

## BLUES FOR A TORCHING

by ROB MALLARD

Lorenzo Wright caught his second hand Jordan's on the door threshold as he stepped out of the beige, listless shoebox trailer masquerading as a classroom, indistinct, mired in a long line of identical boxes that sat doggedly on their pressure treated skirts behind the post-industrial hunk of concrete and crust that was Maynard Jackson Comprehensive High School. He was last out of last period, stumbling onto the landing of the metal stairs as he watched the haze of his 6<sup>th</sup> period classmates disappear into the hot fog of freedom called the summer before your junior year. Jazz band had been his favorite class and he'd ended the year on a high note, pouring through a resigned and hurtful solo on Mingus' Goodbye Pork Pie Hat. Then, as the other students counted down the minutes until freedom's ringing, Lo had stared into an empty, black music stand and waited his turn as each student was called forward to sign in their instrument for that year. Now, empty handed save for the mouthpiece which was too

much him to give back, he stood on the top stair of the short flight that ran from the trailer to the cat walk and listened to his stomach rumble.

"Hey Lo, we'll see you next year. Have a good Summer."

Mr. Jeske was young and cool but at that moment was actually just trying to get Lo moving so he could lock up and get to the bar. Summer break wasn't just for kids.

"Alright, Mr. J. Thanks. See ya." His reluctance gave way and he took one step off the machined stairs then skipped the rest, hopping down and landing in stride, gliding down the catwalk towards the ball fields and the fast food. His laces were untied and his stomach was in knots, black Diesels riding down on his blue plaid Hilfiger boxer shorts.

"LoEnd, yo, get with it. Graduation party in the gym at Iconium tonight." Rahim was calling to him as the young musician moved up some concrete stairs and strolled out from behind the cinder block out building and onto the red rubber running track. Church parties were cool. Everyone was scrubbed down and filling up on cookies and punch. He let his eyes adjust to the bright early summer sun.

As shapes drifted into focus, he saw some mohawk kids with their rocker duds and cool tats on the aluminum bleachers smoking their Newports. He knew a couple of them but didn't smoke, and anyway, the real action was on the field where some feisty co-ed touch football was being played in celebration of surviving another academic calendar. Lo put down his bag, pulled his belt a notch tighter and jogged onto the field. He laughed and flirted and pounded the j.v. grid iron until somebody started talking about Popeye's and the whole group was seized by a simultaneous pang that sent them scattering in all directions in search of deep fried dreams and a half gallon of whatever you're having.

Lorenzo, or Lo, LoEnd, Lo-ner, any of that, popped in his ear buds and strolled towards the village. He guessed he could beg a slice off his cousin, Ronnie, who worked at The Pizza Place, East Atlanta's favorite pie stop. He walked the half mile from school to the restaurant and got lucky. It was slow and the manager was drinking. Bumming some pepperoni was easy as a wink and a nod. It was almost 6:00 by the time all the knots were tied and untied, and he had finished up his slice and sprite. He thanked his cousin with a 'what it is' and a 'see ya at granny's' and walked out into the way too early in the Summer hot, muggy back side of the late afternoon. He looked up and down the street, then seemed to remember something and wandered South down Flat Shoals Ave. He passed the shut up soul food joint that had tried to get jazzy sheik on a back alley bender, passed the over grown lot and up a side street. He casually ignored a couple 9th graders, pulled up on a girl he like once, then stopped outside a funky store front, looked up at the mural over the door of impressionistic instruments playing some hipsters kids, then walked in. The sign on the door had the words EarthShaking Music splashed across the emanating waves of a vibrating globe surrounded by years of band stickers and handbills.

Lo walked purposefully passed the counter and into the back room, where they kept the drums and band instruments. The indy rock kid behind the counter looked up as he passed. They nodded. He walked back to a silver Yamaha Alto sax and lifted it off the wall. He pulled his mouthpiece out of his pocket, and slid it onto the cork at the mouth of the neck. He adjusted the strap and mouthpiece and blew, but nothing but a awkward squawk came out. He look the reed off his mouthpiece and held it to the light. Somewhere between 6<sup>th</sup> period and here it had split in two in his pocket, probably play

tackling one the giggling girls in the touch football game. If that was the case, it certainly wasn't worth his last Rico. He walked back up to the counter. The cool kid, Russ Kay, or RK, looked up from his Guitar Weekly magazine.

"Can I get a Rico 3?"

"Alto, right?"

"Yeah."

"Just one?"

"Yeah."

"Three bucks."

"Let me get you next time."

"What?"

"Lemme hit you next time."

"This is next time. From last time."

"I'll get you back, slick."

"You'll get me black?"

A good looking lady in a hippy skirt and a tie die EarthShaking t shirt appeared from the back.

