

Saxophone Prayer

On our neighborhood walks, Jen and I had occasionally spotted a litter of kittens spooning in a cardboard box. On those days, I had to talk her off the ledge of bringing one home. Since we have no kids, she'd say.

Today, waddling across the alley behind my apartment is a pregnant street cat with a stubby tail. I follow her to the end of the alley, where we go our separate ways. She squeezes under a supermarket vending machine, and I continue down a trail that leads to a peach orchard nestled in a hillside. The peach trees are in bloom. Thousands of fragile blossoms form thick canopies, the orchard a beach shaded by pink and white swirled parasols.

Jen and I had made a ritual of pausing here. We would slow our breath and get as quiet as we could, and wait. If we were lucky, a family of deer would emerge, weaving through the trees.

Exercise machines line the path. Late middle-aged men and women, some in hiking gear, some in pajamas, use the equipment to rotate their shoulders and pinch their obliques. I hang from a horizontal bar, unlocking my spine. I'm in a masculine mood, so I bang out five pull-ups.

The path opens to a creek. Walking and bike lanes span both sides of the water. Above the creek bank a dirt road runs along a string of cabbage fields and unmanned tractors. This is where I run. From the dilapidated warehouse, the front of which is decorated with dozens of shattered toilets, I jog a half-mile until I reach a house on the edge of a small rice paddy. Sunflowers, ten feet tall, stand sentry before their home. Their heavy necks droop, their faces wide, assessing all who pass by. Along the second-floor balcony fence are melons fastened in hand-twined nets, wombs for the growing fruit. This is where I had waited for Jen to straggle in, kicking up dust with her stubby legs.

As a reward for my exercise, I head to the creek's edge and watch the ducks. They land with a splash, taxi, and take off. Further upstream workers are building an overpass. Oil and construction runoff glitters the water and

dyes it shimmery yellow and pink. I remind myself these pretty colors are bad for my ducks.

I stay a while, pretending I'm an air traffic controller directing the fowl. The sun is a ripe peach, round and orange and heavy, falling off its branch and landing somewhere over the horizon.

I return to the dirt road and follow it to the end, until the church. I've never stepped inside this prefabricated building, the size and shape of a barn. It's made of metal siding but adorned with stained glass windows, portraying blurry biblical scenes. The church is a mother's day gift from a young child: substandard work, but from the heart.

A statue of Mary and a statue of Jesus loom on opposite ends of the church grounds. At first we had only prayed to Mary, who was closer to the entrance, but Jen had been worried about isolating Jesus.

I'm alone now. No service is in session. The candles flickering at Mary's feet are the only source of light. To her, I pray for the members of Jen's family and my family, the ones living and the ones dead. I walk over to Jesus. Spiders had spun webs in his ears. Us being men, I figure I can be honest with him. I don't pray for her to come back or ask that she be miserable. I pray for her to be happy. I know that's what I'm supposed to do. You can't pray for destruction anyway. Those prayers get shredded as soon as they get faxed in.

When I turn to leave, I notice a gray compact car idling in the parking lot. The windows are cracked open, and from them come music. Marvelous music. Bright and jazzy and then somber. All of it full of soul. The type of music you listen to with your eyes closed. But I force my eyes open.

Under the car's interior light I make out the glint of a gold instrument. A saxophone. The riff he's playing draws me in like a smell to the kitchen.

He's reclined in the driver's seat, almost supine, playing, rocking side to side. His instrument clangs against the window. I move closer, sinking into cool, sweet quicksand.

The sounds have texture. Genius flavors the air. The realization covers my neck in goosebumps: this is sacred.

I have to preserve this experience. Does he have an album? CDs or cassettes locked in the trunk? I'll sprint to the nearest ATM and buy everything he's selling.

Just then the man tosses his instrument into the back like a hamburger wrapper and takes off. I give chase, flapping my arms and shouting, but he doesn't stop. All I'm left with is a parting view of his car: a bumper secured with crisscrossed strips of red duct tape.

I look around for someone to share this moment with. But the dirt road is empty, the church deserted. The ducks have all flown away.

I hum the tunes on my walk home, keeping the earworms alive. Back in my apartment, I dig through the recycling for two plastic bottles and funnel them half-full with almonds and granola. I rattle off "We Will Rock You" with the nut-filled maracas. My memory unearths another elementary school project, and I rip out the tissues from a Kleenex box. They float to the ground like mini parachutes. From a drawer, I collect Jen's old hair ties. I string them over the tissue box, but when I pluck them there's no sound. They're dead. Because there's no . . . vibration! I snap a pencil in two and shove the ends between the ties and the box. I flick the strings of my makeshift guitar and produce . . . noise. It's alive. For a flute, I unscrew the back of a pen, extracting the ink. I wipe it with a fallen tissue, stick it in my mouth, and half-puff, half-whistle "Jingle Bells."

By blowing air through a brass cone, the saxophone man had created hypnosis. In a movie, world powers would vie for his music-making ability, lethal in the wrong hands.

But in my hands . . . I try to recreate the beat, the rhythm, any facsimile of that man's art. Frustrated, I shelve the instruments and binge saxophone videos. While I watch, I jam to bebop and saxophone solos, but I can't recognize anything from the church. This makes sense. What I had heard was creation in real time. Music like that doesn't come from memorizing chords. It comes from a place far deeper than where conscious knowledge is stored.

I take the next day off work and swing by the hardware store for the tools and materials I need to make a PVC pipe saxophone.

As evening approaches I leave my apartment, my DIY instrument, which I name Charlie, in hand. At the orchard, fallen blossoms blanket the ground. I play a few notes. But the deer are immune to my enchantments. I'm in a musical mood so I skip the exercise machines.

