to go to the store anyway I decide to pick it up for them. I walk out onto the street, towards the ball, but one of the boys runs in front of me and scoops it up.

"Okay, I got it," he says to me. He runs back to his friends. I finish crossing the
street and walk to the store.

The store’s called Wan’s Mini-Mart, and there’s a sign in the front window that says they’re open twenty-four hours a day. When I open the door there’s a little buzzing sound from somewhere up at the front and I see a pretty Chinese girl on the phone behind the counter. She is talking in Chinese into the phone very fast. I go to the back of the store where the coolers are.

I have twenty dollars that I took out of the bank yesterday, but I only want to spend ten on food for now. I’m sure Bobby will give me a ride home tonight, but I’ll keep the other ten in case I have to take a cab back from the bar downtown. If I know he’s going to give me a ride home then I’ll use the other ten to buy a couple beers.

There are some packages of lunch meat in the cooler at the very back wall of the store. I open up the cooler and take out the bologna. It’s $3.29. On my way to the front I grab a big bottle of Coke from another cooler and a loaf of bread from a shelf and bring it all up to the counter. The girl keeps talking fast Chinese till she sees me, then she says “Hold on, customer,” into the phone.

“Will that be everything?” she asks me, and I nod yes. She doesn’t sound like she’s from China. She has a lot of freckles on her nose, which is pretty cute. You don’t see that on a lot of Chinese people. Her hair’s long and black and shiny, though. She bends over the cash register and rings up my stuff.

“That will be six dollars and eleven cents,” she says, without looking at my face. Her T-shirt says *Picasso: Atlas Galleries, 1988*. I give her my twenty bucks. While she’s looking down to count out my change, I sneak a peak at the dirty magazines on display up
behind her head. I wouldn’t mind buying one of the them but I don’t want this girl to think I’m like that. I should save my money anyway.

“Thirteen eighty-nine is your change,” she says. She holds the change out for me, and my hand touches hers as I take it. She shoves my stuff into a plastic bag and leaves it sitting on the counter. As I pick up the bag she goes back to the phone and says “O.K.” to whoever she’s talking to. I take one last look at the girl’s freckles and leave the store. I’ll come back here to buy other things sometime so I can touch her hand again.

The boys are still playing football. When I get back to my building there’s a small pink bike on the front lawn. I don’t see any children around, but I do notice that the front door of the building is wedged open with a piece of wood. When I go in I see a woman and a little girl at the top of the first small set of stairs.

“Mommy,” the little girl says to the woman, “how come you tell me not to write on the walls?” The girl’s standing with her back straight against the wall, and her mother’s marking off where the top of the girl’s head is with a pencil.

“Shh,” the woman says. “This is okay cause this isn’t in the apartment, and we ain’t even gonna live here always.” The mother scribbles a dark line on the wall and says, “You’ve grown a lot.” The little girl smiles. I smile at the little girl and she notices me.

“Hi!” she says to me really loud. Her mom turns around, quickly. She seems scared because she didn’t know I was there.

“I was just marking how she grew,” the mother says to me. I nod at her. The little girl steps away from the wall and I see a few pencil marks showing how tall she used to be.

I move down the hallway to my apartment. My sister has two kids down in Ohio, but I
haven’t seen them in about two years.

I haven’t been in the bar I am playing at for a long time, so I don’t know if it’s the way it used to be. Bobby told me that it’s casual though, so I’m not wearing a tie. I’m just wearing jeans and a white shirt. The shirt was a little wrinkled from being in the garbage bags and since I don’t have an iron here I had to lay it flat on the kitchen table and smooth it out with my hands. I don’t have anything at this place. I had to shave with soap and comb my hair back with water.

When I practiced today it was better than yesterday. I went through some old tunes that I played in a band here in town years ago. We used to do a steady gig downtown for a while, doing a lot of rock and roll. I was the only horn in the band so I had to take a lot of solos. There was me, guitar, bass, drums and a girl singer. The girl and the guitar player went to Toronto for a while after that to try to get something started, but it didn’t really work out. We had a guy singer and a few different guitar players after that. That’s how I met Bobby.

There’s a honk outside and I go to the front window and see that Bobby’s waiting there for me. I throw on my jacket and grab my horn and go out to his car. He rolls down the passenger window and says, “Hi, you wanna put that in the trunk?” I nod yes, and he gets out of the car, and opens the trunk. I put my horn in on top of his guitar case and we take off.

“So Jesus,” he says to me, “I guess I really hit the jackpot yesterday, eh? It’s hard to
find a sax player free on a Saturday night.” He turns on the car radio and flips around through the stations. He’s wearing a lot of after-shave. “So what?” he says. “The union follows you around or something?”

“I told them last week that I was moving back into town in case they had any jobs for me.”

Bobby nods and stops the radio on a station that’s playing the Eagles.

“So what?” he says. “You were paying your fucking union dues in Chatham?” He starts laughing. I go to say “Yes” but then he says, “Half the people who are playing in town aren’t even in the union anymore.” He turns to me and smiles and says, “Jesus, you’re really something, Ray.”

“I always wanted to get back into it.” I look out the window at a new bar on Wyandotte. I wonder what downtown is like these days. Bobby pulls a pack of cigarettes out of his jacket pocket and takes one out. He pushes the car lighter in.

“Smoke?”

“No,” I say, “I quit.” The radio plays Fleetwood Mac.

“Way to go, Ray,” Bobby says. The lighter makes a click and pops out. Bobby lights his cigarette and says, “You got it all together, eh?” He drags on the cigarette and drums his fingers on the steering wheel to the music.

“So this is mostly blues and three chord stuff in this band, eh?” I ask.

Bobby blows out some smoke and says, “Oh yeah, don’t worry about any of this shit. You’ve done all this stuff before, Ray.”

“Cool.”
"Yeah, don’t sweat it. You know, it’s all that old Motown and blues shit. Nothing hard."

"Oh good, I know all that stuff."

Bobby nods. "Yeah, it’s all there." He turns left on Ouellette Avenue. "So yeah," he says, "if you’re feeling good up there and everything, go on and take a solo if you want."

"Yeah, maybe." I loosen the seat belt and drum my thumbs a bit on my lap.

Bobby starts singing along with the radio, "Don’t, stop, thinking about tomorrow."

He drags on his cigarette and blows it out. "Fuck this is a good tune, isn’t it Ray?" He’s bobbing his head to the song.

"So how are your kids?"

"Oh geez!" he says. "Anita’s running around like a little friggin’ maniac all day long, and Dan’s talking and jabbering and shit like nothing else." He laughs. "You know how they are, eh? All no and ma and dad and why and shit." I smile at him. My sister’s kids are both shy.

"So how old are they again?" I ask him. He turns right on University Avenue.

We’re almost at the bar.

"Uh," he says, thinking about it. "Anita’s four—no, shit—she’s five now, and Dan’s two." He pulls the car into a spot on the street. I unbuckle my seat belt.

"Okay, Ray" he says. "Hope you came out to play." I smile at him and get out of the car, glad we’re finally here.
It’s funny how easy the tunes come back to you once you start jamming with a band. I swear it feels like ten years ago, with Bobby on guitar and singing all these old tunes. We do ‘Midnight Hour’ and ‘Ain’t Too Proud to Beg’ and ‘Knock on Wood’ and ‘Hoochie Coochie Man’ in the first set and the crowd here’s really getting into it. All these college kids and folks my age are having a good time dancing and drinking. I’m feeling good on my horn, and I think I fit in okay with the other guys. We end the set with ‘Lonely Teardrops’ and I decide to take a solo and it goes pretty good. After the song, Bobby points to me and shouts out, “Ray Morgan on alto sax!” and all the people in the bar start clapping and cheering. I step off the stage for the break feeling pretty happy. Bobby comes up behind me and puts his arm around me.

“See, Ray,” he says, “I told you this stuff’d all come back to you.” I smile back at him and nod. We go grab seats at the bar because Bobby’s friend is working there and Bobby says we’ll be able to scam a free pitcher off of him. The bartender’s name is Doug. He comes over to us.

“Hey Bob,” Doug says. “This guy sounds pretty good up there.” He pulls a pitcher down from a rack over the bar and fills it up from the Labatt’s tap. “You gonna ship Lennie out of town and give this guy the regular job?” Doug winks at me.

Bobby says, “Yeah I should, eh?” as he lights up a cigarette from his pack. He says to me, “You wouldn’t mind taking the job away from my other alto player, would you, Ray?” I’m not sure if he’s joking or not so I just smile at him. Doug places the full pitcher and two empty glasses down in front of us. There are a lot of people calling for drinks at the bar so he doesn’t have time to stay and chat with us. Bobby thanks Doug for the beer as
he walks away.

“Well, Ray,” Bobby says to me. “you got fifteen minutes to make new friends before we go back up and you blow that horn some more, okay?” He pats me on the back and walks off into the crowd, taking the pitcher of beer with him. He’s a nice guy but he always was kind of like that, a little selfish about free beer and stuff like that. I turn on my barstool and take a look around the bar.

There are a lot of young girls here and not a lot of women my age. Most of the young girls seem to be with young college guys. I want to find a single girl to talk to. There’s a woman who looks around my age sitting at a table on the other side of the room, but I don’t want to rush over there in case she’s not alone. I sit still for a minute and wait to see if her boyfriend or husband or whoever comes back from the john and sits at one of the chairs next to her. After a couple minutes she’s still sitting alone, drinking a beer. She’s pretty, with long curly black hair and red lipstick. I go over to her table.

“Hi,” I say, “do you mind if I sit down here?” She points to one of the chairs at the table and nods. She has white powder on her face and blue make-up around her eyes.

“Do you come here a lot?” I say, but she just shrugs her shoulders. “I just moved back into town, I haven’t been to this place in a long time.”

She nods and looks down at her long red fingernails that have little moons painted on them.

She looks up and says, “So you don’t play here regularly?” I sip my beer and shake my head no. She nods.

She looks back down at her nails and says, “Well, I think you sounded good up
there.” She takes a sip from her beer.

“Thanks. I was nervous tonight cause I haven’t played much in a while.”

“Really?” she says and looks at me. “You sounded good.”

“What’s your name?” I ask.

“Diane,” she says.

“I’m Ray.”

She sticks her hand out at me and says, “It’s nice to meet you.” I shake her hand and nod. I see that Bobby is starting to gather up the guys in the band on the other side of the room.

“I think I have to go back up there,” I say. She nods.

I see Bobby starting to walk over to the table from the other side of the room, so I say. “Do you think I could maybe call you to do something sometime, Diane?” She looks at her nails again and then looks up at me.

“Okay,” she says. “You want my number?” I nod yes, so she takes a pen and a pack of cigarettes out of her purse and writes down the number on a little piece of the cigarette pack that she rips off. “Here,” she says and hands it to me. Bobby comes to the table and says, “Time to go back up there, Ray.”


When we start the second set and do ‘634-5789’ I look at Diane while I play. She gets up and leaves in the middle of the song, before I get to do a solo.
When Bobby’s driving me home he says, “So who was that girl you were talking to on the first break?” He has the radio going again on some talk show. It’s almost two in the morning.

“That was just a girl I met,” I say. “Diane.”

He smiles and says, “She’s pretty, Ray.” I smile back at him and look in my shirt pocket to make sure that her phone number is still there with the fifty bucks from Bobby.

“So are you gonna go out with her?” he asks.

“I think so.”

Bobby pulls the car up in front of my building. He says, “Cool.” I unbuckle my seat belt and open up the door. Bobby gets out to open the trunk for me. As I’m taking my sax out of the trunk he pats me on the back. “Glad you could play tonight, Ray. We might need you again sometime.”

“Always here,” I say to him as he gets back into the car. He drives away and I stand on the street and wave to him before I go inside.

When I get into the apartment I put my horn down and take off my shoes and my jacket. Then I go and put my money and Diane’s phone number in the secret hole in the wall so I know exactly where they are and they won’t get lost. I plan on calling Diane tomorrow and seeing if she is free for tomorrow night. I won’t give her a chance to get away.

It’s late and I feel like watching t.v. I never used to be able to afford a t.v. when I lived in Windsor before, but now I have a small black-and-white one that was my mom’s in
the rest home before she passed away. I get myself a glass of Coke and a piece of bread from the kitchen and flop down in my chair to watch the tube.

There’s never anything on this late at night. Most of the channels are just snow or plain white screens at this hour. I end up with three choices—some old movie that seems to have started a while ago, one of those half-hour commercials about some spray paint for bald guys, and an episode of some old cop show. None of these shows seem to have any women in them. I get up from the chair. I’ll walk down to Wan’s and buy something.

This probably isn’t the best neighbourhood to walk around in this late at night but since Wan’s is just down the street I figure it’ll be okay. It’s very cool now and the wind is strong so I zip up my jacket to the very top, close to my neck. It’s really quiet outside. Nobody is around on the street. A tin can rolls in a circle on the road from the wind and the scraping noise it makes makes me jump.

Wan’s is very bright and stands out on the dark street. When I go in the door I hear the buzzing sound from the front again but the Chinese girl isn’t behind the counter anymore. There are two young guys there, a Chinese one and a blond one. Both of them look at me when I come in. The blond one is skinny with pimples on his face. He stands on the customer side of the counter. The Chinese boy has slicked back hair and sits on a chair by the cash.

I’m not really hungry so I won’t buy any food. The store has lots of different things. There are note pads and toilet paper and pet food. They have small toys for kids, and condoms and aspirin and tampons. If I had a VCR I’d rent a movie. One that I could watch from the beginning without commercials. A magazine will be alright for tonight.
I walk to the magazine stand and look at the different ones there. Most of them are for women. The stories on their covers aren’t really for me. The do’s and don’ts of adultery. 12 days to a thinner funny. Quick and easy salads for the perfect summer barbecue. I have never learned to cook myself, really, but my mom was good. She baked great desserts. I turn away from the regular magazines and take a look up at the dirty magazines behind the boys. I take my time checking them out. With guys here you don’t have to pretend.

After a while the Chinese boy looks right at me and asks if I’m going to buy something. I go to the counter and point at one of the dirty magazines.

“This one?” he asks, but his hand is touching a really sleazy one, one with some girl with her legs spread and her tongue hanging out. I point to the one I want again and he takes it down and puts it on the counter. It’s wrapped in plastic. He rings it up.

“Six eighty-four,” he says. I put seven dollars on the counter. He takes the money and puts my change back in the same spot. I grab my stuff and leave. I walk back to the apartment quickly, with the magazine hidden under my jacket, zipped up tight.

On Sunday morning I watch wrestling and eat bologna sandwiches. A fat black guy beats a skinny white guy by knocking him out. Then the black guy cuts the white guy’s hair off with some big scissors while all the fans boo at him. I usually don’t watch this stuff but I’m trying to kill time before I call Diane. If I call her too early she’ll think that I’m desperate and I’ll scare her away. It is twenty to twelve on my watch. I’m hoping to hold
off until at least noon. The skinny white guy wakes up and sees hair all over the ring and puts his hand on his bald head and can’t believe it. What a joke.

There’s a knock from somewhere. It sounds like it could be my door but I don’t know anybody in town who would just drop by. Only Bobby and the union and my family know where I live. I’ve found that this building is pretty noisy at times. The last few nights I have heard fights and loud music and things dropping and babies crying. I can never tell where the noise is coming from. Sometimes it’s just everywhere all at once. I get up from my chair and go to the door, just in case the noise is for me this time. There’s another knock, my door for sure.

I’m about to open up but then I notice that there’s a peephole on the door. I look through it to see who’s out there.

On the other side of the door is a girl I’ve never seen before. She has yellow hair with black roots, like a bee. Her dress is pink and very tight and made out of T-shirt material. I can see her nipples poking through. She’s not wearing a coat so I wonder if she is from somewhere in the building. There’s orange glittery lipstick on her mouth and a pimple on her chin. While I’m staring at her, her fist comes very close to the peephole and she knocks again.

“Jeremy,” she calls out and looks up and down the hall. I don’t know anyone named Jeremy. She opens her mouth and runs her tongue over her teeth. Her teeth are the same colour as her hair. She pulls her dress out a bit so that the nipples don’t stick out as much. She knocks again.

“Jeremy,” she says another time. I can’t remember what the name of the guy who
lived in the apartment before me was. I can’t remember if the landlady even told me. The girl scratches her ass.

“Jeremy!” she calls out, loudly, really impatient, but she doesn’t knock this time. She looks up and down the hall again and then walks away out of sight of the peephole. I want to open the door and see where she’s going but I don’t know what to say if she sees me. I look at my watch. It’s noon. I can call Diane.

Her number is still in the secret hole where I left it, next to my money. But there’s something wrong with the cash. The wad seems smaller than last night. Bobby paid me in fives and tens and I know that fifty bucks should be a bigger pile than what’s there in the secret hole. I pick up the money and count it. There’s only twenty-five dollars. I take out Diane’s number, close up the secret hole and go into the bedroom.

My pants and shirt from last night are on the floor and I go through the pockets to make sure I didn’t leave any cash there. Nothing. I go back to the front room and check the pockets of my jacket. Again, nothing. I don’t know where the money has gone. I walk a lap around the living room looking at the floor. It’s not there. I think that maybe I dropped some cash on my way home from Wan’s last night. I’ll go look as soon as I call Diane and make a date.

Three rings go by before someone answers. Then there’s a little girl on the phone who says, “Hello?” When I ask if Diane is there the little girl says, “Hold on a sec,” and then I hear her put down the phone and call out, “Mommy.” Diane didn’t tell me she had any kids. I hear some footsteps across a floor and then the phone is picked up again. Diane says, “Hello?”
“Hi Diane,” I say, “It’s Ray from last night.” There’s a long silence on her end. She has to remember me. It was only just last night.

Finally she says, “Was that you last night?”

She does remember me. “Yeah. Remember you gave me your number.”

“I forgot about that. Well listen, Ray, I appreciate that you didn’t wake my fucking kid up this time.”

I don’t know what she means.

“What are you talking about?” I say. She’s quiet a long time again before she talks.

“Well, I dunno,” she goes, “did you think that your little game last night was funny? Is that it, Ray? I mean, are you into jokes or something?”

“Huh?”

She says, “Well, I hope it was a joke, buddy, because, I mean, Jesus, if you ever called about any of that shit for real— Well, fuck I don’t know what I’d do.”

“Diane,” I say, not knowing what the hell is going on, “I really don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Look, Ray,” she says, really slowly, like my sister does when she’s pissed off at her kids, “to be honest, I don’t usually give my number out to guys in bars and there seems to be a good reason for that.”

“Diane—” I start to say.

“No, Ray, you listen to me, alright? Don’t call here again, O.K.? I don’t want any replays of that shit you pulled last night. My kid wakes up easily and it’s hard to get her to go back down after, O.K.?”
“Diane, I really don’t know—”

“No, Ray,” she goes. “Just forget it, O.K.? Forget it!”

She hangs up the phone.

I get my jacket and put on my shoes to go look for my money out on the street near Wan’s. I open the door of the apartment and make sure the girl with yellow hair isn’t waiting for Jeremy in the hall. It’s been a weird morning.

Outside the boys, four of them, are playing football again across the street. I go across the street and stand on the sidewalk near them.

“Did any of you guys see some money, like twenty-five bucks, lying around here this morning?” I ask. The boys all stop and look at each other and shake their heads and then look back at me. The one holding the football goes, “No.” I say, “Thanks,” and walk away down the street towards Wan’s, looking down. Behind me one of the boys says, “As if we’d give it back if we found it,” and then I hear one of the other boys say, “Shut up, fucker, he’ll hear you.”

I go up and down the block, to Wan’s and back, twice on each side of the street. There’s gum and crusty leave and paper and three pennies but I can’t find my money. I walk one last little circle around the front of the building before I give up and go back inside.

When I get back up the stairs and try the door to my apartment I see that I’ve left it unlocked. I’m getting stupid or something. If I don’t lock up someone will get in and take my stuff. I have to be more careful. Once my cousin left his apartment unlocked while he went downstairs for an hour or so to do some laundry and when he came back his leather
jacket and his records were gone. When I get inside I lock the door behind me.

I take out my sax case and open it up and take a look, even though I know the money was never in there. I will look just about anywhere at this point. It'll hurt too much to lose twenty-five bucks. I do a lap around the apartment, checking every place I can think of. The money is nowhere. Then there is a knock at the door. I rush over to the peephole and take a look. I can only see the top of a blonde-haired head. I open the door and see the little girl from the hallway yesterday. She hasn't grown enough to fit into peepholes. She's holding a blonde-haired doll.

"Hi!" she says, very happy.

"Hi," I say.

She says, "I'm Carol-Ann." Then she points to the doll and says, "This is X."

"Why did you name her X?" I ask. Carol-Ann looks down at the doll and frowns.

"What's your name?" she asks.

"Ray."

"Why did they name you, Ray?" she asks. Ray was my father's name.

"Because—" I start to say, but then a woman shouts out, "Carol-Ann! You get your ass down here." I look around the corner of my door and see Carol-Ann's mother down the hall holding a basket of laundry. She looks pissed off. Carol-Ann and X run away.

Then the mom says to her, "Don't you ever let me catch you near that apartment, do you hear? You stay away from that apartment!" She says this very loud and I wonder if she wanted me to hear. Mothers are always afraid of strangers. I close the door and lock it.
At three o’clock in the afternoon I’m practising my axe quietly in the living room while watching a baseball game on t.v. without the sound. I’ve decided that I’m going to keep my chops up these days in case any more gigs come along. I’d love to get a steady job playing with somebody. Hopefully something will come along before long.

On one of the commercials during the game I stop playing and look through my sax case because I’m bored. I’m always stuffing things in the case and then finding them and then stuffing them back and forgetting about them and then getting surprised when I find them there again later. It’s like a game. Even today I get surprised again.

There’s a book of matches in the case from a place I played at once, a sort of ritzy place in Detroit called Harrigan’s. It was much different than most of the places I’ve played. They served food there and it wasn’t just pizza or burgers and fries. I remember they had steak and shrimp and salads and soups and people would dress up there and drink wine while the band was playing. I was nervous about doing the gig because it was a lot of jazz stuff with this piano player from Windsor named Alan that the union hooked me up with. It was just a duo and he took the most of the solos. Basically I just had to read the melodies for each tune from a fake-book he had with him and then sit back while he stretched out over the chord changes.

So the gig was going smooth and I was feeling good because it turned out to be a pretty easy job and I was going to come away with a hundred bucks at the end of the night. All the people in the place were from Detroit, and all the guys had ties on, and all of the women wore dresses. I didn’t know anyone there so on the breaks I just sat at the bar with
the piano player, and after one of the sets he even bought me a shot.

During the third set we were doing a bunch of mellow old tunes, like ‘Someday My Prince Will Come’ and shit like that. I did the chorus to one of the tunes and then layed out and sipped on a beer I had going while the piano player took his solo. I started looking around at the people in the place and most of them seemed to be liking the music we were playing. There were some older couples who were snuggling up to each other and getting all mushy for each other because we were doing tunes they knew.

Then I recognized someone, a girl I’d gone out with for a long time. Jessie, my old fiancee for a while, before that day when she said she didn’t like the way things were going and told me I should take my ring back. There she was in Detroit, looking good, all dressed up in a black dress, and with her hair up in a bun. She was with some guy in a suit who had grey hair. She caught me looking at her and smiled at me like she used to, as if we weren’t broken up and it wasn’t a surprise that we were both here. I nodded at her and then she whispered something into the guy-in-the-suit’s ear. I went back over to the piano and came back in for the last chorus of the song. Jessie and her date got up and left before the set was over.

After the night was over, when I was packing up my sax and waiting for the piano player to collect my money from the manager and then give me a ride home, a waitress came up to me and handed me a note on a napkin. Jessie wrote it. She had very dainty handwriting, small letters. It said, “Ray. Good to see you’ve made out of the cheap bars! Take care.” I put it in my pocket and read it over and over and over for a month.

