

THE SAX PLAYER

Les Barrow closed his eyes and blew his last note for the night. In the past he might have been playing a jazz festival, Monterey, New Orleans instead of an obscure road- house on the flat outskirts of Bakersfield. But music was music and always an elixir, if not to those listening, at least to those playing, and with more bills than money. Les knew better than anyone that the option of choice sadly no longer existed.

Nodding to a scattered applause, he lowered his saxophone, placed it in its cradle, then taking his tip-jar walked over to the small lounge table where he sat every night after finishing his last set.

He signaled, holding up two fingers, to Marilyn the cocktail waitress, then took a cigarette, and after tapping it on the table, put in his mouth and lit it. Inhaling deeply, he leaned back in the chair feeling the heat of the smoke filling his lungs, the lingering residue of the night settle behind him. He unbuttoned his shirt, opened its collar. At the edge of his vision he could see Marilyn, floating through the drifts of smoke, carrying his drink, walking up to the table.

“Long night, Les?” she asked, setting down the scotch.

“They’re all long Marilyn,” Les sighed. “They’ve never stopped.”

He watched her walk away, the swing of her hips knocking the tight skin of denim, her bare shoulders glistening with sweat. When she reached the bar she sat on a stool, lit a cigarette and began talking to a customer.

Les picked up his scotch feeling the chill of the ice sweating through the glass. He took a long drink, then lighting another cigarette, looked around the room he'd been playing now for nearly a year. The room had a high stamped tin ceiling, wood floors and paneled walls. Its windows were filled with a resinous light from cheap beer ads, and a thin line of flattened smoke hung just above the tables. In the lounge a few scattered customers, like indolent apes, leaned over their drinks. Another couple, obviously indifferent to each other, sat at the bar.

Exhaling a pale cloud of smoke, Les took his tip jar and turned it over on the table. Two dollars in change and four crumpled one dollar bills, barely enough to buy cigarettes he thought. He scraped up the money, dropped it into a pocket then picking up his drink, slid the last of the cool scotch past the ice and into his mouth.

He closed his eyes and stretched out his legs, his muscles felt stiff like cardboard, and the early tightness of a cramp twitched along the back of his calf. When the cramp finally did bite, Les stiffened and opened his eyes. That was when he saw the man standing next to his table.

The man was thin, maybe in his late twenties and wore thick wire-rimmed glasses. He was dressed in a crew-neck sweater that looked to large and khaki slacks. His brown hair was cropped short and stippled with a grey, which if Les didn't know better, might have mistaken for mange. He might have been an unemployed math or science teacher or even a bookkeeper, but somehow Les didn't think he was.

"If you're a bill collector the tips were lousy tonight," said Les.

The man smiled, his lips stretching across a mouth of uneven teeth. "No, I'm not a bill collector and I'm sorry to interrupt but I just had to ask."

Les cocked his head studying the strange man. "Ask about what?"

The man stepped closer to the table. His clothes smelled full of cigarette smoke, stale cologne and something faintly sour. "You're Les Barrow the jazz musician right?"

Les straightened, looked at the man curiously. "I am."

"I knew it," said the man. "I'm Tim Brown; I've been a fan of yours for years."

"I didn't know I had any fans left," said Les.

Brown nodded excitedly. "God, I love all the old players, You, Coltrane, Getz, Parker. You guys were the best."

Les had been looking past Brown's shoulder, waving two fingers trying to get Marilyn's attention.

"I've got all your albums," Tim Brown continued. "I recognized you from your photo on the back of the Della More jacket, 'Indigo Summer.'"

Les reached into his pocket and took out the crumpled dollar bills. Tim hastily held up his hand waving him off. "Please let me," he said, dropping a twenty dollar bill on the table, then stepping back like an anxious child waiting approval from a parent.

Les looked at the money, raised his brow.

"I don't want to intrude," said Tim Brown already reaching for a chair, "but do you mind if I sit down?"

“As long as I have a drink in my hand and one on the way, you’re welcome to do whatever you want.”

