

## GOODBYE PORK PIE HAT\*

When the man died, he took it all with him. He took the throaty coffee-cream sound of his tenor horn and the blackstrap molasses flow of his clarinet. Those were from the great years. He took the breathy rasp of that same horn and the fragile squeak of that same clarinet. Those were from the last years. He took the breath he couldn't catch anymore and the legs that wouldn't hold him up and the last sour whiff of the liquor he drank. And he took the muscles in his hands and the slow steady beat of his heart, and he took every last one of the tunes that slipped through his head and wrapped together like the strands of hair in a little girl's braids.

You never knew the man; not to talk to. You never unpacked your gear with him, wedged in with the rest of the band like sardines in a can in the backstage hole at some club. You didn't bum smokes or lights or hits or swigs off him. You didn't listen with him to the roar outside like a train in the distance, or smell the blend of a hundred or so different cigarettes and two hundred glasses of alcohol. You didn't walk behind him up the stage steps and get smacked in the eyes by the glare of lights and rolled over by the train roar, two hundred pairs of hands clapping and two hundred voices yelling his name. You didn't step into the light next to him and move your music stand over a fraction of an inch on the scuffed parquet floor and hook your horn onto the strap around your neck at the same time he hooked his. And when the music started and everything else disappeared, and the coffee-cream sound or the blackstrap molasses sound poured out and wound around, so clean and strong you could taste it in the back of your throat, you didn't shut your eyes there on the stage and forget where you were while you rode those notes down like beads on the most perfect string.

You were too young to meet the man. He never saw you or knew your name. You unpack your gear in the backstage hole in some club and listen to the thin sound of a dozen voices in the dark. You smell a handful of cigarettes and a dozen or so glasses of alcohol. When you walk onstage, no train rolls over you.

The man took it all with him. This is what you have: a hole-in-the-wall club with a scuffed-up drinks counter and a few falling-apart chairs and a blue glow-worm light that barely makes a dot on the throat of your horn. You have a bare-walled apartment with a sagging mattress and a record player, and three LPs with the grooves wearing out from all the times you played them. You have the black-and-white photos from those LP covers. They are good photos. You can look at them and not see how, at the end, the man's cheeks went slack and his eyes sank into his head.

In the blue glow-worm light, you set up your music and tune your horn. You don't see the drinks counter or the falling-apart chairs. Instead you see what is only in your head: a long, sleek black car pulling up to a sidewalk in thin drizzly rain. On the car's back door, the yellow bulb of a street lamp makes a splash like the moon on water. In your head, you stand on the sidewalk in the rain and watch that door open.

The man's trench coat could have come straight off the rack. Drops of rain fall on his black porkpie hat. In the yellow light they glitter like diamonds. Strong square fingers grip the handle of his horn case. Behind him, the club door stands open. White light gushes out onto the sidewalk, along with the blend of smoke from a hundred or so different cigarettes.

His cheeks are smooth and his eyes are young. He looks at you and smiles.

You stand in the blue glow-worm light and the thin hum of a dozen voices. In the back of your throat, this is what you have: the smoothness of coffee and cream, the rich tang of blackstrap molasses.

Tunes wind together for you like the strands of hair in a little girl's braids. Your horn sounds like strong, sweet, black coffee. You close your eyes and ride those notes down like beads on the most perfect string.

\*Title is taken from Charles Mingus's tune of the same name, written in memory of jazz saxophonist Lester Young (1909-1959).