I saved some matches from that place here in my case but damned if I can
remember where I put the note. I think I needed a secret hole back then. I put the matches on the coffee table. After the game I’ll put them in the secret hole where they belong.

There’s a knock at the door. I lay the sax down on the couch and then get up and go to the peephole.

It’s the yellow-haired woman again, but this time she’s with a guy. The guy is kind of tall, about six feet and has muscular arms. He has shaggy blond hair and a scratch on his cheek. He’s wearing a tank top and there’s a tattoo on one of his shoulders of Woody Woodpecker smoking a cigar. He’s also wearing soccer shorts with a white stripe down the side. The girl’s dressed the same as before. Her fist comes right up towards my eye in the peephole and then she calls out, “Jeremy!” again.

“This prob’ly ain’t even the place,” the guy says to the yellow-haired girl.

She hisses at him and says, “I know that fucker’s in there.” She knocks on the door again, her fist right near the peephole. “Jeremy!” She shakes her head and says, “Fucker”, kind of quietly.

“Let’s forget this shit,” says the guy, looking really bored. He puts his hand on her rear end and giggles. He goes, “Eh? What d’ya say to a li’l of that?” The girl slaps his hand away and knocks lightly on my door again.

“Come on, baby,” the guy says, in a fake French voice, like Pepe Le Pew. He cups his hand under one of her boobs and starts bobbing it up and down in his hand. The girl smirks, but then slaps his hand really hard. “Stop it,” she says to him, and then to my door, “Jeremy!”

“Ah, fuck this Jeremy shit,” says the guy. He sticks his tongue out, as long as it will
go, for the girl and twirls it around in front of her face. She frowns and goes, “Now stop it.” He won’t quit though. He reaches into the front of his soccer shorts and pulls his dick out, flopping it around like a little white fish.


The girl says, “Fucking Jeremy” and walks away quickly. The guy chases her, without pulling his shorts back up. He disappears out of the peephole. I can still hear him in the hall speaking fake French, saying, “Eh? Huh?”

I go back to the coffee table and pick up the matchbook and take it to the wall. I pull the picture down by the t.v. and go to put the matchbook in the secret hole but another strange thing has happened. There’s a small cellophane bag in the secret hole, filled with marijuana. I haven’t smoked weed in a long time, but I definitely know what it looks like. Bobby and some of the other guys used to take up a lot after gigs. I certainly had nothing to do with this being put there.

Next to the bag of weed, there’s a note. It says, “J., What’s up with this Diane? What’s with all the new stuff?” It’s crazy seeing Diane’s name on the paper, and I read the note a few times just to make sure. This is baffling. Somebody was in my apartment. Somebody that knows Diane. Somebody that smokes weed. I take the weed and the note, put them on the coffee table and flop down in my chair.

The note is addressed to J. and that must mean Jeremy. Whoever he is, Jeremy knows the yellow-haired girl and the person who was in my apartment, and then maybe he knows Diane. Or maybe the yellow-haired girl was the one who was in the apartment, and maybe she knocked because she forgot her weed here. I don’t think Diane was ever in the
apartment. That would just be too weird.

I start to get a little jumpy and it seems like it might not be a bad idea to smoke a bit of the weed since I have it. Just one joint to calm me down and get it together. Then maybe the yellow-haired girl will come back and things can get sorted out.

I look around for something to roll the joint in. I could try doing it with Diane’s phone number but it’s written on the cardboard from her cigarette pack and I don’t think it’d work too good. There’s also the magazine I bought at Wan’s the other night, but the joint might taste crappy on the glossy paper. There is the note to J., though maybe I shouldn’t roll a doob in that because it will destroy a clue. Still, it’s the only paper I have handy. I rip the note down a bit to get it to the size of a rolling paper, and then I put a little weed in from the bag. I roll it carefully and seal it with a little spit from my tongue. It’s a pretty fat doob, and I hope the yellow-haired girl or whoever isn’t pissed off when I give the rest of the weed back. Before I light up, I decide that it’d be a good idea to block up the front door with something. Bobby used to do that with a towel, when he and his wife were living with her folks for a while, and we’d drop by after gigs to hang out in the basement. Bobby said if his wife’s folks caught him smoking up they’d throw him out.

I only have three towels and I don’t want to waste any of them on the floor just so I can smoke a joint, so I decide to use some clothes instead. I get the white shirt I wore last night, since it’s dirty anyway, and my socks from yesterday and my underwear from yesterday and Friday. I get down on my knees and smooth the clothes out on the floor so that they block up the space under the door. Hopefully, if anybody walks by they won’t be able to smell anything funny. I don’t want anyone to think I’m some kind of toker or
anything. After the crack is all blocked up, I go take the Harrigan's matches from the secret hole and light the joint.

It's weird sitting in your own place, smoking a fat one, and not having to share it with anybody. Anytime I smoked up before it was always with other people. With Bobby and his wife at Bobby's in-laws, in parking lots with musicians after gigs, once with Jessie and one of her girlfriends at a party. Now I'm alone, in my own place, with the weed all to myself. Maybe this is how rich people do it, maybe this is how they live.

The buzz falls down over me like a big fuzzy blanket. I smoke the joint down to the end, till the roach burns my finger and I have to put it out on the coffee table because there's no ashtray. The room is suddenly smooth, and I could swim through it like my sister's pool in Ohio. I turn the t.v. on and they're showing everything at a slow speed. I like this because it makes it all so easy to follow.

On one commercial I get out of the chair and crawl across the floor a few feet to my sax. I put the sax together and bring it back to the chair. When music comes from the t.v. I try to play along, but I'm always stuck doing three chord shit, while they stretch out doing jazz. So I start just playing long, low notes, holding them down like fog horns in the night. It feels really late to me but there's still daylight through the window. Sometimes in Alaska the sun stays up for a year.

I'll call Diane. It's been a long time since I talked to her, and I really should keep in touch. Her number is still on the coffee table and when I pick up the phone and start to dial I go really slow to get it right. The phone rings once, then twice, then after three someone picks it up, a little girl. "Hello?" she says but I wait a bit to be funny. "Hello?" she says
again, but then I giggle and ruin the joke.

"Hi, X." I say. "Can you get Diane?" The girl puts the phone down and it sounds like it's falling down the stairs, clunkety-clunk. Then I hear the girl says, "Mommy, it's hum again." There's some clicking like claws across the floor. Maybe Diane has a lion. She picks up the phone and says, "Hello," except that it's Jessie, not Diane who's there.

"Jessie!" I say, I'm so surprised, "what are you doing there?"

She says, "Ray, I know it's you again. What the hell do you want from me?"

I start to say, "I just want you to know--"

"Ray," she says, interrupting me, "stop this, or I'm going to call the police."

"--that I still play in the cheap bars." I say, finishing what I wanted to.

"Ray, what the hell are you talking about? You have to stop this, or I am going to call the police. Ray!" By the end of the sentence she's shouting at me. The way she sounded when I called before, after she gave the ring back, those weeks and weeks when I tried to get it back together but she said she'd had enough.

"O.K., Jessie," I go, "say good-bye to X. for me, and be careful down there in Detroit."

She says, "Don't call again, asshole. I don't need trouble like this." She hangs up the phone, and I listen to the dial tone, a little foghorn trapped in a box somewhere far away. Then I realize that someone has put something heavy on top of my head, heavy and invisible, and I have to lie back and go to sleep to make it fall off.
I’m asleep in the dark when Diane’s lion roars in my ear really loud. I jump up, ready to run away to save my life, but then I realize that it was a saxophone, not a lion, and it was played by a strange guy in a leather jacket and a tie standing over me. The balcony door is open behind him and the wind is blowing in. I’m not in the jungle, like it felt when I first woke up, but this stranger is here so there’s still reason to be scared. He squonks the saxophone again, holding down a long note that cracks and turns into a bad squeak. He takes the sax out of his mouth.

“Scared you, huh?” he says. In the dark his teeth are kind of glowing but the rest of his face is hidden.

“Who are you?” I say, easing up in my seat.

He says, “No, who are you?” and then does a quick squonk-squonk on the sax like a car horn. This guy is freaking me out.

“I live here.” I say. The guy steps back a bit quickly.

“Whoa-whoa-whoa-whoa-whoa!” he goes. “Where the hell is Jeremy, man?”

“I don’t know who Jeremy is,” I say. “I just moved in here the other day.”

The guy chuckles a bit, and then goes, “Well, if you don’t know who Jeremy is, then why are you helpin’ yourself to his weed, man?” I’m embarrassed by this, and wish I hadn’t gotten caught with everything out on the table.

“I’m not usually like that—” I start to say but the guy cuts me off with a squonk.

He takes the mouthpiece out of his mouth and says, “Ah, save it. So J. is outta this dump, eh? No wonder there’s all this new shit lying around. I was in here the other day and I couldn’t figure out what the fuck was up with this saxophone and shit.”
“You were in my apartment?”

“Shit yeah. I pop in all the time through the balcony there. I live next door. Just a quick jump from my balcony to yours. Jeremy never kept that door locked.”

“You just pop in?”

“All the time,” he says. “Jeremy never cared. Shit, I wish the fucker’d have called me. He should have let me know he was moving out.” He blows another squonk and then says, “Ass-hole.”

“Who are you?” I ask.

He says, “I’m a business man, dude. I specialize in——” and then he ends the sentence with a big squonk. He puts the horn down on the coffee table and scoops up the bag of weed. “I take it you found the secret door?”

“Door?” I ask.

“Yeah,” the guy says. “Don’t play dumb.” He walks over to the painting of the fruit by the t.v. and takes it off the wall. He puts his hand inside the secret hole and smacks the back of it. It flies open on hinges into the apartment next door. “Neat, huh?” he says.

“I didn’t know it opened up.”

“Oh yeah. That’s how Jer used to score off me, man. He’d leave me money for him or one of his dippy friends and I’d fix him up. Perfect set-up, cause you know I can’t afford any more time in the can. Already on parole as it is.”

“You were in jail?” I ask.

“Hey,” the guy says. “What’s it to you, pardner?”

“Sorry.”
"Did you know that girl, Diane?"

"Yeah. I was gonna ask her out."

"Well she definitely didn’t want to score any hooch from me, dude. I thought she was one of Jeremy’s dope friends so I gave her a call when I found the number in there. Man, she’s all freaked out, that one."

"What did you say to her?"

"Doesn’t matter, man. She’s fucking crazy." The guy waves his hand, as if to say, forget her. "Anyway, listen," he says, "I guess I won’t beat the shit out of you for gypping some boo off me." He puts the weed in his pocket. "Jesus, Jeremy is such a fuck-up. I wish the dick’d told me he was moving."

The guy in the leather jacket turns away in the dark and walks across the room to the door. He kicks my clothes away, opens the door and leaves the apartment without closing the door behind him. The light from the hall is shining in. He calls, “See ya,” from out in the hall as he takes off.

I get off my chair and go across the room to close the door. As I get there, Carol-Ann and her mom are coming up the stairs. Carol-Ann is carrying X., who’s wrapped up in a plastic bag. The mom’s carrying a video tape and a bottle of Pepsi. As she passes my apartment she sniffs in the air like a dog. The wind blowing from my apartment reeks like pot. The mom frowns at me, and tugs Carol-Ann along quickly.

"Hi Ray," Carol-Ann says.

"Hi Carol-Ann," I say. Her mother pushes her down the hall from behind and then turns and gives me a long dirty look over her shoulder. You can only take things for so
long. I’m so pissed off that I shoot the finger. I know it’s a really rude thing, but she’s kind of pushed me to it. To be honest, it’s something I wouldn’t usually do.
Chicks With Guitars

After The Blood Wedding’s meteoric rise from Fridays at the BatCave in Windsor, to gigs at Lee’s Palace in Toronto, to a major-label record deal and a video in frequent rotation on MuchMusic, everybody and their brother was forming a band back in the City of Roses. Skinny boys in ripped T.’s and tattered Chucks were taking to garages at all ends of the city, cranking their Fender amps, thrusting heavy feet down on distortion pedals and crackly wah-wah’s, dreaming of Billboard chart deliverance. The BatCave’s door swung open and shut with new faces every weekend as the downtown basement bar offered an ever-open invitation to ensembles of all sizes. It was an easy gig to get as long as you could muster a thumping 4/4 or spread the obligatory wash of bass-heavy electric fuzz. The whole scene was a revolution of white noise and modest talent in Windsor, an indignant cry, an obscene gesture, *Hail hail rock and roll.*

On the first Friday in June, The Bell Boys are gathered down at the Cave, not playing tonight, but hanging out and making plans. They’re Windsor’s latest up-and-coming up-and-coming band, not famous yet only due to a wild inconsistency in their group sound. Since they got going last fall, they’ve done three gigs in four different styles: grunge at their first performance, death-metal at the second, and then a weird combo of new wave and gangster rap at their most recent show in April. Ronnie, the lead singer, thinks they need to circulate outside of the city. He wants to do a 7-inch single and send it to all the college stations. He’s sure it would make the band’s name
across the country. This probably isn’t going to fly, though—money’s tight all around. All four bandmembers are working full time for the summer, but each has got a monkey on his back: Ronnie’s parents are making him pay his own tuition in the fall; Brooks is shelling out dough for his ex’s baby; Al is trying to buy a car; Doc is saving to tour Europe.

“Five hundred bucks, guys,” says Ronnie, leaning back in his chair, bringing his ribs to the surface of his too-tight Shaggy T-shirt. He sucks some foam off the top of his beer. “That’s all. A guy from The MelonI leads told me.”

“MelonI leads suck,” Al offers. “All that shit they’re doing is old.”

“For sure,” says Brooks. “It’s like bad Human League and ’80’s Rolling Stones in one.”

“They know people though, man,” insists Ronnie. “Their band’s got a following. And it isn’t that much, for the single. It would only cost us around a hundred each.”

Doc says, “No can do.” The others shake their heads; they can’t afford it either.

Ronnie sighs. None of these guys are as committed to making the band happen as he is. They’d all settle for staying in this lame town working on the line at Chrysler or GM or Ford. They can’t think big and go for the major pay-off. Rock and roll is possible, Ronnie thinks. He’s the man with the plan.

Across the room the girls strut into the dark bar in a pack: Yasmin, Siobhan and Beth. Yasmin leads. She’s walking differently these days, more like a snob than she used to, with her head held high and a wicked wiggle to her hips. She’s got a hole in her nose and a hoop in the hole. It gleams in the bar’s amber light. She’s started dressing up
lately too, always in skirts and clunky platform heels. They haven’t seen her in jeans in ages.

“I hate these guys,” Siobhan says, getting to the Bell Boys’ table, nodding at the bandstand. The Poseurs are playing—a young foursome who look fifteen or sixteen, with red and green spiked hair. They’ve all got hollowed faces covered in their mothers’ make-up. The skinny singer is shouting out ‘Anarchy in the UK’ in a fake British accent and snarling here and there at a photo of Princess Di he’s got taped to his mike stand.

Ronnie checks them out.

“Lil fucker’s got heart, man.”

Siobhan scowls. “What’s with the make-up?” she asks. “What a bunch of fucking faggots.”

“Siobhan!” Yasmin squeals, flicking her head towards Beth. ‘Cool it, the rod says. Beth, as it turns out, is a lesbian recently confessed to Yasmin and Siobhan. It’s been a hot topic in the group of late. No one would have figured her for gay. No butch, she’s a retro-glam girl who makes a lot of guys swoon. Farrah Fawcett hair, silver hot pants, white knee-high boots. She used to go out with boys, in grade school mostly, but now, she’s told her friends, she wants to just be herself, play the field, see some chicks or something.

“What?” Siobhan asks. “She knows I fucking hate that queer stuff. Guys should go out with girls.” Beth shrugs and cracks her gum. No harm done. Yasmin shakes her head and the girls haul seats from other tables and join the Bell Boys.

“Get some glasses if you want,” Ronnie says, tipping his nose to the half-full
pitcher of beer in the middle of the table.

"Have they checked anyone's i.d. tonight?" Yasmin asks.

"Fuck, Yas," Ronnie says. "What does it matter? They're never gonna i.d. a chick. Girls bring the guys in here." (At eighteen, Yasmin is the only under-age drinker in the bunch; getting tossed out of the Cave is always a worry for her.) She stands to fetch some glasses from the bar. "Anyone else?" she asks, and catching nods from the two other girls takes off.

"Anyway," Brooks says to the boys. "I think we should change the sound a bit before we record anything."

Al scoffs. "Like what, man? We're balls-out as it is."

"I dunno," says Brooks. "Like we should go ska or something. You know a bouncy beat, some wicked grooves." He bops in his chair. "A kind of Jamaica slash London thing, you know?"

"Ska?" Ronnie whines. "Jesus. Do you know any fuckin' trombone players, man? You need all sorts of horns and shit to do that stuff."

"Just a thought," says Brooks. He belches, and rubs a big hand across his chubby, unshaven chin.

"I'mg." says Siobhan disinterestedly. She continues to watch the Poseurs with disgust. Brooks pours another beer and tugs his baseball cap down over his eyes.

Doc says, "I got it." He takes a drag on his cigarette. "Let's go fucking rockabilly, man. Like all twangy guitars and bass drum." He grins and exhales.

"Like the Stray Cats?" Ronnie asks.
"No, man. Like fucking Link Wray!"

"Who's that?"

"Guitar hero from the Fifties. All twangy and shit. Like, we'll come out in jeans and motorcycle boots with slicked back hair and white T-shirts--"

Brooks belches again, then says, "What are we?" He pounds his chest. "The fucking Beverly Hillbillies? Get outta here, man."

Doc frowns. Ronnie squeals, "Yee haw!"

"Fuck both of you," Doc says, hurt. His eyes burn behind his specs.

Brooks goes: "I say we get more people. Like a big fuckin' rock-n-roll revue. Get some of these chicks to back us up like Joe Cocker had or something."

"You wish, pig," says Siobhan, turning back to the table. "Like I would back up your fat ass."

Brooks' eyebrows furrow. "Your ass ain't too tiny, either." He butts out his cigarette. "You're a bitch, Siobhan." Her lips tighten up, and her plump face goes red between blonde pigtails.

"Shut up," says Ronnie. He pours another beer. "You know I think Brooks has gotta cool idea."

Yasmin returns from the bar with three draught glasses and a full pitcher. She squeezes into her seat.

"You thought of something, Brookside?" she says playfully. Brooks drops his head shyly and smiles. Yasmin sits down next to him and strokes his arm. His face turns red. They all go nutty when she flirts like this, she's so pretty. "I got some beer," Yasmin
says. “They didn’t even check me.”

“Yas,” Ronnie says. “You and your homegirls here wanna be in the band?”

Yasmin and Beth and Siobhan exchange glances and then smile one after the other in turn. Yasmin pours glasses of beer for the girls.

“No.”

“Why? You did your time in the choir in high school. It’d be fucking cool to get some chicks in the group.”

“Sorry, Ron.”

“Fuck, you’re sad.” He looks away. “All three of you.”

“Well,” Yasmin says, grinning. “We’ve got our own thing happening.”

Doc laughs. “You’ve got what?”

“We’re getting a band together, asshole.” Siobhan barks. Beth smiles.

“You gotta be fucking kidding me,” says Ronnie.

“True,” says Yasmin.

“You three?”

“Yeah.”

Doc continues to howl. “I love it,” he says. “Chicks with guitars.”

“Jesus,” Ronnie says.

“We’re gonna rock,” says Beth, quietly. She flutters her mascara’d lashes at Doc.

“Gotta name?”

The girls all look at each other. Yasmin nods. “The lissy Fits. We’re punk.”

“But not some faggot poser-punk like these queers,” Siobhan adds.
“Yeah. The real thing,” says Yasmin. “We may get some more piercings and shave our heads and stuff.”

Doc doubles over, howling with laughter.

“F*ck you,” says Siobhan.

“I don’t believe this,” says Ronnie.

“Relax, Ron,” Yasmin says, draping her bangled arm over his shoulder. “You still got your Bell Boys. We’re all friends here.”

“What was that guy’s name?” Ronnie asks Doc. “The rockabilly dude.”

“Link Wray.”

“Give me a tape of him.” Ronnie says, and sighs. “Maybe we can do some of that shit after all.”

Just then, Siobhan scowls and mutters, “F*ck.” She’s looking toward the door of the bar, and collectively turning, all of them at the table catch what’s turned her off. Pug Wiley, Yasmin’s very recent ex-, has wandered in with some dopey looking hippie chick in tow. Pug smiles at the bunch of them and saunters through the Cave toward the bar, dragging the spaced out flower-child behind him.

“He’s got a lot of nerve,” Siobhan says. “What a shithead.”

Yasmin’s eyes go ever-so-slightly teary. It’s been a messy, see-saw kind of break-up, probably not finalized in her mind until now, with the appearance of this new female companion. Ronnie’s quick to console.

“Come on, Yas. Forget that S.O.B.”

“Yeah,” Brook says. “If you want, I’ll even go kick his sorry butt for you.”
Yasmin smiles and sniffs. "Thanks, Brooksie."

"When you start your band you can rag out on that loser," adds Ronnie. "You can stand up there and bitch out big-time, write all sorts of songs about what a sorry shit he is."

Yasmin smiles and kisses Ronnie's cheek. They've been friends since grade school. He's always been good at cheering her up when she's down. Across the room Pug smooths his short-short hair and plants a kiss on the hippie chick. He turns back to the Bell Boys and winks.

Later, Ronnie and Doc share a joint in the open air, sprawled on a picnic table in the park by Ronnie's place. It's a clear night and there are plenty of stars. The pair kept the spliff from their friends all night, saving it for this quiet moment, when they can get stoned together like they used to in grade nine.

"So Pug was fuckin' around on her for awhile?" Doc asks. He drags hungrily on the joint and lets the smoke fill his lungs.

"That hound has been laying girls behind her back for ages!" Ronnie inhales and holds the joint under his nose.

"And she didn't know?"

"She knew about some of them. He fessed up here and there when he was wasted."

"I don't know why she put up with that shit."
"Well, she's a little flaky, man. She thought she was in love or some silly shit like that."

"God. I would kill for a chick like that to be lovin' me. Pug is sad, man."

"Sure is."

"Can you imagine takin' a chick like that to bed?"

"I he wasn't."

"Yeah, right."

"Serious."

"You're shitting me."

"Nope. He never had her."

"Get out of here."

"She's saving it for marriage."

"Holy!"

"That's a secret. Between you and me."

"Gotcha."

"Can't kill the Catholic in her, Doctor." Ronnie passes the joint.

"Wow." Doc sucks from the shrinking roach. "That's too much." He inhales greedily from the roach again. "You know what, Ron. This pot sucks."

"That's the last time we score from that guy from the Melon Heads."
Beth’s younger brother, Joey, set the girls up in the garage for their first rehearsal. He’s a bit of a music handyman, building amps in the basement, making guitars out of necks and bodies he’s picked up along the way. His room downstairs is stuffed full of tubes and wires and Dean Markley strings and dog-eared tablature magazines. He’s trying to help the Hissy Fits out. He’s given them a couple of amps to use—a pair of self-constructed stacks that he made at home out of old stereo parts. As well, Beth is using his drums on loan, a set of orphaned pieces in different colours from kits picked up used around town. Siobhan’s parents got her a bass after she promised to go back to university in the fall. On lead, Yasmin has a pink guitar, an old imitation Strat she bought from Ron and coloured herself. There’s gloopy pink spraypaint stuck to the strings.

“Okay,” Siobhan says. “Let’s get going. Are we gonna do any covers or only originals?”

“I dunno,” says Yasmin. “Have either of you written any songs?”

There are headshakes from the other two. Not a lot of planning has gone into this venture. It all started as a cool idea that the three had sitting on a curb outside a party a few weeks ago. It was a late-in-the-evening moment when Siobhan turned to the other two and said, “You know what? It’d fucking rock to be in a band.” Now’s the turning point, when the girls have to stop thinking of the group and start being one.

