

THERE'S SOME OUTRAGEOUS MUSIC playing on the sound system in this place, clearly the bartender has brought along his own favorite records tonight. This one is by a hot electric quartet doing jazz standards and some original tunes, everything at ultra-up tempos. The whole group is great, but the guitar player is a monster. It sounds like his fingers are connected directly to his ears—he doesn't so much play as *sing*. You can hear a lot of rock in his jazz, a lot of blues in his rock. He's getting a thrilling, punchy sound out of his amp. This is the way I'd like to play. I don't know how I've missed this guy—another incredible guitar player from out of nowhere. You close your eyes for five minutes and everything changes.

Five minutes ago Bobby began to cry and went to the men's room so I wouldn't see him doing it. Now he's just sniffing and blinking his eyes, holding on to his beer and looking down at the table. When we came in I took a booth in the back thinking this place would start jumping after a while. So far it's only the two of us and the bartender. The privacy would be torture without this music to focus on. I thought I'd be carrying Bobby out of here but he's scarcely drinking.

He looks up at me and tries to smile. "Isn't this some shit," he says.

For a moment I think he's talking about the music, which is definitely some shit, but he's still talking about Chris, his wife, who's doing it again. I told him everything I could tell him when he called on the phone, told him he already had plenty of skills as a victim without any help from me. Then I felt bad and agreed to come out and meet him. When I got here I told him the same things again anyway.

"Bobby, this band is smoking," I say now, gesturing up at the black theater speakers hanging from the ceiling. "Absolutely smoking. When did you ever hear 'Stella by Starlight' like this?" I mimic the guitar player with my fingers. "Burning," I say.

Bobby and I used to do "Stella" together. Everybody does "Stella."

He nods. "Burning," he says, swirling his beer, watching it spin around and fizz.

They've just remodeled and reopened this place, spent some money doing it. I'd like to come back here soon, bring Janet and some other friends, have a nice time in a decent bar with good music. But I wonder if this neighborhood can sustain a place like this. I was in here once,

before it changed hands, when there was a depressing jukebox full of oldies and a handful of old regulars at the bar. Now it has track-lighting on a flat-black ceiling, hanging plants, colorful art and posters on the walls. I can't remember what it used to be called—it's called "All Out" now. I'm looking through spider plants and Swedish ivy at red-and-blue neon tubes in the front window announcing the new name to a dark, empty street.

The band on the record finishes this wonderful "Stella" they've been doing, and in the silence between tracks I glance over at the bartender. He's loping around behind the bar, wiping glasses, hanging them by their stems from the new wooden rack above his head. The next tune comes on—it's "The Night Has a Thousand Eyes"—and he bops his head in time with it.

Bobby gets motivated and swallows the rest of his beer. "I want somebody to tell me how it's done," he says. "I want somebody to tell me how I do this."

I can't get involved with that. I've seen Bobby this way before. He wants me to help him back the truck over himself a few more times. He knows what to do.

"I think we should start playing again, Bobby," I say. "I think it's a mistake to let the music slide."

He looks up at the ceiling and lets out a long breath through his mouth.

Bobby and I used to have a duo—electric guitar, electric piano. We did standards and pretty pop things, all our favorite tunes, all with passion and bebop idealism. We worked day jobs, played evenings and weekends. A couple of cafés and lounges used us for six months or so and then the work dried up. We were just starting to sound good. We kept trying for a while and then I stopped seeing Bobby, almost a year ago. He's in computer-programming school now. Chris talked him into doing it. He borrowed the money from his folks.

"Next round's on me," I say, sliding out of the booth. "You want something to eat? Maybe they've got the grill going. My treat. Pretzels at least."

He shakes his head, ears sticking out. This afternoon he had his black hair chopped off to about two inches all around. It used to be shoulder-length and fluffy.

The bartender—he's maybe all of twenty-two—is tall and rangy, with long brown hair parted in the middle, plaid flannel shirt, a peaceful expression on his face. He doesn't look like he's from around here. He looks like Colorado, New Mexico, somewhere like that. He's snapping his fingers and swinging his arms as I walk up to the bar. He smiles at me, big white teeth. He has two gold stud-earrings in his left ear, one in his right.

