

## The Pursuer – Julio Cortázar

In memorium Ch. P.

Be thou faithful unto death - Apocalypse 2:10

O make me a mask - Dylan Thomas

Dédée had called me in the afternoon saying that Johnny wasn't very well, and I'd gone to the hotel right away. Johnny and Dédée have been living in a hotel in the rue Lagrange for a few days now, they have a room on the fourth floor. All I have to do is see the door to the room to realize that Johnny's in worse shape than usual; the window opens onto an almost black courtyard, and at one in the afternoon you have to keep the light on if you want to read the newspaper or see someone else's face. It's not that cold out, but I found Johnny wrapped up in a blanket, and squeezed into a raunchy chair that's shedding yellowed hunks of old burlap all over the place. Dédée's gotten older, and the red dress doesn't suit her at all: it's a dress for working under spotlights; in that hotel room it turns into a repulsive kind of coagulation.

"Faithful old buddy Bruno, regular as bad breath," Johnny said by way of hello, bringing his knees up until his chin was resting on them. Dédée reached me a chair and I pulled out a pack of Gauloises. I'd brought a bottle of rum too, had it in the overcoat pocket, but I didn't want to bring it out until I had some idea of how things were going. I think the lightbulb was the worst irritation, its eye pulled out and hanging suspended from a long cord dirtied by flies. After looking at it once or twice, and putting my hand up to shade my eyes, I asked Dédée if we couldn't put out the damned light and wouldn't

the light from the window be okay. Johnny followed my words and gestures with a large, distracted attention, like a cat who is looking fixedly, but you know it's something else completely; that it is something else. Finally Dédée got up and turned off the light. Under what was left, some mishmash of black and grey, we recognized one another better. Johnny had pulled one of his big hands out from under the blanket and I felt the limber warmth of his skin. Then Dédée said she'd make us some nescafé. I was happy to know that at least they had a tin of nescafé. I always know, whatever the score is, when somebody has a can of nescafé it's not fatal yet; they can still hold out.

"We haven't seen one another for a while," I said to Johnny. "It's been a month at least."

"You got nothin' to do but tell time," he answered. He was in a bad mood. "The first, the two, the three, the twenty-one. You, you put a number on everything. An' that's cool. You wanna know why she's sore? 'Cause I lost the horn. She's right, after all."

"Lost it, but how could you lose it?" I asked, realizing at the same moment that that was just what you couldn't ask Johnny.

"In the metro," Johnny said. "I shoved it under the seat so it'd be safe. It was great to ride that way, knowing I had it good and safe down there between my legs."

"He finally missed it when he was coming up the stairs in the hotel," Dédée said, her voice a little hoarse. "And I had to go running out like a nut to report it to the metro lost-and-found and to the police." By the silence that followed I figured

out that it'd been a waste of time. But Johnny began to laugh like his old self, a deep laugh back of the lips and teeth.

“Some poor devil’s probably trying to get some sound out of it,” he said. “It was one of the worst horns I ever had; you know that Doc Rodriguez played it? Blew all the soul out of it. As an instrument, it wasn’t awful, but Rodriguez could ruin a Stradivarius just by tuning it.”

“And you can’t get ahold of another?”

“That’s what we’re trying to find out,” Dédée said. “It might be Rory Friend has one. The awful thing is that Johnny’s contract ...”

“The contract,” Johnny mimicked. “What’s this with the contract? I gotta play and that’s it, and I haven’t got a horn or any bread to buy one with, and the boys are in the same shape I am.”

This last was not the truth, and the three of us knew it. Nobody would risk lending Johnny an instrument, because he lost it or ruined it right off. He lost Louis Rolling’s sax in Bordeaux, the sax Dédée bought him when he had that contract for a tour in England he broke into three pieces, whacking it against a wall and trampling on it. Nobody knew how many instruments had already been lost, pawned, or smashed up. And on all of them he played like I imagine only a god can play an alto sax, given that they quit using lyres and flutes.

“When do you start, Johnny?”

“I dunno. Today, I think, huh De?”

“No, day after tomorrow.”

“Everybody knows the dates except me,” Johnny grumbled, covering himself up to the ears in his blanket. “I’d’ve sworn it was tonight, and this afternoon we had to go in to rehearse.”

“It amounts to the same thing,” Dédée said. “The thing is that you haven’t got a horn.”

“What do you mean, the same thing? It isn’t the same thing. Day after tomorrow is the day after tomorrow, and tomorrow is much later than today. And today is later than right now, because here we are yakking with our old buddy Bruno, and I’d feel a lot better if I could forget about time and have something hot to drink.”

“I’ll boil some water, hold on for a little.”

“I was not referring to boiling water,” Johnny said. So I pulled out the bottle of rum, and it was as though we’d turned the light on; Johnny opened his mouth wide, astonished, and his teeth shone, until even Dédée had to smile at seeing him, so surprised and happy. Rum and nescafé isn’t really terrible, and all three of us felt a lot better after the second swallow and a cigarette. Then I noticed that Johnny was withdrawing little by little and kept on referring to time, a subject which is a preoccupation of his ever since I’ve known him. I’ve seen very few men as occupied as he is with everything having to do with time. It’s a mania of his, the worst of his manias, of which he has plenty. But he explains and develops it with a charm hard to resist. I remember a rehearsal before a recording session in Cincinnati, long before he came to Paris, in forty-nine or fifty. Johnny was in great shape in those days and I’d gone to the rehearsal just to talk to him and also to Miles Davis. Everybody wanted to

play, they were happy, and well-dressed (this occurs to me maybe by contrast with how Johnny goes around now, dirty and messed up), they were playing for the pleasure of it, without the slightest impatience, and the sound technician was making happy signs from behind his glass window, like a satisfied baboon. And just at that moment when Johnny was like gone in his joy, suddenly he stopped playing and threw a punch at I don't know who and said, "I'm playing this tomorrow," and the boys stopped short, two or three of them went on for a few measures, like a train slowly coming to a halt, and Johnny was hitting himself in the forehead and repeating, "I already played this tomorrow, it's horrible, Miles, I already played this tomorrow," and they couldn't get him out of that, and everything was lousy from then on, Johnny was playing without any spirit and wanted to leave (to shoot up again, the sound technician said, mad as hell), and when I saw him go out, reeling and his face like ashes, I wondered how much longer that business could go on.

"I think I'll call Dr. Bernard," Dédée said, looking at Johnny out of the corner of her eye, he was taking his rum in small sips. "You've got a fever and you're not eating anything."

"Dr. Bernard is a sad-assed idiot," Johnny said, licking his glass. "He's going to give me aspirin and then he'll tell me how very much he digs jazz, for example Ray Noble. Got the idea, Bruno? If I had the horn I'd give him some music that'd send him back down the four flights with his ass bumping on every step."

"It won't do you any harm to take some aspirin in any case," I said, looking out of the corner of my eye at Dédée. "If

you want, I'll telephone when I leave so Dédée won't have to go down. But look, this contract ... If you have to start day after tomorrow, I think something can be done. Also I can try to get a sax from Rory Friend. And at worst ... The whole thing is you have to take it easier, Johnny."

"Not today," Johnny said, looking at the rum bottle. "Tomorrow, when I have the horn. So don't you talk about that now. Bruno, every time I notice that time ... I think the music always helps me understand this business a little better. Well, not understand, because the truth of the matter is, I don't understand anything. The only thing I do is notice that there is something. Like those dreams, I'm not sure, where you begin to figure that everything is going to smash up now, and you're a little afraid just to be ready for it; but at the same time nothing's certain, and maybe it'll flip over like a pancake and all of a sudden, there you are, sleeping with a beautiful chick and everything's cool."