“Well, I know some basslines,” says Siobhan. “I’ve been trying out some stuff the last few nights since I got my axe.” She plugs the bass into one of Joey’s makeshift amps and pulls a pick from the pocket of her jeans. Biting her lip in concentration, she
stares at the strings and starts picking along a dull line, a repetitive figure that sounds like one long, vibrating hum through the crappy speaker she’s using.

“I don’t think I know that one,” Beth says. “What is it?”

Siobhan stops playing, frustrated. “You couldn’t tell!”

Yasmin shakes her head.

“Shit, guys. It was ‘Boredom.’ The Buzzcocks, you know?”

“Oh,” the others say in unison. “Yeah.”

“Do it again,” says Beth. “But pick up the speed a little bit.”

Siobhan gets the line going again, a bit quicker this time. Here and there she flubs it and has to stop and begin again. After a few tries she gets it down kind of solidly, with a lot of focus and staring at the strings. Beth tries to come in on drums when it seems like the tune’s going alright, but she jumbles everything in a mess of misplaced snare hits and timid rim shots. Siobhan stops playing.

“Shit, what were you doing?”

“Sorry,” Beth says. “It’s kind of tricky.”

“It’s just four beats. Come on, follow my bassline.”

Siobhan cranks up her line again, starting off slow but building into a fairly loud, fairly punky show of confidence. If she could step it up a little more and hurry the tempo, it might even sound like the actual tune. Yasmin taps her foot on the concrete floor. This is getting good. Beth tries to join in again, but it’s the same clumsy phenomenon—this time with a bad bass drum kick thrown in, out of time with the beat.

Siobhan stops playing again, more frustrated than before.
“Jesus. I thought you said you could play drums.”

“I can. I did back in majorettes when I was a kid. This stuff is different though.”

“Maybe Joey could help you,” Yasmin suggests.

“Good idea.” She drops her sticks and rises from the kit. “I’ll go get him.” She wanders through the door of the garage that leads to the house.

“Fuck, this is bad,” Siobhan says, cracking her gum.

“Don’t worry. She’ll get it.”

“You know the guitar part, though, right?”

“Well, I’m sure it’s easy to learn.”

“You don’t know it?”

“Don’t worry, we’ll get it.”

“Do you even know how to play any guitar?”

“Kinda.”

“What the fuck does that mean?”

“Ronnie showed me some stuff.”

“Jesus, this is lame. We’re gonna suck.”

Beth returns from inside the house with Joey, a pimply faced adolescent with long, greasy hair. He’s wearing an undershirt and sweat pants. His feet are bare and yellow around the nails.

“Whassup?”

“You’ve gotta show your sister how to play the drums,” Siobhan says. “She lied and told us she could play.”
“I can,” Beth squeals.

“What tune are you doing?”

“‘Boredom,’” Siobhan says, “by the Buzzcocks.”

“Ace,” Joey says. “Great tune.” He sits down at the drums and picks up the sticks. “Go ahead, you guys start.”

Siobhan does her bass part again, really sure of herself now. Joey taps four beats together with the sticks and then comes in with a solid rhythm, a thumping snare and bass drum pattern with intermittent cymbal crashes.

“Watch me,” he calls to Beth, over the noise. “Watch my hands. Just do eighth notes like this on the snare and hit four beats on the bass here with your foot.” Beth stands behind him and watches with interest—an intern observing surgery.

“Go on, Yasmin,” Joey yells. “Do the guitar.”

Yasmin stands shyly with a pick in her hand. She hunches over the guitar and acts like she’s going to come in but then stops and looks up, embarrassed. She shrugs her shoulders.

Siobhan and Joey stop playing. The three of them turn to Yasmin.

“Jesus, we need help,” Siobhan says, while Joey looks from girl to girl and smiles.

A week later they’re back in Beth’s garage, at it again. At Joey’s suggestion,
Yasmin restrung the guitar, tossing the pink-gloopy strings in the trash for a shiny new set. She’s also painted numbers on the fretboard of the guitar—a bunch of digits in red nailpolish to help her remember which fingers go where in certain chords. Beth has worked her ass off to get the four-beat punk rhythm down, a generic pulse that fits alright into any of the songs they’re going to do for now. Siobhan is a monster on bass. She’s got the calluses going on the tips of her fingers and she knows those 32nd note basslines inside and out.

“Alright,” Yasmin calls at the top of rehearsal. “I’ve got some tunes written. Let’s get going.”

“What are the chords?” Siobhan asks, pumped up to rock and roll.

“I dunno. Like, I just go by these numbers, you know? But, hey I’ll show you.” Yasmin moves over near Siobhan and together they hunch over the guitar. Yasmin runs over the chord changes to her first tune slowly, stopping here and there so Siobhan can figure out the pattern on bass.

“That’s cool,” Siobhan says. “This is gonna be pretty tops.”


Beth counts them in and launches into her routine. She slams her sticks down on the heads of the drums, blasting the beat through the room, driving her sisters along. Yasmin strums quickly, racing through the chords, and Siobhan steps it up on bass, rounding out their sound with a heavy, booming bottom. This is starting to sound like something fierce. This group is savage.

“Okay,” Yasmin calls over the music. “I’ve got some words too.”

80
“Go to it!”

Yasmin begins to sing, in her squeaky voice. *Nuns* microphone, though, she’s barely heard above the music.

“Louder!” Siobhan yells. Yasmin nods, and swallows hard. She screams the lyrics when the chorus rolls around again.

“You made me lonely, leaving all the time!” Her voice scratches its way into the group sound, her vocal chords rubbing raw. She bobs her head as she sings. Siobhan picks up the gist of the lyric and joins in when the chorus rolls around a third time.

Together they sing: “You made me lonely, leaving all the time.” Siobhan embellishes here and there: “Yeah, you made me lonely, motherfucker.” and while Yasmin sings the main figure a fourth time, “This one’s for you, Pug Wiley, you piece of shit!”

Joey runs up into the garage from the basement. “Wow,” he calls out, barely audible over the song. He heard the music while playing Sega downstairs and had to come up and check it out. It was too good, too *ace*, he couldn’t believe it was them.

That weekend Pug calls Yasmin, wasted and moaning into the phone about what a sorry shit he is and can she please just take him back. This has happened too many times before. This time she’s going to stand her ground.

“Uh, Pug, hell-o! This is like the forty billionth time you’ve fucked around with
somebody else and then come crawling back.”

“I know, Yas,” he says, sullenly. He drops a whimper into her ear. He keeps doing this. The obnoxious sound has intensified in volume and frequency as this conversation has gone on.

“Well, I’m sick of this shit. You’re not the end-all, be-all, you know. I’m gonna just walk away from this.”

“Yas, baby, please, you don’t know what you’re doing to me.”

“If I take you back you’ll fuck around again.”

“No, really, Jesus, I won’t. I get weak sometimes, Yas, but that’s over. I’m gonna be good. I’m gonna respect your wishes about everything.” Another whimper drops.

“Yeah, okay, like I wasn’t born yesterday. Whatever.”

“Really, Yas. Let’s just be together. No more pressure to go to bed with me. No more fooling around.”

“Uh huh, okay, sure. Not quite.”

“I mean it, Yas. I want to marry you.”

“Oh please. This is too much.”

She drops the phone into its cradle and tumbles onto her bed. When it rings a second later she ignores it. The tears have already begun to fall. She buries her face into the pillow, and thinks, *Forget him, he’s no good.*
Yasmin and Ronnie get the great idea one night at the Dairy Freeze out in the sticks on Highway 4, outside of town. Two bands, one show, his and hers rock and roll. The rivalry between the Bell Boys and the Hissy Fits has pretty much gone by the wayside over the past couple of weeks and the truce is officially signed here—as the two leaders squelch up their Vernor’s floats on the hood of Ron’s dad’s car.

“That’s cool,” Ronnie says. “Whatta you think of doing a big jam at the end, too, huh?”

“Yeah, all seven of us could come out and wail together.”

“Yeah, we could do like an old Pistols song, or a tune by the Dry Heaves or something. Something that would get everybody really into it.”

“Both you and I could sing.”

“Yeah. Like the Sonny and Cher of punk, baby.”

Yas smiles and shoots her cup into the trashcan by the ear. Ronnie puts his arm around her, with a little trepidation, but with a laugh to smooth the moment out.

“This is gonna be really awesome, Yas. I’m gonna go down tomorrow and set the gig up right away.”

Fruit flies gather in the lights around the parking lot. There’s a Nirvana song coming from the radio of one the idle cars.

“I love this tune,” Yasmin says.

Ronnie smiles and nods. “Me too. Maybe we can do something like this together.”
Julian Small is the guy who books gigs at the BatCave. The man is a local music legend. He’s maybe thirty but he looks nineteen. Long brown hair, scratchy goatee, red-rimmed eyes. Small is an impresario of sorts—the music director for Hillberry College’s campus radio (where he’s rumoured to still be finishing a B.A. in Creative Writing). He’s also the source for used music equipment, and a man who always has a roach to smoke. Ronnie drops by his office at CHIL radio to see about setting up the show. He finds Julian screening music for the station, sneaking sips from a bottle of Jack Daniels while he chucks c.d.’s into separate piles. Yes or No.

“Uh, hi, Julian?”

Small is startled. The whiskey bottle’s stuffed between his legs, the red-rimmed eyes search out Ronnie’s face. “Who are you, man?”

“Uh, Ronnie Sullivan, from the Bell Boys. Remember? You booked us for a coupla gigs at the Cave before?”

Small brings the bottle back up and takes a swig. “Sorry to freak out, man. I thought you were a narc. The university’s trying to smoke me outta here. They keep sending people in here to catch me boozin’ or burnin’ in my office.”

“Geez.”

“Yeah, fuckin’ fascists. The university’s like the dudes who killed Jack Kerouac.”

“I didn’t know Jack Kerouac was killed.”
“Fuck, yeah. Where you been, man? Like Kerouac, Brian Jones, Sal Mineo, Andy Warhol. They were all fucking killed by the right-wing Nazi underground, man.”

“Serious?”

“Yeah. Like Warhol, the first time they tried was when they sent that freak after him. You know? That chick who shot him in the Sixties?”

“Never heard about it.”

“Well, Andy held on, man. That little guy had the smarts to hold on. But they got him in the end. They’re always after artists, man. Like Lenny Bruce, too. And Eric Dolphy, that’s another one. They know we’re all trouble, all the artists. See, it’s all part of opposition to the military-industrial complex, like big business paying for war and shit, man. You know, like all that underground government hoodoo that we never think about, eh? And so artists have the power to lead revolutions and foment all this kind of terrible shit, that would bring down like church and state and all the bullshit powers that be and all that. So they gotta knock off a singer or like some poet or something every once in a while, like to keep us all scared shitless to act, man. Cause, you know, like artists lend some sort of utility and shit to all the sorry lives of the lower classes, and that scares a lot of people way up.”

“Seriously?”

“Oh, totally. Wouldn’t lie to you about any of this shit, dude. It’s too important, this s**it.”

“Wow.”

Smalls sits up and smiles. He’s prone to sudden, unanticipated moments of
animation. "I remember your band, man! You guys were that punk-rap thing or something like that."

"Uh huh, that's us."

Smalls gets up abruptly from his chair. "Say, you wanna burn a fatty with me?"

"Uh, okay."

"Close the door and stick something under it, man. So those fucking fascists out there don't smell anything."

"Um, what should I use?"

"Stick your fuckin' shirt under it, dude. I don't care what you use."

"My shirt?"

"Burn it, man."

Ronnie shuts the door. Reluctantly, he pulls his Motorhead T-shirt off and wedges it under the crack near the floor.

"Beautiful, man." Smalls has procured a fat joint from a drawer somewhere. He lights it with a Zippo and inhales happily in christening. "Here." He hands the blunt to Ronnie. "So what's up, anyway? You guys looking for a new gig?"

Exhaling, Ronnie answers. "Yeah. We got these friends, see, these chicks, and they got a band going. And like, we wanna do a show together, like some kind of battle of the sexes kinda thing."

Julian takes the joint back, takes a puff and nods. His eyes are glassy. Flopping his hippie hair around, he blows smoke and answers, "I like that, brother. I like chicks who play in bands."
“So you can set this thing up for us then?”

“Indeed, indeed. But be careful, man. Tell your chicks not to be too radical, dude. Like, I hear feminist art’s going down. The feds are fucking going for Melissa Etheridge next, man. It’s scary. They don’t want women to get too powerful. It’ll be like Suffragette City all over again.”

“Really?”

“Oh yeah. I’ll get you guys a show, but keep the political stuff out, dude. Rock and roll is in trouble, brother. Don’t take this shit lightly. Tell your chicks to look good but not to say too much.”

One night Ronnie is showing Yasmin the chords to “Purple Haze” on his acoustic in the basement of his parents’ house when the smell of her hair gets to be so much he can’t help himself. He leans in close to her and places his lips against her cheek—aiming for her lips but getting the side of her face as she turns away.

“Jesus, what are you doing?”

“I’m sorry, Yas. I dunno. I just thought that—I dunno.”

She’s turned red. She eases away from him on the basement couch, creating a distance between them that will inhibit any more such moves.

“Don’t you ever think about us going out, Yas?”

“No.”
“We’ve known each other for ages, though. We’re good friends. Like we’re practically there anyway. I thought, you know—”

“No, sorry, Ron. I just wanna be friends.”

“Okay. I’m sorry.”

Ronnie puts the guitar down. He walks her up from the basement. The night ends awkwardly, without even a handshake at the door.

“What do you think of Ronnie?” Yasmin asks Siobhan the next day over coffee.

“What do you mean what do I think of him? He’s my friend.”

“What do you think of him as a guy?”

“He’s okay.”

“What do you think of him and me as a couple?”

“Why?”

“What do you think of him?”

“I think he’s an alright friend. Yasmin. But he’s fucked girls over just as nicely as Pug.”

“Get out of here. Like who?”

“Allison MacIsaac.”

“What’d he do?”

“I heard he told her she was his prom date, just so he could bag her. He got her a
month before the prom and then sent her packing.”

“That’s a rumour. Allison’s a slut.”

“Jeanie Holzer.”

“What about her?”

“He fucked around on her with her best friend.”

“More lies.”

“He also took her to that party I had last summer, and then after she got too wasted to even stand, spent the whole night chasing my cousin Zoe.”

“The one from Toronto?”

“Uh huh. He told Zoe that he was single and that he hadn’t been laid in a year.”

“He’s got a good heart, though, don’t you think?”


“Well Ron’s cute, don’t you think. I mean, I’ve always kind of thought so.

anyway—”

“Not that cute.”

“He can be really sweet.”

“Not that sweet.”

“So you don’t think I should—”

“Fuck no.”

“Okay.”

“Just stay friends, Yas.”

“Okay.”
Friday is the joint practice between the Bell Boys and the Hissy Fits. Saturday is the big show. Julian Smalls came through quickly, set the thing up in a week, and has billed the show as “Boys Meet Girls: Two Bands, One Night” on photocopied flyers taped to telephone poles all over town. Yasmin and Siobhan and Beth have been going over their set like mad lately. Their group dynamic is happening; the sound, though mean, is more polished now. Joey scored them some microphones so Yasmin can save her voice in practices. The extra volume adds some intensity. The trio’s ready to wow a Windsor audience. When the two bands gather in Beth’s garage for their big rehearsal they bicker over what tune will feature their combined talents.


“Something by Minor Threat?” asks Ronnie.

“No, let’s do a local thing, like a tune by the Flesh Columns,” says Yasmin.

“Or the Dry Heaves,” says Doc.


“I’ve got it!” says Yasmin. “Let’s do a tune by the Slits.”

“Who the fuck are they?” asks Brooks.

“They were an all-girl punk band like us.”

“Fuck no,” says Brooks.

“Fuck you,” says Siobhan.
“Guys!” Ronnie yells, “We’re not getting anywhere.”

In the end, the ensemble goes with a chestnut: ‘Rock and Roll Music’ by Chuck Berry. It’s a revved up, distorted version, without the 50’s gleam. Ron, Al and Yasmin provide three guitars and Brooks and Siobhan are both on bass. To Doc’s embarrassment, Beth proved a better time-keeper on drums, and so she stays behind the kit when the two bands combine. The Doctor’s left to swing his hips at the side of the stage, shaking a tambourine to the speedy beat. Ronnie and Yas share vocals, alternating verses and taking the choruses together. It’s gotta be rock and roll music, if you wanna dance with me. By four, the two bands think they’ve got it. It’s all happening, this game is cool. The Bell Boys and The Hissy Fits will rock the house.

When Yasmin unpacks her guitar at home on Friday evening she finds a rose in the case. She smiles. Someone stuck it in there at Beth’s when she wasn’t looking. She sniffs the flower and the someone calls on the phone.

“Hello?” she asks.

“Hi. It’s me.”

“Hi Ron.”

“I think we sounded great today.”

“Yeah. It’s a fun tune to do. I hope I don’t fuck up the chords when we do it live.”
"No. No. You've got it down good."

"Thanks."

"You doing anything tonight?"

"Not really," she says. "You?"

"No. I was wondering if you wanna go catch a movie or something."

"Okay."

"I can pick you up. Got my mom's car."

"Okay, cool."

"Hey Yas?"

"Yeah."

"Did you get the, uh—"

"Yes, Ron. It was very sweet of you."

"Cool."

"Come pick me up."

Later they end up ditching the movie and go for a drive instead. They cruise on out of Windsor, along the river, through the suburbs of Tecumseh and St. Clair Beach and find themselves in the middle of nowhere, on a country road. The conversation is short along the way. They listen to tunes on the radio, and on tapes that Ron's smuggled along. The wind blows through the open windows, whispering through Yasmin's hair. After a while, as the gas in the tank burns down, Ronnie turns to her.

"I think we're lost. And we're almost out of gas."

"Nice try, Ron."
“Seriously.”

“Pull over to the side then.”

Ronnie brings the car to the road’s gravel shoulder. He idles it, and turns sheepishly to Yasmin.

“I’m sorry about this.”

She smirks. “Is this a ploy?”

“Fuck, no, Yas—”

“You sure?”

“Yeah, really.”

“Then kiss me before we try to find our way home.”

He looks back at her stunned, and then leans across the front seat and presses his mouth to hers. He puts his hand on the back of her head and pulls her close to him. She parts her lips for him and the kiss gains momentum. Outside the crickets sing. Lou Reed moans to his groovy beat on the radio inside the car. “Hey man,” he says. “Take a walk on the wild side.” Yasmin pulls away from Ron and he starts the car again.

On Saturday night the BatCave is packed. There are kids standing shoulder to shoulder from wall to wall. In the small, cellar-like room designated for bands to get ready, the girls are primping for the show. Beth’s applying make-up from a pink compact that has a smiley-face sticker on it. Siobhan is sitting on a stack of beer cases
laeign up her combat boots for the aural assault that’s soon to begin. Yasmin is nervous and pacing the room with her guitar strapped on, mouthing the words to their various songs to make sure she remembers the words.

“Would you sit down.” Siobhan says. “You’re going to make all of us jumpy”

“I can’t.”

“Just relax.”

Right then Ronnie dips into the room, wearing a Bell Boys T-shirt he made himself with neon fabric crayons. He’s got a green Army-issue knapsack on his back.

“Hi ladies,” he says. “All set to go on?”

“Yasmin is freaking out.” Siobhan says.

“Shut up. Bhan!”

“Well hey, don’t worry,” Ronnie says. “I’m gonna fix you up here.”

He pulls the bag off his shoulder, unlaces the opening and pulls out a bottle of whiskey.

“Stole this from my dad’s bar today.” Ronnie says. “A few shots’ll get you chicks ready to make some noise.” He pulls the top of the bottle and walks it over to Siobhan who grabs it with one hand and tips a liberal mouthful down her throat.

“Beth?” she asks, making a sour face as the drink burns through her insides.

“None for me, thanks,” Beth says, brushing her wavy hair. “But thanks for the gesture, Ron.”

Yasmin comes over to Siobhan and takes the bottle in hand. She tips it timidly against her mouth and winces as the harsh liquid pours into her mouth. Swallowing what
she can, she blinks and tries to hand the whiskey back to Ronnie.

“No,” he says. “You’d better take another. Yas. You really do look kind of nervous.”

“Yeah, go again,” Siobhan adds.

Yasmin puts the bottle to her mouth and turns its bottom up again. This time she’s ready for the slow burn and the horrid taste and allows herself to take a little more, swishing the whiskey around in her mouth before sending it down her gullet.

“Thatta girl,” Ron says, taking the bottle from her. He recaps it and puts it back in his bag.

“Aren’t you going to have any, Ron?” Yasmin asks.

“I’ll wait to before we go on.”

There’s a knock at the door. Brooks pops his head in.

“Hey! Chicks with guitars. Get going. It’s ten-thirty. You guys are supposed to go on.”

Siobhan stands up and claps her hands. “Let’s do it.”

When the girls take the stage, Yasmin is surprised to find that it’s almost impossible to see the crowd through the blinding white heat of the spotlights at the front. They never seem so intense when you’re sitting in the audience. It’s better this way, she thinks. No need to see who you’re playing to.

Beth sits behind the drum kit and tightens the skins on the snare and the toms. She snaps her sticks down on them, testing the surface of the drums for its crispness. Satisfied with the snap the drum makes she plays a bit, running through her trademark
beat while the others tune up. Yasmin and Siobhan stand close together, adjusting to each other's sound, insuring that if nothing else, the Hissy Fits will play this show in tune. As they get close to some facsimile of consonance, Yasmin hears a familiar, yet unwelcome voice at the foot of the stage.

"Wow, baby, you didn't tell me you were starting a band."

She kneels down to look below the shine of the spotlight. Pug's there, smiling his shit-eating grin, wasted already and smelling like after-shave and too much beer.

"Shit, Pug. What are you doing here?"

"Checking you out, baby. Are you going to dedicate a song to me?"

"You don't wanna hear it if I do."

"Wow, Yas, this is so cool, you in a band."

"Yeah, well, we have to play, so you better get lost."

"Let me take you home tonight."

"You've gotta be kidding me."

"No way, listen--"

A girl's voice behind Pug cuts him off. "Pug, who's this?" it says.

Yasmin looks beyond her sorry ex. The hippie chick stands behind him. The flower-child weaves her arm through Pug's and tries to pull him away.

"Yasmin," he says. "I know that you think--"

"Ah, save it."

She stands up and looks to Siobhan.

"Are you ready?"
Siobhan furrows her eyebrows, fiercely pepped up to rock and roll. "You betcha."

Yasmin turns to Beth. "Let's do it. Count us in."

Beth taps four beats together on her sticks and the threesome launch into a short cacophony of 'fuzz and thunder. It's hard on the ears, something's amiss. Yasmin's in the wrong key. They stop playing. Some jerk whistles in the crowd.

"My fault,� Yasmin says. "My hands were on the wrong numbers. Let's go again. One, two, three, four--"

And this time they launch into their opener as planned. Beth beats the pulse of angry youth, shaking the floorboards of the bar with each amplified smack on the skins. The bass pounds over the drums, and Yasmin's guitar slices into the fray, providing crackling harmony through the distortion pedal Ronnie set up for her during the soundcheck. She steps up to the mike and begins to wail her lyric in the best pissed-off way. The veins in her neck bulge as she screams. She tries to look beyond the white light and find Pug. She senses his shape at a table near the front and looks at the silhouette each time she howls the chorus: You made me lonely, leaving all the time!

After two verses Yasmin takes an instrumental break on guitar, strumming the chords twice as fast. Beth whams her sticks down on the crash cymbal on alternate beats, accenting the rhythm with the thunder of wood meeting metal. This is mean. They're going to tear this place down before they're finished. They run through the chorus one last time, with Yasmin shrieking the signature line again until the tune tumbles toward the end on a fiercely discordant note. Yasmin and Siobhan jump in the
air and stomp on stage as the final chord sounds. Applause roars up from the crowd. Someone shouts, “You rule!” The Hissy Fits have landed, waiting, in Windsor.

