

ERIC RAWSON

*Paris*

On Tuesday after Veterans Day the snow started. I remember because it was the day that Foster Jackson ruined the jazz band. He was only a sophomore, a year younger, but when he sat on the piano bench, languid and serious and occupied, we knew already that he was our superior. We could not clearly see his fingers move, so light and quick was his touch on the keys; nor did we recognize the melancholy music he played. Like a scattering flock that rose and reformed in a clear sun and swept back over us in a rush of shadowy wings he played; and we were embarrassed and ashamed. I knew I would not perform my piece when Mr. O'Connell called me because I knew that my fingertips were gunmetal and my notes would be dead birds in a cage of piano wire. As soon as he finished, Foster Jackson left the room, straight out among us on our folding chairs. He wore a little smile, because he was aware, surely, that he had ruined us. A boy who played clarinet claimed that he knew him from his old school, and he snickered when he told me his name.

—But just call him Fag-butt Jackson, the boy said.

I waited in the snow that spun out of the colorless sky for him to come out of the school. The air was streaked with tiny beads of ice that stung the face and pelted the dead autumn oak leaves. A group of girls came out, laughing the way some girls do, and I could hear their shoes crunching on the sidewalk, and I heard the car tires spinning impatiently at the corners. The nearby buildings receded and became indistinct in the blueness of the afternoon, and the distant buildings were altogether veiled. Along the avenue the streetlights glowed like feeble outpost fires.

He wore a burgundy-colored beret and a navy coat that hung to his ankles, and as he passed into the snow I saw flung over his shoulder a foreign-looking leather bookcase. He went on down the hill into the snow, eating a red apple, and he was like a shadow amidst curtains or a dark space opened into the whiteness, moving quick-silent in his hard-soled shoes.

I called after him: —You! Foster Jackson!

He drew up and waited without turning around, as if turning would mean losing his direction down the street. I slid around in front of him.

—I saw you back there, he said. He bit from the apple and looked at me with moist, confiding eyes. The snow powdered the top of his beret and the shoulders of his coat and rivulets coursed down his dark face where the snow melted. His tone was cool but not uncordial:

—You play?

—I thought I did, I said to him. —Till you showed me I couldn't.

I was not even angry, only broken-hearted. My vanity was a young man's vanity, and I had believed that I deserved everything I wanted, and I wanted to be great. —What was that? I said.

He told me it was "Begin the Beguine." It had never sounded like that in my Cole Porter songbook, and I would have judged it a lie but for his serious face. I could not stand that old sappy romance, and I wanted to know how he had turned it into something feathery dark and raw.

He stepped around me, swinging the tail of his long coat, and walked on. I bent to gather snow in my bare hands and compacted it into a loose icy ball. It hit him on the heel, but he never turned. I made another ball and ran a few steps and tossed it at him. All the way down the hill, across Lincoln past the video store and Marion's restaurant, I followed him with the snowballs. I did not throw to hurt him, only to remind him I was there. I was not angry at him. What he knew about I wanted too much to lose in a moment of fury.

—Where'd you learn that stuff, Foster Jackson? I called at his back.

—My mother taught me, he shouted, walking on, eating his apple, his voice quieted by the falling snow. —She sings opera. Nobody else around who can play good enough for her but me, and she won't have a stereo. That's why she taught me.

—Your mama?

—That's Miz Juliet Jackson, sweetheart, he shouted back at me.

—How does she know anything?

—Paris, he shouted. —In France.

—I know where Paris is, fool.

We were into the neighborhood now, where the houses appeared stripped and skeletal. Plastic sheeting covered their windows, and

ice covered the branches of the ramshackle little ash trees and the naked twiggy stuff along the walks. The trim of some of the clapboard and stucco buildings had been painted a hopeless pink or yellow; but the house Foster Jackson approached was a uniform grayish white and retired spiritlessly behind the falling snow. When he reached the top step, he wheeled and squinted down the walk. Then he lobbed the apple core over my head.

—Do you intend to follow me right on inside? he said.

I said that I guessed I did. I shoved my hands in my pockets to warm them.

He nodded deliberately, eyeing me, and swung his leather bookcase off his shoulder so that he could reach his keys. —My mother doesn't approve of improvisation. You understand you can't tell her about that pathetic jazz band of yours?

—I guess I do, I said. —Only I'm not in that band anymore and you know it.

A flicker of embarrassment passed over his face. He hesitated. —Well, it ain't that bad. You might as well come on up here, Armand Miller, he said.

So: he had asked around about me too. He had known the one he had challenged.

The bare dark passageway had the cold smell of paste wax and vanilla. He hung his long coat and his beret on a hook next to a woman's winter coat and reached for mine, whispering, —Slip off your shoes, honey. We keep things clean in here.

We went into the sudden yellow light of the livingroom. The heat vents ticked and banged, but the room was cold. Under my stockinged feet, the worn carpets felt gritty with age. We crossed the square, thinly curtained room with its plain wooden chairs and tea tables grouped around the centerpiece of a tremendous Steinway. On the wall behind it hung a portrait of an African Christ framed in blood-red, a splash of color in the drab room. In my mind's eye I again saw Foster Jackson like a shadow in the snow with his red apple.

In the kitchen Juliet Jackson, the woman who had taught him, sat at the white formica table, studying a musical score with one long square-ended finger that moved across the spread pages. She wore a pale blue nurse's uniform that embraced the full curves of her body as if she had had it tailored. Her skin was black like a ripe radiant grape, shiny and smooth on her cheekbones and temples,

for she wore her hair straightened and pulled severely back. The kitchen seemed to rise up around her like a white shell: the white porcelain, the white curtains, the white tiles ivoried with age. Four blue rings of flame burned on the top of the white stove and fogged the window at which the sleet was pecking.