Dédée's washing the cups and glasses in one corner of the room. I noticed they don't even have running water in the place; I see a stand with pink flowers, and a wash-basin which makes me think of an embalmed animal. And Johnny goes on talking with his mouth half stopped up by the bottle, and he looks stuffed too, with his knees up under his chin and his black smooth face which the rum and the fever are beginning to sweat up a little.

"I read some things about all that, Bruno. It's weird, and really awful complicated ... I think the music helps, you know. Not to understand, because the truth is I don't understand anything." He knocks on his head with a closed fist. His head sounds like a coconut.

“Got nothing inside here, Bruno, what they call, nothing. It doesn’t think and don’t understand nothing. I’ve never missed it, tell you the truth. I begin to understand from the eyes down, and the lower it goes the better I understand. But that’s not really understanding, oh, I’m with you there.”

“You’re going to get your fever up,” Dédée muttered from the back of the place.

“Oh, shut up. It’s true, Bruno. I never thought of nothing, only all at once I realize what I thought of, but that’s not funny, right? How’s it funny to realize that you’ve thought of something? Because it’s all the same thing whether you think, or someone else. I am not I, me. I just use what I think, but always afterwards, and that’s what I can’t stand. Oh it’s hard, it’s so hard ... Not even a slug left?”

I’d poured him the last drops of rum just as Dédée came back to turn on the light; you could hardly see in the place. Johnny’s sweating, but keeps wrapped up in the blanket, and from time to time he starts shaking and the chair legs chatter on the floor.

“I remember when I was just a kid, almost as soon as I’d learned to play sax. There was always a helluva fight going on at home, and all they ever talked about was debts and mortgages. You know what a mortgage is? It must be something terrible, because the old lady blew her wig every time the old man mentioned mortgage, and they’d end up in a fistfight. I was thirteen then ... but you already heard all that.”

Damned right I’d heard it; and damned right I’d tried to write it well and truly in my biography of Johnny.

“Because of the way things were at home, time never stopped, dig? From one fistfight to the next, almost not stopping for meals. And to top it all off, religion, aw, you can’t imagine. When the boss got me a sax, you’d have laughed yourself to death if you’d seen it, then I think I noticed the thing right off. Music got me out of time, but that’s only a way of putting it. If you want to know what I think, really, I believe that music put me into time. But then you have to believe that this time had nothing to do with ... well, with us, as they say.”

For some time now I’ve recognized Johnny’s hallucinations, all those that constitute his own life, I listen to him attentively, but without bothering too much about what he’s saying. On the other hand, I was wondering where he’d made a connection in Paris. I’d have to ask Dédée, ignoring her possible complicity. Johnny isn’t going to be able to stand this much longer. Heroin and poverty just don’t get along very well together. I’m thinking of the music being lost, the dozens of sides Johnny would be able to cut, leaving that presence, that astonishing step forward where he had it over any other musician. “I’m playing that tomorrow” suddenly fills me with a very clear sense of it, because Johnny is always blowing tomorrow, and the rest of them are chasing his tail, in this today he just jumps over, effortlessly, with the first notes of his music.

I’m sensitive enough a jazz critic when it comes to understanding my limitations, and I realize that what I’m thinking is on a lower level than where poor Johnny is trying to move forward with his decapitated sentences, his sighs, his impatient angers and his tears. He gives a damn where I think everything ought to go easy, and he’s never come on

smug that his music is much farther out than his contemporaries are playing. It drags me to think that he's at the beginning of his sax-work, and I'm going along and have to stick it out to the end. He's the mouth and I'm the ear, so as not to say that he's the mouth and I'm the ... Every critic, yeah, is the sad-assed end of something that starts as taste, like the pleasure of biting into something and chewing on it. And the mouth moves again, relishing it, Johnny's big tongue sucks back a little string of saliva from the lips. The hands make a little picture in the air.

“Bruno, maybe someday you'll write ... Not for me, dig, what the hell does it matter to me. But it has to be beautiful, I feel it's gotta be beautiful. I was telling you how when I was a kid learning to play, I noticed that time changed. I told that to Jim once and he said that everybody in the world feels the same way and when he gets lost in it ... He said that, when somebody gets lost in it ... Hell no, I don't get lost when I'm playing. Only the place changes. It's like in an elevator, you're in an elevator talking with people, you don't feel anything strange, meanwhile you've passed the first floor, the tenth, the twenty-first, and the city's down there below you, and you're finishing the sentence you began when you stepped into it, and between the first words and the last ones, there're fifty-two floors. I realized that when I started to play I was stepping into an elevator, but the elevator was time, if I can put it that way. Now realize that I haven't forgotten the mortgage or the religion. Like it's the mortgage and the religion are a suit I'm not wearing at the moment; I know that the suit's in the closet, but at that moment you can't tell me that that suit exists. The suit exists when I put it

on, and the mortgage and religion existed when I got finished playing and the old lady came in with her hair, dangling big hunks of hair all over me and complaining I'm busting her ears with that goddamned music."

Dédée had brought another cup of nescafé, but Johnny was looking with misery at his empty glass.

"This time business is complicated, it grabs me. I'm beginning to notice, little by little, that time is not like a bag that keeps filling up. What I mean is, even though the contents change, in the bag there's never more than a certain amount, and that's it. You see my suitcase, Bruno? It holds two suits and two pairs of shoes. Now, imagine that you empty it, okay? And afterwards you're going to put back the two suits and the two pairs of shoes, and then you realize that only one suit and one pair of shoes fit in there. But that's not the best of it. The best is when you realize you can put a whole store full of suits and shoes in there, in that suitcase, hundreds and hundreds of suits, like I get into the music when I'm blowing sometimes. Music, and what I'm thinking about when I ride the metro."

"When you ride the metro."

"Oh yeah, that, now there's the thing," Johnny said, getting crafty. "The metro is a great invention, Bruno. Riding the metro you notice everything that might end up in the suitcase. Maybe I didn't lose the horn in the metro, maybe ..."

He breaks into laughter, coughs, and Dédée looks at him uneasily. But he's making gestures, laughing and coughing at the same time, shivering away under the blanket like a

chimpanzee. His eyes are running and he's drinking the tears, laughing the whole time.

"Don't confuse the two things," he says after a spell. "I lost it and that's it. But the metro was helpful, it made me notice the suitcase bit. Look, this bit of things being elastic is very weird, I feel it everywhere I go. It's all elastic, baby. Things that look solid have an elasticity ..."

He's thinking, concentrating.

"... a sort of delayed stretch," he concludes surprisingly. I make a gesture of admiring approval. Bravo, Johnny. The man who claims he's not capable of thinking. Wow. And now I'm really interested in what he's going to say, and he notices that and looks at me more cunning than ever.

"You think I'll be able to come by another horn so I can play day after tomorrow, Bruno?"

"Sure, but you'll have to take care of it."

"Sure, I'll have to take care of it."

"A month's contract," explains poor Dédée. "Two weeks in Rémy's club, two concerts and the record dates. We could clean up."

"A month's contract," Johnny imitates her with broad gestures. "Rémy's club, two concerts, and the record dates. Be-bata-bop bop bop, chrrr. What I got is a thirst, a thirst, a thirst. And I feel like smoking, like smoking. More'n anything else, I feel like a smoke."

I offer him my pack of Gauloises, though I know perfectly well that he's thinking of pot. It's already dark out, people are beginning to come and go in the hallway, conversations in

Arabic, singing. Dédée's left, probably to buy something to eat for that night. I feel Johnny's hand on my knee.

"She's a good chick, you know? But I've had enough. It's some time now I'm not in love with her, and I can't stand her. She still excites me, she knows how to make love like ..." he brought his forefinger and middle finger together, Italian-fashion. "But I gotta split, go back to New York. Everything else aside, I gotta get back to New York, Bruno."

"What for? There you were worse off than you are here. I'm not talking about work but about your own life. Here, it looks like you have more friends."

