

## You See How Much I know About Jazz

Clara begins to read newspapers. Not just any newspapers, but the radically Marxist ones sold in our local bookstore. You've read these newspapers, so you understand how quickly she succumbs to despair. How, in the middle of conversation, she bites her wine glass and falls into silence. How all the cutesy little love notes we left in the spice rack disappear.

I begin to loiter at the local convenience stores. Clara doesn't notice. We planted a lilac in the back yard for each year of marriage, and this spring she doesn't so much as remark when they bloom. She says, "Around the world, so many wars."

"But right here in our own back yard, the lilacs are in bloom." Clara keeps one finger on her place. She looks at me like she is about to ask for directions to someplace neither of us has ever visited. In this exact moment, her hair turns gray. The whole head of it changes color. When she looks down at her paper again, I see it's only the evening sun.

We become part of a trend enveloping our whole neighborhood. Next door, Delia Voodol's husband leaves her for a Finnish woman who works in what I think must be the country's last surviving Photomat. Once her husband leaves home, Delia begins playing his jazz records so loud Clara has a hard time concentrating on her heartbreaking publications. Delia sees me and Clara unloading groceries from the car, and she brings up the matter of jazz. She says, "It's the only thing that helps." I walk Delia back to her own yard. In the face of her bewilderment, I offer my thanks. I say, "Do me a favor?"

"Anything."

"Turn it up."

The following week the oldest Carson boy, who lives two doors down from us, is diagnosed with a spine which will never stop growing him tumors. While we are sitting at our favorite table outside our favorite coffee shop, Clara reports the news as if it were one of her terrible headlines. I don't understand this new ruthlessness of hers. I say, "How can you sit there and eat biscotti like that?"

“You’re only upset because this happened down the street. All over the world, children die each day.”

Over my objections, Clara begins unveiling the truth of the never-ceasing injustice befalling the world’s innocent each night before bed. It becomes routine. We lie there while she reads each injustice aloud. Famine. Corruption. Poverty. Genocide. Another genocide. What I want to say is, “My dear, is this the way we should now fall asleep?” But knowing her answer, I decide not to mention it.

Then it begins to rain. Not a spring storm. No particular weather pattern occurs. The sky turns on. It won’t turn off. The meteorologists attempt to keep our spirits up. They dress umbrellas in sunglasses, wear progressively lighter pastels. After the first month of rain passes unbarred, they look desperate. New haircuts. Carnations in their lapels. At last, one shrugs right on television. We are without hope. Every store in the surrounding region sells out of raincoats.

The roadsides have gone wild and lush with new monster weeds that no one has ever seen before.

One night, while I’m in the bathroom, Clara goes off about Gidlen Research, where we are employed to perform background checks. Up on the second floor, I do criminal and down on the first Clara does credit. “Work predicated on the underlying falseness of the world,” she says. Be that as it may, does she have to announce her disappointment in humanity through the bathroom door?

“How long do you think you can hide in there?”

Until she is sound asleep and I can close my eyes to the sound of something other than her iterating all the tragedies of our generation.

“I won’t wait up.”

By the time I get upstairs, the light is off in our bedroom. I close my eyes and listen to Delia’s jazz percolating under the sound of the rain. To the mosquitos diving at the weak points on the screen. Although I didn’t know she was awake, Clara says, “I can’t lie here anymore.” I think she means she’s about to go someplace, but instead she starts to cry.

I say, “Honey.” I say, “Love.” Go through the whole list, working my way at last to the most secret and effective of all our pet names.

Clara says, “I appreciate you trying. I really do, but I don’t want to hear those names anymore.”

She says, “I don’t know what it is I want.”

“Aside from me.”

When Clara doesn’t answer, I fall into a sentimental episode. Can’t

she remember our first weekend together when I underpacked and ended up wearing one of her flowered blouses to dinner? It was the same weekend she wore my flannel shirt over her shoulders and we huddled up over a fire that sinking down into its bed of coals. Just as I'm about to lose it, Clara interrupts. She says, "Please tell me you're not about to propound a theory of enduring love founded on cross-dressing."

"Something like that."

In the same bed where Clara told me about parents who were made to watch as the hands of their children were hacked off, we make love. We do it quiet and a little mean. Like we are burying something in each other's bodies that we hope never to see again. Afterwards, I push my nose into the familiar smell of sweat at Clara's neck, meaning to speak, to give and receive confirmations of our enduring love and our mutual position of happiness in the wide world, but I don't say a thing. It's all I can do to breathe upon her skin.

The smell of lilacs is filling up our silent room.

