

BLUES FOR COPIE

A short story by Willard Manus

Copie Martin was dead. No more would that goose-necked little black man touch people in the night with the cry of his clarinet. The long journey he had made from the Come Clean Dance Hall in New Orleans (where he had tootled "If You're the Lemon Let Me Be the Squeezer") to the black and tan joints in Detroit and the dance halls in K.C. and the sailor traps in Newport News was ended. He was boss, real boss, on the clarinet, but he died covered with roaches in a lonely boarding-house in Pine Bluff, Arkansas. And now his shrunken body lay before us, refrigerated and shelved, in the Jim Crow section of the city morgue.

"Let's get the hell out of here," Herman Mathews said, his expression twisted and pained.

So we turned away and went outside into the summer night, the sickly-sweet smell of embalment still in our nostrils. Swarms of tiny green bugs flew at us, their brittle wings whirring. Herman let out a panicked cry and flailed away at them. "Jesus, get them off of me!"

The bugs were everywhere, drawn by the glare of the neon lights along Mulberry Street. It was only ten p.m. but the shops were closed and the sidewalks were deserted. From a side street came the roar of a hot-rod, a snub-nosed Ford that shattered the silence with twin exhausts and back-seat laughter. Then the street was ours again and we moved on, still warding off the bugs, passing a pool hall where a fat boy practiced billiard shots and four men sat drinking beer and playing dominoes. They regarded us with suspicion: we were heading toward the black section of town. Two white strangers going in the wrong direction.

Here, beyond the railroad station, darkness cloaked rickety houses and shacks. The night sky was wildly beautiful but down here things smelled of raw sewage. We could see people sitting on their porches, talking and smoking and laughing. It made me feel lonely and bereft. As we passed and were noticed, voices went silent, then resumed with caution and wariness. Dogs growled menacingly from behind low fences.

We welcomed the lights of The Bluff Café; inside was the sound of jukebox jazz and the comforting smells of life. Sweat-drenched men came here to drink beer after a day's work in the cotton fields or in the nearby furniture plant; perfumed women came on weekends to gossip and dance and get high. Only two nights ago, Copie had sat on the band-stand, a black knot of a man, his shoulders hunched, his chin squeezed tight against his chest, his cheeks puffed out like an adder's as he played the blues: honky-tonk blues, B-flat blues, old-time blues.

"Did you see him?" asked Faz Carter, the owner of The Bluff, a big, beer-heavy man. He came out from behind the bar to greet us.

I nodded and asked, "What will happen to him? How long will they keep him in the morgue?"

"Maybe another day or two."

"Then what?"

"If nobody claims him, they'll dump him in the ground out behind the city jail."

"That's just great," Herman said. "A goddamn pauper's grave."

“Copie passed without leavin’ a thin dime,” Faz said. “He’s got a cousin in New Orleans, but if she doesn’t send money we won’t be able to give him a proper burial.”

“Money,” I said. “Why does everything come down to money?”

“Good question,” Faz said, adding, “Why don’t you boys go sit down? I’ll send over some beers.”

The back room was empty and dimly lit. An ancient over-head fan turned creakily, barely stirring the hot, fetid air. Herman sat down in the booth muttering, “I wish I hadn’t gone to the morgue. I hate looking at dead people.”

The beers arrived. We drank thirstily, needily.

“Seeing Copie made me think of my aunt when she died,” Herman said. “So shriveled-up and wasted. She was always nice to me. Bought me my first oboe when I was ten years old.” He gave a rueful sigh. “Wonder what she’d do if she knew I became a jazz musician.”

“Probably take back the oboe.”

Herman managed a laugh, then tossed down some more beer. “Doesn’t it make you sick the way Copie went? He blew his heart out for forty years and died in a bug-filled town halfway to nowhere.”

I didn’t know how I could possibly console him. Herman was a troubled young guy, a conflicted soul. At twenty-five, he had come late to jazz, completely unprepared for its hard knocks. His family had sent him to the Curtis School of Music, where he had done well and been offered a job at graduation: second chair in the wind section of the St. Paul Symphony Orchestra. But after three years of full-time employment, he had quit St. Paul to join our group, the Gotham Jazz Quintette.