"Sure, there's you, and the marquesa, and the guys at the club ... Did you ever make love with the marquesa, Bruno?"

"No."

"Well, it's something that ... But I was talking about the metro, and I don't know, how did we change the subject? The metro is a great invention, Bruno. One day I began to feel something in the metro, then I forgot ... Then it happened again, two or three days later. And finally I realized. It's easy to explain, you dig, but it's easy because it's not the right answer. The right answer simply can't be explained. You have to take the metro and wait until it happens to you, though it seems to me that that only would happen to me. It's a little like that, see. But honestly, you never made love with the marquesa? You have to ask her to get up on that gilt footstool that she has in the corner of her bedroom, next to that pretty lamp and then ... Oh shit, she's back already."

Dédée comes in with a package and looks at Johnny.

“Your fever’s higher. I telephoned the doctor already, he’s going to come at ten. He says you should stay quiet.”

“Okay, okay, but first I’m going to tell Bruno about the subway. The other day I noticed what was happening. I started to think about my old lady, then about Lan and the guys, an’ whup, it was me walking through my old neighborhood again, and I saw the kids’ faces, the ones from then. It wasn’t thinking, it seems to me I told you a lot of times, I never think; I’m like standing on a corner watching what I think go by, but I’m not thinking what I see. You dig? Jim says that we’re all the same, that in general (as they say) one doesn’t think on his own. Let’s say that’s so, the thing is I’d took the metro at Saint-Michel, and right away I began to think about Lan and the guys, and to see the old neighborhood. I’d hardly sat down and I began to think about them. But at the same time I realized that I was in the metro, and I saw that in a minute or two we had got to Odéon, and that people were getting on and off. Then I went on thinking about Lan, and I saw my old lady when she was coming back from doing the shopping, and I began to see them all around, to be with them in a very beautiful way, I hadn’t felt that way in a long time. Memories are always a drag, but this time I liked thinking about the guys and seeing them. If I start telling you everything I saw you’re not going to believe it because I would take a long time doing it. And that would be if I economized on details. For example, just to tell you one thing, I saw Lan in a green suit that she wore when she came to Club 33 where I was playing with Hamp. I was seeing the suit with some ribbons, a loop, a sort of trim down

the side and a collar ... Not at the same time, though, really, I was walking around Lan's suit and looking at it pretty slow. Then I looked at Lan's face and at the boys' faces, and then I remembered Mike who lived in the next room, and how Mike had told me a story about some wild horses in Colorado, once he worked on a ranch, and talked about the balls it took for cowboys to break wild horses ...”

“Johnny,” Dédée said from her far corner.

“Now figure I've told you only a little piece of everything that I was thinking and seeing. How much'll that take, what I'm telling you, this little piece?”

“I don't know, let's say about two minutes.”

“Let's say about two minutes,” Johnny mimicked. “Two minutes and I've told you just a little bitty piece, no more. If I were to tell you everything I saw the boys doing, and how Hamp played Save it, pretty mama, and listened to every note, you dig, every note, and Hamp's not one of them who gets tired, if I told you I heard an endless harangue of my old lady's, she was saying something about cabbages, if I remember, she was asking pardon for my old man and for me, and was saying something about some heads of cabbage ... Okay, if I told you all that in detail, that'd take more than two minutes, huh, Bruno?”

“If you really heard and saw all that, it'd take a good quarter-hour,” I said, laughing to myself.

“It'd take a good quarter-hour, huh, Bruno. Then tell me how it can be that I feel suddenly the metro stop and I come away from my old lady and Lan and all that, and I see that

we're at Saint-Germain-des-Prés, which is just a minute and a half from Odéon."

I never pay too much attention to the things Johnny says, but now, with his way of staring at me, I felt cold.

"Hardly a minute and a half in your time, in her time," Johnny said nastily. "And also the metro's time and my watch's, damn them both. Then how could I have been thinking a quarter of an hour, huh, Bruno? How can you think a quarter of an hour in a minute and a half? That day I swear I hadn't smoked even a roach, not a crumb," he finished like a boy excusing himself. "And then it happened to me again, now it's beginning to happen to me everywhere. But," he added astutely, "I can only notice in the metro, because to ride the metro is like being put in a clock. The stations are minutes, dig, it's that time of yours, now's time; but I know there's another, and I've been thinking, thinking ..."

He covers his face with his hands and shakes. I wish I'd gone already, and I don't know how to get out now without Johnny resenting it, he's terribly touchy with his friends. If he goes on this way he's going to make a mess of himself, at least with Dédée he's not going to talk about things like that.

"Bruno, if I could only live all the time like in those moments, or like when I'm playing and the time changes then too ... Now you know what can happen in a minute and a half ... Then a man, not just me but her and you and all the boys, they could live hundreds of years, if we could find the way we could live a thousand times faster than we're living because of the damned clocks, that mania for minutes and for the day after tomorrow ..."

I smile the best I can, understanding fuzzily that he's right, but what he suspects and the hunch I have about what he suspects is going to be deleted as soon as I'm in the street and've gotten back into my everyday life. At that moment I'm sure that what Johnny's saying doesn't just come from his being half-crazy, that he's escaping from reality; I'm sure that, in the exchange, what he thinks leaves him with a kind of parody which he changes into a hope. Everything Johnny says to me at such moments (and it's been five years now Johnny's been saying things like this to me and to people) you can't just listen and promise yourself to think about it later. You hardly get down into the street, the memory of it barely exists and no Johnny repeating the words, everything turns into a pot-dream, a monotonous gesticulating (because there're others who say things like that, every minute you hear similar testimony) and after the wonder of it's gone you get an irritation, and for me at least it feels as though Johnny's been pulling my leg. But this always happens the next day, not when Johnny's talking to me about it, because then I feel that there's something that I'd like to admit at some point, a light that's looking to be lit, or better yet, as though it were necessary to break something, split it from top to bottom like a log, setting a wedge in and hammering it until the job's done. And Johnny hasn't got the strength to hammer anything in, and me, I don't know where the hammer is to tap in the wedge, which I can't imagine either.

So finally I left the place, but before I left one of those things that have to happen happened—if not that, then something else—and it was when I was saying goodbye to

Dédée and had my back turned to Johnny that I felt something was happening, I saw it in Dédée's eyes and swung around quickly (because maybe I'm a little afraid of Johnny, this angel who's like my brother, this brother who's like my angel) and I saw Johnny had thrown off the blanket around him in one motion, and I saw him sitting in the easy-chair completely nude, his legs pulled up and the knees underneath his chin, shivering but laughing to himself, naked from top to bottom in that grimy chair.

"It's beginning to get warm," Johnny said. "Bruno, look what a pretty scar I got between my ribs."

"Cover yourself," Dédée ordered him, embarrassed and not knowing what to say. We know one another well enough and a naked man is a naked man, that's all, but anyway Dédée was scandalized and I didn't know how to not give the impression that what Johnny was doing had shocked me. And he knew it and laughed uproariously, mouth wide open, obscenely keeping his legs up so that his prick hung down over the edge of the chair like a monkey in the zoo, and the skin of his thighs had some weird blemishes which disgusted me completely. Then Dédée grabbed the blanket and wrapped it tightly around him, while Johnny was laughing and seemed very cheerful. I said goodbye hesitatingly, promised to come back the next day, and Dédée accompanied me to the landing, closing the door so Johnny couldn't hear what she was going to say to me.

"He's been like this since we got back from the Belgian tour. He'd played very well everywhere, and I was so happy."

"I wonder where he got the heroin from," I said, looking her right in the eye.

“Don’t know. He’d been drinking wine and cognac almost constantly. He’s been shooting up too, but less than there ...”

There was Baltimore and New York, three months in Bellevue psychiatric, and a long stretch in Camarillo.