Tim pulled out the chair and eased himself into it. He glanced around the room then leaned forward lowering his voice. “I have to ask you,” he said, earnestly. “Why are you playing in a shit hole like this?”

“I happen to like hot and cold running water,” Les shrugged.

“But with all your recordings and studio work you must have made good money.”

Marilyn walked up to the table, set down the fresh drink then steeped back fanning her face. “Go ahead,” said Tim Brown nodding at the money with his chin.

Les picked up the bill, looked at it then handed it to Marilyn. Dipping his head in a brief nod he turned back to Tim raising the glass, “to playing in shit holes,” he said.

“Yes,” said Brown. Tim crossed his wrists over the table and leaned closer. “So what was it? What happened? Was it bad managers, the studios...?”

An inward thought darkened the sax player’s face, quickly he blinked it back. “We didn’t need their help to mess things up. Sure, they screwed us. A lot of people did, but that was the nature of the business. We weren’t naïve,” he shook his head. “I guess we just abandoned the rules and stopped being human that’s all.”

“How can you stop being human?”

“You become an animal. That’s how you stop being human.”

"I'm sorry," said Tim Brown, "but please, I'd love to hear more."

"Yesterday's news," Les shrugged. "Nobody cared then and nobody cares now."

"I care, Les," answered Brown. "And not just about the fame or music but what that infectious world, in its slaughter-house terms of logic and morality, was really like. To navigate with impunity the miscarriages of design and social responsibilities that for whatever reason upheld the conviction that the chartered referendum of laws and the consequences of those laws never applied or claimed even the most meaningless of jurisdictions in the vaguest of terms. Les, you're the last to tell the story, the chapter is closing and there will never be another." Brown shook his head his eyes pleading. "Please, don't let this moment of history, your history, wither and blow away in the analogs of a lost and dry wind. Tell me Les, for my own narcissistically provoked reasons I need to know. I need to know the accounting of your life, the gritty interpretation of your dreams, the languid memories of the lightless shafts of smoky clubs and the constant caravan of every lurid temptation known to man."

Les put down his drink and stared at the young man sitting across from him, a man who now claimed relevance not to just an insignificant moment at a lonely table in a lonely bar, but the dragging years of a wounded lifetime. "You think it was so exciting and salacious," Les said, crimping his mouth. "The nameless women, the countless nights so impetuously lost that they can't even be remembered, let alone regretted. Yes, it was intoxicating, at least for a while, and then like everything the bill came due and the price wasn't painless or pretty."

Brown sighed. "That's why you need to talk about it now," he urged. "Purge the demons so to speak."

"An arduous journey."

“But one that can be profoundly rewarding under the right circumstance.”

Les took a drag from his cigarette, letting the smoke curl out his nostrils. He shifted in the chair then lifted the glass of melted ice. “I’ve found the best listeners are the ones that don’t ask questions.”

“Because they’re too busy judging or echoing the excuses of the person telling the story.”

Les tilted the glass, sucked at the colorless ice then looked at the peculiar strange man, who was now leaned back in his chair, his arms folded across his lap, his face expressionless. “I guess I appreciate your curiosity and interest, but I can’t see why anything beyond the music is either relevant or important.”

Tim Brown took out another twenty, unfolding it with his pale hands. “Because it’s never been just about the music,” he answered, spreading the bill out on the table. “Think about the inspirations and circumstances that created and encouraged the evolution of this music. The enigmatic lifestyles, the culture and drugs, the reckless, bold ambitions of men so greatly talented, that the suggestion of a tangible world might induce such a baffling dilemma as to perpetuate a world of extreme insanity instead of the pursuit of their immortal destinies.”

“You paint a complicated picture.”

“Swimming above the wreckage can be complicated and tiring, that’s why it’s so important that you talk about it.”

Les looked at Tim Brown, then beyond his shoulder to Marilyn who was sitting at the bar drinking a bottled beer. When their eyes met, she simply nodded and rose from the stool. “If I needed a confession I’d have gone to a priest,” Les said wearily.