I smile back. "This really makes it," I say, pointing to the record on the turntable. The bass player is at this moment taking a mean solo over some airy chord changes the guitarist is flinging at him.

The bartender nods and raises his eyebrows, and holds up a finger for me to wait. Then he rummages in the shelving in back of the bar and hands me the record jacket.

"The grill working?" I ask.

"Next week for the grill," he says. "Place just opened, the grill isn't together yet."

I order beer and pretzels.

"No pretzels," he says. "Pretzel distributor didn't come through." He rattles the empty pretzel rack. "It's just popcorn tonight," he says. "Homemade, all you want on the house."

"Popcorn's what I really wanted," I say.

While he draws the beer I look at the album cover. I've never heard of anybody in the band. The guitar player is a woman.

"I can't keep up." I wave the cardboard jacket. "There's too much going on."

The bartender laughs and pushes the glasses across the bar. He fetches a few more record albums and hands them to me.

"Here's some more to worry about," he says.

Then he scoops a wicker basket full of popcorn from a big plastic garbage bag beneath the shelf of liquor bottles, sets the basket on the glasses of beer. The other records feature the same musicians—they have a lot of albums out. I copy the titles onto a bar napkin while he rings up the drinks.

"You play?" he asks, handing me my change.

I hand him back a dollar bill and he winks. "Guitar," I say.

"Solid," he says. "Like this?" He's pointing up at the music in the air.

"Like this but not this good," I laugh. "Or this fast."

He laughs too and nods. "She's a bitch, right?" pointing to the woman

pictured on one of the records. In the picture, she's holding a guitar like the one I play.

"Really."

We shake hands, I tell him my name. His is Carl. He plays sax, tenor and soprano. He's from Kansas, just moved here.

"My friend plays keyboards," I say, and I nod my head toward Bobby who's slumped down in the booth staring at the door to the ladies' room in back. "We had a duo for a while, just a lounge thing. He's having some troubles tonight, we're talking about it."

Carl says he digs. He says we might be able to do some jamming in a week or two, and we trade phone numbers on bar napkins for that. Carl's pretty booked at the moment, helping his friends who own the bar get things going.

"Maybe my friend too," I say.

"Whatever," Carl says.

Then five people walk in the door all at once—two men, three women, very talky and happy—and take the table in front of the window. The women duck beneath hanging plants and sit down in the red-and-blue glow of the neon sign. One of them can't get a long tendrill of Swedish ivy out of her face; the others laugh and prop it up in the plant hanger for her. Carl promises to play the other records and walks down the bar to take the order from the two men. On my way back to the booth, the popcorn basket balanced on the glasses, I smile and nod hello to the women at the table and one of them—a thin blonde in a brown leather jacket—smiles and nods back.

Bobby has become a different man in the ten minutes I've been at the bar. He's stoic now, not asking for comfort or advice. He just wants a place to stay for the night. He's not going back home. He takes a pack of cigarettes out of his jacket, lights one, blows the smoke up over my head. He'd been restraining himself.

"You quit," I remind him.

"I started again," he says.

I light one of the cigarettes too, the first I've had in about a year. It tastes like they did when I was fourteen, and I think for a minute about being that age. When cigarettes tasted as alien as this, I was taking guitar lessons in music stores, playing in bands with friends after school, wearing the grooves off records trying to figure out how my heroes did

what they did. My best teacher was a purist jazzer named Walter who closed his eyes and drifted away when he played, snapped his fingers when he wasn't playing, wore a beret. I was impressed, and I think Walter enjoyed making an impression on all the little jazzlings who came faithfully every week with their guitars.

It pained Walter that I also dug Eric Clapton and Jimi Hendrix and The Beatles. Jazz was a kind of life, Walter would say, based on a kind of music. That life didn't have anything to do with having spangles on your clothes, or being on television, or jumping up and down on a stage. I had to try and understand that, he would say. I remember that Walter frightened me sometimes. I was just a kid who thought that if you could reach people with a guitar you were king of the world.

Behind the bar, Carl is putting another record on the turntable. He holds the album cover up for me to see and then punches it to show me how good it's going to be. I give him the O.K. sign.

"Carl over there plays sax. He's into jamming sometime soon."