“Thanks very much for coming out,” Yasmin says into the mike. Her heart is racing. “This is our first gig in town.”

A raspy male voice slices through the room: “Take it all off, honey! Show me some skin.”

“Fuck you,” Siobhan barks. “Stupid shit.”

“This next song is an original of ours,” Yasmin says. “It’s called ‘Landshark.’”

The Hissy Fits begin the second number with the veteran sureness of seasoned pro’s. They rock through their set with more verve than they showed in practice. They play off the crowd dynamic and drive their sound harder and louder with each enthusiastic rush of applause. Yasmin shines at centerstage, delivering the lyrics to each tune with bad-girl impudence and insurgent charm. Her face glows red with exertion as she stands bold through the set. This chick can hold her own. These girls can rock and roll, and nobody’d better tell them otherwise.

The set ends with a cover—the Hissy Fits’ take on the Go-Go’s decade-old girl-group anthem, “We Got the Beat.” The trio give it a raucous spin, taking the tune in double-time and ending with a squealing, gnarled mess of distorted guitar chords and beating drums. Siobhan takes off her bass and drops it on the stage. Yasmin steps to the microphone and whispers, coyly, “We’ve been the Hissy Fits. Hope you liked us.”

The crowd goes wild.

Offstage, a small group of mostly male well-wishers swarm the three girls to
compliment their debut. Yasmin, Siobhan and Beth scratch their way through the pack, dismissing these bootlicks with rock-star attitude. There’s no need to pander anymore. This band is on the way up. The three are nearly back to the cobwebby dressing room when Pug flies out of some shadowy corner and grabs Yasmin by the arm.

"Yas, you’re amazing."

Siobhan’s on the case in a heartbeat. "Pug, you sorry shit. Let her go. She doesn’t want anything to do with you."

"Stay out, Siobhan," Pug warbles through his booze-tripped lips. "This is between me and her. I know she still loves me. Don’t you, Yasmin?"

"No."

"You told me before. You said I was the first guy you ever loved."

"I didn’t mean it."

"You can lie in front of your friends, Yasmin. But I know you love me."

"I don’t," she says. "I might have, but I don’t."

Siobhan pulls her away from him and ushers her into the band room with Beth a step behind. The Bell Boys are getting into costume in the room, slicking back their hair like rockabilly crooners of four decades past.

"I know you," Siobhan says to Yasmin. "Another five minutes and you’d be giving him a second chance. It’s a good thing I was there."

"That’s not true. I’m finished with him this time."

"Pug?" Ronnie asks.

"He’s out there," says Siobhan. "He’s trying to make up with her again."
Ronnie looks alarmed. "Don't let him, Yas."

"I won't, Ron."

The Bell Boys finish prepping and saunter out of the room. On the way out Ronnie gives Yasmin the bottle of whiskey from before.

"Drink some more of this," he says quietly to her. "Forget about Pug. I'll drive you home after the show tonight."

Yasmin smiles and accepts the offer.

Out in the bar, The Bell Boys' set is passable, but it's less well received than the one that preceded it. The crowd doesn't make as much noise for this group. The four boys jump through their music and get off to a good start, but they become progressively less-inspired as each tune concludes to only a smattering of charitable applause. The Hissy Fits have stolen the show. When the three girls take the stage at one a.m. for the big two-group jam, there's a wave of whistles and cheers through the bar's remaining patrons. "Rock and Roll Music" brings down the house. It draws a few drunken dancers to the front. The two groups play it to the nines. Chuck Berry's rebellious spirit rages on, no worse for wear after forty years.

In the car on the way home, Yasmin is giddy with acceptance and drunk on Ronnie's whiskey. She rolls down the passenger seat window and shouts out to the sleeping world, "We're the Hissy Fits and we fucking rock!" Ronnie smirks at the wheel.
beside her.

"You guys were awesome, Yas."

"We were awesome!" she howls out the window. "Fucking awesome."

"You wailed on guitar."

"I wailed," she squeals to the slumbering masses. "On guitar!"

"Pug Wiley doesn't deserve you."

"Pug-" she begins to scream out the window, but halts. She turns to Ronnie next to her. "No he doesn't," she says.

Ronnie pulls the car up into Yasmin's driveway, sending a flash of headlights over the darkened front of the quiet suburban house.

"You want me to help you bring your stuff in?"

"Yeah, please."

Ronnie turns the car off and gets out. He flips the trunk open and takes out Yasmin's guitar case and makeshift amp. She rolls out of the passenger seat and stumbles a bit with her feet on the solid ground.

"Jesus, Yas," he says. "You're really wasted."

"That's rock and roll, baby," she says and grins. She totters up the front walk and leads Ronnie to the door. He carts her gear up the front porch steps.

Inside, Yasmin puts her finger to her mouth. "We have to be quiet," she whispers. "My parents are asleep. Can you bring that stuff down to the rec room?"

Ronnie nods and follows the staggering girl through the front room and down the carpeted stairs to the finished basement. He takes the steps carefully, uncertain how
many are left until Yasmin flicks a light on at the base of the stairs.

“Just put that stuff anywhere,” she says, tumbling onto the couch and kicking off her shoes. Ronnie places the gear down in one corner and creeps over to the couch. He sits down on the edge. Yasmin sits up and pats the cushion adjacent her.

“Sit down if you want.”

Ronnie slouches into the soft seat beside her. He puts his hand on her leg.

“That was really cool, tonight,” he says.

She slides her arms across his chest, awkwardly positioning herself face-to-face before him. Ronnie smiles. He slides his hand under her bottom and guides her on top of him. The bell of her dress splays over his lap and her legs bend and straddle his. Seated on him comfortably, with her long hair draping his face, she bends and kisses his mouth.

What follows behind either set of their closed-eyes is a quiet, furtive tangle. Her hands rub his shoulders, her tongue parts his lips. A button on her dress is opened. His hand is on her back. She feels his lips nudge the base of her throat. Her soft hair brushes against his cheek. They kiss again. She’s running her fingers through his hair when a touch she didn’t anticipate startles her. His hands have slipped beneath the silky folds of fallen dress. They rush upwards where they don’t belong.

“Mmm. No. Ron. Don’t do that.”

The hands continue their run. Unwelcome fingers wrap around the waist of her underwear. They tug menacingly.

“I said no, Ron.”
The hands won't stop. Insistent fingertips slip beneath satin. She pushes his chest and rises from his lap. She stands upright and smooths the front of her dress.

"What do you think you're doing?" I said no."

"I just thought--""

"I said no!"

"Yeah, but I thought--"

"I'm not just another chick you can fuck, Ron."

He doesn't respond.

"I'm not just gonna lie here and let you ball me!"

He stands and turns his back to her. He moves toward the stairs.

"This is stupid," he says.

"I'm not just someone to fuck, Ronnie," she says again. "You know what I'm all about. I'm not just some girl."

He shakes his head but doesn't turn.

"You're supposed to be my friend," she says.

He skips quietly up the stairs. She hears his footsteps overhead. They creak across the living room floor and move out the door into the night air. She flops on the couch and listens for the start of his car. The motor sounds and disappears down the street. She perks her ears for its return. In a second, though, she knows: there's nothing left to hear—no music, no crowd. There's only quiet now and she's sitting here alone.
Jack’s Blues

Sometimes Jack still plays the saxophone; in the morning, after Sarah’s left for work, when their two young sons have gone to school. Each time, with the wood taste of the reed against his tongue, he descends back into that forgotten world: of smoke and drink and darkness, and music that flirted with incessancy, that dared to linger above the faithful last listeners in the bar each night, beyond the superficial finality of last call. On most nights, though, even that long stretch of playing done in the bar had been only the pre-amble. It was a lead-in for the real blowing that followed later, in some designated after-hours spot where the band played to impress themselves.

It was this aspect of the lifestyle that his wife, Sarah, never understood, and what had ultimately put strain on their marriage. She’d never grasped the necessity of the jam till dawn, of the need to play music beyond the gig each night. She couldn’t comprehend the essentiality of Jack’s carrying on with God-only-knew-who till the early morning hours while his wife and children slept at home. In the mess that’s followed his playing days, Sarah has never denied him the music itself, but knowing the nasty associations jazz has for his wife, Jack’s taken to playing it only when he’s sure it won’t offend, at those times when he’s been left at home alone.

There have been a lot of sacrifices made since he quit playing. Of late, for example, she and the boys have forbidden him from smoking in the house, in the hope that he’ll quit altogether. The tactic was initially the kids’ idea, one sprung from the genuine fear that his pack-a-day intake might put the cancerous pinch on him before long. Sarah is the muscle behind the movement though—taping a no-smoking sign over
his desk in the den; tossing all the ashtrays in the trash; absconding with his lighter. Jack senses that it's her last action in a long series of strategic demands, all directed at separating him from the past, and snipping his ties with the life he loved so well. His weary concessions to each are some part of the armistice he's made, a re-commitment to the marriage with his tail between his legs.

Since he quit playing the clubs he's devoted his talents to composing t.v. show themes and thirty-second commercial jingles. He's traded the sportsjacket and wingtipped shoes of his previous incarnation for a cardigan sweater and comfy sneakers. The John Coltrane poster that hung in the living room for so long has relinquished its sacred mount at last, in favour of a pastel blue lithographed seascape. And on the wings of Sarah's promotion, the family has changed locales—leaving the depraved big city of Toronto behind, for the sterile safety of a new suburban subdivision, light years away.

If nothing else remains from the past, Jack still has these private morning moments. He sits at the picnic table in the backyard, with the clean breeze through his hair and the fresh sod at his feet. Here, in this arcadia, with the horn at his lips and a cigarette burning on the table's edge, it might all come back. In slow smoky solos over half-remembered tunes, he might close his eyes and lose himself again. Some mornings, such as this one, though, despite his best efforts to keep the music to himself, he attracts an audience.

"Eh? You playing a little tune, there?" crackles a septuagenarian voice over the privacy fence that divides Jack from the yard next door. It is his neighbour Chaz, a retired barber who doubles as town crier and community watchdog in his rumour-
mongering and intervention. Chaz and his wife Hazel are the lone exception to the
population of yuppie upstart families and double-income-no-kids couples that inhabit the
new suburb. This man is the last of the old-world troopers. He’s parlayed fifty years of
bangs-snipping and whisker-clipping into a two level ranch-style with a car port and a
back deck. It’s a final settling place that, for Hazel and him, marks a return to Eden after
five tartarean decades spent back in the city’s humble Cabbagetown

Jack takes the saxophone from his lips and answers: “Oh you know me, Chaz.
Just a little music to get the day going.” He rests the horn on his lap and picks up the
cigarette from the edge of the table. He takes a greedy drag on the smoke and Chaz
speaks again.

“Your wife told me you quit smoking those,” he says, dipping his long nose and
deep set eyes over the fence and into Jack’s yard.

“Nope,” Jack says, exhaling a long stream of smoke through his nostrils. “Still
light up, Chaz. Just not allowed to in the house, or Sarah’ll give me a licking.”

Chaz smiles unsteadily. “Ah, is that so?” He peers down at Jack for a second and
then says, “You know there’s a new family moving in today.”

“Which house?”

“Two doors down on the other side of you. I guess they finally finished the
inside.”

“Well, Chaz, they get a couple more houses built around here and we just may
have ourselves a full street.”

“Yeah,” Chaz says, with a more definite smile, “that’d be something, eh? A
whole neighbourhood.”

“Sure.” Jack says, taking a final drag on his cigarette before tossing the spent butt to the sod. “Just divine.”

Chaz’s smile diminishes from sure to unsteady again, and he pulls his nose back over the fence and into his own yard. “Well,” I don’t wanna keep you, Jack.”

Jack nods and forces a smile.

“What do you call that style you were playing, anyway?” Chaz asks. “It was kinda jazzy, eh?”


Jack had to be careful. He knows that Chaz and Sarah talk. The old man disappears over the other side of the fence. Jack rises and carts the sax back to the house, committing himself to the adult portion of the day. He slips through the patio door and steps back into Sarah’s domain. Careful to kick off his sneakers inside, he pads down the hall to his study where the day’s work might begin.

His latest project is one that should be a breeze, a week’s work at most, but it’s been giving him trouble. He is to write the theme for a new children’s animated program, an action cartoon imported from Japan for Canadian syndication. Normally Jack doesn’t mind this sort of work: cartoon themes rarely demand innovation, and it doesn’t take much out of him to whip together a generic foot-stomping march or rah-rah hero ditty in a few days.

After the family’s relocation and reconfiguration, Jack, in his search for work,
hooked up with an old TV producer friend. The friend, Alex, had survived the CBC job cuts of the 1980's by opening his own distribution firm, and channeling his energy into obtaining North American rights for Japanimation kung-fu and sci-fi cartoons. In ten years of operation, Alex has set up a tidy assembly-line production scheme: shipping in the product; giving the little wide-eyed heroes and heroines some English voices; slapping on a home-grown theme song; flying the updated merchandise off to small-market UHF stations across the nation. Jack quickly found a niche within this tight set-up, solidifying his position with his ability to play a variety of instruments and record most of the work in a home studio he set up in the den. Alex can’t resist sending the music work to him; it saves so much cash.

Earlier this week Alex made the drive in from the city to bring Jack this latest cartoon, a half-hour serial called, in its English translation, *Mr. Nice Guy*. Jack greeted him out in the driveway. He looked forward to his friend’s visits. It was not unlike Al to show up with a mickey or a six-pack under his arm to complement the latest bundle of video-tapes to be scored. The bounty this most recent time was beer and lunch.

"Christ, Jack," Alex said, wrestling out of the car and loosening his tie. "You live so far away, bud. Our food is cold." Jack looked beyond his friend and peered into the car with interest.

"What’d you bring to eat?"

"Falafels," Alex said, peeling off his suit jacket and tossing it into the car. "And I’ve got a six-pack in the trunk."

"You’re a beaut."
"Yeah, well someone's got to look after you, Robinson Crusoe." Alex looked around and laughed. "Jesus, what a waste of space. Look at all the open lots on this friggin' street."

Inside, the pair enjoyed lunch in front of the t.v. in the den. Alex popped the first episode of the new show into the VCR.

"You might want to put some music on," he said. "I just want to give you an idea of what the visuals are like for this. I doubt you wanna hear the karaoke music the Japs did for this show."

Jack took a swig from his beer. "Actually I was hoping to follow the story." He stood up and walked to the stereo console.

"Oh, you wanna translate for me what those little yappers are saying," Alex said and laughed. "If you spoke Japanese, I could cut the payroll down by one more guy."

Across the room, Jack popped an old Miles Davis disc into the c.d. player and returned to his seat. The band counted in and Miles' muted trumpet danced around a slow shuffle from the rhythm section. 'If I Were a Bell', was the tune. Jack reached for his beer.

"O.K.," Alex said, plopping back down into his seat. "You want the lowdown for the show?" Jack sipped the beer and nodded.

"Alright, this guy—right there, the little blonde bugger in the red jump suit," Alex pointed at a figure on the screen, "is the hero, Mr. Nice Guy."

"He's not very big. What is he? A boy wonder or something?"

"No, no. That's the hook. This guy doesn't need to be big."

"Why's that?"
“Cause he never fights anybody. Get this, he runs around in his pajamas there, carrying a camera.”

“A camera?”

“Yeah, so he can just take photos of bad guys in action and then turn the dirty bastards into the police.”

“Oh Christ,” Jack said. He bobbed his head to Miles and the quintet. *If I were a hell, I’d go ding-dong ding-dong ding...*

“It’s beautiful, huh? This one’s a real keeper.”

“What happened to good guys that kicked butt?”

“Ah Jack, that stuff is a no-go. Violence is a hard sell now. You have any bloodshed in a kid’s show and you’ll get parental action groups so far up your ass you’ll have picket signs coming out your ears. You saw all the fuss over that Power Rangers shit.”

“Hey hey for the suburban moms,” Jack said.

“Yeah, that’s you, baby. Anyway, this show couldn’t have come to us at a better time.”

Assignment at hand, Jack’s been sitting down at the piano with the visuals going in the VCR for three mornings since, but unlike his past theme-composing, the generic march has yet to fall into place. It’s hard to get pumped up for *Mr. Nice Guy* like he did in the past for *Johnny Rocketboy* and *Kalimba, Jungle Warrior*. The block in his creativity necessitated this morning’s jazz getaway in the back garden.

However, if anything, the interrupted session going over tunes at the picnic table...
stirred the wrong impulse. When Jack sits down at the piano after coming inside, for the fourth day of attempted composing, his natural reaction is to run over some old material, not mess with any cartoon heroces. Sax is his first instrument, but he has respectable chops on piano, as well. Years ago, it was essential for him to take some keyboard training through his musical education, to help him find his way through the labyrinthine ins and outs of jazz harmony.

*Mr. Nice Guy* runs across the screen, clutching his camera and poised for action. Jack watches the little red-lyra-clad hero run and improvises an uptempo funk to accompany the chase. *A jazzy theme might work for this one,* he thinks, *a new approach for a funky new hero.* He glances over at *Mr. Nice Guy's* choppy stride and awkward motion across the crime-fighting landscape, out of step with the piano playing. The music and the visuals are not pacing well. Disgusted, he rises from the piano and paces the room. *Mr. Nice Guy* just doesn’t have that swing.

Discouraged, Jack flops onto the couch and sends *Mr. Nice Guy* into oblivion with a click of the VCR remote. The tape whirs to a stop and gives way to the television shows that have been showing in the background. He flips through the stations. Jack hates daytime t.v. Even with the satellite dish he installed in the backyard, his viewing choices seem perennially limited to trash. Daytime television is all sex and scandal in varying fictional and non-fictional forms. It's too much to take before noon.

His flicking finger stops on a lithe blonde in tears. She's sitting with her long legs crossed in a padded chair on a lime-green talk show set. The camera cuts to the show’s host, a fortysomething woman in tweed with horn rimmed glasses and frosted
hair.

“Now just take your time, dear,” the host says in ersatz t.v. sympathy. Her close-up cuts back to the distressed guest.

“I-I-I... he’s just so mean to me,” the blonde warbles with her hands in her face.

The camera jumps back to the host.

“I know, dear,” the host says, raising two fingers to massage her eyes behind her specs. “Lord knows what gets into their heads sometimes.” The host pauses for dramatic effect, then announces to the camera, “We’ll be back.” The show cuts to commercial, to a jingle Jack recognizes. It’s one of his more successful projects—a paper towel theme for a national campaign. Onscreen, a happy, anthropomorphic roll of disposable towels bobs across a messy counter-top on Plasticine legs, mopping up spilled drinks with his carefully-constructed rear end as he goes.

The phone rings. Jack rises and slides across the floor to answer. Sometimes he depends on calls from the outside world to break up the day.

“Hello.”

“Hi, it’s me,” says Sarah on the other end. “How’s Mr. Nice Guy going?”

“He’s not. On ice for the nonce.”

“Jack, don’t let this thing sit too long. You’re not at home to loaf around.”

“Alright, sergeant.” Jack taps his middle finger against the receiver of the phone.

“Ah, come on, babe,” she coos into his ear. “Don’t get testy. I just want you to get things done.”

“What’s up?”
“Oh,” she says. “Well I’m going to be late getting back today. We have a new transfer starting and there’s a small reception for him here after we close up shop.”

“So you won’t be here for dinner?”

“No, I’ll stuff myself on crackers and cheese here. Will all my little men be able to look after themselves?”

“We’ll manage.”

“O.K. babe, later then. Love you.”

“Yeah, smooch-smooch.” Jack returns the phone to its cradle and walks to the stereo. The Miles Davis c.d. remains in the player from earlier in the week. Jack returns it to its case, curious as to whether or not Sarah spotted it out. He snatches a Sonny Rollins disc from the rack and pops it into the c.d. player. A little outlaw music won’t hurt with the sheriff gone till evening. Jack returns to his seat and closes his eyes to listen to the music. He inhales Sonny’s growling tenor sax as he might a cigarette. He remembers a time when he and Sarah made love to this tune, on a night before they were married, many moons ago.

Jack met Sarah in his third year of university, back at Hillberry in Windsor, in a bookstore just off campus, on a cool autumn day. He stepped into the shop in a black turtleneck, with a clove cigarette dangling from his growing-in goatee, and Jack Keroauc on his mind. He was looking for a copy of The Subterraneans, a book an enthusiastic chum had lauded as essential jazz reading. At the time, Jack was a combination music
and English literature major. His musical spirit had just recently made the change from classical to hip, and her sister muse was not far behind. Most of his college reading to that point didn’t keep with the new lifestyle. The Odyssey didn’t swing; there was no groove in Byron. No, that stuff wouldn’t fit the new Jack. He wanted to go all the way, not just to play jazz and listen to it, but to live it.

While patrons leafed through magazines and browsed through books, he bebopped across the room, cool behind dark shades that he’d kept on despite the store’s dim interior. His pace was like Elvin Jones on drums. He was a steady, swinging beat with constant, fire-cracking fills. Jack drummed to the back of the store and paradiddled up the stairs to the second level where the literature section was. The girl at the top of the stairs brought the beat to a sudden, cymbal-crashing stop.

From behind, she was stunning. Jack lowered his sunglasses and surveyed the girl. From the smooth, round heels that peaked out the backs of her clogs, up her long legs, over her high ass and slim waist, to the long blonde hair that draped down her shoulders and over her back, Jack could find nothing wrong. He bit his lip and crept toward a new vantage point from which he might observe her front side.

Pretending to scan the titles in a display of Leonard Cohen books, Jack snuck a glance at the girl’s face. His heart could have skipped a beat, a swinging irregular solo, Joe Morello on ‘Take Five’. She was a knock-out. Her skin had a peachy, sun-freckled colour and a look of softness that begged to be touched. Her eyes were big and sad and brown, downcast with the straight slope of her perfect nose. The pout of her mouth was painted red. Jack noticed she had a book in her arms and he squinted his eyes to zoom in
on the cover. Lawrence Ferlinghetti. This was something he could dig—all that and beat poetry too. He would drift over to her, real cool. *Pleased to meet you, miss,* he would say. *I just noticed you standing here, and I can’t help but think I’m in love.*

"Do you," he began, but was then forced to clear his throat to prevent it from cracking, "Do you dig Ferlinghetti?" He was trying to sound throaty, the masculine growl of a tenor sax.

"Um," the girl said, looking up at him through the dark-toasted brown of her gorgeous eyes, "yeah, he’s pretty cool."

"Cool," Jack said. He winked and nodded, bobbing his head to some unseen groove. "I dunno if you can dig this, but I was just on my way to grab a cuppa joe, and it would be, uh, real, you know, hip if you could come with." He smiled.

"Um," the girl had a shy voice, "I dunno about that."

"Ooh," Jack raised a hand to his heart, "you’re hurting me here."

She looked down into the book and smiled. "What’s your name, man?"

"Jack."

"Yeah, Jack, coffee’ll be cool, I guess."

"What’s your name?"

"Sarah."

"Cool."

The coffee became a movie date became seeing each other became a relationship. She liked her coffee black. Her favourite colour was green. She was a science major.

They made love once, to Sonny Rollins, before Jack found out that she didn’t dig
Ferlinghetti. The book had been a birthday gift for a painter friend she hardly knew.

At some point in Sonny Rollins’ set, fifteen years and two sons later, Jack fell asleep. The c.d. played itself out and the room stayed quiet until the phone rang at noon. Jolted awake, Jack fumbled blindly for an alarm clock, but then realizing the source of the clamor rose from the couch and rushed to the phone.

“Hello?”

“Good afternoon, may I speak to Miz Sarah Gore, please.” It was a female voice.

“I’m sorry, Miz Gore isn’t in, but this is her husband. How may I help?”

“Oh, it’s alright, Mr. Gore,” the woman on the line said. “Could you tell me a good time when I might be able to catch Miz Gore?”