"It's okay, Russ, he can have one."

He handed Lo the reed. "You know they're not mine to give, right."

"It's cool," said Lo turning away.

"Yeah, maybe," said the kid.

As he walked to the back room, Lo took the reed and popped the cut end into his mouth "Thanks Ms. Jessica, I will play you back." He was talking around the reed

protruding from his lips.

"You'll play me back? Or pay me back?"

"Or play you black. Let's see. Come on."

Smiling at Lo's charming cockiness, Jessica Allain, who threw a wink back at her employee behind the counter, followed the young man into the back room and took her place on the throne behind a vintage set of Pearls. She tested the heads. She ran through them a little bit, tuning up the rack tom a notch, then started a groove on the ride cymbal. Lo fit the new reed onto his mouthpiece then eased it onto the neck of the silver horn. He started to imitate the groove, hanging around a couple notes and playing right behind the beat. Jessica smacked the crash cymbal and then started a fine ride across the whole set. Lo took off after her, running through some thick arpeggios and then cruising on a blues. The kid from the counter walked back, nodding his head smiling, and clicked on a Kurzweil keyboard and jammed in. They were hitting pretty hard. After a good few minutes, a customer wandered in and stood in the opening watching. Jessica nodded to RK to go help them out. Lo stopped playing. Breathing heavy, he looked up at Jessica, unsnapped the horn from the neck strap and put it back on its hook on the wall. He put the mouth piece back in his pocket. Jessica smacked the crash cymbal one more time for good measure, then put the sticks down on the snare drum. She came around and gave Lo an enthusiastic and awkward high five.

"That was awesome, Lo. You have really gotten so good this year. I want you to bring this amazing teacher of yours by the store."

"He's been here. Looks like Julio Jones, long braids. Mr. J is cool, except he took my horn away today."

"What do you mean."

"He took up all the instruments from all the kids, keeping 'em for the summer. Last day of school today."

"Congrats to that, Lo, but not cool going the Summer with no ax. I know you know that you are welcome to come up here and play whenever you like."

"I was hoping to get some gigs this summer, play outside the Braves games or at the Mall. I think I can make a some money." Jessica smiled, music and money, how well she knew that contradiction. Lo looked away and drifted out of the music room.

She watched as he wandered around the shop with a heaviness that settled all the way into the soles of his shoes. He shuffled slowly down the hall of guitars. Without looking up, he reached up and strummed a black SG, a '65 reissue, that painted the corridor with a hollow sound like a rumbling stomach.

Jessica picked a black case from a line of cases set neatly against the wall under the instruments and began to pack the silver Yamaha saxophone into it. When she finished she looked it over and ran her hand across the bell and then snapped the lid shut. She carried it out to Lo. She was clearly hesitant as she walked into the guitar room with the resignation of someone who sacrificed prudence to righteousness.

"Lo." Jessica had a faint smile as she held up the sax. RK watched hopefully from his stool.

The young man turned slowly. He blinked and reached up to twist a braid.

"I've got a deal for you," she said. "I want to lend you this horn for the Summer but there's a catch. You have to come by here at least once a week and show me something new you've learned." She smiled and handed the horn. Do that and at the

end of the Summer, I will get us a gig at 529, and we can show the whole village what you can do. Sound good?"

529 was the dope place to get started in the village. Way cool. Lo looked at her without registering hardly any reaction at all. "Okay." She walked over to him and handed him the case. He picked up the case and looked at the ground.

She smiled and put a kind hand on his shoulder and he met her gaze. "Go get em, Bird."

"Dolphy," he corrected as he stepped out into the thick East Atlanta dusk. Jessica's smile faded into a blurry *deja vu*. She turned to her employee with a hopeful look on her face.

He shrugged. "That was cool."

She sighed. "Was it?" and walked to the back room.

Generosity made Lo nervous, and the bounce in his step was hindered by the prickly notion he owed someone. Feeling indebted ran counter to his survival instinct. It even made the music feel on loan. At the same time, he was just so glad to have a horn. He promised himself to make enough money playing it to own it before the gig at the 529. No one would take his horn or his music again. It may take a lot of Braves games, but he would put his hat out and play 'take me out to the ballgame' until his face fell off if that's what it took.

He stopped and looked around. There were plenty of folks milling around the village. Why wait, he thought. So he picked a spot on the corner of Glenwood and Flat Shoals outside of Joe's Coffee and starting improvising, just jamming along with the

people and cars that passed as he played, telling tall tales in tones that high tailed it up and down the road and back. So many stories and lyrics to songs, so much youth poured out in bars, he played all the rocked out village had to offer. And all the sounds of that early evening, the voices, traffic, piped in pop tunes, Friday night coming alive, pulsed behind his attentive solo, a rhythm to his rhyme, a rhyme to his reason.