Mass is in progress. The congregation is singing a hymn, backed by the guttural whine of a pipe organ. This musician has no soul, adding to the world nothing more than stilted noise.

During my prayers, I ask Jesus to expel my judgment of mortal musicians. Sound takes up no space after all; there's always room for more music.

I perch myself at a picnic table and wait for the saxophone man. I blow long Es and Cs, building up my endurance. Parishioners depart in their automobiles. When they pass by I stop playing. The pastor exits the church with his clerical vestments in a garment bag. I jog home.

Over the next few months, I kiss Charlie more times than I had ever kissed Jen. Under the tutelage of online courses, my mind and mouth and fingers grasp the fundamentals.

I change my route and run directly to the church, increasing my chances of meeting the saxophone man. The peaches at the supermarket are always plump; and if I want, I can see deer roaming the nature channels.

One night at the church I have a blackout of consciousness. The backup generator flips on and my subconscious takes over. Hot breath bursts through Charlie, who filters my air into music. Eyes close. My fingers move on their own accord. I'm playing. Not following, not remembering, not copying, not doing a rendition. But playing. My soul's first contribution to the world.

When I open my eyes, an elderly couple is clapping. I unlock my jaw and wipe the spit from my lips. A man shuffles up to me, proffering a dollar bill. I wish I was the type of person to refuse it, but god it feels good to sell out.

The next morning I visit a local music shop. The owner suggests a used alto student sax. I pay in cash and he throws in a case for free.

Before I leave, the owner motions to a flier on a bulletin board. "Interested in lessons?"

What starts out as twice a week increases to three and then five times a week. I replace studying online with learning from a professional. My instructor is patient and teaches simply.

After months of training together, he says I'm progressing nicely. It's a mild enough compliment to know he's not bullshitting me. He then asks what brought on my late but intense interest in music. I know I should

mention the cognitive benefits or how I am planning to perform “Moon River” for my parents’ anniversary. But I can’t lie to him. And I can’t tell him the truth. About the saxophone man or Jen or how playing keeps my thoughts from bubbling up out of my ears.

“To play is enough,” my teacher says when I don’t reply.

I return to the church for the first time since taking lessons. I play my sax when pedestrians walk by. They smile at me. Some linger. Their toes tap.

The next day I arrive early for my lesson and put my sax in the practice room. While I wait for my teacher, the owner chats with me about his upcoming gig. A man enters the shop and hoists a saxophone case onto the counter. He’s older, mid-fifties, with graying black roots and a dyed-blond ponytail. The buttons of his flannel shirt are undone. Beneath he has on a sweaty tank top. The owner gives him a professional greeting, and I drift to the background, giving them room to do business.

The window magnifies the heat. I stand in the light, my back to the glass. Perspiration clings to my undershirt too. I glance out to the parking lot and look for my teacher’s SUV. A small gray car sits crooked in a parking spot.

I hurry over to the counter. The case is open, revealing the saxophone that had transfixed me so many months ago. I don’t know what to admire: the musician or his instrument. Can one exist without the other?

To my disbelief, they are in the middle of a negotiation. Their haggling concludes with a handshake. The owner opens the till and counts big bills, double-checking the math before announcing he needs to grab more cash from the safe.

“You’re really selling your horn?” I say when we’re alone.

“She’s tormented me long enough.”

“I heard you play once.” I describe the night at the church. “You were in that.” I point to his duct-taped compact.

“I’ll have to sell that next.” He isn’t smiling.

“You don’t perform or give lessons?”

“I’m not the teaching type. And I don’t enjoy playing with or in front of others.”

“Did you ever record your stuff?”

“I saved up the dough to cut an album once. But not enough people pay to hear a saxophone.”

“Your music moved me. You’re meant to play.”

“Then it’s time I outmaneuver destiny. This instrument has held me back from . . . more practical pursuits.”

The owner returns with a thick envelope. The sax man pockets it and nods in my direction.

If he hangs it up, what right do I have to play?

“But you’re a genius,” I blurt out.

He laughs, his teeth the color of his just-sold instrument. “I was good. That’s it.”

“But I *felt* it.”

“Maybe I had genius, but I’m no genius. It was a gift. And it will be given to someone else. Maybe even to you.”

The owner takes the instrument to the back once he leaves. I retreat to the practice room. A cluster of guitars leans against their stands. I choke the neck of a cherry wood acoustic.

I’ll sell my sax too. As a demonstration of solidarity. No. As a fuck you to Fate. The world is a lesser place now. If the universe doesn’t allow that man to play that instrument, what’s the point?

I’m not a genius or talented or even good, but I play. I contribute. Fate gets what it deserves. And the world will lose two players today. I can go back to my walks. The stray cats and the ducks and my prayers. Or I’ll find another distraction. Anything to—

“Sorry, I’m late. Did you warm up?”

I turn toward the door. My teacher is removing a bass guitar from its case.

“You play that?” I say.

He tunes the strings in response.

The owner enters the practice room. He scoots the bench closer to the piano and cracks his knuckles.

“What’s going on?” I say.

“I told him what happened.” the owner says. “We’ve heard him play.”

“Then how could you let him give it up?”

He stabs at the keys as if they are hot to the touch, playing staccato chords. “Sometimes the business trumps the art.”

The rumble of a funky bass line interrupts us. “No sheet music today,” my teacher says. “In memoriam.”

I open my mouth to refuse—I’m not in the mood—but the neck strap is already slung over my head, the saxophone pressing cool against my skin.