Bobby holds up his cigarette and turns it around, examining it. "All God's chillun are into jamming sometime soon," he says. "All got soul."

He flicks a piece of popcorn against the wall and watches it bounce back across the table. Then he smirks and takes a drag on the cigarette, and leaves it hanging from his lips. When he speaks, smoke spills out and the cigarette bounces in the corner of his mouth like a baton.

"All God's crappy chillun are jammers and artists," he says.

The guy Bobby's wife is seeing is a painter. She bought one of his smaller oils at a show, that's how they met. This morning Bobby took the painting off the wall and threw it out their fourth-floor window onto the street. Chris went out to get it and didn't come back.

The other record comes on, funkier than the first—tight, electric-groove music. Carl has jacked up the volume a bit. The woman on guitar is now playing screaming rock licks through a wah-wah pedal. Halfway through the first cut, the people sitting by the window get up and start dancing in the space between the bar and the tables. Carl approves—he's biting his lower lip, snapping his fingers, doing a funny imitation of ecstasy.

Bobby looks over and then looks back and runs his tongue over his upper teeth. "Invasion of the body snatchers," he says. He wants to use the bathroom and then leave, and as he's sliding out of his seat the blonde woman dances between the tables toward our booth and asks with her hands and head if we want to join in.

“Go ahead,” Bobby says. “Dance a dance. I can wait.”

I smile at her and shake my head. She makes a pouting face and shrugs and dances back. Carl has the strap for his sax fastened around his neck. He’s pulling a shiny golden tenor out of a case propped open on the bar.

Janet has heard the latest installment of the Bobby saga. I told her after he called. She’s down on Bobby and didn’t want me coming out here. She said people like Bobby always take advantage of me. She had a long list of examples. I don’t want to bring him home without letting her know. The pay phone is back in the corridor with the rest rooms, and while I’m fooling with my coins I can hear Bobby scat-singing in the men’s room and Carl warming up on the saxophone out front.

The line is busy. At our booth I put on my coat, light another one of Bobby’s cigarettes, sip some of the rest of my beer. Carl is rambling around behind the bar, blowing his tenor to the record while the people dance. The blonde-haired woman is clapping her hands and cheering him on. He plays good sax. Bobby comes back and when we get up to the bar I shout to Carl that I’ll call him in a week. He strolls over and lets go of the horn long enough to slap my hand.

Out on the street the quiet is almost funny, nestled up against the loud music and dancing on the other side of the door. There’s no traffic at all, nothing happening except three black guys up on the corner waiting for something. I don’t see how this bar can make it in this neighborhood.

Bobby hasn’t come out of the place. Through the window I see him laughing with Carl, writing something on a napkin, paying Carl for a package. When he comes out he holds it up.

“A six-pack,” he says, “for the road. The long road.”

We get to my car and Bobby puts a quarter in the parking meter and turns the crank. “They sell time out here,” he says, and gets in.

When we get rolling, he twists open a bottle and starts drinking.

“Suddenly you like beer,” I say. “We’re in a bar, perfectly nice bar, all the beer in the world, perfectly good beer, great music, people dancing, having a good time, you have to leave. In the car you like to drink. It’s illegal to drink in the car.”

“Bobby’s a problem,” he says. He takes another swallow from the bottle, then he turns on the radio and makes like he’s dancing in his seat.

“So why didn’t you dance with the blonde one?” he says. “I saw you

checking her out. Nice. Surfboards, hot dogs, coral reefs. You could've danced with her, made her feel accepted, verified, worthwhile. She wanted you to do that for her, man, but you didn't. Terrible."

"She asked both of us. You didn't dance with her either."

"Yeah, but I wasn't flirting with her. I got a wife to be faithful to, pal," he says and laughs this sick laugh. Then he says, "Well, you talked me into it."

"Talked you into what?"

"Into playing. I want to play tonight, right now. And don't say it's too late."

"It's too late," I say. "Janet's going to be in bed, I can't make noise. I have to get up in the morning and go to work."

"I didn't say I wanted to play at your place. You can't go in tomorrow and rustle those papers if you miss a little sleep?"

"I thought you didn't want to go home."

"Not home. I know some cats across town, they're always jamming."

I'm humming along in third all the way up the boulevard, as if the lights are turning green because they see my car. We're home. "What cats?" I say.