He was deep in the cut, eyes closed and soaring, when he heard some coins splash into his horn case. When he finally came up for air, he already had three bucks and some change. A smiling child was watching him bug eyed as he continued his playing, swinging through some tight licks to the youngster bobbed back and forth. He played on that street corner until his mouth was burning and it was well past dark. Maybe he would stop by the party at the Church. Could be fun, but where would he stash his horn. He figured he'd better head home anyway and check on his little brothers. There'd be other parties. He guessed his mom probably hadn't made it back from work yet, anyway. He counted the change and few bills carefully as he took his earnings out of the horn. \$9.23. He covered the instrument with the blue velvet polishing cloth, and snapped the black leather case shut around his new co-worker and wandered up the sidewalk. It was late now, and the hike down Moreland after dark could make even a tough competitor falter, but Lo was right at home. He stopped by Wendy's on the way and bought a bag full off the dollar menu. The ax slung over his shoulder, he ate a small chocolate Frosty as he walked home. He was betting his little brothers would be alone and hungry. He probably could have headed home sooner.

As he walked up the driveway of the small two bedroom house where he lived with his mom and his two brothers, he could see the blue glow of the TV through the



blinds in the front room. He walked up to the door and headed in. His two younger brothers were inside with a neighbor watching IronMan. Ricky was 9 and Jermaine was 11. Lo held up the Wendy's bag and asked, "Who wants a burger?"

The kids hopped up all smiles and jumped up at the bag that Lo now held over his head. Finally, the three youngsters wrestled him and the fast food to the ground. They all hit the couch with their snack and finished watching Tony Stark fight evil and wow the girls. At the end of the movie, Lorenzo turned the TV off and made his brothers brush teeth and go to bed. Then he laid down on the couch still in his clothes, the saxophone on the floor next to him, and stared at the ceiling thinking about where to play next.

He was still awake when he heard his mother struggling to find the keyhole with her house key. She eventually stumbled into the house, sagging and drunk. She didn't even see Lo. She went straight to the bathroom and then passed out in the bed. Lo walked into her room and slipped off her shoes. He pulled a blanket over her then went back to the front door, shut it, locked it, then unlocked it and stepped outside. It had cooled off a bit and the early June night was beautiful, full of sounds. He listened and imagined what he would play to compliment the avant grade assemblage of city life descending and the crickets serenade. He squatted down and picked up a stick and tapped out a swing in the dirt and gravel that marauded as a yard. He stood up and clapped his hands together aggressively, bouncing a hard slap off the noisy night. The crickets all fell silent. He smiled, tossed the stick and stepped back quietly into the house. He got back on the worn-through, blue upholstered sofa and stared at the water marked ceiling looking for signs of life in the dimly lit spray on texture as his internal

rhythm settled on adagio and marked time with his heartbeat until his eyes blinked retreat and sleep descended.

Early next morning, he was awakened by an out burst of aggressive knocks on the door. He slung his feet to the floor, sat up and wiped the thick night from his eyes. 'Bang, bang.' Two more loud knocks and then, 'Ms. James! We need to talk.' Lo hopped off the couch and jogged to the door. He opened it and the rent man strolled inside. A door shut in the back of the house.

"Sorry to wake you up. I need to talk to your momma. Where's she at?"

"She's not awake. She's not feeling good. It's 7:30 on a Saturday."

"Hate to break it to you, but Saturday's been a work day for a long time now."

"Doesn't mean you got to knock a dent in a door first thing."

"I see, I see. You a big man, huh. Git you're mom...please."

"I told you, she aint feeling good. You tell me, I'll tell her."

The tall, thin Nigerian spoke with a warm, sing song accent. He had a long, deliberate face. "Mr. Morrison wants his money. Tell her she's got two weeks to pay up two months."

Lo nodded.

"Two weeks, okay."

"Not a problem."

"No, son, it's a problem."

"I got it."

"Tell your mom to get the money."

His littlest brother, Ricky, peeked around the corner of the cased opening. The rent man looked at him and he ducked out of sight.

"It's cool, Rick, come on. Go on and turn on the tv." The boy walked sheepishly around the corner looking at the ebony skinned African and then ran and jumped on the couch, pointing the remote at the flat screen.

Walking to the door, and holding it open, Lo said, "I'll tell her. Now take it easy."

The Rent man looked him over good. Smiled. "Mr. Morrison thanks you in advance. You take care, big man."

Ricky had turned on a Green Lantern cartoon, but had diverted his attention to the black case that was on the floor next to the couch. He picked it up and opened it.

"This one is silver. Where'd you get this one."

"Lady let me keep it over the summer since they took mine up at school."

"What lady?"

"At the music store."