“And what are priests? Nothing but sanctimonious ambassadors to God, that in mumbling a few archaic phrases of Latin allow everything to be conventionally forgiven and the burden of guilt to be peeled away with about as much discomfort as shedding a dried scab.”

“I don’t know.” Les shook his head. “I only know that in the depths of night, in the darkness of my dreams I find myself lost and wandering a colorless landscape, a world inhabited by faceless, mewling creatures, sniffing and clawing the air and pursuing me to the rim of a tarnished and trembling dawn.” Les paused, the cigarette in his hand slightly quivering. “And then I wake, and sometimes there’s a spot of blood on the pillow and sometimes my eyes burn deep into their sockets. Then I get up and walk into that blur you call life and everything starts over again.”

The sax player picked up his drink and took a deep swallow. It went down smooth and weightless and he could taste the smoky malt and oak rise up in a tingling heat to the back of his skull, warming his entire body. “I don’t know who you are, or what you want,” he said softly to the man sitting across from him. “Maybe you are only a misplaced admirer who just happened to wander in from the autonomy of night, or maybe you’re more than that.”

“Does it matter?” said Tim Brown.

Les lowered the glass and stared at the amber liquid, his eyes filling with thought. “I don’t know,” he answered hollowly. He looked through the dull air at the small stage the bar and tables at Marilyn talking to a customer, an exit sign of bleeding green light hanging in a shaft of darkness. Then lighting a cigarette, he leaned back and told Tim Brown his story.

“It was 1954,” he began, “the jazz scene in Chicago was struggling so we were looking to make a change. L.A. was where it was happening then. The studios were grinding out albums

and there were plenty of night clubs, private parties and even some concerts. Three of us rented a bungalow just outside North Hollywood at the base of a canyon. We did studio work in the daytime and played gigs and jammed around at night, the whole time running and partying as if the world were ending the next day. The money was good, enough to buy anything and everything we wanted, and we did exactly that. One of my roommates was a fellow named Loony, a great jazz drummer but crazy as a shit-house rat, actually slept in a closet, and liked it. Cole took the couch, and me and Dean who was a decent trumpet player, each took one of the small bedrooms. The parties were recklessly pursued and frenzied, nothing less than riots of heated flesh, insidious savagery, and the insane indulgence of every drug and vice we could get our hands on."

"What kind of drugs?" Brown interrupted.

"Everything," Les snorted. "But we had to be careful, it was the 1950's and a single joint could get you a hard twenty years in prison."

"What about heroin?"

"What about it?"

"I understand heroin was pretty popular in that time and culture."

Les felt a band of heat pass across his forehead. He lifted the glass of scotch, brought it to his lips and swallowed tightly. "It was more popular than anyone knew. You'd be shocked if I told you the names of some of the popular actors, film execs, singers and comedians, who at one time or another burned the bottom of a spoon."

"So you and your friends did heroin too."

“Yes,” Les nodded. “We liked the high and exclusiveness, along with the idea of belonging to that same elite enigmatic society as Parker, Benson, Holiday and Coltrane. But what got us off more than anything I think was the risk, the danger. Every time you bought a bag, slapped a vein, cocked a needle and shared a spoon, you were putting it on the line. Like I said, you don’t know the half of it. And now what do we have?” Les shrugged. “Nothing more than an inundation of meaningless noise and a plague of bile sweating drugs, cooked and bottled from the rust bleeding sink of some toothless degenerates.”

Tim Brown listened, his face tightening with understanding. “So it was the drugs, heroin, in particular, that infected your life and career.”

“It’s your best friend until it decides not to be, and then there’s nothing left but a black, empty hole straight to hell... or maybe even worse.”

“I don’t mean to be disrespectful,” Brown said cautiously. “But what do you mean by worse?”

Les shrugged, ran his index finger along the rim of the glass. “You’ve gotten your story and I’ve gotten my drinks. Why don’t we just we call it a night?”

Brown leaned forward, rested his arms on the table. “But the story’s not finished and every story needs an ending. What was it Les? What happened? What was so bad that you’re still drowning this subsistence of darkness even till today? What?”