"Some cats, never mind. I'm going over there to play, I don't have a car, you're taking me and you're bringing your gee-tar."

"I don't know, Bobby," I say, pulling the emergency brake and switching the headlights off.

"You know," he says, and gets out.

Upstairs, Bobby falls on the sofa and lights a cigarette. Janet is awake in bed, reading. I close the bedroom door.

"He needs a place to stay," I say.

She's annoyed, staring at the book, not saying anything.

"We're gonna go and play some music with some guys he knows, just for a couple of hours."

She looks at me, a brutal look. I sit down on the bed. I rub her knees through the blanket.

"I tried to call, the line was busy."

"I was on for a while," she says, moving her knees. "You smell like smoke."

I get up, find some guitar picks, put them in my pocket, coil an electric guitar cord around my hand. "Who were you talking to?"

“Jeffrey called.”

“Jeffrey,” I say. I look around for my guitar. She’s put it somewhere. “What’s on Jeffrey’s mind?”

“He’s in town tomorrow on business. He wants to take me out to dinner.”

“Take you out to dinner. Like the last time.”

“No, not like the last time. He knows we’re together and it’s just dinner. Don’t start.”

“We were together the last time and it was just dinner then, too.”

“We weren’t together then the way we’re together now. Jeffrey knows what’s what. I’m going out to dinner with him. Period. Go play your guitar.”

“If I could find it I would.”

“I put it in the closet. I kept tripping over it where it was.”

My guitar’s in the closet, upside down. In the living room, Bobby seems to be sleeping on the sofa. I drag my amplifier out of the corner and set it next to the door. He opens his eyes and smiles.

“Hey, soulbird,” he says. “Ready to fly into jazzland?”

In the car, Bobby sings and drums out rhythms on his knees, a beer bottle sticking up from between his legs. He’s making fun of the blues. “Oh my baby,” he sings in a raspy voice, “she done gone and done me wrong. Ooh hoo.” Then he sings a trumpet lick to fill in behind that, mimicking a trumpet player with his hands. He looks happy, drinking and giving me directions to someplace all the way over on the other side of town. I’m drinking a beer too, holding it in my lap while I drive. Bobby lights a cigarette and feels his flattened pack. He waves the pack in the air.

“I see a place coming up,” he says. “We could get some more of these bad boys, too.” He swings his empty bottle by its throat.

I park near a small storefront lit up with five or six neon beer signs. Inside, there’s a bulletproof plexiglass barrier separating the customers from the merchandise, a revolving plexiglass drum for exchanging the money and goods. It feels like being inside a huge pinball machine. Three elaborate beer clocks are flashing on the wall behind the clerk, all saying wildly different times. Some old people are lined up to our right, playing a row of video poker games, staying out of the cold. On our way out of the store, a tall, skinny black kid is going in with a naked electric bass slung over his shoulder.



"Musicians," I say to Bobby. "Everywhere, musicians."

"He's probably incredible," Bobby says. "And you'll never see him again. You'll never hear him. The world eats incredible bass players for breakfast."

On the sidewalk, an old woman in a print dress steps out of a doorway to ask us for spare change. I give her what's in my pocket, thirty-five cents. Bobby rummages in his coat and hands her several dollar bills. She looks at her hand and then she looks at Bobby. He winks at her and pats her on the shoulder, and she hustles right into the store. He looks at me and laughs.

"Gas money," he says. "I don't need it and she gets terrible mileage."

Bobby's wife took their car when she left with the painting. It's her car. Bobby never did have his own car, and his motorcycle is broken the way it always was.

"You been playing?" he asks when we get rolling down the strip again.

"I've been practicing at home," I say. "Learning some tunes."

"Not getting out with anybody?"

"Nobody I know needs a guitar player for gigs and nobody wants to play just to play. The telephone has to sound like it has money in it or they won't even pick it up when it rings. I work, I'm tired. Haven't met any new people."

"You'll meet these cats tonight. I've played over here a few times."

"Really."

"Yeah, you know, hitch a ride over, sit in for a few tunes. I met one of these guys in a club."

"I'm into playing," I say.

"I always thought you could have been a real good guitar player," he says. "Never understood what was keeping you from it. I think you have trouble with deep commitments." He burps.