"She got any drums she want to lend?" Ricky jumped up on the couch and bounced.

"No, she wasn't too sure about letting me hold this."

Ricky plopped down flat on the couch. "Let me play it. Show me how."

"Nah. That's no toy. It's not even mine. I just said the lady let me borrow it."

Ricky's face scrunched up. "Please. Just a little. Show me one thing."

Lo pulled the mouthpiece out of his pocket, fit the neck on the horn then adjusted the neck strap to fit his brother. He put his fingers on a couple of the keys and told him to blow. His cheeks puffed full but no sound came out.

"Ease up on your mouth a little. Let your breath go."

A piercing squawk blasted out of the bell. Lo laughed and took the horn from around his brother's neck.

They were both giggling. "You play something. Play 'Crazy'," the boy shouted excitedly.

Lorenzo took the horn and blew through a fairly recognizable version of the Gnarl Barkley's hit.

Their mom came shuffling into the living room, bleary and washed out, and begged, "Please, honey, it's just to plain early this morning for horn playing. I love it, I love you, just not this morning. Not right now. My head's exploding."

"Sorry Momma." He winked at Ricky, set the horn on the couch, then helped his mom to the breakfast room table.

"You got any coffee, momma? You want me to make you some."

"No, baby, just a glass of water, and see if there's anything left in that honey bear. I could use a spoon."

"Alright Momma." Lo gave her a kiss and went in the kitchen.

"Come here, Baby Ricky, come here a second. Give mama some sugar. I need a little sugar."

Ricky climbed up in her lap. "Momma, the rent man was here this morning?"

"I know baby. I heard him." Lo walked in with a glass of water, a glass of green kool-aid and the honey bear, which he set on it's red cap so the last tastes could drip down into the top of it's head. "Thank you, Lorenzo, for talking to him for me. It's good to have a man in the house." She smiled. "I was not in the mood for it."

"I guess you heard him," he said, crossing over to put his horn away.

"He'll get his money. I can sell that EBT and my check should be here Wed. Now you're home for the Summer, I can pick up a shift at work."

Lo drank half the glass of bright green bug juice, then handed the rest to Ricky. Jermaine and the neighbor kid came out of the bedroom and plopped on the couch.

"Who are you?" asked Lo's momma.

"I'm Terry. I got to school with Jermaine."

"Momma, he's Tamitha's cousin."

"Well, alright, Terry. You're momma knows where you're at?"

"Yes ma'am. I told her."

Lo had walked over to his horn and was packing it up. Ricky came up next to him.

"I like that one. It's cool. It's awesome," said his little brother.

"Thanks, big Rick."

Lo pulled on his shoes and headed out the door.

"Where you going? It's barely 8'o clock."

"I'm gonna go play this horn," he replied, like playing was a place, the sound a destination. "Y'all be cool," he said to his brothers, and stepped into the morning. He shut the door and listened. The crickets had given way to the birds, who carried the melody, up beat and strong, the cityscape comping in the back. "I'm gonna play this horn."

And he did. For the next two weeks he played all over town. Ball games, malls, downtown parks, uptown restaurants, festivals and street parties, night and day he put

his case out and busked for bucks. He especially liked the booming Marta stations, with the echo sounding like a whole big band playing with him, that the history of Jazz was complicit in his money making scheme. The cops ran him off more than a few times, but it didn't matter. He just took the cats to another corner and set out the hat.

And like he promised, he showed up for Ms. Jessica and the jam at Earthshaking.

"Lo, you are playing like a champ. I can't believe how strong your tone is getting."

"Yes ma'am. Can I ask a favor?"

"Maybe. But it'll probably cost you another jam or two."

He smiled. He told her what he wanted, and she went behind the counter and pulled out some Vandoren Java jazz reeds. She gave him a box of 10. He thanked her for them and then started for the door. There was an afternoon game at the Ted, and he usually could make \$20 or \$30 bucks if he got down there couple hours before first pitch.

Ms. Jessica stopped him. "Can you come by tomorrow around 6? I want you to meet someone, jam with them. He's a good guy and wants to see what you can do."

"Yes, ma'am. That's a bet."

"Please, Lorenzo, it's Jessica."

"Oh, yes, ma'am, Ms Jessica."

She smiled. He skipped out of the music shop and headed to catch the number 12 down to the ball yards. By the time Lo was walking up the drive to his little house in Reynoldstown, he had played at two coffee shops, the music store, three malls, Turner field twice (pre and post game) and the entire strip of Virginia Highlands bars and

restaurants. He had made \$119.72 all on one reed. He was the king of swing. He had been playing since 9 am, starting at Aurora Coffee in L5P and finishing outside The Majestic on Ponce at 2 am. He set his horn down on the stoop to fish his key out of his pocket, when he saw the yellow sign duct taped to the front door. He recognized the eviction notice instantly, and he also recognized his momma's handwriting in the, 'GO TO HELL' scrawled across it in rust colored crayon. He unlocked the door and walked in the house. His mom was passed out on the couch with the TV still playing an infomercial on HSM. He turned the TV off and started to take off her shoes when she woke up.