Herman was a gifted musician and a key member of the Quintette; he could play three instruments, had perfect pitch, and had a natural feeling for jazz. But a part of him still belonged to the classical world, a world of regular pay-checks, public respect, euphonious music. It was a long way from the Quintette’s world: hard travel, badly paying gigs, unruly audiences. He’d gone from being an insider to an outsider and it didn’t sit well with him, especially when his family kept telling him what a mistake he’d made, kept putting down the low-class music he was playing.

Herman sipped some more beer and asked, “How long are we going to hang around here?”

“Until we find out what’s going to happen with Copie.”

“What do you think will happen?”

“I wish I knew.”

“What if nothing happens?”

“Then we’ll help bury him here in Pine Bluff.”

I finished my beer and started on another. “Hey, hadn’t you better take it easy?” Herman asked.

“With your ulcer, you’re not supposed to drink alcohol.”

“This is a special night.”

We kept drinking bottle after bottle of Falstaff beer. My ulcer began to ache but I didn’t want to quit drinking. I wanted to get bombed, blot out the image of Copie lying dead in that dreary morgue. The beer didn’t work, though. It did nothing for me. The night went on; every once in a while we heard men shouting and laughing next door, saying things like “Shee–itt, boy! She thinks you hung the

moon!" Outside the bugs whirred and scratched at the screened window. Herman muttered, "Goddamn bugs!" Then, finally, "Let's split, let's get the hell out of this dump."

"Herman, lighten up, man."

We fell silent. We heard the sound of a Southern Pacific freight train rumbling through town. Then silence and thoughts of Copie again: a memory of that winter in New York about ten years ago, sharing a Broome Street loft with Copie, who'd just come up from the south to try and find some work. Taking him uptown to 52nd Street—it must have been 1947—to dig Bird and Diz and Miles. It was a shock for him to hear what those cats were putting down, it was all so new and different and raw, but to his credit he listened and learned; Copie couldn't play like them but he appreciated and respected what they were doing, swing was still his thing, but he later incorporated some of their licks into his solos as a way of paying tribute to those Young Turks.

New York didn't really work out for him; he got a few jobs of course, but the bop revolution had cast him aside, made him redundant, and he soon announced that he was going back home, back to the south, where his name still meant something, his music as well.

"Why keep fighting it?" I asked him. "Why not retire, kick back and take it easy for the first time in your life?"

"Can't quit," Copie said. "I don't have no savings and social security won't cut it. I'll just have to keep on keepin' on, same as always."

"Has it been worth it?" I asked him. "Tell me the truth. Would you do it over again if you had the choice?"

He smiled his wise little smile and said, "I surely would do it again—providin' I could marry rich."

When dawn came our table was littered with beer bottles and Herman was quite drunk. "When we get back to New York I'm packing it in," he mumbled. "I'm gonna give up jazz and find another symphony job. Play Mozart's flute and harp concerto. My aunt always loved it."

He got to his feet and wobbled to the men's room. I sat fighting the pain in my stomach and watching as sunlight filtered into the room. Suddenly the door banged open and a tall, gangling black guy swept in and announced himself with a loud cry. "Oh yeahhh! What's happening, my man? What's shaking, brother Irving?"

I gave a cry of joy. For this hipster in a three-button Brooks Brother olive-green suit and white frilly shirt with a roll collar and a pencil-thin red tie, was Willie Peters, an ex-band-mate whom I hadn't seen in maybe five years.

"Give me five!" Willie cried, extending a rigid palm. I slapped it loud and hard.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"Don't you remember? This is my turf. Stopped by yesterday to visit my mama and, you know, get me some good home cookin' again."

He smiled broadly and asked, "How've you been, Irv? How's your old lady?"

"Norma? We got divorced about a year ago."

"Too bad. I always thought highly of her."

"What about your wife?"

“Which one? They’re numbered one through five, you know.”