The next morning, I find Clara downstairs on the back stoop. She is almost completely cross-dressed. She is wearing my sweat socks. One of my old shirts and my baseball cap. My filthy sweatpants. Seeing Clara sitting thus, I have my first true thought of the day. It is, *Given one gift in my life long, I would choose what I already have.*

Under the influence of my new-found optimism, I bump Clara's back with the screen door, and she moves aside. I sit down, put my arm around her shoulders, lean her toward me. Her body rocks over like a plank of wood. Nonetheless, I say, "My theory looks a little more credible this morning."

Clara doesn't say a word. She's staring into the rain that weighs down the briars behind the house. Or maybe she doesn't notice them at all. I massage her thigh through the filthy sweatpants, as if this will make her warm again. Ease her mind. Erase her afflictions and take us back in time. I say, "You're wearing my pants is what I mean." Then I get so desperate, I lose all sense of discretion. I say, "Just like old times."

In my arms, Clara quivers as if chewing ice. She is released from a trance. She gives me a melancholy peck on my forehead.

She says, "It's nothing like old times."

Clara and I begin walking home from Gilden Research separately. There's no specific agreement. I work late or she knocks off early. What she doesn't know is I follow her. I stay a block or two behind, jogging

from shrub to shrub, smiling nervously at the neighbors who catch me in the act. I hope they think I'm on a fond lover's chase. A private little game. I want them to marvel at the longevity of true love. But sometimes I also want to walk up onto their porches and spill my heart right there in the precious moments before supper.

Clara keeps her head down while she walks. At the big intersection in front of the coffee shop where she told me about the oldest Carson kid's spine, she stops to look into the puddles. A few houses down our street, she scares mourning doves from their feeder and then watches as they land in the branches over her head.

The next day at Gilden research, I turn on the radio and my lifelong friend, Bessie, stops into my office, drops her whole two hundred pounds into the vinyl chair beside me. Bessie's last marriage ended when she chased her husband through the subway with his own pistol, but she's still not afraid to use the word "love" in a sentence. If there's one person who will tender up compassion in the face of my trouble, it is she.

"Trouble?" she says. Her voice is grit and moonshine, phlegm and tobacco, but a quaver of tenderness snakes through it like the warble of a flute.

"I know trouble," she says. "What kind are you talking about?"

"Clara and I falling out of love."

"Sorry. Can't buy that."

"I mean it, Bessie. I'm talking about serious despair. I'm not kidding. I don't know what to do."

"What happened?"

"It all began with the newspapers. Clara started reading these terrible newspapers. Now she recites horrible things before bed each night. You wouldn't believe what's happening in the world right now."

Bessie clutches the sides of her chair like she were headed into oncoming traffic.

"We don't say 'Good Morning' anymore. Clara growls in her sleep. She won't hold my hand. I don't know if I want her to."

Bessie guides me into her enormous palms. Loosen up my tie, adjusts the knot, and pulls it tight again. She says, "Anybody else, I'd worry. But the two of you?" She whistles at my teeth. "You're forever."

"When we make love, we don't kiss anymore. We don't look at each other. We don't speak. We don't hold each other afterwards. I'm not allowed to call her 'darling' or 'dear' or 'muffin.'"

"Go home and tell this to Clara. Light that woman some candles.

Make a sweet dinner.”

“If I lose her that’s it. I don’t know anything else. The sky falls.”

I shut down my computer, roll my chair backwards. Bessie and I both sit here and stare at some point on my desk which is not the picture of Clara and I. In this photograph that we’re not looking at, Clara and I are ten years younger. The freckles on her face are sharply-defined in the brilliance of the sun.

My heart plucks in my chest.

That night, Clara and I do not speak over dinner. Afterwards, she goes right upstairs. I load the dinner dishes into the dishwasher, make myself a drink and take it into the living room. I decide to keep the lights off. Can’t make up my mind about the temperature. I crank the heat, but I also open the windows. It occurs to me, I am allowing a small portion of the world’s finite energy to waft away into space while other people are freezing.

I don’t shut the windows.

Somewhere between my windows and space, my neighbor Delia is playing jazz. What do I know about jazz? The sound is part of the lawn and trees, a kind of bird call, the clatter of a child’s stick on a picket fence. It belongs out into the dirt, enters the house like carbon monoxide and killer bees, then hides in a moment of silence so long I think Delia’s gone off to bed. But the high hat is only biding time.

When I get to our bedroom, Clara is lying on the floor. She, too, has the windows open. She, too, is listening to second-hand jazz. She tells me so. For the first time in weeks, she speaks. She says, “I have never felt so scared before.”