"Hey baby."

"Hey momma."

"They're coming in the morning. I don't know what to do."

"You have any money?"

"Baby, I'm flat. I've got \$30 left from my check."

"I've got \$500, momma. It should buy us some time."

"Where you get that money, boy."

"I've been playing my horn."

"Get serious, boy..." but she stopped herself. "I don't care where you got it, just get it for me."

"Momma, I'm gonna give it to the rent man when he comes in the morning. I don't know what you do with your money, but you're not going to do it with mine."

His momma's hand moved so quickly that he didn't really know what had happened until the fire came up in his ear and cheek. Then his momma just started to

cry. Lo stood up and went to the bathroom and washed his face. Then he walked back into the living room and helped his momma to bed.

"It's gonna be alright, momma. I'll make it alright." She was still choking sobs when he put the sheet on her and shut off the lamp.

The Sunday morning glare poured through the door, spilling around the silhouette of the rent man black on black in the early heat.

"Today's the day, Ms. Wright. Today's the day."

Lorenzo walked straight up to him and handed him the \$500 bucks he had earned a dollar, a quarter at a time. "This is \$500. I will have some more next week."

The rent man started to count the wad, but then just rolled it up and put it in his pocket. "Alright, big man, that'll buy you another day. We're coming back tomorrow and Mr. Morrison wants his money."

"There aint no more money tomorrow. I need a week."

"Better get ya a garage sale sign then, cause all this gonna be in the yard by lunch time tomorrow."

"You gonna put us out like that, then just give me my money back and go ahead and put us out right now. Aint no point in waiting. Got no more money. Aint no more money. Just give mine back and be done with it."

He stepped out of the shadows and stood right up over Lo holding up the wad. "Young brother, your money's my money now." He began to back up. "Tomorrow's soon enough."

He backed all the way out of the door never taking his eye off the young musician.



He swung the door shut with a bang, leaving the family's battered expressions to adjust to the darkness.

Lo didn't say a word. He just picked up his sax and headed out the door. He went to three different pawn shops before he found one open. He literally begged and pleaded until the redneck shop owner at Lakewood Pawn got sick of him and gave him \$300 and a ticket.

When he got home everyone was sitting around watching a bootleg of Denzel in 'Flight'. Lo watched as a wasted Washington trashed a hotel room. "Mama, we're about to get tossed up out of here, and you're watching TV? You need to find some money! I got some, but you got to get up and find us some more. Go talk to Uncle Patrick. He'll give you something. Don't sit around and let those motherfuckers throw us out of our house!" Lo was on the verge of losing his composure which was something he was conditioned not to do.

"Now watch your language, young man. I know you're taking of business and all, but I won't have you talking like that in front of your brothers."

"Or what, you gonna put me out. Out of what?"

"It's okay, mama," said Jermaine, standing up.

"No it's not. And I won't put you out, I'll knock you out. Don't think I won't and can't. Don't press me. I'm getting my mind together. As soon as my movie's over, I'll go talk to somebody. Not like they ain't heard it all before."

"Why aren't you down at Church today, anyway, at least you could be praying for some help, not sitting around this house they're about to take. I don't guess God would get sick of you. Somebody at Iconium could help us out."

"They think they're 'better than' down at that church. I like St John's or the Shy Temple better."

"Just find us something. And Ricky and Jermaine, I need you to get up from there and give me a hand. Terry, you ever go home? You need to run on. We got a situation."

"Be nice to Terry, and what do you need with your brothers. They are keeping me company right now."

"Pretty sure they don't need to be watching this movie."

"Denzel is a hero to our people. I'm proud for them to watch it."

"Which people, ma, poor ones?"

She didn't look up.

"Now get up you two, and Terry, go home!" ordered Lo.

Terry put on his shoes and left. The brothers followed him out the door. Mama didn't look up from the movie.

The boys followed Lo around the house into the small, overgrown backyard. He stopped and put a baseball in an athletic sock.

"What are you doing with that? You aint gonna hit us?" asked Jermaine.

"We didn't do nothing," pleaded Ricky.

"I'm not going to hit y'all. I need you to hit me."

"What does that mean?" asked Ricky.

"What are talking about? Don't be stupid," said Jermaine in amazement.

"Nobody's going hit you with that baseball sock!"

"I'm not," said Ricky, looking like he might cry.