“This is Mr. Newborn. Are you sure I can’t help you?”

“Well, I’m Lisa, a representative from Trueway Insurance, and in collaboration with the Sears Department Store chain, we’re offering a special premium on life insurance for Sears card holders.”

“Oh really?”

“Yes, could you tell me when Miz Gore might be reached?”

“My wife and I have a joint account with Sears.”

“Oh—” the voice wavered. “What’s your first name, Mr. Gore?”

“Mr. Newborn. Jack Newborn.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Newborn, but I only have Miz Gore’s name here. Perhaps there
was a clerical—"

"It is a joint account. I used to be the first name on the card."

"Well, it seems that some omission has been made with the card-holder information I was given, sir."

"Apparently."

"Anyway, can you tell me when Miss Gore might be reached?"

Jack hung up the phone and turned the answering machine on.

"If this is gonna work, Jack, it's gotta be by my rules for a while."

"What does that mean?"

"What do you think? You have to grow up at some point, you know. Doesn't it seem a bit foolish, now? You shit away a good-paying job to be some beatnik and hang out with college girls again."

"That's not fair—"

"We're in debt, Jack. We owe money. You have to find work. If things are going to get better, it's going to be because you let me handle them for a while."

Jack makes a cup of instant coffee and wanders out to the front lawn to observe the progress of the movers two doors down. Chaz is already out at curb side, squinting his eyes against the sun, and espying the toil of the shirtless workers down the street.
The neighbourhood is an unfinished colony, a test site on a newly discovered planet. Jack and Chaz and the other locals can't help but find spectacle in the arrival of fresh inhabitants on the new frontier.

"Hey Chaz," Jack says. "Did they carry anything interesting in there?"

"The man plays golf, Jack. And they got some kids with bikes."

"How many kids?"

"Two," Chaz replies. "Young ones. They were small bikes."

"They didn't happen to carry a piano in, did they?" Jack asks. Misery loves company, he thinks.

"No, but the man has a band saw. Must be some kind of handyman."

"Call him over when you see him then, Chaz." Jack sips his coffee. "My toilet runs."

"Eh?"

"Nothing, neighbour."

Jack strolls up the street to observe the action from a better spot. The movers, three of them with brown leathery backs, are carrying a couch in. It's a stiff looking sofa in a blue and green tartan. Sarah would hate it. She's big on plush and throw pillows. There's a red-haired, bearded man in a suit directing the strong bodies as they heave the couch toward the front door of the house.

"Be careful when you bring it through the door. Don't wedge!" The man is sweating profusely. The top button of his shirt is undone and his tie has been loosened. Jack approaches the man.
"I take it you are the new frontiersman in the undiscovered country here?" Jack asks. The man turns and eyes Jack from toe to brow.

"Huh?" he says.

"Are you the new neighbour?"

"No, I'm moving this guy in. He's an out-of-town transfer from the city. Company sent me down here to make sure his stuff gets moved in O.K."

"Ah, another family shipped around by the big bosses."

"The wife's out back somewhere," the bearded man says. "She's been a pain in the you-know-what all morning. Can't wait to get her kitchen reared up so she can get cooking for the family." Jack listens and sips his coffee. He hasn't thought of anything to make for dinner yet.

"What's the family's name?" Jack asks.

"Uh," the man looks down at his shoes. "Oh, do you believe this? I've been looking after their stuff all morning and now I can't get the name." The man taps his toe. "Gra something. Gr--oh!" He pulls a business card form the inside pocket of his jacket and glances at it. "Grubich."

Jack nearly chokes on his coffee.

"Grubich?"

Her lipstick was gone when he found them in the living room. There was red on the other man's collar.

The bearded man looks at the business card again and nods.

"What company?" Jack asks.
“Velacom.”

“Ah.” Sarah and Grubich and Velacom together again

Jack makes an about-face and walks quickly back to his own house. He has to call Sarah at work. He needs to know exactly how late she’ll be getting back tonight.

In their senior year of university Sarah got pregnant. They’d made love without her diaphragm only twice in the thirteen months they’d been together. Once was after a night across the river in Detroit, catching Ahmad Jamal in town, seeing the old cat swing down at Baker’s Keyboard Lounge. Both of them were drunk that night and the act ended almost in the middle of things. Jack slow and soggy with booze and Sarah sleepy in his arms. The second time was the fateful coupling. A night on which he’d done his first real gig, at the Topaz Lounge, a club in town.

It had been his first exposure as a pro musician, his first solid venture aside from some impromptu jams at house parties, and a semi-regular job playing in a soul band at the campus pub. He wore a jacket and tie to the date and in each of the three sets that night he blew everything he knew, dipping back into his store to search out each rote-practiced lick, every ornament learned from record. His playing had impressed the regular cats with whom he was filling in. The manager of the club had given him a free drink and a vote of encouragement at the end of the night. Alan, the young piano player at the Topaz had added, “You can really swing, man. You should really play regularly.” He was in. Jack was a musician. He could play jazz.
Ilated, he had jogged, sax in hand, at two a.m., to Sarah’s building and skipped up the stairs to her apartment. She was up late studying, and though she greeted him at the door with disheveled hair and eyes swollen from reading, he was never more convinced of her splendor.

“Sarah, my love,” he sang, dropping the horn case to the floor and swallowing her into his open arms.

“How did it go?” she asked, muffled within his tight embrace.

“Get your shoes on. Let’s go somewhere. It was incredible.”

“Jack, I have an exam tomorrow—”

“Come on!” he insisted. “I may never feel this good again.” He took her face gently in his hands. “I’ve never been this in love with everything.”

She conceded and they strolled through the campus, drawn close against one another in the cool of the night. Jack told her the story of his success—the smooth unity of his solos, the applause from the crowd, the affirmative nods from the guys in the band. Sarah and Jack celebrated the victory in touch. They found their way to a dark hill behind the Humanities building and gave in to abandon on the calm, damp grass.

On the first three days of her missed period Jack kept cool, consoling her, assured in his mind that things would work out. But as the days crept on, they both grew fearful. For a week he prayed for blood. He promised the higher powers countless fantastic favours if they should grant him his wish. When she emerged from her doctor’s examining room with sullen eyes, though, he knew what their carelessness had conceived. Jack was a father. Sarah would have to be his wife.
They finished school in the third month of her pregnancy and married quietly in
the fourth. By the sixth month, with the reluctant help of Sarah's disapproving father.
Jack landed a good-paying job up in Toronto, as a junior copy writer in an advertising
firm. The couple moved up to the big city in summer's sweaty heat. Jack did his nine-
to-five with humility, raced home in the evenings to attend to his tired wife, and for the
most part, left the sax tucked away. They settled into a flat in the city, pondered names,
prepared a room, and waited nervously for the coming birth.

On a Saturday morning in the eight month, she woke shrieking, and grasped his
arm with such ferocity that, rising, he dripped blood on the sheets. He slipped into his
pants, grabbed the car keys and struggled to help her from the bed. She rose halfway on
several tries, but each time collapsed back, screaming and clutching at her swollen belly.
Panicked, Jack called for an ambulance. In the short wait for it to arrive, he sat on the
bed and held his wife, fearful that in her pained hysteria she was near death.

After the manic, whirling ambulance ride, he lost sight of her in the hospital. She
was whisked away on a gurney, and he was ushered into a small room, directed to a sink,
and ordered to scrub himself clean. He lathered his arms in scalding hot water till they
were red. A nurse emerged and urged him to hurry, helping him to slip into a green
gown, white mask, rubber gloves. She steered him up a flight of stairs and pushed him
into chaos.

Sarah was on her back, covered in blood. Her legs were spread on metal stirrups
and a crowd of green-cloaked bodies toiled and fretted around her. He ran to her side
and offered his hand but she ignored it. She wailed in suffering and when he tried to
console her with his whispering voice she glared at him with a fierce lack of recognition.

"Help me," she screamed.

"Sarah. It's me."

"They're killing my baby!"

"It will be alright, Mrs. Newborn."

"Sarah. It's me."

"Save my baby!"

The doctor and nurses spoke amongst themselves in hurried, hushed voices, in a language Jack had ceased to understand. He watched their hands skirt around the clotted, bloody mess between her legs. They pulled and poked and forced their way inside of her. Amidst her screams, he heard a gasp. His eyes shot through the green-cloaked crowd for the source and watched the eyes of one young nurse go damp with tears.

"What?" Jack asked. "For God's sake, what?"

The doctor pulled at the top of the small head and eased the baby out, slipping his fingers around the smooth, purple skin, easing the lumpy mass through her stretched aperture. Jack was horrified. The only sound was Sarah's insane howling. The baby didn't cry. It hung bloody and limp in the doctor's hands.

"I'm sorry," the doctor said.

"Save my baby," Sarah howled, but in Jack's head there was only a constant frenzied refrain: your baby is dead your baby is dead your baby is dead.
With the phone cradled under his ear, Jack stares into the excited eyes of his older son, Jason, in a fifth grade school photo on a shelf in the kitchen. Sarah’s office phone is ringing but nobody’s picking up. Adjacent to the framed 8 by 10 photo, stands a fittingly smaller photo of their younger son, Brett, who in his animated second grade portrait shares his older sibling’s exuberance. *I am only with her for them.* Jack thinks as the phone rings for the sixth time in his ear.

He says aloud, ”I am only with you for them.” He wishes that Sarah would answer as he says it, and he wishes she would be instantly convinced of the notion even if he secretly is not. The phone continues to ring. Jack slams the receiver into its cradle and paces to the back window. Chaz is picking up leaves that have fallen into his yard from Jack’s tree and surreptitiously tossing them back over the privacy fence, where presumably they belong. Jack returns to the phone and dials once more. One ring, pause, one more ring, pause, one more ring.

”Sarah Gore,” she says, into his ear, slightly out of breath. What the hell has she been doing?

”Where you been?”

”Down the hall. Greg Allegash and I were running over the results of some ecology tests that they did in safety this morning—” Greg Allegash is an effeminate safety manager at the plant; he shook Jack’s hand limply the lone time they met.

”Seen the new transfer yet?”

”He’s meeting with the bigs, due down here later. What’s wrong, Jack?”

”You didn’t tell me it was going to be an old friend.”
"Honey?" She was concerned, he could tell. "What do you mean?" Oh, Sarah. so coy.

"Grubich!" Jack barks, sounding in his own mind pained, not fierce as he'd intended. "Why the fuck didn't you tell me it was Grubich?"

"How do you know--"

"Why didn't you tell me that the big fat fuck was gonna be moving in just a few doors down?"

"Jack, if you're going to start with all these ridiculous accusations again--"

"Can't wait till the fucking housewarming."

"--then I'm not going to listen. I've already told you--"

"I'd better keep my eyes on you."

"--that I see absolutely nothing attractive in Dean Grubich, and that nothing ever happened--"

"Sure wouldn't want a repeat of the old times."

"--between us."

"Yeah, right."

"Jack, I have to get back. I can see you're only going to get ridiculous on me, here."

"Fine."

"I'll call you in a bit if I can, and I'll be home as soon as I can tonight."

"Take your time. Give him a big smooch for me."

Jack slams the phone down, picks it up, and slams it down again.
"Jesus!" he screams, and nearly starts at the volume of his voice in the otherwise quiet room. He paces a short circle, whacks his hand on the counter and then storms toward the den. Halfway there he spins around and marches to the counter where he seizes a half-empty bottle of scotch and a glass from the cupboard. Armed with rations, he goes back on his way.

The saxophone sits on the couch in the den, shining demurely in the sunlight from the window. Jack picks it up roughly, falls back into the couch, opens the scotch and pours himself three fingers. He drinks heartily. The scotch burns in his throat and he shuts his eyes to tears that well as a result of his scorching, greedy gulp. Returning the glass to the table, he brings the mouthpiece of the sax to his lips. There is nothing to play but the blues: something low-down, something introspective. There is no form that accommodates humiliation so well.

The tune rises like a mournful dirge from the brass belly of the horn—a slow, growling line that begins at the instrument's lowest notes and spirals up through the registers, taking momentary melodic dips back downwards in the scale to cover each complaint in Jack's heart. The song is a throaty lament. But it isn't cleansing. Abruptly he stops playing and reaches for his drink again, sucking the wood-tasting scotch back in a spreading flame down his throat.

He puts his mouth to the sax again, and keeping his lips loose, blows with full-breath. The sloppiness of his approach elicits a menacing squawk from the horn. Twirling his fingers arbitrarily over the keys, he strings together a cacophonous line, a grating melody of squonks and screeches and yelps. Squonk, screech, squonk, he blows
till his lungs feels tight. Rising from the couch, he continues the discord standing. He moves to the window and gives the song more wind. Squonk, seronk, reech. He intends the tune for the benefit of an audience, but nobody out in the neighbourhood can hear. The window is shut tight to the outside, and cool, if not fresh, air flies up from a vent at his feet. Frustrated, he stops playing and hurl the sax. The horn meets the wall with a crash and falls to the floor, scraping off an alarmingly large leaf of paint-skin on its way down.

"Shit." He walks over to the sax. There is a dent in the bell of the horn and flecks of egg-shell paint on its open mouth. This will be hard to hide. Then a sound, footsteps, somewhere in the front of the house. Jack creeps out of the den, closing the door to the mess behind him.

"Who's there?" he calls out.

"Dad, it's us." Jason's voice. Jack shoots a glance at the clock on the kitchen wall. It's quarter to two. Jason turns the corner from the dining room, schoolbag in tow, Brett a step behind him.

"Why are you two home so early?"

"Daddy." Jason whines, recoiling slightly at this unfriendly greeting. "The teachers have meetings. You know that Brett and me--"

"Brett and I."

"--Brett and I get out early on the last Wednesday of every month."

"Oh, well. I forgot."

"Silly Daddy," Brett calls out from behind Jason.
"Yeah, Dad...silly," Jason says, uneasy.

"Well, you should use the extra time to do something useful," Jack says.

"Can we watch t.v. in the den, Dad?" Brett asks, still hiding behind Jason.

"No!" Jack roars. "I'm doing work in there. Go outside."

"Aw," Brett whines.

"Go!" Jack points toward the backyard and the boys drop their schoolbags and scurry out of the house like mice.

Jack lumbers back to the den, slamming the door behind him. He slouches over to the stereo, throws on the same Sonny Rollins cd from earlier in the afternoon and then returns to his roost on the couch. Digging the music, he drinks more scotch, watching the level of the liquid in the bottle dip more and more as Sonny's gig goes on. Soon a head-spinning buzz overcomes him and he feels happy for the first time in weeks. There is nothing in Grubich or Sarah or the suburbs that a good drunk can't kill.

Jack's career in music resumed with a drink of scotch at a bar in the city after a day of work at the advertising firm. An associate had invited him out for a drink to celebrate Jack's innovation on a coming magazine campaign—yet another upward step for the ex-hipster on his climb towards the executive high-plane. The two men had chosen a watering hole in the basement of the Holiday Inn. A jazz quartet played Friday nights at Happy Hour. Jack grabbed his Glenlivet from the bar and tugged the colleague along to a table near the bandstand.
The group was pretty fine. They swung through some bebop chestnuts at a pretty decent clip. When they took their first break an hour later, Jack's associate excused himself, and slipped into his coat to go.

"Ah come on," Jack said. "You're not loving this? I haven't heard a live band in ages." The divinity of the moment was lost on the other advertising man, and Jack was left to revel in the music alone. He stayed and waited for the band to wrap up their second set, forty minutes later. The tenor player walked close to Jack's table on his way to the bar.

"Great stuff up there," Jack said.

"Thanks."

"Wish I'd kept up my horn."

"You play?"

And from those two words came an extended bar chat, about jazz and neglected chops and unrealized hopes. On Jack's bar tab, the tenor player stayed and schmoozed for two hours, finally parting with a handshake and an offered phone number, scribbled on a cocktail napkin. "Practice a bit," he told Jack. "Get your chops back up and then come and sit in sometime." He stumbled drunk out the door with a cheery over-the-shoulder wave.

Jack practiced for weeks afterwards. He ran through scales; he stayed up late breaking down the changes for tunes: he went through his old albums and relearned long-forgotten licks. Sarah encouraged the rediscovery of his musical side. Since the stillbirth of their first child, she had borne two healthy boys. From the role of young
mother she had moved to a quiet incursion into the workforce and was supplementing Jack's healthy income with a modest allowance of her own. They needed their leisure, she thought. They were a thriving nuclear family, and if Jack wanted to take up some hobby time, then he deserved it.

Four months after the Friday evening scotch, Jack made his return to the music world, sitting in on a few standards with the Holiday Inn quartet. Sarah came and responded to each of Jack's solos with a glimmer of the cheerleading fervor she'd shown in the past. As on that night, years earlier, on which their first ill-fated child had been conceived, Jack's playing impressed the working musicians. They invited him back again. Buoyed by the night's success, he rushed out into the crisp darkness holding Sarah's hand.

"I want to get back into it," he sang.

"What about work?"

"No, on weekends, after work, whatever...I just want to play."

"You sounded good, but I don't know if you should let it take that much away from your job. I mean—"

"I want to do this regularly. I'm going to do this, really."

And so the resurrection continued, despite the concerns of his wife, beginning with a few more dates sitting in with the Holiday Inn, and then continuing with a regular gig accompanying a guitar player on weekends at an uptown bistro. Jack's skills improved rapidly. He practiced constantly, at home, in his office at lunch, in the evenings while Sarah read and his sons played around him. The lost flame caught in him
and set his heart ablaze. Advertising mattered less, and more and more he longed to devote himself entirely to passion rather than occupation. When Sarah was promoted, seven months later, Jack strove to convince her that he should fulfill his dream, regardless of financial concerns. When she finally gave in, he packed up his office at the firm and took to the clubs four nights a week.

Initially the scheme worked fine, despite their drop in income. Sarah liked that Jack was home in the afternoons when the boys returned from school. With her promotion had come increased responsibility at Velacom, and it was a relief to her to stumble in the door at six each evening and find a tidy house and dinner on the table. Jack was happy in his new role. His exuberance could not be contained. It came out in the way he taught songs to the boys at the piano and in the energy he devoted to managing the house. He was relaxed, and he spoiled Sarah with affection, something that had dwindled some in his tiring career climb as a professional. Music kept him happy, life was good.

On the bandstand each night, he soared free with spread wings, dipping through solos, over an endless, dreamy landscape. His playing was a kind of weightlessness. He slipped earthly bonds with ease. The first song of the first set was the launch into a soaring euphoria, and the band interaction, the applause of the crowd, the scotch at the bar on the breaks, all sustained him in his flight. Like any great high, though, the come-down was consistently cruel. He grew to abhor the parting at the end of the gig, when the band packed up their instruments and sipped black coffee to sober up for the ride home. More and more he looked to put off the return to level-ground.
One evening, a new opening was presented to him, with a musician's invitation to stop by and jam in a studio apartment when the gig wrapped up. The rendezvous helped alleviate the end-of-the-night pang with which he was usually stung. After last call, Jack moved from the haze of the club to a smoky new frontier, an environment of which he'd dreamed in college. The musicians at the studio jam were mostly upstarts, young cats intent on polishing their styles and attitudes before landing in the clubs. They made Jack feel young. He was the sage, yet ageless beat—a limber soul that had survived. Jack poured a scotch, bummed a smoke, and hailed his horn into the fray. The night was long, and there was plenty of music. His thoughts grew dim with drink and he surrendered to the senses, guided mostly by his ears. Sarah and the boys never entered his mind.

The come-down came at four the next morning. After fumbling with his keys at the door, he kicked off his shoes, and trundled down the hall, trying to remain quiet with a drunk's clumsy care. Slipping into the darkened bedroom, he pulled at his belt and bit his lip. Sarah's body moved up and down subtly with the heavy breath of sleep. She was turned away from him, on her side. He wrestled out of his clothes at a break-neck pace. Lifting the cover and easing himself into bed, he thought himself homefree. Sarah rolled over toward him.

"Where have you been?" Her eyes burned through the dark.

"I went to jam after work." His hot breath slipped out with the words.

"Jesus, how many drinks have you had?"

"A few."
"Are you drunk?" He didn't answer. She turned her back to him.

"I'm not driving you to go get your car tomorrow."

"It's here," he said. "I drove it home."

"Oh Jesus, Jack. I can't believe you."

She ignored him all the next day, and in turn he came home promptly and sober after the gig the following two nights. Three weeks later, though, they replayed the scene. He couldn't stay away from the life. She stopped waiting up for him. He started taking a taxi to work each night, leaving the car idle at home while he stayed out late. Jack would relieve himself of as many burdens as he could.

At five he starts to think about dinner, although the energy required to survey the contents of the fridge and shape them into a plausible meal seems momentous. He continued to drink the scotch while the boys are outside, and it's all he can do not to retire to the couch in the den and sleep off what's left of the week. He opens the fridge and roots absently through the crisper for a second before suddenly feeling exhausted and teetering over to the counter for support. He throws open one of the overhead cupboards and searches through the dry goods for refuge. The boys like macaroni and cheese. It'll be enough for dinner without Sarah here to nag about vegetables and vitamins and all her other crap. Jack pulls the Kraft Dinner box down from the cupboard and tears it open. Dry, hard noodles spill out onto the counter top and fall to the floor.

"Shit."
"Don't swear, Dad!" Brett yells, having crept in through the front door. Jack kneels to the floor and scoops the fallen noodles into his hand.

"What do you want?"

"Mommy said we would get our mouths washed out with--"

"What do you want?"

"Can Corky eat over?"

"Who's Corky?"

"Our new friend."

"No." Jack stands up and dumps the noodles back into the Kraft Dinner box.

"Why not?" Brett asked.

"Where's Jason?"

"At Corky's. They just moved in."

"Where?"

"Down the street." Jack grimaces; Corky must be one of Grubich's kids.

"Go get him. Tell him dinner's ready soon."

"What about Corky?"

"Go!" Brett scrambles away.

Jack pulls a pot from a lower cupboard and fills it with water from the kitchen tap. He puts the pot on the stove, lights the burner and lurches first to the den to recover his drink, and then to the window in the living room to survey the street outside.

Corky is approaching the house with Brett and Jason. He's a chubby, menacing little Grubich-doll, his father's son through and through. All the physical traits are
accounted for: from the squat arms and legs of his stubby body, up to the turned-down brows and coal-dark eyes at the centre of his fleshy face. His head is round as a ball, with a high forehead that suggests the bald pate to come. Brett smiles outside and takes Corky’s hand in his own. Jack pounds on the window.

“Come on! Dinner!” The boys look up. They can’t seem to make out his words through the thick glass of the closed window. Corky eyes Jack and then amiably totters off toward home. Jack leaves the living room.

In the kitchen, the water is bubbling over the edge of the pot and spreading in a gurgling hiss across the stovetop. Jack slides across the floor in his stocking feet to the counter. He scoops up the Kraft Dinner box—spilling loose noodles to the floor a second time—and dumps the contents of the package into the pot. The foil packet of dried cheese falls from the box into the hot water. Jack pinches it out carefully and throws it to the counter.

“What were you saying through the window, Dad?” asks Jason, entering from behind.

“Dinner!”

“Oh.”

“Did you see Corky?” Brett asks, entering as well.

“Yeah.”

“They’re new here,” Jason offers.

“Go wash up for dinner.” The boys skip off to the bathroom.

The noodles have softened somewhat in the pot. Jack turns the burner off and
pulls the pot from the stovetop to the counter, wincing at the hot pain in his palm from the handle. He rips the corner from the cheese package and dumps the orange-yellow powder into the pot. Taking a spoon from the cutlery drawer, he begins to stir. The noodles sog around in a clumpy mass, and the cheese dissolves into the water. The pot contents swish around under the spoon, but they don’t change in colour. The noodles don’t end up yellow like the picture on the box.

“Hmmmm,” Jack says, genuinely beguiled. Jason bounces back into the room and slides up to his father. He peers over Jack’s arm into the sloppy mess in the pot.