She looked up unblinking at Foster Jackson for a long moment. Her black eyes held glinting pinpricks of blue, blue like the gas flames, and these eyes studied my face and narrowed.

—You're late, Foster, she said. She used the same cool but not uncordial voice her son used. —I was expecting you to play the Verdi for me before my shift.

—Yes, ma'am, he said softly, reflecting her own steady narrowed gaze.

I had never met anyone who addressed his mother in this manner, and it shocked me for some reason. My family used Ma or Mom or, among the kids, mocking nicknames and thought nothing of yelling to one another from room to room over the blare of the tv. No one in Juliet Jackson's house, I could tell, had ever raised a voice toward another room.

—And I don't believe you have time for entertaining, she went on. —Do you?

—Yes, ma'am, I do. I only have algebra tonight. I worked ahead over the holiday.

—Well, she said. —We can't rehearse now anyway.

—I don't see why not.

—Because this is not the appropriate time, Foster.

—I think I'd better go, I said to him, since I had not yet spoken to his mother; but I did not want to go. There were times when I sat to practice, times when the house was empty and still, when in my meandering boredom I would accidently, with a single right discordant note, transform a common harmony into a device that sent shocks through my being. How did I do that? Why did Foster Jackson know how to do that?

—Maybe you had best go, Juliet Jackson said.

—No, ma'am, Foster Jackson said. —He's my guest.

Juliet Jackson looked over at me, then back at Foster Jackson, then at the sheet music. She tapped her square-ended finger, then closed her eyes. Finally she said:

—In that case, why don't you gentlemen sit down.

We sat across the snow-field of formica from her on vinyl-padded chairs, and Foster Jackson told her my name. I tried to meet her eyes, but they were cold blue black and made me blink rapidly.

—I know your mother, she said in a way that both opened and closed the subject. I realized that her uniform was not that of a nurse but of a nurse's aide. My mother worked as a registered nurse in the public-health office and went into homes to visit the newborn or the dying.

—Would you like something to drink, Juliet Jackson said politely.  
—Water? Wine?

—Let's have some wine, Foster Jackson said brightly. —Something to put some color in this poor boy's cheeks.

—Sounds great, I said, but my enthusiasm was born of discomfort.

—All right, she said. She rose from the table and went to a cupboard and carried two wine glasses to the table, then brought a wedge of white cheese on a cutting board with one hand and a bowl of apples with the other. —But not for me; I plan to sing, she said, and her tone was level and cold.

She pulled the cork from the bottle with a deft motion of the corkscrew. As she poured the red wine, the color was clear and deep. The stark white kitchen seemed suddenly suffused with its subtle warmth, as though the sun had shifted through a stained-glass window. The wine burned lightly on my tongue. I could feel the vapor behind my eyes. I was not used to alcohol, certainly not at the turning of twilight in the home of strangers. But it seemed perfectly right, drinking the wine and eating the white cheese and apples, while Foster Jackson bent over his mother's erect and unmoving shoulder, studying the score.

—In the recitative... listen to the uncertainty here.

—Okay. Sure. I'll remember.

—Exactly like this....

I leaned forward to look—it was the score of *Aida*—and spilled some wine on one of the sheets of music.

—Be careful now! Juliet Jackson cried.

I tried to wipe it up with my shirtsleeve, but it only spread the stain. To cover my embarrassment, I said: —Foster said you used to live in Paris and all. It must be boring around here. I mean there isn't any opera or anything. I don't know much about it—I'm really into jazz and all—but Foster said you taught him how to play and, man, does he ever—

—Armand plays the piano, too, Foster Jackson interrupted. He cautioned me with a flick of a finger.

—That’s always encouraging to hear, Juliet Jackson said. She trained her deep drenching eyes on me coldly.

I sat back down and, still embarrassed, plunged on: —I’m pretty bored with my teacher and all. He has no imagination. It’s always the same stuff, but what I want is to get free of it. Like I was in jazz band, and I really think—

—Free of what? she broke in sharply.

—You know, the usual stuff they make you learn, all those damn finger-drills and Haydn and Chopin on the black keys. Anyway, I guess I was thinking you could show me some new things. Like Foster....

—I’m not a teacher, Juliet Jackson said, her lips hardly moving. —I didn’t spend three years in Paris to teach tricks to my son’s friends.

Foster Jackson no longer bent over his mother’s shoulder. He looked into the air. The only sounds were the snow pecking at the window and the wavering hiss of the blue gas burners in the darkening room.

—I could pay you, I said helplessly.

—I am not a teacher. She was studying the score spread on the white table, and Foster Jackson was looking into the air with tears in his eyes.

Then she said: —Your mother must be waiting dinner. It’s good to have met you.

The snow was brittle as I stepped to the side of the house. The light through the livingroom window cast a moonish haze in the streaked air and made diamonds on the ground. Up against the clapboards, my jacket wrapped tight against the cold, I waited with an audience of silvered trees. A car ground slowly down the street in low gear and made me angry. Presently the music spilled out into the hushed night, and a thick, transparent soprano rode out on the buoyant beam of the piano and danced about my head. My face burned with the cold, and my feet were numb. After a time—a long time—there was a pause. Then I heard the melancholy swing of Foster Jackson’s striding blues and those shadowed wings flying out through the snow. There was a harsh rebuke and the sound of a chair or stool overturning, and the piano went silent mid-bar.