“Did Johnny play really well in Belgium, Dédéé?”

“Yes, Bruno, better than ever, seems to me. The people went off their heads, and the guys in the band told me so, too, a number of times. Then all at once some weird things were happening, like always with Johnny, but luckily never in front of an audience. I thought ... but you see now, he’s worse than ever.”

“Worse than in New York? You didn’t know him those years.”

Dédéé’s not stupid, but no woman likes you to talk about her man before she knew him, aside from the fact that now she has to put up with him and whatever “before” was is just words. I don’t know how to say it to her, I don’t even trust her fully, but finally I decide.

“I guess you’re short of cash.”

“We’ve got that contract beginning day after tomorrow,” said Dédéé.

“You think he’s going to be able to record and do the gig with an audience too?”

“Oh, sure.” Dédéé seemed a bit surprised. “Johnny can play better than ever if Dr. Bernard can get rid of that flu. The problem is the horn.”

“I’ll take care of that. Here, take this, Dédéé. Only ... Maybe better Johnny doesn’t know about it.”

“Bruno ...”

I made a motion with my hand and began to go down the stairway, I'd cut off the predictable words, the hopeless gratitude. Separated from her by four or five steps, made it easier for me to say it to her.

“He can't shoot up before the first concert, not for anything in the world. You can let him smoke a little, but no money for the other thing.”

Dédée didn't answer at all, though I saw how her hands were twisting and twisting the bills as though she were trying to make them disappear. At least I was sure that Dédée wasn't on drugs. If she went along with it, it was only out of love or fear. If Johnny gets down on his knees, like I saw once in Chicago, and begs her with tears ... But that's a chance, like everything else with Johnny, and for the moment they'd have enough money to eat, and for medicines. In the street I turned up the collar on my raincoat because it was beginning to drizzle, and took a breath so deep that my lungs hurt; Paris smelled clean, like fresh bread. Only then I noticed how Johnny's place had smelled, of Johnny's body sweating under the blanket. I went into a café for a shot of cognac and to wash my mouth out, maybe also the memory that insisted and insisted in Johnny's words, his stories, his way of seeing what I didn't see and, at bottom, didn't want to see. I began to think of the day after tomorrow and it was like tranquillity descending, like a bridge stretching beautifully from the zinc counter into the future.

When one is not too sure of anything, the best thing to do is to make obligations for oneself that'll act as pontoons. Two or three days later I thought that I had an obligation to find out if the marquesa was helping Johnny Carter score for heroin, and I went to her studio down in Montparnasse. The marquesa is really a marquesa, she's got mountains of money from the marquis, though it's been some time they've been divorced because of dope and other, similar, reasons. Her friendship with Johnny dates from New York, probably from the year when Johnny got famous overnight simply because someone had given him the chance to get four or five guys together who dug his style, and Johnny could work comfortably for the first time, and what he blew left everyone in a state of shock. This is not the place to be a jazz critic, and anyone who's interested can read my book on Johnny and the new post-war style, but I can say that forty-eight—let's say until fifty—was like an explosion in music, but a cold, silent explosion, an explosion where everything remained in its place and there were no screams or debris flying, but the crust of habit splintered into a million pieces until its defenders (in the bands and among the public) made hipness a question of self-esteem over something which didn't feel to them as it had before. Because after Johnny's step with the alto sax you couldn't keep on listening to earlier musicians and think that they were the end; one must submit and apply that sort of disguised resignation which is called the historical sense, and say that any one of those musicians had been stupendous, and kept on being so, in his moment. Johnny had passed over jazz like a hand turning a page, that was it.

The marquesa had the ears of a greyhound for everything that might be music, she'd always admired Johnny and his friends in the group enormously. I imagine she must have "loaned" them no small amount of dollars in the Club 33 days, when the majority of critics were screaming bloody murder at Johnny's recordings, and were criticizing his jazz by worse-than-rotten criteria. Probably also, in that period, the marquesa began sleeping with Johnny from time to time, and shooting up with him. I saw them together often before recording sessions or during intermissions at concerts, and Johnny seemed enormously happy at the marquesa's side, even though Lan and the kids were waiting for him on another floor or at his house. But Johnny never had the vaguest idea of what it is to wait for anything, he couldn't even imagine that anyone was somewhere waiting for him. Even to his way of dropping Lan, which tells it like it really is with him. I saw the postcard that he sent from Rome after being gone for four months (after climbing onto a plane with two other musicians, Lan knowing nothing about it). The postcard showed Romulus and Remus, which had always been a big joke with Johnny (one of his numbers has that title), said: "Waking alone in a multitude of loves," which is part of a first line of a Dylan Thomas poem, Johnny was reading Dylan all the time then; Johnny's agents in the States agreed to deduct a part of their percentages and give it to Lan, who, for her part, understood quickly enough that it hadn't been such a bad piece of business to have gotten loose from Johnny. Somebody told me that the marquesa had given Lan money too, without Lan knowing where it had come from. Which didn't surprise me at all, because the marquesa was absurdly generous and

understood the world, a little like those omelets she makes at her studio when the boys begin to arrive in droves, and which begins to take on the aspect of a kind of permanent omelet that you throw different things into and you go on cutting out hunks and offering them in place of what's really missing.

I found the marquesa with Marcel Gavoty and Art Boucaya, and they happened just at that moment to be talking about the sides Johnny had recorded the previous afternoon. They fell all over me as if I were the archangel himself arriving, the marquesa necked with me until it was beginning to get tedious, and the boys applauded the performance, bassist and baritone sax. I had to take refuge behind an easy-chair and stand them off as best I could, all because they'd learned that I'd provided the magnificent sax with which Johnny had cut four or five of the best. The marquesa said immediately that Johnny was a dirty rat, and how they'd had a fight (she didn't say over what) and that the dirty rat knew very well that all he had to do was beg her pardon properly and there would have been a check immediately to buy a new horn. Naturally Johnny hadn't wanted to beg her pardon since his return to Paris—the fight appears to have taken place in London, two months back—and so nobody'd known that he lost his goddamned horn in the metro, etcetera. When the marquesa started yakking you wondered if Dizzy's style hadn't glued up her diction, it was such an interminable series of variations in the most unexpected registers, until the end when the marquesa slapped her thighs mightily, opened her mouth wide and began to laugh as if someone were tickling her to death.

Then Art Boucaya took advantage of the break to give me details of the session the day before, which I'd missed on account of my wife having pneumonia.

"Tica can tell you," Art said, pointing to the marquesa who was still squirming about with laughter. "Bruno, you can't imagine what it was like until you hear the discs. If God was anywhere yesterday, I think it was in that damned recording studio where it was as hot as ten thousand devils, by the way. You remember *Willow Tree*, Marcel?"

"Sure, I remember," Marcel said. "The fuck's asking me if I remember. I'm tattooed from head to foot with *Willow Tree*."

Tica brought us highballs and we got ourselves comfortable to chat. Actually we talked very little about the recording session, because any musician knows you can't talk about things like that, but what little they did say restored my hope and I thought maybe my horn would bring Johnny some good luck. Anyway, there was no lack of anecdotes which stomped that hope a bit, for example, Johnny had taken his shoes off between one cutting and the next and walked around the studio barefoot. On the other hand, he'd made up with the marquesa and promised to come to her place to have a drink before the concert tonight.

"Do you know the girl Johnny has now?" Tica wanted to know. I gave the most succinct possible description of the French girl, but Marcel filled it in with all sorts of nuances and allusions which amused the marquesa very much. There was not the slightest reference to drugs, though I'm so uptight that it seemed to me I could smell pot in Tica's studio, besides which Tica laughed in a way I've noted in Johnny at times, and in Art, which gives the teahead away. I wondered

how Johnny would have gotten heroin, though, if he'd had a fight with the marquesa; my confidence in Dédée hit the ground floor, if really I'd ever had any confidence in her. They're all the same, at bottom.