"I'm not getting into it," snapped Lo. "They trying to take our house, and I'm

dealing with it how I'm dealing it. Now no damn whining, alright. You gonna hit me in the face with this damn ball, and then you can go back in the house and watch that movie like nothing. You got it? Jermaine, you first?"

"The fuck I am," said Jermaine.

Neither of the boys wanted to do it. They got to arguing, pushing and shoving. Ricky yelled loud as he could. "This stupid shit ain't gonna keep the rent man away."

"Maybe not, but it'll keep me out of juvenile!" screamed Lo right back. They all stopped and looked at each other. They were all breathing hard, and the air sounded a rhythmic counter point to the action.

"I aint gonna go into it all and I aint gonna ask you again. Smack me with this god damn sock...please."

Lo got down on his knees to make it easier for the boys to reach him with the makeshift blackjack. The first blow, albeit rather tentative, caught him on the side of the mouth. His lip puffed up and a little blood trickled out of the corner of his bottom lip. Jermaine handed the sock to his younger brother, who was just a little bigger than his older sibling, and little Ricky swung the ball with abandon and hit Lo in the side of the nose at the corner of his eye. It sounded like a coffee mug getting dropped on a tile floor. Lo gasped and crumpled onto one hand. Ricky swung again and caught him in the ear. Lo toppled over on his side. He lay there groaning for a second, then hopped back up to his knees and waited for the next blow. Ricky landed a couple more shots to his brother's cheeks then gave the sock to his brother and sat down on the ground and put his face in his hands. Jermaine hit him square in the mouth, snapping his head back and cracking a tooth. A couple more swings, then Lo held up his hand for them to stop.

Ricky got up and stood next to Jermaine. The youngsters stared at their battered brother in shock as he reached out and took the sock from Jermaine. Struggling to his feet, he shook the five ounces of leather and yarn from the mouth of the tube sock. It landed on the dirt with a thud and rolled a couple feet until it stopped on a twig. Lo dabbed at the cuts on his face with the stretched out cotton, inspecting the blood each time he went to his face. He looked up from the sock a last time and stared at his brothers. They shared an unusually black expression. He gave them a faint nod, then turned, staggered once and disappeared around the side of the house as he shoved the sock in his back pocket.

He wandered, stumbling punch drunk towards the village. He stared through the chain links on the I-20 bridge. He watched from across the street as the inspired, sharp dressed congregation filed out of First Iconium Baptist. He walked slowly to the Village. As he passed the 529, he stopped and looked in the blacked out store front window. His reflection squinted out at him from his swollen face. He blotted a little more blood from the welts with the sock, then tossed it in a trash can. He was early for his appointment at Earthshaking. He walked on.

He went to his school and crossed the ball field, quiet now except for a couple of grown ups trying to walk off a big Sunday dinner and a culture of fast food. He sat down on the steps of the band room trailer, leaned back against the door in the hot sun and closed his eyes. It was actually very quiet. He listened and breathed in the calm. A parade of sounds churned in his mind, as the mid day heat baked his wounds dry.

He lurched awake when a maintenance man poked him with the stick end of a push broom.

"Hey Mr. Peel. What are you doing?"

"Seeing if you were dead. Lots of kids taking that dope. Drop you out quick. Who kicked your ass?"

"Nobody. What are you talking about?" Lo stood up to disappear but his foot was dead asleep. He stumbled down the stairs and landed on his hands and knees next to the janitor.

"Looks like your high to me, young man, and be how you want about it, but I'm gonna tell ya, somebody whopped you ass."

"Aint you got a floor to sweep or some shit," said Lo at his shoe as he tested his footing. "I aint high. My foot asleep, okay. I aint messing with that. Why you even here? School's done."

"It takes us all Summer to clean up after all y'all. Y'all some nasty kids," smiled Mr. Peel.

"Man, please. My shit's tight," Lo protested still stomping life back into his leg.

"I'm kidding. I ain't got nowhere to be." He stepped close to Lo and leaned in. "I bet the other guy's still on the ground, aint he." He winked, smiled, and gave Lo a soft punch in the shoulder, then turned and walked off, using the broom like a staff.

Lo looked up. The sun was getting drowsy and he was guessing it was well past 6. He shook off the day and limped through the school yard. Late didn't much matter he didn't guess since his horn was sitting on a shelf next to a mess of hostage goods at the pawn shop, but he needed to get to the music store before she closed. It was a long mile down Glenwood to Flat Shoals, as the sun settled into the skyline. As he passed the Chinese restaurant, the smell of frying hot wings billowed out of the hood vent stack. It all but doubled him over. He could eat 2 dozen, he thought. He looked through the lively

storefront at the folks eating fried rice and egg rolls, wings and fries.

"Go get you some. Ain't you got no money?" A girl about his age had appeared next to him and was staring through the adjacent window.