I lie down beside Clara on the floor. I say, “I know how you feel.”

I reach under Clara’s shirt and touch her cold stomach. She grabs my hand like she’s about to remove it, but then she rolls toward me and kisses me in a way I wasn’t expecting. When she’s done, she rolls away again. I roll after. I get close to her ear, and I say, “I don’t understand what’s happening.”

Clara takes in that puff of air that means she’s about to laugh. Only she doesn’t laugh. She says, “You’ve never seen anything like this happen before?”

“But *us*?”

Outside, the music gets serious. The brass starts throwing kicks.

The strings are suffocating the bass. I hear the horns weep. While the two of us are lying here, I feel years pass. My joints swell. My hair falls out. My teeth splinter at the root. My beard withers up into yellow whiskers. The foundation of our house crumbles beneath us. The Carson kid shrivels into a skeleton and lies down beside me on the floor. Bessie falls into a bed while nurses gather round, folding white sheets.

The air begins to peel right off the sky.

I wake up on the floor. Outside, the trees are a lighter shade of green. Despite the noise of birds, I can make out a prevailing absence of sound. Then it hits me: *The rain has stopped*. I turn to share the good news with Clara, but she's gone. At some point during the night, she snuck back up onto our bed.

So, fine. I'll let her sleep in. I'll do some of the Saturday shopping myself. Buy some groceries. Be the good husband.

You see how scared I am.

Downstairs, I smuggle the phone into the bathroom, switch on the fan. Bessie's voice is so low I think I've called the wrong number. I say, "I'm sorry," but then I hear her say, "You better be," and I realize she was sleeping.

"Clara's slipping away right before my eyes. Meet me at the coffee shop."

"Coffee? I don't drink coffee."

"Bessie," I say. "Oh, Bessie."

I step outside, but I can't tell what the weather is. A new patter on the trees says rain, but the sky is bright blue and shadows are everywhere. Two joggers run down our street splashing each other in the puddles. Over in her yard, Delia gardens. Her long hair is bound up in a ponytail that reaches to her waist.

On the sidewalk in front of Delia's house I try to get away with just a wave, but she meets me on the sidewalk. Garden shovel in one hand, clay pot in the other. She says, "Are you okay?"

In this neighborhood, we tell time by looking in each other's windows, so I know Delia must mean Clara and me, but all I do by way of an answer is chuckle menacingly. It means, "Don't take another step in that direction. Don't go there. Hold your tongue." The subtle implications of my chuckle, however, are lost in Delia. She reaches out for my shoulder. I say, "Look, we're fine. I'm fine. Clara's fine. I'm going to the grocery store."

Delia looks me right in the eye.

“You want to know what’s wrong?” Delia crosses herself with her garden shovel. “You really want me to tell you?” She moves her head. It could be a nod. “Fine, here it is. Everywhere you look, something absolutely awful is happening. Around the world, right here on our street. Have you noticed that? Floods. Famines. Couples breaking up before your eyes. Children getting cancer.”

Delia gives me a schoolgirl smirk. Lowers the garden shovel. Laughs. At me. The sound is deeper than I imagine her body capable of making. At once, I realize I’m in over my head, and I don’t want to compete with this woman. My misery against hers.

On my way out of the grocery store, the sky flashes. A group of teenagers is squatting by the Dumpsters, pretending not to notice, but frenzy mounts. By the time I make it to the coffee shop, the wind blows paper cups against the awning. I almost start to cry at the sight. Here’s our table and its wobbly chairs. The ashtray with its chipped rim.

Bessie walks up behind me. She says, “Don’t worry. I know another place.”

I set one of my grocery bags on a table. “I could care less about this place.”

Bessie tugs my arm, and we make a sharp turn into the alley. She says, “Aren’t you every going to learn how to tell a decent lie?” She keeps hold of my arm as we walk. Her grip is so tight and her pace is so fast, I feel as if we’re on the way to the principal’s office.

The sky grows darker and darker, but it doesn’t rain. Gusts of wind shake sticks out of the trees. Stray drops splat on my glasses. Right there on the sidewalk, I start talking. I don’t even look to see who else is around. I say, “How can anyone who thinks about love as much as I do know so little about it? The truth is, I’m stumped. Hopeless. I’m totally miserable. I feel nauseous. I’m exhausted. I slept on the floor last night.”

“Not a bad place to begin.”

“Bessie, Clara is my life, my soul, my heart!” I stop to catch my breath. “Isn’t she?”