I was a little envious of the equality that brought them closer together, which turned them into accomplices so easily; from my puritanical world—I don't need to admit it, anyone who knows me knows that I'm horrified by vice—I see them as sick angels, irritating in their irresponsibility, but ultimately valuable to the community because of, say, Johnny's records, the marquesa's generosity. But I'm not telling it all and I want to force myself to say it out: I envy them, I envy Johnny, that Johnny on the other side, even though nobody knows exactly what that is, the other side. I envy everything except his anguish, something no one can fail to understand, but even in his pain he's got to have some kind of in to things that's denied me. I envy Johnny and at the same time I get sore as hell watching him destroy himself, misusing his gifts, and the stupid accumulation of nonsense the pressure of his life requires. I think that if Johnny could straighten out his life, not even sacrificing anything, not even heroin, if he could pilot that plane he's been flying blind for the last five years better, maybe he'd end up worse, maybe go crazy altogether, or die, but not without having played it to the depth, what he's looking for in those sad a posteriori monologues, in his retelling of great, fascinating experiences which, however, stop right there, in the middle of the road. And all this I back up with my own cowardice, and maybe basically I want Johnny to wind up all at once like a nova that explodes into a thousand pieces and

turns astronomers into idiots for a whole week, and then one can go off to sleep and tomorrow is another day.

It felt as though Johnny had surmised everything I'd been thinking, because he gave me a big hello when he came in, and almost immediately came over and sat beside me, after kissing the marquesa and whirling her around in the air, and exchanging with Art and her a complicated onomatopoeic ritual which made everybody feel great.

“Bruno,” Johnny said, settling down on the best sofa, “that’s a beautiful piece of equipment, and they tell me I was dragging it up out of my balls yesterday. Tica was crying electric-light bulbs, and I don’t think it was because she owed bread to her dressmaker, huh, Tica?”

I wanted to know more about the session, but Johnny was satisfied with this bit of braggadocio. Almost immediately he turned to Marcel and started coming on about that night’s program and how well both of them looked in their brand-new grey suits in which they were going to appear at the theater. Johnny was really in great shape, and you could see he hadn’t used a needle overmuch in days; he has to take exactly the right amount to put him in the mood to play. And just as I was thinking that, Johnny dropped his hand on my shoulder and leaned over:

“Dédée told me I was very rough with you the other afternoon.”

“Aw, you don’t even remember.”

“Sure. I remember very well. You want my opinion, actually I was terrific. You ought to have been happy I put on that act with you; I don’t do that with anybody, believe me. It

just shows how much I appreciate you. We have to go someplace soon where we can talk over a pile of things. Here ...” He stuck out his lower lip contemptuously, laughed, shrugged his shoulders, it looked like he was dancing on the couch. “Good old Bruno. Dédée told me I acted very bad, honestly.”

“You had the flu. You better now?”

“It wasn’t flu. The doc arrived and right away began telling me how he liked jazz enormously, and that one night I’d have to come to his house and listen to records. Dédée told me that you gave her money.”

“So you could get through all right until you get paid. How do you feel about tonight?”

“Good, shit, I feel like playing, I’d play right now if I had the horn, but Dédée insisted she’d bring it to the theater herself. It’s a great horn, yesterday it felt like I was making love when I was playing it. You should have seen Tica’s face when I finished. Were you jealous, Tica?”

They began to laugh like hell again, and Johnny thought it an opportune moment to race across the studio with great leaps of happiness, and between him and Art they started dancing without the music, raising and lowering their eyebrows to set the beat. It’s impossible to get impatient with either Johnny or Art; it’d be like getting annoyed with the wind for blowing your hair into a mess. Tica, Marcel and I, in low voices, traded our conceptions of what was going to happen that night. Marcel is certain that Johnny’s going to repeat his terrific success of 1951, when he first came to Paris. After yesterday’s job, he’s sure everything is going to

be A-okay. I'd like to feel as confident as he does, but anyway there's nothing I can do except sit in one of the front rows and listen to the concert. At least I have the assurance that Johnny isn't out of it like that night in Baltimore. When I mentioned this to Tica, she grabbed my hand like she was going to fall into the water. Art and Johnny had gone over to the piano, and Art was showing him a new tune, Johnny was moving his head and humming. Both of them in their new grey suits were elegant as hell, although Johnny's shape was spoiled a bit by the fat he'd been laying on these days.

We talked with Tica about that night in Baltimore, when Johnny had his first big crisis. I looked Tica right in the eye as we were talking, because I wanted to be sure she understood what I was talking about, and that she shouldn't give in to him this time. If Johnny managed to drink too much cognac, or smoke some tea, or go off on shit, the concert would flop and everything fall on its ass. Paris isn't a casino in the provinces, and everybody has his eye on Johnny. And while I'm thinking that, I can't help having a bad taste in my mouth, anger, not against Johnny nor the things that happen to him; rather against the people who hang around him, myself, the marquesa and Marcel, for example. Basically we're a bunch of egotists; under the pretext of watching out for Johnny what we're doing is protecting our idea of him, getting ourselves ready for the pleasure Johnny's going to give us, to reflect the brilliance from the statue we've erected among us all and defend it till the last gasp. If Johnny zonked, it would be bad for my book (the translation into English or Italian was coming out any minute), and part of my concern for Johnny was put together from such things. Art

and Marcel needed him to help them earn bread, and the marquesa, well, dig what the marquesa saw in Johnny besides his talent. All this has nothing to do with the other Johnny, and suddenly I realized that maybe that was what Johnny was trying to tell me when he yanked off the blanket and left himself as naked as a worm, Johnny with no horn, Johnny with no money and no clothes, Johnny obsessed by something that his intelligence was not equal to comprehending, but which floats slowly into his music, caresses his skin, perhaps is readying for an unpredictable leap which we will never understand.

And when one thinks things out that way, one really ends up with a bad taste in the mouth, and all the sincerity in the world won't equalize the sudden discovery that next to Johnny Carter one is a piss-poor piece of shit, that now he's come to have a drink of cognac and is looking at me from the sofa with an amused expression. Now it's time for us to go to the Pleyel Hall. That the music at least will save the rest of the night, and fulfill basically one of its worst missions, to lay down a good smokescreen in front of the mirror, to clear us off the map for a couple of hours.

As is natural, I'll write a review of tonight's concert tomorrow for *Jazz*. But now at intermission, with this short-hand scrawl on my knee, I don't feel exactly like talking like a critic, no comparative criticisms. I know very well that, for me, Johnny has ceased being a jazzman and that his musical genius is a façade, something that everyone can manage to understand eventually and admire, but which conceals something else, and that other thing is the only one I ought

to care for, maybe because it's the only thing really important to Johnny himself.