The sax player lowered and shook his head. When he looked up again his eyes held the silent emptiness of a man who might have just lost his sight. “Ghosts,” he answered so faintly

that Tim Brown had to lean closer to hear it, “the kind that can never die, because they’re already dead.”

Brown nodded, his expression softening with an empathetic understanding. “Yes,” he agreed. “I know of these things, because, like you Les, I have my own ghosts, and like you they haunt me without quarter. But it’s possible we can help each other. Tell me those secrets you host in the blackness of day, the ones that burn and feed on your soul like ravenous evil leeches. Tell me of your ghosts Les. In return you’ll allow me to reveal and show you mine.”

Les pushed himself back from the table. He looked at Marilyn sitting on the stool, the last two customers hunched over a table veiled in smoke, the cool reflections of dancing light spinning off the bottles and glasses that lined the edges of the bar.

“Why do you need to know this?” He eventually asked with a voice tight and thick in his throat.

“For those same reasons you need to tell me,” Tim Brown answered evenly. “And for the same reasons I need to tell you.”

Les downed what was left of his drink then stared at the empty glass. “If you’re here to judge me it’s too late.”

“I know,” agreed Brown, “unfortunately, it’s that way for a lot of us, that’s the way it’s always been.”

Les cleared his throat, wiped his mouth with his hand then continued. “Like I was saying it was 1954 and we’re doing studio work, playing clubs and private gigs. I was doing session recordings at RKO and making \$250.00 a week. Loony had a part time gig with the Tommy

Davis quartet, Dean was working with Warner Brothers. We had it all, the keys to the candy store, our own private paradise, at least so we thought." Les paused, a melancholy sadness touching his eyes, he stutter blinked it back. "We'd have parties, three, four a week, sometimes thirty people in that little crap box of a house. Even now, I'm amazed we never burned it to the ground. Anyway, it was sometime in October and we just got through playing an early gig and we decided to go back to the bungalow. There were eight or ten of us drinking, smoking weed and listening to music on the stereo. It had been raining on and off that day. Outside in the falling night, pockets of mist were beginning to collect along the edges of the shadows and the windows were wet with condensation and the sour smell of heated bodies and sweat was thick in the air. I can remember it, yes, like it was yesterday. It was around midnight, and Loony said he knew a guy who had just gotten a package of smack, so we gave him the money and told him to make a run. There were only about eight of us now, and a guy named Ammo who I never liked, was getting pretty wild, so we thought besides copping a nice high it might calm him down as well.

For the next hour we tied off, slapped our veins purple and shot heroin. The dope wasn't that good, didn't have legs, so we just kept firing away, trying to get high. Eventually everything, the heroin, the booze, the grass finally caught up with us and the place turned into a raging asylum, pure bedlam. The stereo was blaring, Looney was playing the table with his sticks, Ammo was pounding away on a pot and howling. The rest of us were singing, slapping and banging anything we could get our hands on. There was a girl there, a young, pretty girl named Dorothy, who sang back-up for Capitol. She was very attractive but shy and for the most part kept to herself. I'd seen her around and heard she had a baby, a boy I think, that she'd left with her sister back in St. Louis. We only knew her casually from the hangouts and clubs. She

was at the gig that night and just tagged along; I guess she thought we were cool, maybe important. I don't think she ever shot drugs but that night she did, I think she just wanted to fit in and maybe the thought of visiting that dark side intrigued her.

Most of us were around the dining room and kitchen. Dottie had been sitting on the couch alone, and we all just figured she was high and wanted to be left to herself. I saw Dean walk over to her, I guess to talk, because like I said she was very good looking. Anyway we were pretty wound up, and the stereo was loud so we never heard Dean yelling until he threw and shattered a glass against the wall. It had the effect of a rifle shot, everything stopped, I think even time. I looked at Dean, he was standing in front of the couch, his face slack and pale, his arms limp at his sides. "Something's wrong with Dottie," was all he could say. My heart sank; a sickening panic filled my body. We rushed over to the couch where Dottie was slumped sideways across the cushion." Les sighed, lowered his head. "Her lips were blue, like that awful color of a drowned worm; her skin the color of wet ash. A chalky substance that looked like dried cream caked the corners of her mouth and her eyes were just empty black slits. We shook and begged her, pouring ice water over her face and limp body, but she just lay there without so much as a blink or a twitching finger. Someone said they'd heard that shooting up an over dose with salt water could bring them back, so we dissolved a shaker of salt and shot her veins full of that saline concoction," Les paused, pressing his forehead into the palm of his hand. "It didn't do any good, nothing did. The horrible reality was we'd lost her. She was gone."