“Dad.” Jason says.

“Uh-huh?”

“Aren’t you s’posed to drain out the water or something?”

“Shit!” Jack has forgotten this step. God, he feels so soggy from the scotch.

“Daddy!” Brett snaps, trudging back into the room, “don’t swear!”

“He just screwed up dinner,” Jason says. Jason looks into the pot and giggles

“Geez, Dad,” he says.

Jack shakes his head and tosses the mess from the pot into the sink.

“Hey boys,” Sarah calls, right then, from the living room. “I made it back early for dinner. What’s cooking?”

Jack reaches for his glass and swallows the last sip of scotch.

“Shit,” he says.

“Daddy!” Brett calls. Sarah walks into the room. She has no lipstick on. She’s kissed him again. There’s red on Grubich’s collar once more.
"Look at all my men, ready and alert for Mommy," she says. She crosses the kitchen to Jack at the counter. She tries to kiss him but he turns away and her lips catch him only fleetingly on the cheek. He wants neither her affection, nor her attention to the hot liquor on his breath.

"What have we here?" she asks, looking into the mess in the pot.

"Dad screwed it up," Jason says chirpily.

"Oh. Silly Daddy," Sarah coos. She nuzzles her nose in on Jack's face, "You silly head." Then fixing her eyes deeper into his, she whispers, surprised, "Are you drunk?"

Jack kisses the tip of her nose and takes a step back.

"Well, fellas," she says, standing up straight and smoothing the front of her suit.

"What do you say Mommy springs for dinner and takes the crew out for some burgers?"

"Yeah!" Jason and Brett squeal in unison. Goddamn Sarah is always saving the day.

"O.K., go get scrubbed up," Sarah orders and the boys rush off obediently. She waits till she is sure they are out of the room.

"Are you alright?"

"Of course."

"I don't want there to be any of that old weirdness between us. I don't know where exactly these thoughts of yours about Grubich come from, but I assure you nothing--"

"I said I'm alright."

"Jack, you don't need to interrogate insanely everytime the man's name gets
mentioned.”

“Forget it.” He turns his back to her.

“Well, anyway,” she says. “His moving into our neighbourhood is no excuse for you to spend the day drinking here. I told you before that nothing ever happened with him. The thought is ridiculous to me.”

The boys scamper back into the room with dripping wet faces.

“Let’s go,” they shout. They rush out to the car.

Sarah and Jack follow in single file, the wife leading. Getting into the passenger seat of Sarah’s car, Jack Sneaks a glance over at Grubich’s place. There’s a Buick in the driveway that wasn’t there earlier in the day. Maybe the bastard is finally home.

Back then, by the sixth month of his steady gigging, Jack was blowing like a motherfucker. The young cats from the studio apartments would come by and catch him at the club. The older musicians he played with had come to love him like a longtime brother. Crowds were positively digging him—college kids, pretty girls, senior citizens, waitresses, bartenders, all of them. His bombastic playing demanded attention. He could solo with anyone in the city. Check this out! His horn blared. This is gonna knock you out.

He had become a firecracker on the jazz scene, though a phantom in the home. The day began for him at noon now. And there was always practicing to do. Licks, scales, progressions. He stopped cooking and ordered out for dinner most nights, though
they really couldn’t afford it. He hired a cleaning lady to come by once a week to tidy up—another luxury that really exceeded their funds. The money would come, he thought, time was too important. He’d find some way to pay for it all.

One night he was wailing his way through ‘Billie’s Bounce,’ stretching out over five, six choruses, not repeating any tricks along the way. There was a rush of heat he could feel beaming up to the bandstand from the people below. Fingers were snapping in his head, voices were whispering kudos behind the blindness of his closed eyes. Jack was giving them a show. He took the tune all over the place, throwing startling chords over the progression that would have made Bird himself reach for a drink. Leading the line up to a 32-note zenith run, he capped the rally off with a hearty, low bellow and stepped away from the mike, solo complete. The applause was overwhelming. Jack could only smile.

“Yeah,” squealed some girl from a table up front. Jack looked over and caught sight of the source. “Yeah,” she called again. She was a young one, twenty maybe. Her hair was a feathery-brown and clipped close like a pixie. She wore a black turtleneck and jeans. There was a glisten to her mouth, the red shine of new lipstick. She smiled his way and Jack nodded down at her.

On the break he was offered a drink by three different sax players, the eldest of whom appeared no older than sixteen. The trio dressed alike as if conforming to a dress code: short slicked hair, collarless shirts, baggy jeans, black blazers, wingtipped shoes.

“Hey man,” one said, “you were smoking up there.”

“Yeah dude,” sang another, “great chops.”
“Fucking Wayne Shorter couldn’t top that shit,” offered the third.

Jack bobbed his head to their compliments and gulped down the drink they’d picked up for him. He wondered how much money they had. Maybe there would be more free drinks to come before the break was through.

“Hey man,” one of the kids said, “what was that thing you did over ‘Billie’s Bounce’?”

“Yeah,” another piped up, “you were playing fucking G flat or something, man. That was some wild shit, man.”

“Fucking fantastic, man.”

“It wasn’t G flat.” Jack said and dropped the last of the drink down his throat. He eyed the girl with the pixie haircut over one of the kid’s shoulders. She caught him looking and fluttered her lashes girlishly. Jack smiled and winked. One of the kids turned around and checked out the girl.

“Oh, hey man, you know Zoe?” the kid said. The other two boys craned their necks and looked at the girl.

“Oh, Zoe, man, she’s hot. You know her man?”

“You know Zoe, dude?”

“No,” Jack said. “I don’t know Zoe.” He checked his watch. Five minutes left in the break.

“Well, hey, man,” said one of the kids, “if you want to know Zoe, man, I’ll get her to come over here.”

“Shit, Scottie!” moaned one of the other boys, “you don’t know Zoe!”
"I know her, man," said the first boy to his incredulous friend, and then to Jack:

"Don’t worry, man. I practically went out with her last summer. She’s jazz crazy, man. I’ll get her over here." The boy smoothed his hair down with his hands and strutted over to the pixie’s table.

"Does he really know her?" Jack asked.

"I dunno, dude," said one of the boys, observing his friend’s progress. "Scottie’s a good guy and all but sometimes he’s full of shit."

The third boy noticed that Jack had finished the drink.

"Hey, man, let me get you another drink."

"That’d be great," Jack said, offering a smile. The first boy had coerced Zoe away from her table, and was leading her back to Jack and the other two kids, both of whom were open-mouthed and unbelieving.

"Hey, man," the triumphant first boy said on return, "what’d I tell you. This is Zoe, guys."

"Hi Zoe," the other two boys whispered.

Jack nodded and smiled.

"You were really great up there," Zoe said to Jack.

"Thanks."

"Come on, fellas," said the first boy, who in his small victory had assumed the authority of a decorated sergeant. "Let’s scram." The three boys left.

"I love jazz," Zoe said. She blew air out of her mouth and cleared her feathery bangs from her forehead.
“Me too.” Jack said. The bartender placed another shot in front of Jack. Jack nodded a thank-you and ran his finger along the rim of the glass.

“My parents got me into jazz.”

“Do they play?”

“No,” Zoe said. “My dad’s got his own business. He’s got lotsa records though.”

Jack swallowed the shot.

“I think jazz is so romantic,” Zoe said and looked over her shoulder.

“It’s nice.”

“I could spend my whole days and nights in a club just listening to music like this. To guys like you.”

“Forever?” Jack asked.

“Well,” Zoe said, and bit her lip. “For a while, you know.”

“How long’s a while?”

“Well, not like my whole life or anything. I mean, eventually, I want to do the whole adult thing. Get married, career and all that.”

“Kids?”

“Yeah,” Zoe said with a smile. “Two or three. And a big dream house in the burbs.” She giggled.

Jack checked his watch. Break over.

“I’ve got to get back up there,” he said.

“Hey man,” Zoe said. “You gonna show up at Scottie’s party after this?”

“Who’s Scottie?”
"You know, Scottie." She pointed to the leader of the three jazzy boys. "He's having a deal at his studio after hours. He said that you were gonna come sit in with him and his boys."

"Yeah," Jack said. He looked into Zoe's grey eyes. They glimmered. "I'll be there."

He found her again, or rather she found him, later in the night, at almost three in the morning, at Scottie's party. Jack was lost in the bustle of fifty kids crammed into the flat, which was uncomfortably small, more bachelor than studio. Someone was smoking a joint somewhere, the smell pervaded. Not a live note had been played in the hour since Jack arrived. Instead, some funk music boomed across the floorboards from a stereo in the corner. Scottie and his two mates had yet to be seen. A pair of freckled, slight arms slipped around Jack's waist from behind.

"Hey man," breathed a squeaky, liquor-hot voice in his ear. "You never told me your name back in the bar."

"I hope this is Zoe," Jack said. He turned around and looked into her eyes—no longer glimmering, but red-rimmed and stoned.

"Yeah it's Zoe, Mister Mister." She teetered on one heel in front of him.

"Well Zoe," Jack said. "Doesn't look like anyone's sitting in here tonight, huh?"

"Yeah," Zoe spun her head around and checked out the scene. "That really sucks. I was hoping to hear you play some more."

"Come by the club again sometime."

"Yeah," she said. "I will."
“Look,” he said. “Maybe you can help me here. Could you point me to the little boy’s room so I can powder up and clear out of here.”

“Hmmm,” she moaned. “Let me take you.” She took his hand in her own weak grip and tugged him through the crowd to a folding door on the other side of the room.

“In there,” she said. “I’ll wait out here and guard. There’s no lock.”

Jack went into the john and ran cold water from the tap in the sink. It was late. He wasn’t really drunk, but he knew he was going to catch shit from Sarah as always. Either she’d wait up and freak out or go to bed and give him the cold, silent bitch routine tomorrow. He just wanted to play. Hang out and play. Live the life.

“Hey, you O.K. in here?” Zoe popped her head through the folding door.

“I’m, uh, fine, Zoe, but I wouldn’t mind a little—”

She’d crept beyond the folding door and closed it behind her. She was smiling, hands behind her back.

“Hey,” she said.

“Zoe—”

“Wanna share a spliff?” she asked, revealing a thin, ragged joint and lighter from behind her back.

“Oh, Zoe, I got to boot soon, but thanks—”

“Come on,” she said. She stepped close to him. Her breath was hot, and her watery eyes stared right into him, if unseeing in their hazy glaze.

“I have to go—”

“You sounded great up there tonight. God I love jazz.”
Her perfume was enchanting, a deliciously sexual scent. This was the smell of soft sheets, tousled hair. Her arms were then around him, and next her breath against his lips. Jack closed his eyes and fell against her. She was gentle and easy to get to know. Their lips met once, open-mouthed, hovering somewhere between friendly and passionate. He pulled away.

"I'm married," he said.

Zoe giggled. "She's not here, is she?"

"Doesn't that bother you?"

"Only if it bothers you."

Jack stepped back away from her. "I don't know about this."

"It's your call," she said. Suddenly she didn't seem so high.

"I don't think so."

"You've already done your growing up, huh?" she said, brushing her hand against his shoulder. Like a ghost she slipped away, back into the noise of the larger room.

It was time to catch a cab home.

In the dark of the bedroom when he arrived, Jack sensed that Sarah was awake, even before he heard her voice. She was turned away from him when he entered, but in her breath there was some slow, deliberate rhythm—an affectation of sleep—that seemed forced and conscious. It betrayed her waking state. She rolled over and spoke.

"You're home early."

"I'm sorry."

"Save it."
"Really—"

"Listen, I just want to know if you’re going to be there tomorrow, before your gig and wherever it is you go. I just want to know if you’re going to come with me for a while."

Jack peered back at her through the grey of the thinning darkness. His eyes were adjusting to the light. "Go with you where?"

"Shit, Jack. I told you about this weeks ago. It’s our office Christmas party. You told me that you’d probably go with me for a while."

"Oh, yeah. Yeah, I’ll go for dinner before I have to leave."

"Great. Glad they can all see I am still married."

Jack peeled his clothes off and slipped into bed. She eased away to allow him room. There were miles of white-space on the sheets between them.

In a rented hall, the following night, Jack sat at a table with Sarah to his left and a menacingly large man to his right. The fellow was introduced to him as Dean Grubich, an engineer at Sarah’s plant. He wore no tie and left the top two buttons of his shirt undone. His head was losing hair and he smelled like Old Spice and dark beer. Next to him, in pink and pearls, sat his wife, Lil—a costumed visitor from another age. 1950’s housewife, the card next to her in the museum might read, Observe the permanent wave in hair. She spoke at rare intervals in the conversation, and even when she did Jack could barely hear her voice. Grubich, on other hand, was loud. He swore unabashedly in mixed company, and spoke with butchered grammar.

"This fuckin’ company can afford to get chicken that don’t taste like rubber," he
grumbled at one point, rolling up his sleeves to reveal a tattoo. Jack was given a look at the design close-up, as Grubich leaned across Jack’s face to grab the last bun from the bread basket. It was a squirly scrawl of green ink on his hairy arm: a Maltese cross.

Jesus, this guy was too much.

“So what do you do, Jack?” Grubich asked, buttering the bun with pudgy hands.

Jack sipped his drink. “I’m a musician.”

“You don’t say?”

“I do.”

“A regular Pied Piper, huh?” Grubich glanced over at Sarah and winked. She smiled.

“So,” the fat man continued. “You a rock star or something? I see these guys on t.v. with their limos and their fucking yachts. You pull in a lotta money at what you do?”

“More than you can imagine,” Jack said. He lit up a cigarette.

Sarah chirped in: “Well, lately, Dean, things have been a little tight.”

“Now that’s a shame,” Grubich said. He stuffed the last of the bread in his face.

Butter tried to slip out of his mouth and escape down his chin. “You do anything else, Jack?”

“Why do you ask?”

“Well, I don’t know.” He licked the butter back up and in. “Man’s got a family to consider. Don’t want things to be too tight.”

“They’re not.”

“We’re wondering if we might just give up the second car,” Sarah said from
across the table.

"Hrm," Grubich said, sponging a bit of gravy up on the end of his finger.

"That's not good. But maybe it's just a slow time. Jack. I don't know much about the
music business."

"I never would have guessed."

"Jack used to work in advertising," Sarah said. "He was a senior copy-writer. He
gave it up to play the saxophone."

Grubich looked from Sarah to Jack and shortled. "Well, Jack," he said again.
"maybe it's just a slow time."

As dinner ended, Jack rose from the table, dropped his napkin by Grubich and
said good-bye with a nod of the head. Sarah walked him to the cloakroom. She'd made
plans to stay—for the branch president's Yuletide speech, for eggnog and token gifts
from the company as the night went on. Jack slipped into his coat and fingered the car
keys in his hand.

"That guy was a nut," he said.

"Who?"

"This guy, Grubich. What a lout."

"He's not so bad. He's often quite nice."

"You're kidding me. You like him?"

"Listen, Jack. Don't drink too much tonight. The roads will be bad."

"I'll be fine."

Jack kissed her on the cheek and slipped out to the parking lot, to the car that
would carry him away. Looking back, he saw into the hall through the glass French
doors. The crowd was easing up to the dance floor, a spattering of reluctant two-some’s
on the dark parquet. How could his wife find entertainment in this sober, foreign world?
Pulling out of the parking lot, Jack sneaked one last look. The dancers were growing in
number. Could that be Sarah making her way to the floor? Then who was that burly
partner leading her?

On the stand at the club Jack’s solos didn’t burn like they usually did. They were
still as icicles in the winter cool. His closed eyes couldn’t contain him tonight, and the
saxophone didn’t offer a place to hide. Something was wrong, it seemed to him, some
intangible harm was on its way. *Maybe it’s Dean Grubich,* he thought to himself while
the bass player soloed beside him, *Fat bastard slouching toward Bethlehem to be born...*

As the set came to a close, Jack took one, two, three phone messages from the bar.
Sarah had been trying to reach him. There was an emergency back at home.

There was a strange car in the driveway when he got there, and skipping into the
duplex he found them together, his wife in tears, standing in the front room in Grubich’s
arms. Sarah’s lipstick was gone. Grubich had a fleck of red on his collar. The pair
separated as he came through the door. He searched their eyes for guilt. Was this
something new?

“How’s Brett?” Jack asked.

“No worries,” Grubich said. “Boys take falls, you know. He just needed a few
stitches over his eye.”

Sarah stood up and wiped her eyes. “He’ll be fine. I was just in a panic. When
the sitter called me at the party, and then I couldn’t get my ear started—"

"I didn’t want to muck around with jumper cables with your boy bleeding."

Grubich said to Jack. "Thought it was best if I drove her myself."

"Uh huh. Good thing. My he-ro. Is Jay in bed?"

"Don’t wake him, Jack," Sarah said. "We just got him to get to sleep."

"We?"

"Well, Jack," Grubich said. "Now that you’re here, I’m gonna head out."

Grubich clumped across the room to his coat. He struggled into it and slouched out the door, to Bethlehem or across town or wherever the hell this happy-to-help bastard was from.

"What’s going on here?" Jack asked.

"What do you mean?"

"What’s going on here with you and this guy?"

"Pardon me?"

"I have to listen to your shit at this fucking Christmas party, about how I don’t make enough money. Just so you and this shit can gang up on me—"

"What are you talking about?"

"And then I come home to you and him standing here. And he’s the one who has to save my fucking son when—"

"You weren’t around, Jack. As usual. What was I supposed to do?"

"Are you fooling around with this guy, Sarah?"

"You’ve got to be kidding me."
"Is that what's going on when I'm out working at night?"

"Working, Jack? Is that what you do?"

"Are you sleeping with this guy? I really just want you to answer me."

"You're out of your mind."

"Tell me, Sarah. Just confess to me, do you want a guy like this? From your company. Do you want this guy?"

"I want my husband, Jack. I want someone who's going to be around when my son splits his head open and my car won't start."

"Your lipstick is on his collar. Why were you hugging him just now?"

"Because he was the one who was here, Jack. Because he was the one who was here." She began to cry again and scammed up the stairs to the bedroom.

Jack left the room to call the club. He wouldn't be back that night. Or the next. Or quite possibly on any number of nights to come. In the dizziness of too many late-nights, stiff drinks, and his own recent brush with flirtation, he no longer knew what to count on. Maybe Sarah was fooling around with this guy, or maybe she was considering it. Whatever it was, things had grown too unsteady in their home and it was time for Jack to begin to reassert himself there.

In the car on the way back from the restaurant, Jack is livid.

"I was fine to drive."

"Jack," Sarah says, taking her eyes from the road for a second to shoot him an icy
glare. She whispers, "You were drunk when I got home, for God's sake, and then you drink three more beers with dinner."

"I'm fine."

"Shh," she said.

"Mommy should drive Mommy's car, and Daddy should drive Daddy's car."

Brett calls from the back seat.

"Good plan, baby," Sarah says.

Jack looks out the passenger window and wishes he was on the sidewalk, on foot, going somewhere else.

When they arrive back home Grubich's car is still in the driveway down the street. Aside from a timid sprinkler turning a slow, wet rainbow over the fresh sod, there is no activity down at the bastard's house. Jack wonders where he is. Perhaps inside, drinking beer, swearing at his wife. Or maybe in the backyard, showing his rotten, pudgy kid how to catch a football or steal a neighbour's wife. God, Jack is exhausted. The booze in him is gauzy and smooth over his mind. The blood in his head is thick and warm. Sarah stops the car in their driveway.

"Daddy," Brett asks. "Can we go see if Corky can play outside for a bit?" He and Jason tumble out of the car and look down the street toward the Grubich house.

"No," Jack says. "You boys should have a bath."

"Who's Corky?" Sarah asks.

"Fat little kid down the street," Jack replies.

"Jack!"
"Daddy!"

"He's our new neighbour," Jack says aloud, and then quietly to Sarah, "Grubich's kid."

"We don't need a bath, yet," Jason says. "It's still light out."

"Well," says Sarah. "I think it will be alright for a little while."

"Why don't you go with them?" Jack says.

"Go on," Sarah says to the boys, ignoring him. "Back at eight-thirty."

Jason looks at his watch, and then calls to Brett, "Come on, let's go." They bound off down the street into enemy territory.

"Do you want to talk?" Sarah asks.

"No," Jack says. "I have work to do." She shakes her head and walks away from him, to the front garden to examine the flowers bursting there.

Jack lumbers into the house, to the den, sneakily grabbing another bottle—gin—from the counter on the way. In the den he puts on an Eric Dolphy disc and tumbles to the couch. Dolphy squonks and scrawls on alto, a mess of scratchy reed over a boppy beat. Jack opens the bottle and drinks the gin straight. He'll be asleep before long. His head sways almost unwillingly to the song. This has turned into a soggy, hazy evening, a good drunk. His head drops to the back of the couch. Darkness falls.

He's half-lost in sleep when Jason speaks.

"Dad?"

"Yes," Jack says, eyes still closed. Maybe this is a dream.

"I know Corky's dad. From before, I mean."
Jack opens his eyes and tries to lift his head. It feels anchored by his hair to the back of the couch. Jason isn’t standing still. Or maybe it’s the room. God this house is screwy.

"Uh," Jack says, finally. "What do you mean, Jay?"

"Corky’s dad is Mom’s friend. The guy that drove us to the hospital the time that Brett had his accident."

Jack winces. "Yeah. That’s right, he is."

"Well," Jason says. "Why is he mad at you?"

"What do you mean?"

"I just heard him say something mean about you, Dad." Jason’s voice is softening into a bit of a whimper.

"What’d he say?" Jack pushes himself up on the couch. Dolphy is cackling in the upper register with his alto. Jack has missed a tune or two from the album.

"Um," Jason says. blubering now like a baby.

"What?"

"He swore."

"Tell me, Jay."

"He said you’re a lazy son-of-a-bitch."

"Who’d he say that to?"

"To himself. He was sitting in the yard when we played with Corky."

"Hmmm. Anything else?"

Jason wavers. "Yeah."
“What?”

“He said all you care about is playing music and not about us.”

“Well, Jay. You know that’s not true.” Jesus, Jack is ripped. He feels like laughing. Jason is still spinning a bit.

“Why would he say that?” Jason asks.

“Well, Jay,” Jack says, snapping the bottle up from the coffee table and taking a swig. “I’ll tell you.”

Jason stands still, wiping a few tears away with the back of his hand.

“You want to have a sip?”

“Daddy!” Jason whines.

“Just a joke,” Jack says, with a gruff laugh. “Come on, lighten up, champ. I’m just horsing around.” He takes another long gulp of the gin. It scorches down his throat. It has no taste.

“Well, Jay,” Jack says. “You see, how can I put this.” Jack puts the bottle down.

“Corky’s dad doesn’t really know me.”

“Why would he say that then?”

“I’ll get to it, Jay. Why don’t you sit down.”

Jason sits down in a chair opposite Jack. The boy faces the scrape in the paint on the wall. “Dad! What happened to the wall?”

“Um, I tripped today. On one of Mommy’s slippers. I fell against the wall.”

“Are you okay?” Jason asks.

“Yeah, but I think we’ll have to paint that, huh?”
Jason nods.

Jack picks the bottle back up and takes another drink. "Alright, about Corky's dad. You see, how can I put this? Well, okay. Jay, do you know what 'insecure' means?"

Jason shakes his head.

"Well, Jay, insecure is like when you know you're different or not as good as other people, and you worry about it. Understand?"

"I think so."

"Well—" Jack sips from the bottle again. "You sure you don't want a sip?" He holds the bottle out toward Jason.

"Daddy!"

"Just joking you. Jesus, Jason." He puts the bottle down to the table again. "Anyway, Mr. Grubich--Corky's dad--is from a funny line. I read about it in a book once."

"What's a funny line?"

"Well, Jay," Jack goes to the bottle once more, to take another drink and plan his way through this. "Do you remember when we saw that special on t v. about prehistoric times?"

