

YESTERDAYS

It was a long way up for a sixty-seven-year-old man. He'd climbed those stairs nearly every day since he'd learned to walk; as a child toddling behind his mother, a boy with mischief in his bones, a young man seeking solitude. Mostly, though, he had climbed them as the superintendent of the building—both master and servant to the tenants who lived above him.

He used the steel-cage elevator sometimes, mostly to carry something heavy to the upper floors: a ladder, for example. His toolbox. Or if it was the end of a long day and someone buzzed for him, needing something urgently: a toilet was overflowing its unspeakable sludge, a boiler wasn't circulating, or in one resident's opinion another was making too much noise.

Once, he was roused from his basement office (really just a small room that fronted his modest living quarters behind the laundry room) because a bird that turned out to be a black-crowned night heron, probably from the nature sanctuary a few blocks south, had inexplicably flown into one of the windows on the tenth floor. It didn't quite break the glass, but it unnerved the spinster who'd been sitting in the seat beneath it reading the book of Revelation and smoking something that smelled a lot like marijuana. After Roscoe had taped the window and promised he'd have the whole thing changed in the morning, he'd had to sit down on the edge of her plastic-covered sofa until she was calm enough to allow his leave.

Afterward, he'd carried a box down to the sidewalk beneath her window, wrapped the broken bird in an old towel and taken it back to his quarters. He could have

incinerated it the way he did all the rest of the flotsam and jetsam the tenants deemed trash, but he felt sorry for it in that moment of darkness. So he laid the box on the floor of his living room and said a prayer he could remember his mother saying at the funerals of his uncles, one by one; his grandmother; a distant cousin; and of course, his father. “We thank you for his life and his death, for the rest in God he now enjoys, for the glory we shall share evermore at your right hand, in Jesus’ name. Amen.” It was the first time he’d ever said a prayer on his own. Even sitting in the front pew at his mother’s funeral in the spring of ’64, when he was only twenty—just two years after burying his father—he’d had no words to pray. Instead, in the nightclub of his mind, he’d heard the lyrics of Chet Baker’s ironic, iconic, *“I Get Along Without You Very Well.”* But that’s how he was. Words came uneasily from his mouth, but not music. Music fell freely.

He was tired by the time he opened the door to the roof, but once he stepped out onto the terrace his fatigue dissipated. It was one of those unseasonably warm October evenings. The dry breeze lifted people’s spirits and windows and inspired them to spill out onto the streets, pushing baby strollers and following dogs from one hydrant to another with blithe patience or taking early dinners alfresco at any of the countless cafes with their folding chairs and tables. Irish pubs flung open their windows and the Italian grocer set up a table outside his shop with pumpkins and pomegranates. Roscoe let the door shut behind him and stood on the roof, his old Blessing Standard trumpet dangling from the loose grip of the hand that still had all five long, slender fingers. He tipped his head back, closed his eyes, and filled his lungs with the crisp, pinked, sunset air that mingled with the exhaust from the compactor room.

Several years before, some of the tenants had started a community garden. There were five rows of planter boxes, each of them six feet long and two wide, bursting with herbs and squash and other small crops. He walked past but then stopped, triggered by something, and went back to the first box. He bent down and relieved the top of one woody rosemary stem of its spikey leaves, rolled them between his fingers and held the tips to his nose. He'd always loved rosemary. The smell of it reminded him of something that seemed just out of reach, some memory or reality to which he wasn't quite entitled but yearned for all the same. He dropped the bruised leaves and continued.

The corner of the roof where the south and east faces met wasn't really a corner at all. It was round and stood out several feet beyond the main structure like a turret. He had to climb over a short wall to get out to the curved edge, but even with that minor inconvenience he never could understand why he was always alone up there. Why everyone didn't climb out and lean against the precipice to watch the sun come up over the lake's horizon or to just get a sense of perspective, to look down at things and realize how small they really were. When he was young, he'd passed many hours tucked behind the cornice, its lion's heads lined up beneath his own like a row of personal guards. It had been a good place to hide from his father, who knew the building almost as well as Roscoe did. His father never did discover him crouching behind that little parapet, sitting out a scolding or waiting for a mood to pass. Roscoe practiced the trumpet there, too, because he could blow into the wind and his notes would get carried away without anybody hearing, especially during those difficult years when he had to learn a new way of fingering the valves.