It's easy to say it, while I'm still in Johnny's music. When you cool off ... Why can't I do like him, why can't I beat my head against the wall? Pickily enough, I prefer the words to the reality that I'm trying to describe, I protect myself, shielded by considerations and conjectures that are nothing other than a stupid dialectic. I think I understand why prayer demands instinctively that one fall on one's knees. The change of position is a symbol of the change in the tone of voice, in what the voice is about to articulate, in the diction itself. When I reach the point of specifying the insight into that change, things which seemed to have been arbitrary a second before are filled with a feeling of depth, simplify themselves in an extraordinary manner and at the same time go still deeper. Neither Marcel nor Art noticed yesterday that Johnny was not crazy to take his shoes off at the recording session. At that moment, Johnny had to touch the floor with his own skin, to fasten himself to the earth so that his music was a reaffirmation, not a flight. Because I feel this also in Johnny, he never runs from anything, he doesn't shoot up to get out of it like most junkies, he doesn't blow horn to squat behind a ditch of music, he doesn't spend weeks in psychiatric clinics to feel protected from the pressures he can't put up with. Even his style, the most authentic thing he has, that style which deserves all the absurd names it's ever gotten, and doesn't need any of them, proves that Johnny's art is neither a substitute nor a finished thing. Johnny abandoned the language of *That Old Fashioned Love* more or less current ten years ago, because that violently erotic

language was too passive for him. In his case he preferred desire rather than pleasure and it hung him up, because desire necessitated his advancing, experimenting, denying in advance the easy rushing around of traditional jazz. For that reason, I don't think Johnny was terribly fond of the blues, where masochism and nostalgia ... But I've spoken of all that in my book, showing how the denial of immediate satisfaction led Johnny to elaborate a language which he and other musicians are carrying today to its ultimate possibilities. This jazz cuts across all easy eroticism, all Wagnerian romanticism, so to speak, to settle firmly into what seems to be a very loose level where the music stands in absolute liberty, as when painting got away from the representational, it stayed clear by not being more than painting. But then, being master of a music not designed to facilitate orgasms or nostalgia, of a music which I should like to call metaphysical, Johnny seems to use that to explore himself, to bite into the reality that escapes every day. I see here the ultimate paradox of his style, his aggressive vigor. Incapable of satisfying itself, useful as a continual spur, an infinite construction, the pleasure of which is not in its highest pinnacle but in the exploratory repetitions, in the use of faculties which leave the suddenly human behind without losing humanity. And when Johnny, like tonight, loses himself in the continuous creation of his music, I know best of all that he's not losing himself in anything, nothing escapes him. To go to a date you can't get away from, even though you change the place you're going to meet each time. And as far as what is left behind, can be left, Johnny doesn't know or puts it down supremely. The marquesa, for example, thinks that Johnny's afraid of poverty, without

knowing that the only thing Johnny can be afraid of is maybe not finding the pork chop on the end of the fork when it happens he would like to eat it, or not finding a bed when he's sleepy, or a hundred dollars in his wallet when it seems he ought to be the owner of a hundred dollars. Johnny doesn't move in a world of abstractions like we do; the reason for his music, that incredible music I've listened to tonight, has nothing to do with abstractions. But only he can make the inventory of what he's taken in while he was blowing, and more likely, he's already onto something else, losing that already in a new conjecture or a new doubt. His conquests are like a dream, when he wakes up he forgets them, when the applause brings him back from his spin, that man who goes so far out, living his quarter of an hour in a minute and a half.

It would be like living connected to a lightning rod in the middle of a thunderstorm and expecting that nothing's going to happen. Four or five days later I ran into Art Boucaya at the Dupont in the Latin Quarter, and he had no opportunity to make his expression blank as he gave me the bad news. For the first second I felt a kind of satisfaction which I find no other way of qualifying except to call it spiteful, because I knew perfectly well that the calm could not last long; but then I thought of the consequences and my fondness for Johnny, thinking of them, made my stomach churn; then I downed two cognacs while Art was telling me what had happened. In short, it seems that Delaunay called a recording session to put out a new quintet under Johnny's name, with Art, Marcel Gavoty and a pair of very good sidemen from Paris on piano and drums. The thing was supposed to begin at three in the

afternoon, and they were counting on having the whole day and part of the night for warmup and to cut a number of tunes. And what happened? It started when Johnny arrived at five, Delaunay was boiling already, then Johnny sat down on a chair and said he didn't feel very well and that the only reason he came was not to queer the day's work for the boys, but HE didn't feel up to playing.

“Between Marcel and me, we tried to convince him to lie down for a bit and rest, but he wouldn't do anything but talk about, I don't know, he'd found some fields with urns, and he gave us those goddamned urns for about a quarter of an hour. Finally, he started to haul out piles of leaves that he'd gathered in some park or another and had jammed into his pockets. The floor of the goddamned studio looked like a botanical garden, the studio personnel were tromping around looking as mean as dogs, and all this without laying anything down on the acetate; just imagine the engineer sitting in his booth for three hours smoking, and in Paris that's a helluva lot for an engineer.

“Finally Marcel convinced Johnny it'd be better to try something, the two of them started to play and we moved in after a bit, better that than sitting around getting tired of doing nothing. After a while I noticed that Johnny was having a kind of contraction in his right arm, and when he began to blow it was terrible to watch, I'm not shitting you. His face all grey, you dig, and every once in a while a chill'd shake him; and I didn't catch that moment when it got him on the floor. After a few tries he lets loose with a yell, looks at each of us one by one, slowly, and asks us what the hell we're waiting for, begin *Amorous*. You know, that tune of Alamo's. Well,

Delaunay signals the engineer, we all start out the best possible, and Johnny opens his legs, stands up as though he were going to sleep in a boat rocking away, and lets loose with a sound I swear I'd never heard before or since. That goes on for three minutes, then all of a sudden he lets go with a blast, could of split the fuckin' celestial harmonies, and he goes off into one corner leaving the rest of us blowing away in the middle of the take, which we finish up best we can.

“But now the worst part, when we get finished, the first thing Johnny says was that it was all awful, that it came out like a piece of shit, and that the recording was not worth a damn. Naturally, neither we nor Delaunay paid any attention because, in spite of the defects, Johnny's solo was worth any thousand of what you can hear today. Something all by itself, I can't explain it to you ... You'll hear it, I guess. I don't imagine that either Delaunay or the technicians thought of wiping out the acetate. But Johnny insisted like a nut, he was gonna break the glass in the control booth if they didn't show him that the acetate had been wiped. Finally the engineer showed him something or other and convinced him, and then Johnny suggested we record *Streptomycin*, which came out much better, and at the same time much worse, I mean it's clean and full, but still it hasn't got that incredible thing Johnny blew on *Amorous*.”

Breathing hard, Art had finished his beer and looked at me, very depressed. I asked him what Johnny had done after that, and he told me that after boring them all to tears with his stories about the leaves and the fields full of urns, he had refused to play any more and went stumbling out of the

studio. Marcel had taken his horn away from him so that he couldn't lose it or stomp on it again, and between him and one of the French sidemen, they'd gotten him back to the hotel.

What else was there to do except to go see him immediately? But what the hell, I left it for the next day. And the next morning I found Johnny in the Police Notices in Figaro, because Johnny'd set fire to the hotel room during the night and had escaped running naked down the halls. Both he and Dédée had gotten out unhurt, but Johnny's in the hospital under observation. I showed the news report to my wife so as to cheer her up in her convalescence, and dashed off immediately to the hospital where my press pass got me exactly nowhere. The most I managed to find out was that Johnny was delirious and had enough junk in him to drive ten people out of their heads. Poor Dédée had not been able to resist him, or to convince him to not shoot up; all Johnny's women ended up his accomplices, and I'm sure as can be that the marquesa was the one who got the junk for him.

Finally I ended up by going immediately to Delaunay's place to ask if I could hear *Amorous* as soon as possible. To see if *Amorous* would turn out to be Johnny's last will and testament. In which case, my professional duty would be ...

But not yet, no. Five days later Dédée's phoned me saying that Johnny is much better and that he wants to see me. I'd rather not reproach her, first of all because I imagine it'd be a waste of time, and secondly because poor Dédée's voice sounds as though it were coming out of a cracked

teakettle. I promised to go immediately, and said that perhaps when Johnny was better, we could organize a tour through the provinces, a lot of cities. I hung up when Dédée started crying into the phone.