Bessie points to a woman sitting on her stoop tapping one sandal. Once we’re past, she says, “You see her? You recognize that tune?” I look back. The woman is moving her mouth to the slow beat of her foot. I say, “Never heard it before.”

“Don’t give me that,” Bessie says. Then she sees I’m serious and she shakes her head. Says, “You don’t know a love song when you hear it?”

“I don’t know every long song there is — do you?” Bessie gives my arm such a squeeze I cry out in pain. “That hurts, you know.”

“I’m just getting started.”

We end up walking on the bike trail that follows the Perkiomen Creek. We stoop at a wall overlooking the water. The current is running fast, carrying full trees downstream. It rolls over objects submerged at the bottom of the bank. A milk jug is caught in a whirlpool, and it spins in place. For some reason, this looks like a bad spot. The word “unsavory” comes to mind. The stench out of the water is fish and mold and something else. Sharp like chemicals.

Bessie says, “Lover’s leap.”

I say, “Clara would like me to skip that topic altogether.”

Bessie lowers herself onto the wall. She says, “Who said you get a choice?”

The sky on this side of the water sags with heavy purple clouds. In the distance, I hear sirens. Police. Fire. It occurs to me that Bessie and I are going to get caught out here in the downpour. We’re going to get drenched. The river will flood its banks. The grocery bags will split open and all of my refried beans will be lost. The milk jug will wash away.

I sit down beside Bessie, Without mentioning it, we hold hands. The two of us are strong, and we hold tight. We squeeze so hard our fingers get numb. We don’t have to talk about letting go. I forget that our hands were ever separate. I don’t know what it could mean to let go.

We are hurting each other.

At the door to her house, Bessie presses both palms flat on my chest. She has a tear on her cheek.

“A *raindrop*.”

“But the rain hasn’t started.”

She backs me down the sidewalk. She says, “Go the hell home, why don’t you? Pour yourself a long drink.”

I say, “I will,” but it turns out to be a lie. I end up at the coffee shop instead. I get lunch and spend the whole afternoon at Clara’s and my favorite table. Just sit there and watch passing cars.

I see Clara in nearly every one.

I speak into my lukewarm coffee mug. I say, “There you are.”

At the sound of my voice, Clara, who’s sitting in the driver’s seat of a pickup, turns in my direction. We make eye contact. You might argue

that Clara couldn't have been in that truck. We don't own a truck. That woman was ten years younger. She didn't look anything like Clara.

But what you do you know? I saw the way she looked at me.

I don't turn onto my own street until twilight. Still no rain. The sky fuzzes over. Stray currents of air stir leaves into circles. All the renegade bats collect into one woozy squad that reels over the streetlight and disappears.

As I'm rounding the last bend before my house, I pass by the oldest Carson kid's window. I keep my head down, but out of the corner of my eye I see his TV. The sight of its gentle light makes me wonder if he's awake or asleep up there. How many states there are between.

In front of Delia's place, I hear jazz. Tonight, she's playing it a little softer. And the music itself is slower. No drums to speak of, just horns and a piano back there. No sooner do I make that pronouncement that the music swells. Cymbals and trumpets. A second later, it tapers off. Peters out like the last crackle in a bonfire, and the song's over. But at the very last moment, I hear a little sputter of horns and a woman's voice. She's loud as an avalanche. So quiet you can't make out the words.

You see how much I know about jazz.

What I know for certain is my feet hurt, I'm hungry, my house is forty feet from where I stand, and Clara is in there waiting for me. She has been worried all day. She's had some time to think, and that may be all she needed. It could be everything will return to the way it was. I'll walk in the door, and she will be waiting with affirmations of love. Dinner on the table. Her long legs in my terrible sweatpants.

Maybe later, I'll find a note tucked under the cinnamon.

"What are you doing out there?" Clara says. She's standing across the street.

I say, "You don't know a love song when you hear it?" Clara doesn't answer. This silence of hers is meant as a rebuff. She's supposed to be scowling, but on her face I can see the relief of the beloved. She says, "If there's one thing I don't want to hear right now it's one of your theories regarding love."

She crosses to my side of the street and puts her arm around me.

The handles of the plastic grocery bags are draped over my wrists, and the contents smack her shoulder blades. Now is the time a new record ought to start up. Some kind of marching beat with bugles and big bass drums. Sound like New Orleans. Little groan blooming out of a saxophone. Something to make us hum along and sway.

Next thing we know, the tune will be there on our lips.

But up in her empty house, Delia's record player is quiet. Little wind rustles the trees. On my shoulder, Clara's mouth doesn't move. Her hips are straight and still. Her cheek burns me right through my shirt.