

Something to Remember

“Here you go again,” she said, eyeing the raggedy set of bungalows, “dragging me into god only knows where.” Weeds growing in the front yard said Renters Live Here. Just like in our house. A car with the hood off was up on milk crates in the driveway leading to the back. It was a good bet that there was an abandoned washing machine in the back yard.

“It's Arnold's house, baby,” I said. “You know, our drummer. It's not just any old where. It's a family thing, a barbecue.”

“It looks just like Hog Maw Junction,” she said, and we both laughed.

“Right next to Chitlin Switch,” I said. I loved making her giggle.

At the door there was that usual uncomfortable feeling you get when you look into a roomful of people you don't know, but my saxophone case gave me entrée, and it helped that I had a woman with me.

“Hi, I'm Henry,” I said. “This is Cheryl.”

“Hi. I'm Shirley,” the large woman in the doorway said, grinning at my wife. “Come on in, girl. You've practically got my name. Arnold and all them's in the back yard setting up, Henry.” She turned around, and this took a long time, as much as she had to move to do it. She was Arnold's sister, all right.

The living room walls sported blacklight posters of heroically posed Brothers and foxy Sisters, the usual shrine in the corner to JFK, Dr. King (but not Malcolm), White Jesus and yep, the unnameable plaster thing as a dining room table centerpiece. There was the familiar blend of smells: boiling guts, greens, a trace of this morning's fried hair. Ahh, home.

“This is Henry and Cheryl, everybody,” Shirley shouted, over the loud phonograph. People waved and introduced themselves, but I couldn't hear a thing over Sly and the Family Stone. A large man who looked like a future Arnold reluctantly glanced up from his full, sagging paper plate and grinned. He had to be family too, big as he was.

“Plenty of food, man! Help yourself!” he shouted, and dove back into his potato salad. A nearby woman smiled at me, pointed to my saxophone and mimed me playing it. I didn't have to look to see Cheryl was glaring at her, letting her know who was with who. I held up my saxophone case and indicated I was going to the back yard.

Yep, there indeed was a motorless washing machine Chester was using as a table for his food and drink. He was noodling on his guitar. I could tell he had just started, because I could still see the gap between his front teeth. When he'd really start hitting it his tongue would slip out and cover the gap. He looked up and smiled. “Here's the reed man.” The other band members looked up and greeted me, Clarence from fooling with his amps and Arnold from setting up his high hat.

“Hey, what's hapnin?!”

“My man! You gonna have to play that thing today, boy. We gonna turn this place out! This is *family!*” And I can't play shit, I thought, inwardly shuddering at the thought of having everybody turn to me and start comping behind a solo I couldn't pull off. In semi-public, yet.

Chester looked all right, but Clarence looked preoccupied. I could tell he'd been drinking, probably behind his own nerves. Arnold was always closed to me. Maybe he'd open up this time. I tried to break through with a smile. Arnold looked like he was getting his head half bad already, and the party hadn't half started. “Here, man, you got a lotta catching up to do,” he said, and he got me a drink amidst all the hand-shaking and setting up. Hand shaking took a long time back then. Arnold watched me take a taste.

“God-dam! Dang, Arnold,” I exclaimed, gasping, making a face at the drink. Everybody laughed.

“It's got alcohol in it,” he said.

“I know that, but damn.”

“No, man he means alcohol,” Clarence laughed. “Arnold works in a hospital.”

“Oh.”

I got a buzz on right away and things started blurring right there. I remember shooting a blank on my first so-called solo in “Proud Mary” and Chester looking over at me. He was always a rock I could lean on during moments of terror when I ran out of ideas. Well, it's confidence that counts in music, like in everything else. Chester pulled me aside as we ended another number. “Let's make a run, man.” What was he signifying? Oh.

We went out to Chester's car and he fired one up and passed it to me. “We got to respect Arnold's house, man,” he croaked, holding in the smoke as he talked. “His sister sings in the choir.”

Uh-huh. After awhile I felt inspired and we went back and played some more. I'm sure I didn't play any better *physically*, but like I say, it's all about confidence. Whatever works.

At the raggedy end of “Black Night” Chester took a pull from his own bottle, then passed it to me. “Are you Ripplin,” Clarence chanted, from the commercial, guffawing with his country self. He got in a good bass line and we all fell in behind him. Chester laid it down right on top of him and really started cooking, his tongue sliding out and sweat popping off his face. Arnold got that stiff-faced look drummers get when they lock in, and folks piled out of the house and started dancing. A neighbor pulled on his shirt and came in his back yard and pretended he was there to pull some collard leaves. Oh yeah, we were smokin!