"My God, she was dead?" asked Tim.

"Yes," Les said in a voice so weak it was barely heard, "at least so we thought."

"So you thought?"

“Yes. We left her on the couch. We didn’t know what else to do; we were distraught and frantic to say the least.”

“And then what?”

“We talked and argued about what to do next, sometimes hysterically. Cheryl, one of the girls there, said we should drop her off at the hospital, but we couldn’t. In 1954 you went to prison for a stick of grass, a death involving heroin, you’d never see the light of day. We figured she’d been seen leaving the club with us, a bunch of wild musicians and dope addicts, so it wouldn’t be hard to put the pieces together. No, there was only one thing we could do if we didn’t want to go to jail, a choice none of us wanted to make.”

Lowering his eyes, Les stared numbly at the table. After a moment he sucked in a breath, looked up and continued. “We wrapped her in a sheet. It made me sick. Someone had a station wagon, I can’t remember who, and we loaded her in the tail gate along with a shovel.

There was a park about a mile away, and we drove there in a grim silence never mentioning the grisly cargo that rode in the back. We pulled into a gravel parking lot harbored with long shadows and trees filled with rain. A light drizzle was falling and I remember the sounds of water slipping all around us, and the clamoring of frogs and nervous insects.

We took her back along the edge of a creek, a frail light forced out by a single flashlight, the shovel rattling out bursts of rain as it caught along the branches and leaves. At a flattened bench of darkened earth, where the creek turned and rolled black beneath the fractured torso of a fallen tree, we dug the grave.

With an awkward empathy, as if some fragile existence or identity still lingered in that tangled sheet, we laid her gently into the root-torn ground. Dean held the flashlight, Ammo held the shovel. What bothered me the most, then and now, was that first raw slapping of dirt against that sheet and I turned away, sick to my stomach, still smelling that freshly turned darkness of humus and soil. I could have been wrong, and I pray that I was, but beneath the sounds of the raking shovel and the thumping of earth, I thought for an instant I heard Ammo chuckling, but Like I said I couldn't be sure.

It didn't take long, the grave was soon filled. We scattered the excess dirt, flattened the mound and covered it with branches and leaves, then without a word spoken, we turned and walked back through the forest; three lonely figures surrounded by the sounds of night, bound by the same secret and all beneath the same endless millennium of black rising stars.

Half way back to the house we stopped, and over a gully choked with brush and chiseled in shadows, Ammo took the shovel and threw it as far as he could it into the darkness. We were still shaken and on edge, but somehow now there was at least a vague sense of relief and conclusion. Yes, that's what I said, as shameful as it sounds, a feeling of relief, at least for the time being."

At the bungalow, we washed off our shoes and attempted to gather our thoughts. Duane had gone through the house gathering up all the drugs and paraphernalia that he buried in the next door neighbor's yard. Yes, debate it all you want, but like it or not we found ourselves on the edge of humanity, flying the black flag, waging slices of our guilt ridden souls, one scorched and tormented piece at a time."

"So, you're saying you were murderers."

The sax player closed his eyes as if pulling the darkness and whatever was in it back through his eyeballs into his brain. "Were we murderers?" he asked skeptically. "What quantifies someone as a murderer? In the narrow discussion of a biblical sense its one man taking the life of another, Cain and Able shit, but on broader terms it's not so cleverly defined is it? Dropping a bomb and slaughtering an entire population, is that murder? Or a doctor prescribing the wrong medication, or a child left unattended in the back seat of a car, or..."