"Yeah."

"And it wasn't like The Flintstones, right?"

"No," Jason said. "The people were like monkeys."

"Right. And remember, some of the monkeys were called Cro-Magnon?"
"I don’t remember."

"Well," Jack said. "They were."

"Okay."

"Now, Grubich is a Cro-Magnon. He’s a latter-day primate, Jay. He’s got a problem that makes him a lil ape-like. He’s like those monkeys."

Jason giggles, uncertain. "Seriously, Dad?"

"Uh-huh. Funny, isn’t it, but it’s true. It’s a medical fact. I read about him in the paper. He’s a rarity, but it’s all true. He’s a caveman."

"Really, Dad?"

"Yes, yes," Jack says. His head bobs. He’s found his rhythm. The way through this is clear. "And, well, Corky’s dad, he knows he’s like a big monkey."

Jason giggles again.

"See," Jack says, pointing at his son. "You noticed, too, eh? Didn’t you? He’s a pretty hairy guy, huh?"

Jason nods and squirms with laughter in his seat.

"So," Jack says. "Mr. Grubich. Since he’s a Cro-Magnon, and he knows he’s like a big monkey, he feels funny about it when he’s living down the street from a couple of smart guys like you and me."

"He knows he’s dumb?" Jason asks, buoyant with the giggles now.

"You bet he does," Jack says. "He feels insecure because he’s all dumb and hairy...and everyone knows it when they see him."

"That’s funny, Dad."
“Uh-huh, yes it is. And,” Jack says, “the other funny thing about him, that makes him act so silly, is that he has a very small penis, too.”

Jason stops giggling. “Really?”

Jack sips from the bottle. “Yes.”

“Like how small?”

Jack considers. “Hmm. Probably smaller than Brett’s when he was born.”

“Really?”

“Yeah,” Jack says. “I bet you can’t see it.”

“How do you know that, Dad?”

_Just ask your mother_, Jack thinks. “It was on the t.v. special, Jay. About the monkeys. They all have very, very tiny penises. They said it after you went to bed.”

“Okay.”

“So you understand why he said something mean about me, now?”

“Yes.”

“Good.”

“Dad—”

“What?”

Jason stands up. “Can I go tell Brett about the monkeys?”

“You bet,” Jack says, proudly.

Jason skips out of the room. On the stereo, Dolphy’s set crashes to a bombastic close. A wash of setting sun blankets the room from beyond the den window. In the honey-coloured, boozy daze Jack thinks that maybe he’ll be able to deal with all that’s
going on. He has toughed out a lot already. He will rise again.

Wrestling out of the sunken cushions of the couch, he smooths back his hair and scratches the whiskers on his chin. Sarah loves him. The boys are fine sons. They are growing, giggling, joyful children—his boys, children that love him. Grubich or the burbs or jazzlessness can diminish none of that. He’ll go outside. He’ll find Sarah in the garden. They’ll kiss among the flowers in the yard, in full view of Chaz and the rest of them. They are the good-looking, in-love couple, the brave king and fair queen of the cul-de-sac.

Jack plods sleepily out of the den. He marches leadenly through the kitchen, down the hall, and into the living room where he throws open the front door—stepping triumphantly into the barbecue-smoked, sprinkler-wet kingdom without. He will not be beaten down. The jazz king has emerged.

Sarah is in the front lawn as before. She is a lovely queen, for all her faults: Ah, so peach-skinned, honey-tressed, white-toothed, round-chested, fine-featured. A splendid beauty in her third decade. She stands in a ray of gauzy light, smiling, blinking her lashes and—Jesus Christ!—talking to Grubich. The fat bastard has reared his ugly head at last.

“What the fuck?” Jack calls.

Grubich turns to the front door with a start. The big ape has lost more hair since that Velacom Christmas party ages ago. What’s left is scattered about his head—dry patches of dark turf crazy-glued to his big round noggin. A massive oblong blob of T-shirt droops over his belt, larger than the big belly that Jack had seen before. His legs are
fat and gelatinous, and they spill white and hairy out of his plaid Bermuda shorts. He’s holding a wrench.

“Jack, honey,” Sarah says, obviously alarmed.

“Shut up, you,” Jack calls to her.

“Easy there,” Grubich says.

“Easy?” Jack says coolly, still king of the burbs. “I’ll show you easy, you fat bastard.”

“Daddy!” call two voices emerging from the backyard. Brett and Jason have stepped into the fray, wide-eyed and curious. Little Weeble-like Corky Grubich wobbles along behind them.

“Get the fuck out of here,” Jack says.

“Dad!” the boys call, in unison, stunned.

Jack turns to them. “No, sons, not you. Corky’s dad.”

“Jack!” Sarah calls.

“You having trouble over there, Jack?”

Jack spins around to this new, crackly voice on the scene. Chaz is spraying his grass with the hose. He has been there, open-eared, no doubt, all along.

“Mind your own business, you old coot,” Jack says, squinting his eyes at the barber, shooting him down dead with a mere menacing glance. Chaz drops his hose. The metal nozzle spins up and sprays a dark stain on his slacks. His head falls in disbelief.

“Jack!” Sarah calls again.
“Wow,” Jason says, breathless, somewhere off to Jack’s left.

Jack zeroes in on Grubich. The big goon’s small pudgy fingers have locked tight around the wrench. The sloppy fat legs have spread into a gunslinger’s stance. His white hairy thighs rub together. The bastard is ready for a scrap.

“I was just talking to her,” Grubich says.

Jack is unfazed. “Sarah go in the house.”

“Jack,” she snaps at him. cross. “You’ve had too much to drink.”

“You been drinking, Jack?” Chaz calls out, revived, from the next lawn.

“Shut up, Chaz,” Jack orders. He is in control of this. This is his kingdom to rule. No barber, scientist, fat child, unfaithful wife, or suburban brat can quell his quick heartbeat or silence the raucous music inside him for a second more.

“I’m telling you again,” Jack says to Grubich. “Take your fat kid and drag your big ass back down to your end of the street for good.”

But then, rather than the cowardly retreat by Grubich and Corky that Jack has hoped for, from the stubble-surrounded, snarling simian mouth of Jack’s adversary comes the call to battle: “Make me.”

“Oh Jesus,” Sarah moans.

“Wow,” says Jason.

“Want me to call the police, Miss Gore?” calls Chaz, ever-helpful.

Jack pounds his right fist into the open palm of his left hand. The boys gasp.

Grubich raises the wrench.

“Jack!” Sarah calls, one last, desperate time.
It's too late. Jack dips his head and assumes the angry butting charge of a frenzied bull. He catches Grubich in the gut, bettering the slow reflexes of the latter man by a second, hitting him head-first in the belly and eliciting a winded “oof” from the ape's mouth. Strike a point for the musician. The triumph of the first-strike is short-lived though. Grubich brings the wrench down quick into the middle of Jack's back. A sharp volt of electric pain zips through, spinning from the spot of impact on Jack's spine up to the base of his skull.

"Stop it," yells Sarah. "Both of you!"

Doubled over in hurt, Jack swings his hand out and catches Grubich in the balls. The ape wheezes again. Jack seizes the chance to stand up, and lands an awkward jab on the other man's chin. He's going to win this one—in front of the children, in full view of the neighbours.

"Mercy," yells Chaz, next door. "I'm calling 911."

Grubich sways on his jiggly legs. His hands swing around in the air. There are tears in his beady eyes.


"Kick his ass, Dad," calls a squeaky, childish voice. Jack turns and traces it. It has come from the mouth of Corky Grubich.

"Shut up," Jack says.

He turns around to offer Grubich a final warning but a blow catches him in the side of the head. The big ape has found his strength again. Jack's temples throb instantly. This is going to take more than he thought. He presses his palm against the
new sore spot. This is it. No more Mr. Nice Guy.

Jack clenches his right fist tight and hurls it toward the pug-nosed mug before him. Again Grubich is slow to react. His eyes widen, his arms are late fending off the shot. Jack’s knuckles crack against the fat bastard’s head, pressing into the fleshy cheek, searching out the hard bone beyond the jelly. Grubich reels back. Somewhere he has lost the wrench.

“Please,” Sarah says.

Jack refuses to let him regain any momentum this time. He steps forward and swings his fist out to the fat man again, landing a short, quick cannonball on his opponent’s shoulder. Grubich stumbles backwards on unsteady ankles. Now is the time to send him to the canvas. Jack is bent on the knock-out.

“I’ve been waiting for this,” he says to Grubich.

Jack pulls his arm back for the final punch as if stringing an arrow in a bow. This is going to be an earth-shattering wallop. Future neighbours will talk about this shot. It will be written about on the first page of the history of this new world. But before he can snap the blow and let the arrow fly, someone catches him by the hair from behind. His head gets spun around by the scalp.

It’s Sarah.

“You’ve done enough,” she says. He winces and raises his hands to try to unwrap her fingers from the patch of hair she holds.

“I’ve got to do this,” he says.

“You don’t have to do anything,” she says, gripping his hair still, without mercy.
Her eyes burn with anger. How embarrassing.

“Okay. Please. Let go.”

She releases his stretched scalp and steps away. “Go inside.”

“Alright,” Jack says. He begins to turn around first, back toward his sunken opponent. “Okay, Grubich. You’ve had enough.”

“Dad!” Jason calls.

Jack finishes the turn toward Grubich and finds his vision flooded with pudgy pink fingers, the small hard fist of his enemy. His eyes close shut with the blow and his legs give in, melting instantly, unable to prevent his fall to the ground. He tumbles backward forever, into a deep chasm, shedding degrees of consciousness on the way down. When he hits bottom he sees Grubich above him. Sarah’s face is somewhere up there too, alongside the ape’s in the cool blue sky. They blur for a second. This is a dream and he’s underwater. In a second if he shakes his head he’ll be back on the couch in the den and—no, it’s all real. Sarah’s hand touches his face. The boys come into view.

“Oh Jack,” Sarah says.

He reaches up from the chasm and strokes her face. He hurts all over. A siren’s plaintive wail approaches from the distance. Grubich steps out of the periphery, perhaps to waddle back to his own turf. Sarah’s eyes are big and brown and sad. The boys look stunned. He’s always been able to contain his anger around them in the past.

“How do you feel?” she asks.

“I’m okay.”

Jesus, what a lie. He really hurts everywhere.
“Look,” Brett says. “Look at Daddy’s face.”

Jack raises a hand up to one of the sore spots on his cheek.

“Look at it,” his son says again. “He’s turning blue all over.”
Bye Bye Blackbird

There is a famous funny recording in our family, of my father playing the piano and me, about six years old, singing along. We’re performing old show tunes like My Funny Valentine and Lady is a Tramp for my mother, who laughs throughout in the background. On the tape, the microphone is obviously too close to my mouth and the sound comes out crazily distorted. I warble the lyrics from a sheet my dad has written out for me, but instead of singing them as written, I keep changing the words to suit my own tastes. In The Lady is a Tramp, for example, She goes to the circus, not Harlem, dressed in Levi’s and curls, rather than the ermine and pearls of the original. The whole thing becomes a game. My father stops playing with each silly substitution I make and acts as though I’m driving him mad, spurring me on even more. Soon the lyrics have become totally different, totally my own creation. The Baby is a Champ. The Gravy in the Lamp. At the end of the tape, my dad cries out in mock horror, “I try for Tony Bennett and I get Ogden Nash! I want a musician not a writer!”

Years later, I keep this tape on my desk and sometimes listen to it before I sit down to write. Each time I do though, I worry that it may be the last. The tape is loose. The sound is fading and warped. It’s probably best for me to stick these remains away in a drawer. I’ll leave the tape alone and refuse to listen for fear that the recording will unravel beyond repair. The cassette could break and the music might disappear. I’ve considered making a copy of it, but have held off, envisioning a long line of copies that will need to be made: tape after tape made to preserve these sounds, with the quality diminishing a little each time. It’ll never sound as good as it once did. Words last.
Music, for all its value, falls short.

I’m sitting in the BatCave, with friends, on the first Friday in July, and the lead singer of the girl punk band playing tonight keeps looking right at me as she sings. She’s maybe seventeen and grey-eyed, and her gaze meets mine every time the chorus rolls around, each time she squeals, *But you made me lonely, leaving all the time*. It’s a melodramatic number, a goofy, girlie attempt at rage, and God, these sassy kids can’t play. But I can’t help but admire something catchy in the girl’s spunk; she seems eager to leave her little rock-and-roll legacy before this bar closes down for the night. That’s probably all that matters. I should have so much nerve again. There was a time when I might have been a bad punk on bass behind her.

At my table, my companions, grad students in English at Hillberry, all of them, like me, are caught up in an odd argument that continues to change its shape. It began an hour ago with a debate over some short story I’ve never read, by some writer of whom I’ve barely heard, only to move to a discussion of the plotlessness in Shakespeare’s wretched final plays. Imperceptibly, with a segue that’s eluded me, it’s changed again just now, taking an about-face and moving to a dialogue about popular music. This last topic’s boiled into a raging cross-table melee over the nobility of the recently-dead rock star Kurt Cobain, a heroin addict done in at his own veiny, shotgun-wielding hands.

“Geffen killed him. His producer,” offers my pal Roger, playful after several drinks. “Cobain’s dead, Nirvana never has to go through that embarrassing mid-life
routine like the Stones. We’ve got a Gen X Jim Morrison and the records sell out for years and years.”

Kristy, another friend, the idealistic defender of Cobain’s grandeur, disagrees:

“No way. The suicide proved it. He wasn’t a big poseur like everybody else. Like every bad band that plays this bar. There was something truly romantic about him. He’s like a modern Shelley or Byron.”

“No way,” Roger interjects. “I’ve got it. Courtney Love killed him. Dead hubby, grieving rock widow, victim of suicide. Crowds reach out to her. She ends up with the number one record in the country.”

Kristy shakes her head.

“ Fucking brilliant plan,” he adds. “And Geffen was in on it too. He and Courtney are having a secret romance. Record mega-producer, rock star widow. Sordid tale.”

“Enough,” Kristy says.

“Geffen’s gay, I think,” says another friend, Jay.

“Shit! There goes my theory.” Roger and Jay laugh.

I look to Kristy and reach out from a half hour veil of silence. “I’m with you. The guy was a brooder all along. He was doing that doleful malcontent shtick from Day One. But it led to something real. At least the guy made good on all that moping and proved he wasn’t just bull-shitting about it.”

Kristy smiles. My girlfriend of six months, Genevieve, Kristy’s best friend, eyes me, interested, from across the table. She might be the only one who’s noticed my
absence from the conversation. She’s quick to catch me sulking and never fails to turn
when I rise from a quiet funk.

“Anyway,” I say, “I think killing himself legitimized all of that shit he was
singing. I liked him more after he shot himself.”

“That’s sick,” Kristy says.

“From an artistic viewpoint,” I continue, “it was the thing to do. He talked the
talk, and then made good on it. I’d have done it—”

“Oh, give it up,” Genevieve says, glaring at me. She’s mad because I’ve been
threatening suicide, only half in jest, all week. It never gets a laugh out of her.

“Leave him alone, Gen,” Roger says. “All of his great musical heroes died young
and tragically.” He sips his beer. “Right, Miles?”

“Well, Bird was young,” I reply, but only Genevieve knows who I mean. The rest
look to me for further explanation. “Charlie Parker. His nickname was Bird. He shot up
like Kurt Cobain. When he died, the doctor that examined him took a look at how rotted
out his body was and thought he was in his 50’s. He was only 35.”

“Yikes,” says Jay. He looks around the table. “This is grim.” He wouldn’t mind
if we left the smack addicts alone, I’m sure. He’s the happiest among us, maybe—
engaged to his high school girlfriend, a quiet church-goer, the one who doesn’t drink.
There have been many mornings when stumbling into our shared graduate students’
office hungover and faithless, I’ve wished I were him.

Roger, on a morbid roll already, pushes me for more grisly details. “Who else
was on heroin? In jazz.”
"Lots. Everybody, man. Miles Davis—"

"Your namesake!"

"Sonny Rollins, Chet Baker, Art Blakey, Billie Holiday—"

"That’s the one Diana Ross played in that movie with Billie Dee."

"Uh huh. Bill Evans, John Coltrane, Art Pepper, Jackie McLean. Tons of them. It’s sad."

Kristy asks, "How do you know all of this stuff anyway?"

Roger’s the one who answers: "His name is Miles. His dad was a jazz musician. The guy was born and raised on this stuff. Right, Miles?" Everybody laughs.

"Yeah. Something like that."

And the thought brings me to the issue I’ve been quietly trying to avoid all night-tomorrow’s anniversary, of which only Genevieve at this table is aware. It’s 364 days after my father’s heart attack. Tomorrow my dad’s been dead for a year.

"So, really," Kristy says. "Do you study all that stuff or something?"

I asked my father for money once as an adolescent and he turned it into another game.

My dad was a wily trickster and I was the steadily unsuspecting rube. Making lunch most afternoons, I’d leave the room for a second and return to find my sandwich gone. He’d hide behind his newspaper with a grin and look the other way when I complained of hunger. "What sandwich?" he’d ask, and ready to burst with laughter,
coo. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.” Then as I bumbled around the kitchen, opening cupboards or rummaging through the freezer, I’d hear the deep voice behind the Sports section quietly calling, “Warmer” or “colder,” until I uncovered the proper hiding place and found the sandwich there.

The time I asked him for money he was sitting on the couch, in a half-buttoned dress shirt. It was one of those lazy moments after dinner, when he’d sit listening to old records, putting off the shower and the shave and the drive to his own gig that night.

“How much?” he asked.

“Ten bucks. I’m just going to a movie.”

He nodded, not at me, I realized, but at the music from the speakers behind me. He lit up a cigarette and smiled. Knuckley fingers wandered up and scratched his bearded chin. I hated it when he wandered.

Exhaling smoke he asked, “Dontcha just love this tune?” and I listened. It was some boppy thing, with a trumpet. I couldn’t discern it from any other song like it back then. I wasn’t into jazz much at the time.

“Geez, Dad, I don’t know. What about the money?”

“Oh yeah. I guess.” He lifted his rear from the couch and started to dig his wallet out from his back pocket. Pulling a ten from the billfold, he went to hand it to me and then recoiled.

“Say, wait.”

“What?”

“Tell me who this is and I’ll give you the ten bucks.”
“Ah, geez, come on, you already said you were gonna give—”

“Hush. Just listen, Miles. You know this one. It’s easy.”

“Uh, Sonny Rollins.”

“Shit, come on. Sonny Rollins was a sax player.”

“I dunno, Dad. Just forget the money.”

“No, no,” he said softly. “Hey, don’t get like that. Just try. I used to play this for you when you were young.”

“Dizzy Gillespie?”

“Closer, but no. It’s Miles, Miles Davis. This is where you got your name, daddy-o.” A smile flashed behind his beard.

“Can I have the money now?”

“Here.” He almost handed me the bill and then pulled it back again. “It’s ‘Seven Steps to Heaven’, know who wrote it?”

“Aw, come on!”

“Victor Feldman,” he said. “Don’t forget that.” He slapped the ten in my hand and raised himself to go clean up.

The game continued other times. I kept asking him for money and he continued to quiz me and fill in the answers I never knew. And while some kids were hauling out their folks’ garbage or raking the leaves for allowances every week, I was learning all the things he’d been dying to have me know. By the time I left high school, I knew so much of that music, and liked it all myself. Who wrote “Blue Bossa”? When did Coleman Hawkins die? If he were here now, he’d see how much I knew—how I kept filling my
head with that trivia, long after the game grew dull for him.

Outside, in the muggy gloom of after-closing-time, Genevieve’s dark eyes are amazingly bright. They often look to me as an invitation, to share with her, if nobody else, all the things that keep me so miserable so much of the time. It’s an offer I rarely exploit.

“We could have stayed home tonight, you know,” she says, slipping her arm through mine as we walk from the bar.

“Then I would have been just as depressed and much more sober.”

“Well, you could tell your friends what tomorrow is,” she says. “You could let them in once in a while, you know. Rather than sulk and pretend like everything’s O.K. all night. They know you lost him last summer before we all met you. They just don’t know the date.”

“They don’t need me to bring them down.”

“You underestimate people.”

She turns in front of me and makes a roadblock in the middle of my path. She places her hands on my shoulders, and those same eyes, bright despite their dark brown colour, find me somewhere, inside my shell.

“I love you. And I hate to see you be this way. But you’ve got to want to get over it. You’re not the one who died.”

“I know. I know that.”
She embraces me in the light of the streetlamp. We’re standing outside the Topaz Lounge, a place my father played on and off for twenty years, from the time he was my age until his death last year at forty-one. I half expect to see the old sign out front as it used to be: *Allan Borocky on piano, with his trio*. Musicians are coming from the club—two, as it turns out, that I recognize: James Otway, with his huge, covered bass in tow, and Randy Saunders, carrying the compact case that holds an alto sax. Genevieve and I part from our embrace and I say hello to the two men. I’ve met them both many times. They gigged with my dad here and there throughout the years.

They greet me with enthusiasm, a call of “Miles” from James. “Hey man, good to see you” from Randy. This pair’s seen me sprout up over a long time—changing from the kid my dad dragged around to rehearsals a hundred years ago to the twenty-one year old I am now.

“Good night?” I ask, and they look at each other and smile. James lights up a smoke and Randy answers, shaking his head.

“We were playing with Medgar tonight, man.”

“That guy is tired,” James adds, exhaling. They are speaking of Medgar Lamprey, a piano player like my dad, about the same age, and from here in town also, but the one who made a name for himself elsewhere. Lamprey’s a crowd pleaser, a panderer—not just a player as my father was, but a lounge-lizard singer, a slicked-hair kind of guy, heavy on style. He’s put out a few records, done a bunch of festivals, toured with some big names. On odd nights he still gigs here in Windsor when things are quiet on the outside. Not a musician in town can stand him.
"Same solos?" I ask.

Randy laughs: "That cat has made the most out of the same old four licks, I swear."

"And the pop tunes!" James says. "Those Bette Midler numbers don't swing, man. Medgar is the worst kind of sell-out, middle-of-the-road trash. I hate that shit."

"Old ladies love it though. You should see the biddies swoon, Miles."

"Sorry I missed it."

"Man, we need you up there on piano," Randy says. "You still playing?"

"Here and there."

"I he practices every day," Genevieve blurts out, with her flair for sudden boldness that often keeps me on edge. I can feel my face go flush.

"Everyday?" James says. "Shit, baby, you must be Chick Corea by now!"

"No, not Chick," Randy jibes. "He does all that plugged-in pop shit. I bet this boy's like Tommy Flanagan."

"Yes, Tommy. A good Detroit piano man from across the river here," James concedes. "Or Barry Harris. Miles prolly got that Barry thing going on."

"Who would know?" Genevieve says. "He won't let anybody hear him."

Randy frowns at me. "Now that's a damn shame."

"I think this lovely lady here's gotta get on your hide a lil more and get you in the spotlight," James says, winking at Genevieve. "Don't let this man hide his great talent, young lady."

"I don't think you guys have met my girlfriend," I say, trying to diffuse them. I
introduce her, and she falls naturally into place in their company. My face is still red.

“Well, we’re gonna hear what all this practising has done for you tomorrow, I guess,” James says to me. “Your mom’s called all of us. Every cat in town. Your neighbours are gonna hear some fine tunes.”

“And we’re definitely gonna get you up on the stand, Miles,” Randy says. He looks to Genevieve. “You’re gonna make sure he gets up there. This boy is gonna do his old man proud.”

“We wanna hear something like your dad would play,” James says. “Something that swings.” This is exactly what I’m afraid of.

“None of that crooning and plinking around the keys like all that Medgar shit,” Randy adds.

“Don’t worry. He hates Medgar,” Genevieve says, like she’s hung around with this crowd since she was kid. She lives my life with more energy than I do.

“Anyway, till tomorrow,” James says. “It was nice to meet you, Miss Genevieve.” The two men laugh and shake her hand and grab their instruments and strut off into the night. She and I carry on our walk home, holding hands.