But this evening, with its perfect sunset and clear, dry sky, Roscoe Jones wasn't going out to hide. There was nobody to hide from; everyone that mattered was gone.

This evening, he was seeking.

He lifted first one creaky, aching leg over the small dividing wall and then the other, and walked up to the curved and sloping edge. He stood there, pressing his old-man belly against the terra cotta for a moment, gathering his strength, and then hoisted himself up onto the flat ledge, careful not to lose his footing or drop his trumpet, because that would have ruined everything.

Once his feet were under him, he stood slowly up to his full and impressive height and without closing his eyes or moving his mouth he said the second prayer of his adult life, which was actually more like a wish. Then he took a deep breath and looked out from this strange elevation at the world below and beyond. It was like being a preacher behind a pulpit, waiting for the faithful to settle down before beginning the sermon, or an actor on a thrust stage, waiting for the spotlight to illuminate the scene. He stood there holding his trumpet, and when he was ready, he brought it to his lips.

All it took to steady his knees from their tremble, standing exposed as he was at such a great height and with all the world to see him, was that landing of the mouthpiece against his lips. Gentle and familiar as a kiss from a long-loved woman, the horn on his face let him fall into the deepest part of himself, forgetting the void, the lack, the lonesomeness. When he buzzed his lips and blew his own breath through the purification system of the trumpet, it was distilled into something far greater than him; his exhales suddenly had purpose and meaning, translated as they were into rich, pure song.

Roscoe knew early on he was going to make music. When he was a boy of eight or nine years old, slipping away as he often did from his father's glare, he started hanging around the back entrance of the jazz club near his building. He'd found that when he got tired of walking, he could sit against the brick wall and listen to the strains of music whenever someone went through the door. It wasn't too long before the owner took pity on his rapturous face and let him come inside to listen, and not too long after that he was allowed to come in whenever he liked, even without knocking — and then, after he took a broom from its lean against the wall and started sweeping up cigarette butts from backstage, he was earning a nickel here and there, a pat on his curly, dark hair, and the right to watch the sessions from the wings. Only one waitress, a girl around twenty with a child of her own at home, seemed concerned by his ever-presence. But the owner just laughed and swatted her on the fanny and told her to mind her own business, the boy was just fine.

One night, a famous trumpeter by the name of Clifford Brown came to play. He showed up in a black suit, sweating a little where his neck strained against his tie in spite of the December cold, and laughing at something his piano-player had said. Roscoe watched as they set up and warmed up, and by the time they'd finished their first set he didn't want to take another breath if he couldn't blow it through a shiny brass trumpet.

The quintet took a break, and Roscoe watched as Clifford carried his trumpet backstage and laid it carefully in its case before he went to find the men's room. When they'd all gone to wherever it was they went for the fifteen minutes, Roscoe crept out of the shadows and opened the case and held the instrument in his none-too-clean hands. Then, turning his back to the door, he brought it to his mouth the way he'd seen Clifford

do, and blew. It was like blowing a balloon. He produced no sound but his own sputtering breath, even as he tried again and again. Finally, he moved his mouth a certain way, closing his lips tighter against the mouthpiece, and he managed to push a note through the pipe, flat and burbling, like something out of the wrong end of a dog. Encouraged, he blew until he was light-headed and heaving for air, achieving a decent sound only once. Then from behind, he heard someone laugh. He spun around and there was Clifford Brown, with his hands in his pockets and his belly jiggling.

“Hey Brownie, you gonna let that kid spit on your horn like that?” said the drummer, Max, who’d come up behind.

“He’s not gonna hurt it,” Clifford said. He walked over to Roscoe, whose light brown face had gone red, and whose reed-thin body wasn’t quite able to hide the trumpet that he’d stashed behind his back. “You trying to upstage me or something?” Clifford said, putting his hands on his hips, looking pretend-serious.