Tim Brown held up his palm. "Whoa, that's a bit drastic."

"That's my point; it's all drastic, but not necessarily to the observer. You can read about a man drowning or be a man drowning, or see a man drowning and doing nothing about it. Which of these elicits the most urgency, the most responsibility?"

"I'm not sure I understand?"

"It's a matter of perspective through the lens of a situation. If the one man never read about the other man drowning then how would he know that that man ever drowned?"

Tim Brown thought a moment. "Sort of like the tree in the forest."

"Yes, except you can't murder a tree. Figuratively I guess you could."

"So, what happened next?"

"We drank rum to settle our nerves and talked about what we would say if the body were found and if we were questioned. Dean had just poured a shot of something and I was lighting a cigarette. The rain had just started falling again, and dry lightning was flashing against the windows, and that's when we heard it."

"Heard what?"

"A soft knocking that could have been a branch in the wind, a loose gutter, an unhinged gate, but it wasn't, it was the front door. Someone was there, outside, standing in the night, and knocking."

Tim Brown stiffened, sat up in his chair and cleared his throat. "So who was it?" he asked cautiously.

"You mean you don't know?"

"I have a pretty good idea but I'd like you to tell me."

Les picked up his glass and rattled the ice. "You can imagine the trepidation and dread, it was paralyzing, and none of us could move or speak. I remember hearing the heavy tick of an old wood clock and thinking it was someone's heart, and maybe it was, or maybe it was all our hearts, and then like the rapping stick of a grim jailer the frightful knocking came again.

We looked at each other then back at the door, our manic anxiety suppressed only by a sharp blade of fear. Duane said we had no choice but to open it. I told him to go ahead, not realizing the dark horror that waited on the other side. When he opened the door Dottie was standing there on the porch. An apparition, a ghost, how could she be alive we thought? But she was, and she stood there, her skin and clothes caked with mud, her hair matted and stickered with pieces of leaves and splinters of twigs. She tried to speak, her mouth opening and closing like the struggling articulation of a gasping fish, and then she raised an arm extending it feebly as if she were reaching for help." Les paused again, his eyes drifting down to his hands folded across the table. "What happened next sealed our fate, not only for this world, but I'm

sure in the next one as well. She took a step, uncertain and shaking like a new born calf, her eyes, filled with fear had locked onto mine. I was just about to take her arm; I didn't know what else to do, and then for the second time that night, our fragile world crashed down around us. Ammo, who had been standing alone and mumbling to himself suddenly began shouting and screaming that Dottie was dead, that this was a ghoul sent from hell to devour our flesh and consume our souls. We were all stunned, and then before I knew what was happening he was running at her, a brass candle holder swinging in his hand, a wicked slicing of air.

The sound was like the sickening crack of a dropped melon hitting concrete. Blood was everywhere, on the walls, the floor, some even splattering us. It seemed like forever but it was only a moment that she stood there, her head emptying onto the floor. Then with a shudder, as the last shadow of life left her body, she let out a child-like moan and collapsed to the floor.

Again we found ourselves in an indictment of panic. What had we done? What could we do? This time it wasn't the work of an insidious winking needle but the paranoid schizophrenia of a pack of depraved, loathing creatures. It was Dean who finally spoke, and I remember his voice was so thin and strained. 'We need to take her back,' was all he said, and we knew exactly what that meant.

We wrapped her head in sheets then rolled her up in a shower curtain. Once again we carried her to the car through the damp night and drove back to the park. The raining had stopped, and above us a yellow moon trembled through the trees and the parking lot looked like cold, rippling iron. It wasn't hard to find the grave. We had thrown the shovel away, so we had to dig the loose dirt and mud with our hands, but we just wanted to get this done and have it be over once and for all."

“Oh my God,” said Tim Brown. “So you buried her a second time.”

The sax player sighed; lowering his forehead into the heel of his hand then slowly looked up. “Yes, we buried her twice, what choice did we have? And now I wear the misery of that unbearable consequence like the sentence of a banished leper.”