“I don’t know why you had to say that,” I say.

“I don’t know why you’re so afraid to let people know you still play the piano.”

“I didn’t even say I was going to show up tomorrow.”

“You have to. Everybody needs you there.”

“That’s my mom’s thing, not mine. She’s the only nut in the world who commemorates her husband’s death with a cook-out, for Christ’s sake.”

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Genevieve sighs. "You wanna know what I think?" she asks.

"You're gonna tell me anyway."

"I think she knows how to deal with your father's death better than you do. And I think that she's got the right idea, inviting all those people over to play music all day in your backyard."

"She's a nut."

"She knows how to keep your dad alive, Miles."

I don't answer her. My father's dead, let's admit it. My mother's barbecue is silly. We stroll on in the heat, in step, too quickly towards tomorrow.

Coming home once in my sixteenth summer, on the night before one of his backyard parties, I saw blood on the kitchen floor. There were small burgundy drops, dried and faded on the linoleum. A knife lay on the kitchen counter. There was a pot of water on the stove. My mother came into the kitchen.

"What happened?" I asked.

She pressed a finger tight against her lips. "Quiet," she whispered. "We just got back from the emergency room--"

"Emergency!"

"Quiet. Daddy cut himself cooking."

"Is he okay?"

"It's his hand," she said. "He's pretty upset. He's in there with Jane."
"How serious is it?"

"We won't know for a few weeks."

She walked to the counter and chopped vegetables as I imagined he'd been doing when the knife slipped. The soup must go on, a party tomorrow. In the living room, I found him with his hand bandaged and my sister Jane on his lap. He was reading her a story, the book propped against his belly in his uninjured hand. She was curled up against him—at ten probably too big for such, but the moment seemed to demand it.

"Hi Dad."

"Hi Miles."

"You okay?"

"Well, I don't think I can pitch tomorrow," he smiled. Everything will be okay.

"He cut his hand badly," Jane said. "He can't feel two fingers."

"Now don't worry," he said. "Miles, you're going to have to sit in for me on the keyboards tomorrow."

"You're still having your party?"

"Of course, I am. This is a summer tradition. It's the only time we all get together to play."

And so the next day his guests came and drank beer and ate chili and burgers all day in our backyard as they did on one designated Sunday every summer. They set up a PA system and jammed on the patio as always, playing too loudly till the neighbours complained and the cops broke things up late in the evening. As expected, my dad forced me to his electric piano for a few tunes, despite my fit of whining protest. (I hated
playing anything in front of him, and only ever practiced when I was sure he wasn’t going to be home. I was such a clumsy mess at the keys, without his inherited grace as everyone seemed to expect.)

That afternoon I suffered through a couple of badly played blues numbers in C and G (the only keys I could handle), with my predictable solos and my usual three good licks—all in some sorry effort to impress. Standing by the barbecue, in his silly *Kiss the Cook* apron, my dad fielded questions about his hand all day, diverting attention from the cut at every turn. “Have some more of my chili,” he said. Or, “Let Miles get you another drink.” And always, “Don’t worry about my hand. I’ll be fine.” So everybody went home assured that old Alan would be alright. He had such a way of convincing them.

Weeks went by, and the hand didn’t improve as quickly as he’d assured his friends it would. He had to take time off from playing, and money grew tight. Creditors would call some days in the afternoon, while he sat frustrated at the piano, wrenching his hand into the right position. He’d try to run his fingers quickly over the keys, only to halt abruptly, and bring the swollen fingers to his chest, wincing from the hurt. He’d get up quickly from the piano bench if I came into the room. He’d smile and return to the couch, snapping up the newspaper or the television remote control and pretending as though it were all okay. In September, when Jane and I went back to school, he had surgery. He told us it was a minor operation, and sure enough, he was out the same day he had it. The recovery wouldn’t come quickly, though; the surgeon advised him to ease back into playing. It would be a month, at the earliest, before he’d return to the level at which he’d been.
Just after the operation, returning from school one afternoon, I found him on the phone in the living room. His face looked grave as he spoke into the receiver.

“Thank you, really, and I wish there was some way I could do this. This would be a great opportunity—”

*Who was he talking to,* I wondered.

“—and please, *please* consider me for any further projects. Thank you again Good-bye.” He hung up the phone and turned around, noticeably startled to find me there. His good humour was in hiding.

“Who was that?”

“Forget it.”

“Who was it?”

“Someone from Columbia Records, believe it or not.”

My heart jumped. “Really?”

“They’re putting out a new record, some new kid from Detroit. A sax player. He’s a real local supporter, I guess. The kid’s calling the shots and wants to do the session with musicians from this area.”

“Wow.”

“My name’s gotten around a bit, I guess, from playing here and there.”

“And they want you?” I asked. This was wonderful news. What was so wrong?

“Yeah, they do. In two weeks.”

“Oh.”

“I had to say no. But who knows, maybe they’ll call me again, you know. For
something else.”

He returned to the couch and picked up his cigarettes. He lit one and sat there smoking in silence.

“Mind if I put some music on?” I asked.

“I’d prefer it if you didn’t,” he said. “Just right now.”

The album on Columbia came out the following Spring, and finding it in the record store one day I snatched up the c.d. to look at the personnel on the back. The whole thing had been forgotten in our home, and my dad had gotten back to playing regularly. He hadn’t mentioned this lost opportunity since. Scanning the credits on the back of the cd case I came to the band—the kid was on saxophone, Marcus Belgrave was on trumpet. Medgar Lamprey had played piano.

Sometimes in my dreams he returns and all my grieving has been for nought. He’s always coming back from the road, having played in another city as he sometimes did, apologetic that he forgot to call and say he’d be away. When I show surprise and tell him we thought he was gone for good, he never fails to laugh. “I can’t believe you thought I was dead.” He drops his bags, pets the dog, kisses my mother, and all is well again. The feeling never holds. Each time I have the dream, I’m drawn back to consciousness in the same cruel heartbeat that had me feeling whole.

“He came back,” are my gasping, waking words this time.

The body at my side wrestles awake and rolls over to face me. Genevieve sidles
over and takes me in her slight arms.

"It’s okay," she says, but the ache of being robbed again is too much. I begin to cry. Tears roll down me and cover her.

"It’s okay," she says again. Her skin is warm against mine. There is solace here.

"Did I ever tell you," I say, "how he used to come see me when my band played at the BatCave?"

She catches a falling tear on the end of her finger and brushes the hair out of my eyes. "The punk band?"

"Yeah," I say, pausing to find my voice. "Cerebellum, the punk band when I was seventeen. He was usually at the Topaz on the nights we played. He’d come around the corner and catch our set on his break."

"He was proud of you."

"I remember the first time we played. I was standing up on the stage, holding the bass, and we were all in our bad punk get-ups: with ripped clothes and fake earrings. I could hardly see past the stage lights but when I stepped back into the shadows, there he was. Standing at the back of the bar. He’d dragged all of the jazz guys from the Topaz to come down with him."

"That’s cute."

"We went into the first song, and he sipped his drink and winked at me. I was embarrassed he was there, but I kinda happy anyway. James Otway once told me that my dad used to harass all the guys he was playing with to come see me with him on their break."
"He wanted to hear you play." There's an uncertain pause, and she speaks again.

"Why don't you go to your mom's party and play tomorrow so everyone can hear you."

"I dunno."

"Your dad can see you again. He'll be there with all of you."

"She wants me to go with her to the cemetery in the morning too."

"Are you going to?"

"I don't think I can. I haven't been back since we buried him."

"Maybe you should force yourself to go."

"It's useless. That marker in the ground out there isn't him. Seeing it doesn't make me feel any better."

She kisses me. "I understand." There is another uncertain pause, before she asks,

"Do you want some music on?"

"Sure."

She rolls over toward her stereo next to the bed and I can hear her fishing around in the pile of c.d.'s. She grabs one from the bunch and sticks it into the player.

"I know you like this one," she says. "It's one of yours." She hits Play and slides back across the sheets to me.

Miles Davis plays "Round Midnight" on trumpet—the muted notes I've heard through tears and good humour so many nights before. It's smooth and familiar: a buddy's voice on the other end of the phone, your favourite drink in a friendly bar.

Genevieve and I hold each other as the comforting sounds guide us back toward sleep.

Here in darkness sunlight's on its way.
On Christmas night, the winter before he died, he and I stayed up playing

*Monopoly* after Jane and my mom had gone to bed—another of our silly traditions
together that had endured throughout the years. We set the board up on the kitchen table
and listened to the year’s batch of gift c.d.’s while we played. There were leftover turkey
sandwiches after midnight and cold beer between us. Thankfully, my dad was enlivened
that night, after a noticeable bout with depression in the days before the holidays. Music
seemed less in demand in town and he’d been suffering through a number of bad gigs to
pay our bills—backing up sloppy R and B bands, taking the piano chair behind various
schmoozy nightclub acts. He’d been irritable for weeks.

“Put another c.d. on,” he said to me. “After you pay me my 700 dollars rent.”

“Worst stay I ever had.”

I tossed the *Monopoly* money his way, rose from the table and went to refresh
our music at the stereo. New music was a constant in our house during the holidays: it
was given that my dad would buy albums for Jane and me. This year had yielded a
number of presents that seemed intended suspiciously more for him than for me: Miles
Davis, Bill Evans, Thelonious Monk. As my tastes had moved closer to his, his gift of
music had been given in greater amounts.

“Put the Miles one on,” he called from the kitchen. “We haven’t heard it yet.”

I took the disc from its case: The Miles Davis Quintet, *Round About Midnight*.
The famous trumpeter, for whom I’m named, looked back at me from the cover, his eyes
lost behind big shades. The album began with ‘Round Midnight’, and Miles played the song with his mute in. His horn had that plugged-up timbre that always sounded like whining to me. I often teased my dad about Miles. New to jazz, I thought that Davis’s playing was self-important, affected. I was more easily impressed by John Coltrane’s robust tenor sax—his flurry of squawking notes, the mad search through so many kinds of thunder to say what was on his mind. Miles was less grand. His music seemed designed for brooding late nights spent alone, for tears without an audience. It goes very well, till just round midnight... It was silly stuff to me, all so shamefully romantic.

“That’s the stuff,” my dad said, as I returned to my seat. His tin thimble lay on my Park Place.

“Ah, how quickly the tides change, amigo. 1300 bucks, please.” I put my hand out, palm up, for emphasis. We’d been ribbing each other all night.

He rifled through his jumbled pile of multi-coloured cash for the debt. His bills were mixed up, some face up, some face down, some with the corners bent. “What do you think of this disc?” he asked. I could tell he was a little tipsy, struggling as he was to dig out the money he owed. He’d overtaken me in the beer-count over an hour ago.

“It’s alright,” I said.

“This was one of my favourites when I was younger. I lent the record to someone in university and never got it back. I’m glad we’ve got it again now. Miles was the real poet in jazz.”

“One with a limited vocabulary, if so,” I chided. God, I was so clever.

“Why do you say that?”
"It's all kinda the same, you know. He sticks that thing in the end of his horn and plays some bluesy, kinda sorry stuff. It sounds so tinny."

"Please!" He waved his hand and dropped the money clumsily in a mess in front of me. "Everytime I think you're learning, you show me how little you know about music."

"Well, geez, he was a bit mediocre, don't you think? There were five guys I can think of right away who could play this tune better than him. That could play circles around all this moaning."

"Blasphemer!" he said. "We need a couple more beers here."

I rose and went to the fridge. "I'm serious, Dad. Dizzy Gillespie was better. Wynton Marsalis, Clifford Brown, Freddie Hubbard."

"You don't understand anything."

"Tell me what I'm missing. Enlighten me, daddy-o." I opened our beers and returned to my seat. "Drop some of that wisdom in my lap."

"You're such a smartass." He smiled. "Where'd you get that from?"

"Come on. Tell me what I'm missing."

He looked at me seriously and said, "It's all about space."

"I don't get it."

"What makes Miles good is not what he's playing—not that he can cook, and play all that frantic bebop stuff—which he could play, by the way. It's all about what he doesn't play."

"This is too Zen for me, Dad."
“Listen. It’s not saying too much and only saying what’s exactly right. It’s about playing one right note instead of ten close ones. It’s about leaving a pause and having your listener die to hear more.”

“That sounds like a justification of his bad talent to me.”

“No way.” He sipped his beer. “You know, you don’t always need to have something there. Good things can come from absences.”

“I’d rather just play the notes.”

“Sometimes the space between them is what’s important.”

“And so I’m supposed to be all excited about what’s not there?”

“Not only that. The greatness comes from the notes and the spaces. If you had a non-stop run of notes, it’d get boring. If you had only space, it’d be nothing. What moves you is feeling what’s there and anticipating what isn’t. You need those right notes to let you know how good it can be and you need those spaces to remind you how good those notes were.”

“This is too metaphysical for me,” I said. “I still need convincing. And you need to roll the dice and get on with this game before New Year’s Eve.”

“Next lesson tomorrow, grasshopper,” he said.

He was crazy and drunk and too sentimental. Miles still left me wanting. I didn’t mind the album, though. Coltrane’s horn in the band made it a worthwhile listen for me. That dude played like a lion, so ready to conquer the world with his saxophone. The Monopoly game went on, an endless teeter-totter contest with no victory in sight, while the music continued behind us. Soon, the fourth song on the disc began with that
standard Davis two-step swing, a kind of lazy finger-snapping rhythm. My dad put the
dice down and his eyes wandered off toward the tune on the speakers.

“I love this one,” he said.

“Okay, you can love it, but come on, we’ve gotta get this game over with.”

“No, no, just listen to this one. ‘Bye Bye Blackbird’. This one might be my
favourite.”

“Sounds the same as the last one to me.”

“Ah Jesus,” he said. “I can’t believe I’ve brought up such an ignorant son”

“We all have our crosses to bear, Dad.”

“He played this one for Bird, you know. ‘Bye Bye Blackbird’. It’s an elegy.
Charlie Parker had just passed away the previous year.”

“No kidding,” I said, unenthused.

My dad bobbed his head. “More poetry, Miles. Beautiful poetry.”

I moved the dice closer to him but he left them alone and remained engrossed in
the album. He reached for his cigarettes and lit a new one to hold while he stared off
into space. This was embarrassing.

“You know,” he said. “When I sit down at the piano on a gig—on one of my own,
when I’m not backing up some lousy crooner and shit like that—it all becomes worth it
again when I get to play something like this.” His eyes came back and looked at me. “I
know you think I’m speaking like a fool here—”

“No I don’t—”

“—but really, that’s the thing about music. You just keep falling in love with the
good stuff, you know. And playing the good stuff makes it worth it.”

“I don’t doubt that.”

“I know you like writing, Miles, and I’m proud that you’ve found your thing. But listen, don’t ever let music get away from you. Because there’re gonna be times when you can’t think of something to write that’ll have the power to ease some crap that’s got you down. And you watch, the piano will be there for you. And sometimes you’ll find that just playing a great tune like this one will be what you need to keep it all going and make you feel sure it’s all gonna come out okay.”

He was over the top. I was worried that he was going to cry.

“Really,” he said. “Don’t stop playing. Even if you win the Nobel Prize.” He smiled. His little lecture was over and he went back to the game. When the final chorus of the song rolled around he sang the lyrics over Miles’ horn, in that embarrassing off-key way that fathers sometimes have, that make their sons cringe.

“Make my bed and light the light, I’ll be coming home tonight. Blackbird, bye-bye.”

Smartass that I was, so convinced that he was just a sentimental nut, I couldn’t outgrow loving him.

I don’t want to run into my mom at the gravesite and have to deal with some big emotional scene, so I get to the cemetery early. By eight I’ve hopped the fence and I’m treading across the grass to the marble headstone that marks my dad. I find the spot
surprisingly quickly, even though it’s been a year since I was last here. The marker looks smooth as I remembered it, the pertinent words engraved in fancy script: Alan Borocky 1955-1994 The sweetest sounds... There is a grand piano carved into the stone’s upper left corner. All that music in his lifetime has been reduced to this small sign, a half-hour under a chiseller’s awl.

Others have been here before me. There are two floral arrangements placed against the marker, one slightly wilted and one fresh as dawn. There is a half-empty bottle of Absolut vodka beside them, a shot glass strewn carelessly next to it. This was my dad’s favourite spirit.

“Lucky fella. Even now they’re buying you drinks.”

I lift the bottle from the ground, loosen the cap and take down a swig. The clear liquid is hot like the sun above me. Returning the bottle to its place, I extract my own offering from the pocket of my jeans. It’s something I’ve written today, scribbled on pink stationary at Genevieve’s desk while she slept. It’s a piece with few words, one not worth showing to anyone else—a poem that’s largely space. I miss you, it reads. I’ve left it unsigned. He was right, words fall short. This morning I tried to come up with healing words when I should have played a song.

I unfold the paper and place it before the grave. The vodka bottle holds it in place and protects it from the wind. Far off across the cemetery, a man in coveralls is opening the iron gates. He eyes me from across the lawn as I depart. My meager gift of words has been left. Music remains.
I remember at his funeral I was stunned. I'd walked in a daze for three days, from
the moment in morning when Jane screamed she couldn't wake him, through the
paramedics' fruitless actions and ensuing crushing news. My dad's heart had failed. A
murmur killed him, of all things—a funny sound ignored too long. In the coffin, he lay as
he had in bed, with his hands across his chest. His face and hands seemed made of wax,
a not-so-close approximation of how he really looked. I'd been duped along the way,
he'd been replaced, this was not the man I knew.

Voices said prayers around me. A minister who never knew him spoke at the
front of the room. A large man from the university played a dirge on a grand piano that
had been wheeled into the room. The music was brooding and antique. It was slow and
oppressively somber, like nothing my dad had ever played. At one moment my mother
nudged me and urged me to turn around, to view the people standing behind us in the
service.

"He made it," she said. Her face was streaked with tears. "I don't care what he
thought about himself. Look at all the people he touched."

I turned uneasily in my seat and was startled by the crowd. There were so many
people I'd never met. A horde of mourners—standing and seated—crowded out the back
of the room. Women weeping, men with fallen heads. There were hundreds, easily.
Had all of these people heard him play?

Turning back to the front, I was alarmed to find the coffin closing. The service
was coming to its end. I'd lost track like a man asleep at a play—a fool who's missed
some crucial scene.
"...always be remembered," said the minister.

"Amen," said the crowd. And at this a number of men rose and took the coffin, leading my father off toward flames. Soon there’d be less of him to behold. A box of white ashes. Smoke above the city. Silent traces of so much sound.

The wake later in the day was unconventional like the life it remembered. We had it at the Topaz. The crowd of mourners stuffed themselves into the plush booths by the piano, or stood grieving at the brass-trimmed bar. There was a sign out front that said the club was closed. *We spend this day in private, it read, to remember our friend.* All afternoon, strangers sought me out and said hello. They shook my hand and wept on my shoulder, so many people touching me as if for luck, as if in me they could feel the one they’d lost. The stunned confessor, I listened to memories all day long.

"We saw your father play on our anniversary every year for fifteen years."

"My name is Alex. Your dad did some music for a documentary of mine once. Your mother tells me you write."

"My God, son, I knew your dad as a kid. You look so much like him."

In the evening, musicians took the stage. They crammed the small band area and jammed together. A pianist, a bassist, a drummer, two sax players, someone on trumpet, a singer, a violin, a trombone. Spotlights were lit. Music filled the room. The band played an endless set, with some mellow tunes, and some up-tempo songs that jumped through the club. The crowd came to life and there were ripples of zealous applause. This might have been any other night in that bar. Who could know that anything had been lost? Someone grabbed me and ushered me to the stage.

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The singer spoke on the microphone and there was some mention of my name.

“Here’s someone you’ve been wanting to hear,” she said. The piano player left and I was pushed into his place.

“What’ll it be?” someone asked. “What are we going to play?”

“Miles Davis,” I said, nervous before so many people. “‘All Blues’. In G.” My hands fell to the piano and I began to play. The bass player picked up the slow groove behind me, and the drummer’s brushes whipped against the drums. The horns jumped in. It was a wash of sound, and I was a part of it. At the solo break, I played without thinking, taking my turn like a pro, sending off some line I’d never heard, some licks I’d never used. My hands moved as though guided by angel’s wings. Everything fit into place. Each note was thoughtful, and it came as though I’d rehearsed it for years.

The song seemed to go on for ages, but ended in one bright second. When the final chord was struck, it hung above the crowd—a solemn blue cluster of notes on horns and strings that drifted to the back of the room. The bassist nodded my way and voices shook me awake. Faceless bodies in the dark of the bar rose from their seats. My mother yelled Bravo. A thousand hands clapped beyond the white of the stage light before me. I stood and bowed my head. I searched the back of the room for my dad’s shape. I probed the darkness for the wink of his eye but found only strangers there.

Back from the cemetery, I try to write a letter to my mother, a note of apology for not giving myself more to the ache that everybody feels. For not being able to admit
that I’m not the only one who’s suffering. There are a number of things I could write. I
admire her for wanting to celebrate my dad’s life, rather than collapse, as I have, in his
absence. I respect her for not giving into grief. I love her for keeping his music a part of
our lives. Again, though, words fall short. Each try I make sounds too stiff, too forced,
insincere. The hardest things to write never come naturally. The feelings lose their
substance, strained as they are, through the filter of the mind. I could weep for the
futility. Late in the afternoon Genevieve creeps up behind me at her desk and wraps her
arms around my shoulders.

“Let’s just go,” she whispers.

“I haven’t finished this.”

“I leave it,” she says. “Your mom will get everything you could write down for
her as soon as she sees you at that party.”


You can hear music all the way down my street on the walk to my house.

Genevieve and I are pulled dreamily down the sidewalk by the happy sounds, and at the
gate, faces turn to me and call their hellos. I’m swept into a wave of affection, a flurry of
hugs and kisses and how-have-you-been’s. My mother moves to me from the barbecue in
her silly Kiss the Cook apron.

She hugs me and tears fall between us. “Thank you,” she says, pressing her cheek
against mine. She looks into my eyes. “Come on. The guys here have been waiting for
you to play.”

I look to the patio, where a PA has been erected, where musicians stand.
bassist, a drummer, guitar, saxophone, trumpet, trombone. There is an electric piano set up in the corner. The chair before it is empty.

"Come on, Miles," they call. "Let's jam here."

I move through the thick crowd assembled to the keyboard. People part for me and touch me as I pass. It's like a dream. All eyes are upon me. There are cheers in the sun as I take the seat.

"What'll it be?" someone asks.

"'Bye Bye Blackbird'," I say. It's an elegy. "In B flat."

I count them in and we fall smoothly into that two-step swing. The horns take the melody. Their arrangement falls so naturally into place. It sounds divine, arranged in heaven over a million years. There's no stiffness amongst this group. This crazy give-and-take, of syncopated melodies, of finger-snapping rhythm, is the real music of the spheres. Maybe we've played together a thousand times before somewhere. We all know our place in this order.

The first solo is mine, allotted to me by a nod of the bassist's head. I begin slowly, throwing a few notes down here and there, nothing fancy. I'm in no hurry to say what's on my mind. I let the line build naturally—no run of endless notes, just my thoughts as tones as they occur. There's plenty of space in my playing. Good things can come from absences. My message sounds clear. In the elemental wonder of song, the pain of voicelessness is eased. The people in our yard are clapping. They know what I'm trying to say. My mother and Jane sway to the music by the barbecue. Genevieve smiles my way.
Blues and exultation fly in tandem from my hands at the keyboard, soaring above the patio, beyond the yard, into the summer sky. This music is the sound of angels' wings. They flutter around me, a flurry of imagined brilliance. Somewhere, a face above me smiles behind his beard, winks in burnished light. In this moment, the ebon raven of melancholy has flown. Darkness is lifted here in song. Blackbird, bye bye.
Vita Auctoris

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