Every Day You Live, You Die Two Days

The jazz guitar player craved coffee the way Coltrane craved smack, and he would've had time to grab a cup from the fresh pot at the end of the bar if the battery in his tuner hadn't died. Yet another hassle with impeccable timing. But Lonny wasn't about to ask for a bandmate's tuner. Instead, he cocked his head and strained to hear his strings as he turned the pegs of his 1951 natural-finish Gibson amid the other players tuning their instruments, warming their jaws, running their scales, rattling rolls and paradiddles, chatting about their previous nights and weekends, the girls they'd fooled around with, the scotch they'd drunk, how many years it'd been aged, whether they took it neat or on the rocks or with a dash of lukewarm water, as the noisy audience drifted into the dark club. The blue and yellow lighting angled off wall-mirrors. It pulled awkward shadows down the patrons' faces. Patrons dragged seats over the floor, removed their coats and draped them over chair backs, unrolled napkins and let the silverware tip to the table and chime against water glasses while the barback dumped ice from bucket to sink under the bar and the bartender shoved beer bottles into ice and arranged the shelves of liquor, clinking glass on glass. And as Lonny twisted the high E string peg then plucked his low E string to measure their tones against each other, he learned they were not in tune though he couldn't tell, over the noise, which one was sharp and which flat. He couldn't remember the last time he'd had a really good cup of coffee. In frustration, he raked all six strings, and the B snapped.

The night had been no good, the second set no looser than the first, the coffeepot level steadily sinking in five ounce increments. On his knees after the gig, Lonny rushed to pack his guitar into its case and shove his music binder into his bag, then loped off the stage and strode toward the bar and the coffeepot. But when he lifted the pot, it was empty, clean and cold; the

dark wall, backgrounding the pot, had tricked Lonny. Jeanine and the girls, he remembered, always had the kitchen and bar shut down minutes after last call.

Lonny turned to look for Marco, the club manager. Perhaps another pot could be brewed, but Marco was busy pacing in front of the stage, stinking of bourbon and mouthwash, palming his nose in circular motions and ranting about some third-world strike, when he should've been jogging upstairs to the office and coming back with the band's pay. Rocco the drummer had cracked open a bottle of McAllister's 12-year and was handing around plastic cups of the stuff. The fumes were mighty, so Lonny hurried back to the stage to get his gear.

There was a twenty-four hour diner right around the corner on 6th Ave., and Lonny thought he could duck out for a quick cuppa joe and get back before Marco'd counted the money out to Richie, the band's manager and trumpeter, and Richie'd counted it out to Rocco, Johnny the keys, the other Rich the bassist, and Bob and Dave, the other horns. But just as Lonny slid on his frayed leather jacket, Richie hopped off the stage and got in front of him. And with that low police siren voice of his, issued from under his wannabe Magnum P.I. mustache—bushy but see-through—started chiding him about the amateur hour tuning flub, the broken string right before the set start, no backup axe on hand, his nervous tempo rushing the band all night, the general downward spiral that his playing, and his appearance too, had taken, which was—"now let me finish, Lonny, no, it's absolutely true"—obvious to everyone in the band.

Then Richie stepped closer and squeezed Lonny's shoulder. Richie was short and stocky, Lonny tall and lanky, so Richie's scotch breath peppered Lonny's Adam's apple. "Lonny, man, I'm gonna try real hard and be honest with you. Maybe you were never handsome, but you had swagger. Ever since you had that cancer-thing cut outta your face…how can I put it? It's been a slow—for lack of a better word—recovery."

Lonny took a small step back, ran his hand through his gray hair and rolled his eyes. He bent over to stretch his spine, perpetually sore from supporting his guitar. When he straightened, his spine cracked. He tilted his head at Richie, waited for the teacher to continue the lecture.

"I don't get it." Richie's shoulders lifted and fell. "I'm trying here but you're giving me nothing. What's this bummy hangdog vibe? Your hair looks thinner when you don't wash it. You almost reached legend status once. Me and the guys are wondering about your commitment to this band. What do you want?"