Johnny's sitting up in bed, in a semi-private with two other patients who are sleeping, luckily. Before I can say anything to him, he's grabbed my head with both paws and kissed me on the forehead and cheeks numerous times. He's terribly emaciated, although he tells me that he's got a good appetite and that they give him plenty to eat. For the moment the thing that worries him most is whether the boys are bad-mouthing him, if his crisis has hurt anyone, things like that. It's almost useless to answer him, he knows well enough that the concerts have been canceled and that that hurt Art and Marcel and the others; but he asks me like he expected that something good had happened meanwhile, anything that would put things together again. And at the same time he isn't playing me a trick, because back of everything else is his supreme indifference; Johnny doesn't give a good goddamn if everything goes to hell, and I know him too well to pay any attention to his coming on.

"What do you want me to tell you, Johnny? Things could have worked out better, except you have this talent for fucking up."

"Okay, I don't deny that," Johnny said tiredly. "And all because of the urns."

I remembered Art's account of it and stood there looking at him.

“Fields filled with urns, Bruno. Piles of invisible urns buried in an immense field. I was wandering around there and once in a while I’d stumble across something. You’d say that I’d dreamt it, huh? It was just like that, believe it: every once in a while I’d stumble across an urn, until I realized that the whole field was full of urns, that there were miles and miles of them, and there were a dead man’s ashes inside every urn. Then I remember I got down on my knees and began to dig up the ground with my nails until one of the urns appeared. Then I remember thinking, ‘This one’s going to be empty because it’s the one for me.’ But no, it was filled with a grey dust like I knew all the others were I hadn’t seen yet. Then ... then that was when we began to record *Amorous*, if I remember.”

I glanced discreetly at the temperature chart. According to it, reasonably normal. A young intern showed up in the doorway, acknowledging me with a nod, and made a gesture indicating food to Johnny, an almost sporty gesture, a good kid, etc. But when Johnny didn’t answer him, when the intern had left, not even entering the door, I saw Johnny’s hands were clenched tight.

“They’ll never understand,” he said. “They’re like a monkey with a feather duster, like the chicks in the Kansas City Conservatory who think they’re playing Chopin, nothing less. Bruno, in Camarillo they put me in a room with another three people, and in the morning an intern came in all washed up and all rosy, he looked so good. He looked like the son of Tampax out of Kleenex, you believe it. A kind of specimen, an immense idiot that sat down on the edge of the bed and was going to cheer me up, I mean that was when I

wanted to kill myself, and I hadn't thought of Lan or of anyone, I mean, forget it. And the worst was, the poor cat was offended because I wasn't paying attention to him. He seemed to think I should sit up in bed en-goddamn-chanted with his white skin and beautifully combed hair and his nails all trimmed, and that way I'd get better like the poor bastards who come to Lourdes and throw away the crutches and leave, really jumping ...

“Bruno, this cat and all the cats at Camarillo were convinced. You know what I'm saying? What of? I swear I don't know, but they were convinced. Of what they were, I imagine, of what they were worth, of their having a diploma. No, it's not that. Some were modest and didn't think they were infallible. But even the most humble were sure. That made me jumpy, Bruno, *that they felt sure of themselves*. Sure of what, tell me what now, when a poor devil like me with more plagues than the devil under his skin had enough awareness to feel that everything was like a jelly, that everything was very shaky everywhere, you only had to concentrate a little, feel a little, be quiet for a little bit, to find the holes. In the door, in the bed: holes. In the hand, in the newspaper, in time, in the air: everything full of holes, everything spongy, like a colander straining itself ... But they were American science, Bruno, dig? White coats were protecting them from the holes; didn't see anything, they accepted what had been seen by others, they imagined that they were living. And naturally they couldn't see the holes, and they were very sure of themselves, completely convinced of their prescriptions, their syringes, their goddamned psychoanalysis, their don't smoke and don't

drink ... Ah, the beautiful day when I was able to move my ass out of that place, get on the train, look out the window how everything was moving backward, I don't know, have you seen how the landscape breaks up when you see it moving away from you ...”

We're smoking Gauloises. They've given Johnny permission to drink a little cognac and smoke eight or ten cigarettes a day. But you can see it's not him, just his body that's smoking, and he's somewhere else almost as if he'd refuse to climb out of the mine shaft. I'm wondering what he's seen, what he's felt these last few days. I don't want to get him excited, if he could speak for himself ... We smoke silently, and occasionally he moves his arm and runs his fingers over my face as though he were identifying me. Then he plays with his wristwatch, he looks at it tenderly.

“What happens to them is that they get to think of themselves as wise,” he said sharply. “They think it's wisdom because they've piled up a lot of books and eaten them. It makes me laugh, because really they're good kids and are really convinced that what they study and what they do are really very difficult and profound things. In the circus, Bruno, it's all the same, and between us it's the same. People figure that some things are the height of difficulty, and so they applaud trapeze artists, or me. I don't know what they're thinking about, do they imagine that you break yourself up to play well, or that the trapeze artist sprains tendons every time he takes a leap? The really difficult things are something else entirely, everything that people think they can do anytime. To look, for instance, or to understand a dog or a cat. Those are the difficult things, the big difficulties. Last

night I happened to look in this little mirror, and I swear, it was so terribly difficult I almost threw myself out of bed. Imagine that you're looking at yourself; that alone is enough to freeze you up for half an hour. In reality, this guy's not me, the first second I felt very clearly that he wasn't me. I took it by surprise, obliquely, and I knew it wasn't me. I felt that, and when something like that's felt ... But it's like at Atlantic City, on top of one wave the second one falls on you, and then another ... You've hardly felt and already another one comes, the words come ... No, not words, but what's in the words, a kind of glue, that slime. And the slime comes and covers you and convinces you that that's you in the mirror. Sure, but not to realize it. But sure, I am, with my hair, this scar. And people don't realize that the only thing that they accept is the slime, and that's why they think it's easy to look in a mirror. Or cut a hunk of bread with a knife. Have you ever cut a hunk of bread with a knife?"

"I'm in the habit of it," I said, amused.

"And you've stayed all that calm. Not me, Bruno, I can't. One night I shot all of it so far that the knife almost knocked the eye out of a Japanese at the next table. That was in Los Angeles, and there was such a fantastic brawl ... When I explained to them, they dumped me. And it seemed to me so simple to explain it all to them. At that time I knew Dr. Christie. A terrific guy, and you know how I am about doctors ..."

One hand waves through the air, touching it on all sides, laying it down as though marking its time. He smiles. I have the feeling that he's alone, completely alone. I feel hollow beside him. If it had occurred to Johnny to pass his hand

through me I would have cut like butter, like smoke. Maybe that's why once in a while he grazes my face with his fingers, cautiously.

"You have the loaf of bread there, on the tablecloth," Johnny says looking down into the air. "It's solid, no denying it, toasted a lovely color, smells beautiful. Something that's not me, something apart, outside me. But if I touch it, if I move my fingers and grasp it, then something changes, don't you think so? The bread is outside me, but I touch it with my fingers, I feel it, I feel that that's the world, but if I can touch it and feel it, then you can't really say it's something else, or do you think you can say it's something else?"

"Oh baby, for thousands of years now, whole armies of greybeards have been beating their heads to solve that problem."

"There's some day in the bread," murmured Johnny, covering his face. "And I dared to touch it, to cut it in two, to put some in my mouth. Nothing happened, I know; that's what's terrible. Do you realize it's terrible that nothing happened? You cut the bread, you stick the knife into it, and everything goes on as before. I don't understand, Bruno."

Johnny's face was beginning to upset me, his excitement. Every time, it was getting more difficult to get him to talk about jazz, about his memories, his plans, to drag him back to reality. (To reality: I barely get that written down and it disgusts me. Johnny's right, reality can't be this way, it's impossible to be a jazz critic if there's any reality, because then someone's pulling your leg. But at the same time, as for Johnny, you can't go on buying it out of his bag or we'll all end up crazy.)