I pretend I'm going to punch him in the head. "If you'd shape up, Bozo, maybe we could do something together. Maybe if you stopped screwing around and showed some interest, maybe other people would get excited and something might happen."

"It's all Bobby's fault," he says.

"I didn't say that."

"Well, I'm going to shape up," he says. "I'm going to stop screwing around."

Where we're going is a big brown building in a funky neighborhood. Bobby rings a bell, nobody answers. His friends are jamming all right—even on the sidewalk you can hear a kind of hard Latin bop happening up there. We try the street door, it's unlocked. In the dark stairwell the music is much louder, more intense. We're almost disembodied by the volume of it, my equipment seeming to haul us up the stairs. On the third floor I can almost not hear Bobby banging on a door. He laughs and pushes it open.

Inside, four or five people are wailing away in a tiny room full of drums and instruments and amplifiers. Bobby and I sidle into a hallway to wait. A pretty Asian woman comes out of another room, kisses Bobby on the cheek, smiles hello to me. He shouts introductions. Her name is Tamara. Bobby sits down on my amp, offers Tamara one of our beers, hands me one and a cigarette. I can see only the bass player and drummer thrashing around in the corner. They don't have a guitar player. There's an abstract, hypnotic painting hanging on the wall behind the drummer which reminds me of computer circuitry, or the patterns of DNA. The bass player is standing beneath an oil portrait of John Coltrane—a dreamy version of the famous profile of him from *A Love Supreme*.

They've been playing "All the Things You Are." When they finish the tune, the keyboard player stands up to let Bobby sit in. Bobby jumps right into it, noodling all around on the piano to warm himself up, sounding every bit as good as the other guy. He sees me strapping on the guitar and he winks at me. Somebody suggests "Freedom Jazz Dance," practically a standard in this late hour of the world but I don't know how to play it. Bobby perceives this. "It's just B flat," he says to me, "all B flat."

I listen for a minute, thinking about what I hear and about what B flat means to me. That was what Walter told me to do when I studied with him. I think that B flat means such and such and I touch the guitar, and what comes out sounds surprisingly fine. Licks that seemed stale and aimless at home alone are fresh and solid with other people playing. I'm surprised I managed to forget that. Everything I do comes out right and when it's time for me to solo, I hear myself playing before I can think about what to play.

We try one tune after another. If I don't know the tune we're doing, I play what I can from the chart. If I can't do anything, I don't try to. Walter told me that too. I'm impressed by how much he really knew, the disaffected, moody bebopper.

Somewhere between tunes we repeat our names, slap hands. Kenny, Ricardo, Len, Cecil, Hideo. Bobby and me. Tamara in an easy chair is applauding enthusiastically after every song.

"Like Jell-O," she says. "Like a room of Jell-O. With Cool Whip."

Bobby laughs and rolls his eyes up at the ceiling. "Tamara digs Jell-O," he says to me. "She was telling me another time I was here."

Tamara is the painter of the work hanging in the room. More of her stuff is up all around the apartment—wild, throbbing things like fantastic bruises on the walls.

We keep playing and everybody keeps sounding wonderful. The bursts of music detach themselves from us and float out into the room like bubbles we're blowing. Bobby in particular is stepping out tonight. He's digging hard into the piano, his playing like a series of excavations of himself. We're doing a bouncy but mysterious "Windows," and in Bobby's long solo I can hear the agony of marriage to Chris, the years of not knowing what to do next, the broken motorcycle in the living room, the arc of his rival's painting sailing out the window and over the street. I can hear him tossing computer school out the window, too, tossing just about everything. Then his solo feathers away, and he sits up straight at the piano, looking at me.