Ha, Lonny thought. Fuckin' Richie, talkin' about status. Here's Richie's status: he was a rickety Miles ripoff, sloppy and servile. He was a bad cover, only in the band because he was a good manager. Man, it wasn't that long ago Lonny'd been one of the go-to session guys in the country. He could find another gig. Fuck these guys.

Richie stood there, his weird, hyper eyes twitching side to side, actually waiting for an answer to a rhetorical question. Lonny would never win a fistfight against Richie. Lonny was no fighter. Yet he found himself wanting to punch that mustache.

"That was hot." Lonny and Richie turned to find Vickie with an 'ie' standing in the shadows behind a center floor table, leaning on a steady arm, elbow locked. Her other hand rested on her hip, two fingers tapping her tight black skirt to some tune in her head, likely a weak, overdone jazz standard performed by a female vocalist. And her red pump, two toes peeping through the hole, tapped the wooden floor.

"Ho, ho, wella, wella, if it isn't Vickie with an i e," Richie said, turning his whole body to face her. He never turned just his head; he didn't have much of a neck. "I felt the morning coming on, but now you're here it feels like a muggy 'Night in Tunisia.'"

Her nostrils moved as she dragged in air. She bit her inner cheek and lifted her chin.

"Lay off her, Richie."

Richie aimed both palms at Lonny and shrugged. "What?"

"You saved my life, sweetheart," Lonny said, stepping toward her. "Get me outta here, please."

Richie blubbered an awkward laugh, then hopped back onstage and hollered, "Don't run away yet, Lonny. Wait 'til Marco wraps up his psychobabble and gets our money."

By the time Marco trudged up the stairs and came back with Lonny's $95, it was after four. Lonny and Vickie stepped out onto 3rd Street, and even if the great ball of fire hadn't yet risen from its dreams, there was something about the gray of the sidewalk and how the trash skimmed across the bluish-black of the street that hummed of a new day. Another new goddamned day. And Lonny thought, *Shit, let's get this guitar player some goddamned coffee already*.

"You guys were hot tonight," Vickie said as they walked.

"I don't know what you were listening to." Lonny hefted his guitar case, pulled his bag's strap further up his shoulder and stretched his neck. "I'm gonna murder someone if I don't get a cuppa joe."

"The coffee at the show was real thin," Vickie said.

Lonny stopped. "You had coffee?"

Vickie didn't answer. She took his bag from him and, laying the shoulder strap across her body, said, "You know what's impressive about you, Lon? No matter how many years you go sober, you'll never pretend you're not an addict."

Vickie was an addict too, but the shackles she lugged weren't as heavy as Lonny's. She was a jazz vocalist who sang standards, usually threw in her three wholly unmemorable

originals, and told wholly uninteresting stories before each tune. Always accompanied by a Japanese lesbian pianist named Miksuto who had a great sense of humor when she wasn't trying to tell jokes, Vickie had a reputation for being a not-so-great singer. But that's only because she'd had these two gigs a few years back—before she'd started AA and coaxed Lonny into joining her—where she'd had a cold, taken too much cheap cold syrup, drank a bunch of bourbon and didn't realize when she'd hit some bad notes. The critics had never paid her so much attention.

Lonny was kind to her then, cooking her dinner while she cried and blew her nose. She was skinny, with disheveled light brown hair, a warm though lopsided smile, a lump on her chin she called a beauty mark, and pock marks on her cheeks—without which she'd have been out of Lonny's league. The pock marks did not appear in professional photos. When she sang and got lost in the groove, she clenched her eyes like she was in pain.

Lots of guys in the jazz scene ragged on her; women did too. Lonny liked her okay though. Okay enough to date her—on the down-low—these past three years. She asked him once to move into her place uptown, but he'd said he preferred Chinatown. When she said she'd move to his place, he said, "Nah, I like it how it is."

They turned the corner to find that the 24-hour diner was closed. Confused, Lonny stood in front of the dark window, guitar case in hand. A few other hopeful patrons walked away grumbling.