Laughter followed and another slapping of palms. Then I asked him if he was still playing piano in Johnny Otis’ r & b band.

“I put in nearly five years with Otis, but then I went off on my own. Found me a young cat who’s a mother-fucker on the tenor and sings like Ray Charles. He’s still got boll weevils stickin’ to him, but I believe he’s going to make me rich and famous one day.”

Then Willie chuckled and said, “I heard the album your band just put out. Some very tasty stuff there. Dug what you did on that trumpet of yours.”

“That’s high praise, coming from you.”

Willie beamed. “Hey, remember that time in Tulsa, when we played together with Copie in some big band or other—”

”I think it was Jack Teagarden’s—“

”Oh, yeah, right. Well, there we were, playing for the folks in this miserable little club—“

”I remember, all right. That club was low, it was foul—“

”And then this gunfight started. All these cut-throats started blasting away at each other. Pow, pow! I wanted to run and hide, but Copie said, ‘No need to worry. This kind of thing happens all the time. Just play loud.’”

“Just play loud,” Willie repeated, with a laugh. “Just play loud!”

Then he put a hand on my shoulder and said, “I heard about Copie.”

“Who told you?”

“Heard the news on the local jazz station. They played some of his music, talked about his life. It was a real nice tribute.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

“I’d like to do something for him.”

Willie reached into his pocket, came up with three wrinkled twenty-dollar bills and dropped them on the table. “Put this toward his funeral, would you? It ain’t much but it’s something.”

“That’s real nice of you, Willie.”

“It’s no big deal. The money ain’t made me rich and it ain’t gonna make me poor.”

He laughed again, then said, “I’ve got to head home, Irv. But if there’s anything more I can do for Copie, just pick up the phone.”

“I’ll do that,” I said, adding as he started out, “good luck with your group.”

“Thanks. Same to you as well.” Willie paused and looked back grinning from the doorway. “Just remember what old Copie said. When the goin’ gets tough, just play loud, man!” And then he was gone.

When Herman returned we sat staring at the small pile of money on the table. Then Faz poked his head in and said, “There’s a phone call for you.”

The voice that came through the receiver was thin and far off. "That you, Irv?"

"Yeah. Who's this?"

"Rudy Goldfarb. I'm glad I caught you."

"How'd you know I was here?"

"The grapevine, man. I'm in Joplin getting ready to play a wedding with my dance band. We just heard the news about Copie. It shook us up, man. So we all chipped in and put together thirty-four bucks. I already wired it to you, care of The Bluff."

I said thanks and hung the phone up. Feeling light and hungry now, I went to the kitchen and ordered a breakfast of spareribs, grits, hot rolls, and coffee. While Herman and I fed our faces, a Western Union boy delivered the thirty-four dollars and the phone kept ringing. Some of those who called promised to send money for Copie, others just wanted to talk about his death.

By mid-morning we realized that we had raised enough money to buy Copie a coffin, ship it to New Orleans, and bury him there.

Herman and I went outside to sit on The Bluff's porch. A fat, blood-red sun was blazing in the overhead sky. A strong breeze swept in from the north bearing the headiness of black upturned earth.

"Herman?"

"Yeah?"

"I think I'll go to New Orleans with Copie's body. I might even stay there for a week or two, play some gigs before returning to New York."

"I'll go with you."

"Wait a minute. I thought you said you were done with jazz."

"That was last night," he replied. "Today's a new day, isn't it?"

"Yeah, I suppose it is," I said.

I went inside and checked out the jukebox. Listed was a tune that Copie had recorded some twenty years ago, "Burgundy Street Blues." I put a quarter in and watched as the disc dropped into place. The disc was warped and scratched, but Copie's sound came through nonetheless. As I listened to him play that slow, sweet, mournful tune I conjured up an image of him on the bandstand, a black knot of a man, his shoulders hunched, his eyes closed as he fought with everything in him to touch people with the sound of his clarinet.

I kept that image in my head for as long as I could, then went back to the morgue to deal with death again.