“No sir.” Even his own shame couldn’t keep Roscoe from staring up at the man who’d made such magic onstage. When Clifford held out his hand, Roscoe’s shoulders fell. He sighed and placed the trumpet into it. “Sorry,” he muttered, and hung his head. He turned to go, eager and reticent at the same time, already mourning his banishment from the club that had become his refuge.

“Come on now. No reason to slink off like that. Come back here a minute.” Roscoe turned around. “Max, you seen my other case?” Clifford said.

“You’re kidding me,” Max said, but he handed it to Clifford, shaking his head the whole time.

“Here it is. Now come here, little man, and let me show you something.”

That was fifty-seven years and one middle finger ago. He'd found somebody to teach him the basics, and he'd practiced nearly every day since on Clifford Brown's hand-me-down Blessing. He'd even turned out to be what some people called a prodigy. His father never did approve, said that he didn't like that washed-out look he got on his face when he played, but eventually, reluctantly, even he had to admit that Roscoe had a gift. He never would tell that to Roscoe directly, nor would he condone the hours he spent locked in his room or hidden god-knew-where, practicing. He didn't go to the club the first night Roscoe sat in with a local tenor saxophonist when he was just fourteen years old, nor was his daddy there ten months later, the night that would be Roscoe's last to play in public — until, that is, tonight.

He settled his fingers on the valves. After so long, he could hardly remember what it felt like to use his middle finger — or even to have one — but he considered it briefly, wondered what people would think if they could see his hand now, working the valves like he'd never gotten his hand stuck in the iron grip of the cage elevator, like he hadn't spent years building up the strength in his pinkie and teaching his ring finger to move independently and figuring out how to keep the galling stump out of the way. Even now he suffered a moment of anger and shame, thinking of those lost years. He'd lost more than just a finger. Far more. Then again, he'd gained something, too.

But by the time he played the first three notes of "*Yesterdays*," none of it mattered. He started slow, sustaining the lower notes, feeling the melancholy mood emerge. He didn't so much feel it as float around it. Even as his lips and fingers did their

work, his soul slipped his body and hovered somewhere close by, tethered only by his breath, flapping like a flag on the wind of the ascending scale and urgently straining for freedom against its fetter when he held the pitches in the upper range.

If he could have embodied himself while he was playing, he might have noticed that the people down below had stopped their strolling and chatting and eating and were now looking more than a hundred and forty feet up at the precipice stage upon which Roscoe stood. Tilt-headed curiosity first, their ears not having remembered hearing music from such a direction; then alarm — they grasped one another’s arms, widened their eyes at each other, gathered unconsciously into tighter groups, look how high up he is! How close to the edge! — Then as Roscoe continued to play without falling, simplifying the cycle-of-fifths progression with a slow, reflective tempo, they let themselves relax somewhat and return to curiosity, or even move past it to appreciation.

Windows opened beneath him, and people looked around for the source. It seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere at the same time, mingled as it was with the sounds of street traffic and the machinery of urban dwellings. But because the air was dry, “Yesterdays” cut through it more clearly than it otherwise would have, and by the time Roscoe was descending chromatically through the final melodic phrases — G, F, C, D, E, and E, E, E — there was an audience of fifty people at least, or a hundred, or maybe more.

He held that last E as long as he could, until his breath was nearly gone, and then his soul slammed back into his old body so hard it seemed to jostle him a little, and he became aware of the sound of clapping and even a few whistles which grew louder (but didn’t displace the purity of that last E). A gentle wind off the lake picked up and lifted

the hem of his un-tucked shirt. He closed his hand around his trumpet and held it against his belly, then he looked out, below and then beyond. There were people clapping, calling for an encore. He hadn't expected that. He searched the crowd for faces that he knew, but from such a distance, nobody was distinct. But then again, even up close, it was often hard to tell who people were. It would've been nice to recognize someone, he thought, as he prepared himself to bow. One someone, in particular. It would've been really nice. But maybe it didn't matter; they were all just people living their lives, sharing an unforeseen moment in time, congregating on some distant future memory, and now they were clapping for him, as though they knew him, as though he were somebody worth knowing. Maybe he was, and maybe they were too, and it was that thought — along with the E still singing in his ears — that occupied his mind as he folded himself in a deep and grateful bow...and fell.