Lonny and Vickie continued up the avenue, passing another two places that should've been open before finding a diner four blocks up. And this place was bustling. "That stinkin' joint," he said, as they squeezed onto two counter stools. He raised an arm and hollered down the

counter, “Coffee down ‘ere,” then continued to Vickie, “It’s the only place in town that does three sets a night, trying to wring the last drop out of us.”

“Yeah, I know,” Vickie said. “Sucks. The crowd pays for a full set and only gets forty-five, fifty minutes.”

“The fuckin’ crowd?” Lonny glanced at her. “I’m talking about us. We play three sets and get paid the same we get for two. What a crock.”

“Oh,” she said, “well that’s true too. Of course, the sets *are* shorter. You *do* play about the same amount of time.”

“Where’s my coffee? That’s not the point. It’s another set, another audience, they’re collecting another 50%, but more importantly, I never get into my groove in that place. Just when I’m starting to get hot, they’re dimming the lights and kicking us off stage. A place like that, I don’t thrive there, not like the young guys coming up, these bush electric trios, playing that ridiculous groove jazz like it’s actually jazz. Fuckin’ kids, watering everything down. It isn’t bebop, it’s teeny-bop. Marco should know better.”

“Lonny,” Vickie said, a jitter in her voice. “I’d be sleeping right now, but there’s something I need to…”

“Coffee down ‘ere,” Lonny shouted, banging the counter. Customers kept streaming in, crowding the aisles, hollering for coffee, elbows and coats rubbing up against everyone. Lonny repositioned his guitar case so it wouldn’t get kicked. A percussion of dishes smashed to the floor at the back of the room. Bodies were popping up, chairs tipping.

A small waitress tapped nicotine-stained fingers on the counter. She came over to Lonny and spoke conspiratorially. “I’m sorry, sir, but there’s a problem. We’re all out of coffee.”

“You’re kidding.”

"I wish. Did you hear about that strike in South America?" Lonny looked at her with a funny smile. He felt he no longer understood English.

Vickie laid her hand over Lonny's. "Listen, you ever notice how the city weighs on us? This is a tricky place for people like you and me. I've been thinking…"

"C'mon, let's go." Lonny snatched his guitar case and tugged her elbow.

Hurrying up the avenue, Vickie hustling alongside, Lonny said, "It isn't fair. What happened to appreciation for the traditionalists? What happened to telling a story, you know, some actual melody? Not just this BS chop chop bend bend, finger tap and repeat crap. Now I'll be the first to tell you, I ain't no Lightnin' Hopkins. I ain't no Speedhead Slim. And I don't wanna be." Some people ran past them up the sidewalk. Others were hurrying the other way. "That's not what it's supposed to be about. And these frickin' half hour sets. Whoever heard a' them? You'd think there'd be some coffee stands out by now. There," Lonny pointed across the avenue to a place on a side street, "let's try there." They heard a car crash down the block to the east. A horn blared and a car alarm yodeled. Lonny thought he heard a trumpet. His guitar was getting heavier. The daylight dams opening, gray and blue trickled through the streets.

"Lonny, slow down, will ya'?" Vickie said, trying to keep up with his long strides as they crossed the wide avenue. "You're all red and sweaty. You can't keep this pace up forever."

This diner, too, overflowed. People plugged the entrance, some trying to get in, others trying to get out. The crowd undulated, especially near the cash register and front window. A big man in a blue jacket slammed back against the window, knocking the glasses off some old guy's face. The streets, normally flowing with working stiffs around this time, convulsed with the frenzy of Bird's bebop. Throngs surged past Lonny. A jacket zipper whipped his hand. A shin knocked his guitar case. Car horns and curses whirred down the avenue. The man in the blue

jacket gained his feet, about to pounce onto the counter when another big man in a dirty white apron, presumably the cook, stepped from the kitchen through the swinging door holding a shotgun, and pumped it.

"Do you trust me, Lonny?" Vickie asked, squeezing his elbow. "Will you come with me?"