"I got money. I got to be somewhere," answered Lo, looking at the girl who continued to stare into the restaurant.

"Buy me something," she asked, dared.

"I got to be somewhere," he repeated, looking her up and down.

She turned to him and looked at him for a minute.

"You look like shit, buster."

"Nobody asked you. Buy your own damn wings, Shaniqua."

"I aint Shaniqua..." She started to protest, but Lo had turned and was on down the road. It was pretty quite in the village, people napping off dodgy decision making and bloody mary's. He got a few odd looks as he moved down the sidewalk, but a battered face was nothing really that out of the ordinary for the under-the-counter culture that flourished in East Atlanta.

Even from outside the door of the music store he could hear the jam. When he walked in, a teenage girl on a stool behind the counter looked him over nervously. He stood in the open doorway for a time before heading back, heeding the call of the familiar swing. He walked past without acknowledging the young lady, who gave a weak wave and asked if he needed any help. Ms. J was jamming with Russ and another couple guys Lo didn't recognize. She glanced up, but didn't immediately recognize him. When she did, she sprang up and ran around the corner.

"What in the God's name happened to you. Oh Lo, you are hurt. Please, come on

back to my office and let me get a look at you."

"It's okay. I'm okay, Ms. Jessica. I just wanted to tell you that somebody beat me up and took your horn. I was cutting through the Marta station after playing in Little 5 points and two kids jumped me and whipped my ass and took your horn. I'm sorry."

"You're sorry? Lo, your face is a mess, please don't worry about the saxophone right now. We will figure that part out. Right now, I think we should get you to a doctor. What did the police say?" Jessica tried to get a good look at the wounds. Lo was not exactly cooperating.

"I'm gonna be fine. I'm just sorry, is all," he looked at the other men in the room.

She pressed. "You did call the cops, right?"

Lo was silent.

"You can't get mugged and not call the cops," said one of the men, his ES-335 still slung around his shoulder.

"Lorenzo, this is Crenshaw. He's an old friend. He runs a dance band called Jig's Up. I told him about you."

"Hey man. You might want to let somebody know what happened...at least for the insurance." Lo hadn't thought about that. "You need to make a report. Looks like you might need a stitch or two, anyway." Crenshaw was street enough not to buy into the story completely. "Why don't ya chill for a minute and we can get an officer to come here and take a statement."

"I ain't calling the cops, not on myself." Lo was edging towards the door even though he really didn't realize it.

"Let's just get you a little cleaned up, get you something to eat. You

hungry?" Jessica sensed his uneasiness. Lo was starving, just the mention of food gutted him.

"I don't feel like eating anything. I need to get home. My mom's at work. I need to check on my brothers."

"I'm sorry, if I hadn't lent you that horn..." Ms. J didn't really know what to say.

"That's crazy. You didn't do nothing."

Ms. Jessica looked at him for a long moment then stepped over to him and hugged him. His arms hung by his side but he let his head rest lightly on her shoulder.

"I'll be back in band class in a couple months. I'll have my horn then. I can make some money and pay you back. I should've been ready."

"Ready for what?" Crenshaw asked.

"The kids, the ones that took my horn," Lo looked at him like he was dumb.

Jessica was a little sick, a little heart broken. "Can't I at least get you some pizza or something."

"No thanks, but thank you. I'm really sorry." He scratched his head and touched his swollen cheek. "I gotta go. I'm really sorry."

"I know, Lorenzo. Me too." They watched him shuffle out the door.

Jessica sat back on the drum stool. "I guess I had a feeling something like this was gonna happen."

"Why do you think?" Crenshaw was leaning out the door watching down the hall.

"Not sure." She started putting her sticks in her stick bag. "I guess I'm done. Don't feel like playing anymore."

Ted, who'd been watching all this unfold said, "My dad always said, 'you can't do



nobody any favors'."

"Can't not though." Jessica stood up. "You got a cigarette?"

"Sure," said Ted, pulling out a pack of American Spirits. "Healthy ones."

"Should've known." She took the smoke and headed out front.

It was well after dark when Lo crossed back over I-20. He was wandering towards home, but wasn't ready to be there. He cut over to Cabbagetown and hopped the fence at the Mill Lofts. Nobody was at the pool. He stripped down to his boxers and dove in. The chlorine burned his face, but the water felt incredible. He swam and swam, floated and dipped, revitalized by the cool water. He stayed in until his fingers were way wrinkled. He got out and rolled up his clothes into a pillow and laid down on one of the many loungers around the pool. He looked around at the remains of the mill that created the space for the swimming area. It was awesome in the dim light, gothic and surreal. He listened closely to the night sounds, as the pool filters kicked on and hummed him to sleep.