Cheryl was late in leaving the house—musicians' women never know what to do with

themselves during a set—and Arnold saluted her with a drum roll when she stepped on the back porch. He'd ever seen her before, and now I felt like making my own little move to show who was with who, but I had my stupid eight-dollar saxophone in my hands, rubber bands substituting for springs.

“Oh, get down, homeboy, get down!” Clarence said to Chester when he hit a good bippity bippity bippity country lick. “Get down!”

It really blurs over around here. I drank some more just to make sure I wouldn't tighten up again with my old fear of performing. I remember asking Arnold something that was bothering me. “Don't people go blind drinkin rubbin alcohol?”

“This ain't rubbin alcohol, man, this is grain alcohol. I drink it all the time at work.”

That satisfied me for some reason and I finally found my way during good old “Honky Tonk” and then I was all right for awhile. But I can't play all that much sax, quiet as it's kept, and I was glad everybody was getting stoned and the guitars were covering me up.

I ate too late to coat my stomach but I still never caught up with the other band members, who finally fell out for good. The alcohol made got us all real loose and we had a good time. I don't remember saying goodbye, but we were suddenly at the car and Cheryl said, “I don't like those people.”

“What you mean? We had a nice time, didn't me? We?”

“That Arnold. He grabbed me.”

I put the sax inside the car. “What you mean, 'grabbed me'?”

“He grabbed me in the garage. He said he wanted to show me something and then he grabbed me. Let's get out of here. I want to go home.”

I shook my head, trying to clear it. I was supposed to do something. A man doesn't just take shit like that. He's supposed to do something, protect—I ran around to the driver's side and grabbed a solid

iron construction bar from under the seat I'd had there for protection and headed for the house. I confronted Arnold alone, in his garage, drink in his hand.

“What'd you try t' do with my wife?” I asked him. He looked at the iron bar.

“Wife? What you talkin bout, man? I didn't know—didn't do nothin.”

I abruptly half-sobered up. I had a lethal weapon in my hand. Arnold weighed three hundred and twenty pounds, and it wouldn't do to make khim mad. Talk about push coming to shove—it was either pound in Arnold's skull and kill him or just tap him and make him mad and then he'd beat me to death. Sure, the former choice was better than the latter, but what was it really about? What had he really done—and what, then should I do about it? I flashed on a lifetime of hearing streetcorner philosophers say you shouldn't draw a weapon unless you intended to use it, and look at me now, I thought. I'd really fucked up. What was I doing?

In my confused state I went back to the car to ask Cheryl what had really gone down.

The first blow landed at the back of my head as I faced her. As I lay in the gutter I saw Arnold's brothers rush up and push Arnold aside to save me, I gratefully thought, only to find they wanted him to save some of me for them and then their shoes were in my face. Arnold's sister Shirley joined in, shrieking as she kicked me, and I had upwards of a thousand pounds of Arnoldfolk kicking the living shit out of me as I lay with my head in the V wedge between the open car door and the car chassis. My head was like a duck in a shooting gallery, bobbing up and then getting knocked down with a new kick before I could rise I was lucky there were so many of them, I now realize, as there was a traffic jam of leather in front of my face from all their shoes.

It's funny about violence; once you're hit, bloodied, you lose all fear. I could fight Arnold, his brothers, his sister, play that saxophone in an auditorium full of people, I didn't care and so when Cheryl jumped on Arnold's back and clawed at him I jumped to my feet, believe it or not, and got in one

good lick.

What did I do that for?

Nature is merciful. As your aging face sags and wrinkles, your eyes go into soft focus with compensating astigmatism. And once you're hit good your body says All right, I got the word, and it shuts down the pain passageways for awhile. You go into blessed, numbing shock, and so I remember the next part even today with a certain detachment, seeing my young self as if in a fight in a cartoon strip dust cloud, the blows an illusion. The fists and feet kept on and on and it was like being tumbled in the surf, being pummeled by this Arnoldfamily wave and then somehow we were miles away and I was driving and I didn't know how I got there.

Cheryl was crying next to me and I tasted my own salty blood in place of tears and I wondered if it would ever be the same between us and if I should have used that iron bar after all, but in my heart I knew that I'd still rather be the fool who didn't use a weapon than the fool who did. I still can't say exactly what I learned then; it's still hard to face the fact that it wasn't Cheryl I was out to protect. I supposed I did learn something about avoiding trouble and fucking up in general, I dunno. All I know is that it was an asswhipping to remember.