Patrons flocked for the door, but apparently not fast enough because the cook fired a round into the ceiling anyway. The deluge surged, and two kids with screwed-up eyes who'd obviously been partying all night tripped over each other, and the panicked crowd stampeded them.

"Damn. We can't get coffee here either," Lonny said. "You come with me." He pulled Vickie back toward the avenue before the diner's large window shattered out and washed over the sidewalk like ocean surf. People jumped the cement window base and spread.

One block north they found a corner bodega, but the frightened Indian was just pulling the door closed and locking it.

Lonny pressed his palm to the glass. "No," he begged.

Vickie seized Lonny's arm and turned him around. He heard that trumpet again and thought of Richie. Five penguins toddled past. Ambulances, police cars and fire engines blasting their sirens sped down the street. A crowd of people sprinted across, but a lady in a beige skirt suit got clipped.

"For God's sake," Vickie screamed over the din. "Can we talk for a second already?" She pushed Lonny back and his guitar case tapped the wall.

"Watch the guitar, baby."

She slapped him a good one. It echoed. Across the street a car ran into a fire hydrant and water shot up. Richie's trumpet again.

Lonny jiggled his face, stretched open his eyelids. "Sorry. I just need that cup of coffee and I'm all ears." Daylight was searing the streets now, the sun rising over brownstones and shooting off glass buildings.

"Listen to me, Lonny. You can't keep going like this. You don't see it. You're killing yourself."

"Watch out," Lonny said, pulling Vickie aside before a garbage can crashed through the bodega's front window.

"Dare is no-ting heeya," the worker screamed as three men with empty travel coffee cups, one with a baseball bat, hurdled through.

Lonny pulled Vickie another half block into a little fenced-off square. "You don't think I'm good either?" he asked, his voice and hands quivering. "I'm a traditionalist, you know that. How is it my fault if Richie and…"

"Not your musicianship, stupid. You. You think no one carries a weight as heavy as yours. You never look in my eyes. You're always looking for something else."

Richie's trumpet again, louder, its note sustained but jerky. As though he was following Lonny, hidden around some corner and taunting him. The sun poked his eyes, dug at his brain. He wiped his forehead in the crook of his elbow.

"What do you want from me?" Lonny asked

"Surrender to me. I wanna leave this city. Don't you want to live?"

He pressed his wrist to his eye. “But my career.” His guitar weighed a ton. “Did Richie put you up to this? Someone at AA?” Creases lined his forehead like a music staff. “Why are you doing this?”

“I love you, Lonny.”

The sidewalk blurred in the heat. There was nowhere to look but at her. The shimmering light brought out the sweet hazelnut in her eyes. They looked tired, heavy. Her mascara had run like sooty tears. He shook his head, peeled his eyes away. “I really need that coffee.”

She slapped him again and his eyes were compelled back to hers. “Will you snap out of it for once in your pathetic life? I gotta go. And you gotta choose.”

Over her shoulder he saw a giraffe gallop by, its tail whipping its own ass.

“Why do you say I’m dying?” His forehead was tingling, hot and cold. “Am I?”

“Yes. We both are. Don’t you smell the shit? Don’t you sense everyone’s wanting? It’s this city. Every day I live, I die two days.”

He looked over her shoulder again, and grimaced.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” She raised her hands in surrender. “Maybe I was wrong about us.”

He pointed.

She turned around and saw the giraffe, now followed by a parade of two more giraffes, a brown bear and three monkeys. Richie’s amateur trumpet sounded once more. And then behind the monkeys, bounding into sight, an elephant blared its trumpet call. Vickie stumbled backwards and her heel landed on Lonny’s foot. “Ow!” he screamed. The elephant turned for them.

For the sixteenth beat rest before it rose onto its hind legs, it looked with sad eyes at Vickie. Vickie stood strong. Neither she nor the elephant blinked. Lonny felt locked out of a vital communication. They were discussing him.

Then the elephant narrowed its eyes and shifted them his way. It rang its trumpet call once again and rose up over him.

Lonny would show them all; he was more than just a musician. He dropped his guitar, grabbed Vickie's hand, and pulled her underground to catch the A-train.