Tim Brown reached across the table putting his hand on the sax player’s. “Les, purging the mind does not allow in its completeness a fostering to cleanse the soul. You know what to do now and how to do it, you always have. It’s simple but not easy. The mortal existence of flesh is simply a temporary paradox to the autonomy of the spirit, and a remedy though painful, is available.”

“What?” asked the sax player, “what can I do now after all these years?”

Tim Brown leaned closer, his glasses now clear of any reflection, his eyes heavy and poignant as if he had somehow absorbed some of the sax player’s pain. “What you’ve wanted to do for a long time, what you need to do now. Let her have peace Les, let her have the recognition of once having life.”

Tim brown rose from the table and now Les realized how long and slender his fingers were, how pale his skin looked and what looked like to be a thin seam of phosphorous light emanating from his clothing and face. “And you were right Les there was baby boy that Dorothy left with Maggie her sister back in St. Louis, a boy that never heard the gentle soothing of his mother’s voice or the warm, comforting touch of her skin. I’m that boy Les. Maggie was my aunt, and Dorothy was my mother.”

A sharp chill, much like the one he had felt years ago in a smoke filled bungalow, on a wet, dark night that seemed to have no beginning or end, rang through his body. "But that was fifty years ago," Les said, struggling with both his emotions and logic. "And you can't be any older than 30."

"I know," Tim smiled; turning towards the door. "I should be but I'm not, that's just the way these things work, and I can't forgive you either Les, no, only you can do that but like I said, there is a pathway, and an answer."

Les watched Tim Brown walk towards the door, but he was never really sure he saw him leave. He leaned back in his chair and stared at the table, the empty glass with only a few small stones of ice, the flecks of cigarette ash looking like pale shavings. A single crumpled dollar bill that looked like a worn out piece of cloth. The club was empty now; the jukebox was off, the lights turned up to a harsh glare. Marilyn was in the lounge cleaning ash trays and wiping down tables with a wet towel. Straightening and letting the towel dangle from her hand, she looked over at the forlorn sax player. "You usually don't stay this late Les, what, no hot date tonight?"

Les let out a tight breath, bit his lip and leaned back in the chair. "It was that young man, the one I was talking to. I guess we just got carried away."

Marilyn stopped wiping an ashtray, cocked her head and frowned. "What man Les? You've been alone all night."

"That young man, he wore glasses and a sweater. He was sitting right here buying me drinks, we were talking."

Marilyn rolled her eyes, shrugged. "The only one buying your drinks was you, Les. Shit, we only had a dozen customers; I think I would have noticed someone looking like that."

Les pushed back his chair, then using the help of the table, rose to his feet. "He was here Marilyn, sitting at this table; you had to have seen him?"

Marilyn dropped the towel, brushed her forehead with the heel of her hand. "Les, if this is a joke it's not funny, I need to get home to my kid, so let me clean this crap up ok?"

Les leaned back, his hand pressing the table to steady his legs. He looked around the room. His saxophone was still sitting in its cradle at the back of the small stage, its case on the ground and his jacket on top of the case.

"Lights off in five Les," said Marilyn.

Les walked the distance to the bar where Marilyn was drying and putting away glasses. "I need to use the phone," he said weakly.

"The phone?" Marilyn's face narrowed, "Jesus, Les who in the hell ya going to wake up this time of night?"

"I won't be waking anyone up. It'll be long distance so tell Jack to take it out of my check."

Marilyn had been wiping out a beer glass, she lowered the towel and glass to the counter then numbly picked up the telephone. "Are you ok Les?"

"I don't know Marilyn, I guess we'll have to make the call and find out."

What's the number Les, I'll dial it then hand you the receiver."

Les exhaled, closed then opened his eyes. In the brackish light Marilyn stood in front of him, a flat expression washed into her face, the phone cradled in her hand. He felt his lips, and skin around his mouth move, his throat so dry it felt stuffed with cotton. "Call the operator," he said in a voice so soft that he didn't even recognize it as his own. "Call the operator and have them connect you to the Los Angeles County sheriff's department. Tell them you have someone who wants to report a homicide Marilyn, a very, very old homicide."

END