The landscaper was laughing as he blew Lo with his backpack leaf blower. He was yelling to his buddy in Spanish, who also laughed as he ran a weed whacker down the edge of the sidewalk. Lo jumped and grabbed his clothes.

"Yo bro, that aint cool. I aint even got my pants on." Lo was pissed. He jogged to the other side of the pool deck and started to get dressed. The mexican guy held up his shoes.

"Don't forget these, amigo!"

He started to go for the shoes, but his stomach seized up and he dropped to a knee.

"Just leave the shoes alone, man."

The guy laughed and dropped the high tops on the concrete and continued blowing trash.

The Mill Lofts were only a few blocks from his house. He headed up Wylie St, past the tunnel, past the train yard, and over the rise to Reynoldstown. As soon as he turned onto his block on Kenyon, he recognized the rent man's car and it all came back to him. He started running. The sheriff was there and three young men were in the process of making a pile of their stuff out in the yard. Lo ran past them without even looking or saying a word. He raced into the house.

"Mama! Mama! Maine! Ricky!" He checked every room. No one was there, and the house was all but empty. A hand clapped him on the shoulder and turned him around.

"Son, you can't be in here. This ain't your home no more."

The sheriff was plump and shiny. The collar on his crisp blue shirt was buttoned tightly around a stump of a neck, making his head appear like an independent entity, floating above a husky frame. He pulled out the cuffs and let them dangle from his plump hands.

"I get to use these today?" he asked with a lightness that made Lo sick. He bolted through the door and ran to the mounting pile of affects that had previously made his house a home. He walked the ruins slowly, taking in every item, kicking a few of his

families things around in the dust. Two of the workers tossed a table onto the pile. It clattered around then settled at an odd angle legs sticking up awkwardly into the morning light.

Lo walked up to the Rent man seething. "Where's my mama. Where my damn brothers. What you done with them?" He barely moved but to twitch.

"I've done nothing with them. They had a few bags and left when the sheriff got here. Where were you? Don't you guess you should've been helping?"

"I guess you don't know a damn thing about a damn thing!" Lo was in his face. "I had your money. I had your damn rent. Now look at this. Look at this shit." The workers had stopped to watch. The sheriff was propped against a tree hand on his holster.

"Let this be a lesson, young brother, you gotta eat or be eaten."

Lo stared at him, deep into his pitch blackness, and snarled. "I'm 14! 14." He paused, grabbed a breath. "Man, I'm 14. A lesson? What? How's this for lesson!" Quick as a snake but with the force of a mule kick, Lo punched him a stiff uppercut right in his nuts. The tall Nigerian drop to his knees like a sack of shit. Lo stepped back and looked the others down for a half a beat and then ran like hell.

As Lo flew down the street, he could hear the sheriff and the helpers laughing behind him. What in the world is funny, he wondered as he pounded pavement out of there. He cut down to Maynard Terrace, crossed the interstate, ran passed his school, wove through Grant Park to Boulevard and didn't stop until he got to the the Federal Pen at McDonough. He put his hands on his knees and tried to catch his breath for half a minute, then took off jogging again. He didn't stop until he got to the Pawn shop. It wasn't set to open for another hour. He sat down on the littered sidewalk and leaned up

against the cinder block wall to wait for his horn. He fished the ticket out of his wallet and held it carefully in his hand.

The pawn broker showed up about ten past nine. He stopped when he saw Lo.

"What do you want? I already gave you way more than I should of for that sax."

"I'm want it back. I'm giving you your money back."

"Well I guess it's still here. You got all the money?"

"I got it." Lo stood up and followed the man into the store.

When he emerged from the shop, he seemed taller, stronger, his skin a richer tone. He marched across the street barely looking for oncoming traffic.

That night, sax in one hand, three gallon gas can in the other, Lo went back to the house. The door was pad locked, so he climbed in the bedroom window he had rigged to sneak in when he got locked out. He needed to look around, just to see it, make sure no one was there. He poured half of the gas around the house and then crawled back outside and poured the rest on what was left of their stuff after a good picking thru by the neighbors. He threw a match on the pile and watched it flame up. Then he picked up a burning magazine and tossed it into the back window. The room started to glow, and even though it was late late, he pulled out his ax and played a tired, angry blues for a torching, as his world went up in midnight smoke.

The house burned quickly, and the flames swirled and lapped amidst a chorus of crackling wood and sizzling plaster. He played along until the sirens sounded, pulsing against the simmering shell of his eviction. He took the horn out of his mouth and slowly laid it in its case. He looked back at the fire, then at his horn, and as the firetrucks flashing lights became visible in the trees and sky, he shut the sax up it is box, and raced

off into the night, song of insects and swear words, bad dreams and traffic noise, and 16 bars of a broken heart appropriately set in the key of E.