I begin to think about what the opening chord of "Windows" is supposed to mean (it's B<sup>b</sup> minor<sup>7</sup>) when suddenly that doesn't matter anymore. It's suddenly more pleasurable to think about Jeffrey wrecking his expensive car on the way to pick Janet up for dinner, and I hear myself playing that, playing Jeffrey trudging back to his hotel with a steering wheel in his hand, the seat ripped out of his pants. Then a big motorcycle appears. It's Bobby with Chris on the back. They've kissed and made up and fixed the bike, and now as Bobby pulls up alongside Jeffrey, Chris produces her ex-lover's oil painting and whacks Jeffrey over the head with it. Then she and Bobby speed away, cackling. Bobby's electric piano is sticking up out of the sidecar attached to the bike—they're on their way to his first gig with our new combo. At the gig, everybody's in the audience and we sound great. It's especially nice to see Walter out there, still in his black beret, sipping a dark ale and giving me the O.K. sign. And then, in the middle of our first set, Janet and Chris get up on stage behind the band and begin to unfurl large banners they've painted as a surprise for us. *Don't they sound great?* the first banner says. *The jazz life!* The audience applauds. *They're good men!* the second banner says, with arrows pointing to Bobby and me. *There's*

*nothing wrong with them! We realize that now!* There is great cheering all around. Then they unfurl the third banner. *How could we ever have wanted anyone else? What were we thinking? We're sorry!* This one brings the crowd to its feet. Bobby winks at me from the piano. We're finally happy. We only wish that the skinny bass player from the liquor store could have joined our group too. But instead of being swallowed up by the world, he's been sent to Moscow as an emissary of our people—to show the Soviets that Americans want only peace and harmony. On the front page of the *Times* this morning there was a photo of the Politburo chiefs dancing and slapping each other's hands while Buster (that's his name) laid down the groove on his bass. . . .

I've been hearing some whoops and shouts from the other guys—they haven't known what I've been talking about but they've liked the way it sounded. I look up from the guitar now to signal that I'm coming to the end of what I wanted to say.

And I see Carl standing over by the door, still in his coat, snapping his fingers and flashing his teeth at me. The blonde woman from the bar is opening Carl's instrument case on the floor and taking out his saxophone. Her friends are here too, dancing and passing around beers and the garbage bag full of popcorn. Carl gets out of his coat and then he prances over with the horn in his mouth and starts lovingly coming on to everybody in the room, to Tamara's paintings, to the room itself, to Chick Corea for writing the tune, to the whole darkened city..

Bobby wouldn't quit playing after everybody else called it a night. Tamara eventually dragged him away from the piano and gave him a sandwich and a beer, and he cracked all of us up, dancing and carrying on. Finally I got him to come downstairs and sit in the car. Then he conked out on the way home, and now getting him up the stairs is a major thing.

In my living room he plops onto the sofa again and lights a cigarette. He lies there with his eyes closed, smoking and flicking his ashes into the fireplace that doesn't work.

I walk through the bedroom to the bathroom. When I come out, the flushing toilet has woken Janet up.

"What time is it?" she says. "What are you doing? Come to bed."

"I'll be there in a minute," I say.

I get two cans of beer out of the refrigerator. Bobby has rolled over

on the sofa and buried his face in the cushions. The short black tufts of his new haircut are pointing in all directions. His head looks like a baby's head. His cigarette is lying on the oak floor Janet and I sanded and polyurethaned, and when I pick it up there's a mark like a black finger in the wood. It's four in the morning. What I most want to do this moment is play the guitar again. Certain thrilling notions are running through my hands; they might never come back to me but it's too late for making noise.

"Hey, Bobby," I say. I nudge him in the shoulder. "You sounded great tonight, Bobby. Really great."

He doesn't move. I lean over him with a beer can and pull the pop-top near his ear. He just lies there.

"Bobby, let's put together a band," I say. "With these guys tonight or some other guys. And do regular gigs for good crowds of people. You know this is what we should be doing. It's not too late."

He doesn't budge but I know he can hear me. So I tell him what was coming to me when I was playing tonight. I go into all the details and it takes me a while. I finish my beer and start on his, and help myself to his cigarettes. I tell Bobby how exciting it was when I jumped right out of myself and into the music, how I was actually somewhere else, not in that room at all. I tell him that all anybody has to do is stay excited.

"Bobby, do you follow what I'm saying? I'm talking about you, man. I'm saying that everything's going to work out. Your problems are over. It came to me in a vision."

He shudders and stretches finally, and then he rolls in one motion on the sofa until he's facing me. His eyes don't open but his mouth does.

"Incredible, man," he says. "Terrific."

Then he puts one hand over his closed eyes and points the other hand at the ceiling.

"Could you kill that light?" he says. "I'm sleeping."