Then he fell asleep, or at least he's closed his eyes and is pretending to be asleep. Again I realize how difficult it is to tell where Johnny is from what he's doing. If he's asleep, if he's pretending to sleep, if he thinks he's asleep. One is much further away from Johnny than from any other friend. No one can be more vulgar, more common, more strung out by the circumstances of a miserable life; apparently accessible on all sides. Apparently, he's no exception. Anyone can be like Johnny if he just resigns himself to being a poor devil, sick, hung up on drugs, and without will power—and full of poetry and talent. Apparently. I, who've gone through life admiring geniuses, the Picassos, the Einsteins, the whole blessed list anyone could make up in a minute (and Gandhi, and Chaplin, and Stravinsky), like everyone else, I tend to think that these exceptions walk in the clouds somewhere, and there's no point in being surprised at anything they do. They're different, there's no other trip to take. On the other hand, the difference with Johnny is secret, irritating by its mystery, because there's no explanation for it. Johnny's no genius, he didn't discover anything, he plays jazz like several thousand other black and white men, though he's better than any of them, and you have to recognize that that depends somewhat on public taste, on the styles, in short, the times. Panassié, for example, has decided that Johnny is outright bad, and although we believe that if anyone's outright bad it's Panassié, in any case there's an area open to controversy. All this goes to prove is that Johnny is not from some other world, but the moment I think that, then I wonder if precisely so there is not in Johnny something of another world (he'd be the first to deny it). Likely he'd laugh his ass off if you told

him so. I know fairly well what he thinks, which of these things he lives. I say: which of these things he lives, because Johnny ... But I'm not going that far, what I would like to explain to myself is the distance between Johnny and ourselves that has no easy answer, is not based in explainable differences. And it seems to me that he's the first to pay for the consequences of that, that it affects him as much as it does us. I really feel like saying straight off that Johnny is some kind of angel come among men, until some elementary honesty forces me to swallow the sentence, turn it around nicely and realize that maybe what is really happening is that Johnny is a man among angels, one reality among the unrealities that are the rest of us. Maybe that's why Johnny touches my face with his fingers and makes me feel so unhappy, so transparent, so damned small, in spite of my good health, my house, my wife, my prestige. My prestige above all. Above all, my prestige.

But it turns out the same old way, I leave the hospital and hardly do I hit the street, check the time, remember what all I have to do, the omelet turns smoothly in the air and we're right side up again. Poor Johnny, he's so far out of it. (That's the way it is, the way it is. It's easier for me to believe that that's the way it really is, now I'm in the café and the visit to the hospital was two hours ago, with everything that I wrote up there forcing me, like a condemned prisoner, to be at least a little decent with my own self.)

Luckily, the business about the fire got fixed up okay, or it seemed reasonable to imagine that the marquesa did her best to see that the fire business would be fixed up okay.

Dédée and Art Boucaya came looking for me at the paper, and the three of us went over to Vix to listen to the already famous—still secret—recording of *Amorous*. Dédée told me, not much caring to, in the taxi, how the marquesa had gotten Johnny out of the trouble over the fire, that anyway there was nothing worse than a scorched mattress and a terrible scare thrown into all the Algerians living in the hotel in the rue Lagrange. The fine (already paid), another hotel (already arranged for by Tica), and Johnny is convalescing in an enormous bed, very pretty, drinking milk out of a milk can and reading *Paris Match* and *The New Yorker*, once in a while changing off to his famous (and scroungy) pocket notebook with Dylan Thomas poems and penciled notations all through it.

After all this news and a cognac in the corner café, we settled down in the audition room to listen to *Amorous* and *Streptomycin*. Art had asked them to put out the lights, and lay down on the floor to hear better. And then Johnny came in and his music moved over our faces, he came in there even though he was back in the hotel propped up in bed, and scuttled us with his music for a quarter of an hour. I understand why the idea that they were going to release *Amorous* infuriated him, anyone could hear its deficiencies, the breathing perfectly audible at the ends of the phrase, and especially the final savage drop, that short dull note which sounded to me like a heart being broken, a knife biting into the bread (and he was speaking about bread a few days back). But on the other hand, and it would escape Johnny, there was what seemed to us a terrible beauty, the anxiety looking for an outlet in an improvisation full of flights in all

directions, of interrogation, of desperate gestures. Johnny can't understand (because what for him is a calamity, for us looks like a road, at least a road-sign, a direction) that *Amorous* is going to stand as one of jazz's great moments. The artist inside him is going to blow his stack every time he hears this mockery of his desire, of everything that he'd wanted to say while he was fighting, the saliva running out of his mouth along with the music, more than ever alone up against that he was pursuing, against what was trying to escape him while he was chasing it. That hard. Curious, it had been indispensable to listen to this, even though already everything was converging into this, this solo in *Amorous*, so that I realized that Johnny was no victim, not persecuted as everyone thought, as I'd even insisted upon in my biography of him (the English edition has just appeared and is bound to sell like Coca-Cola). I know now that's not the way it is, that Johnny pursues and is not pursued, that all the things happening in his life are the hunter's disasters, not the accidents of the harassed animal. No one can know what Johnny's after, but that's how it is, it's there, in *Amorous*, in the junk, in his absurd conversations on any subject, in his breakdowns, in the Dylan Thomas notebook, in the whole of the poor sonofabitch that Johnny is, which makes him larger than life, and changes him into a living weirdo, into a hunter with no arms and legs, into a rabbit running past a sleeping tiger's nose. And I find it absolutely necessary to say that, at bottom, *Amorous* made me want to go vomit, as if that might free me of him, of everything in him that was going up against me and against everybody, that shapeless black mass without feet or hands, that crazy chimp that puts his fingers on my face and looks at me tenderly.

Art and Dédée don't see (I think they don't want to see) more than the formal loveliness of *Amorous*. Dédée even liked *Streptomycin* better, where Johnny improvises with his usual ease and freedom, which the audience understands perfectly well and which to me sounds more like Johnny's distracted, he just lets the music run itself out, that he's on the other side. When we got into the street, I asked Dédée what their plans were, and she said that as soon as Johnny was out of the hotel (for the moment the police had him under surveillance), a new record company wanted to have him record anything he wanted to and it'd pay him very well. Art backed her up, said Johnny was full of terrific ideas, and that he and Marcel Gavoty were going to do this new bit with Johnny, though after the past few weeks you could see that Art wasn't banking on it, and privately I knew that he'd been having conversations with his agent about going back to New York as soon as possible. Something I more than understood, poor guy.

"Tica's doing very well," Dédée said bitterly. "Of course, it's easy for her. She always arrives at the last minute and all she has to do is open her handbag and it's all fixed up. On the other hand, I ..."

Art and I looked at one another. What in hell could we say? Women spend their whole lives circling around Johnny and people like Johnny. It's not weird, it's not necessary to be a woman to feel attracted to Johnny. What's hard is to circle about him and not lose your distance, like a good satellite, like a good critic. Art wasn't in Baltimore at that time, but I remember from the times I knew Johnny when he was living with Lan and the kids. To look at Lan really hurt.

But after dealing with Johnny for a while, after accepting little by little his music's influence, his dragged-out terrors, his inconceivable explanations of things that had never happened, his sudden fits of tenderness, then one understood why Lan wore that face and how it was impossible that she live with Johnny and have any other face at all. Tica's something else, she gets out from under by being promiscuous, by living the dolce vita, and besides she's got the dollar bill by the short hairs, and that's a better scene than owning a machine gun, at least if you believe what Art Boucaya says when he gets pissed off at Tica or when he's got a hangover.

"Come as soon as you can," Dédée said. "He'd like to talk with you."

I would have liked to lecture the hell out of him about the first (the cause of the fire, in which he was most certainly involved), but it would have been almost as hopeless to try to convince Johnny that he should become a useful citizen. For the moment everything's going well (it makes me uneasy) and it's strange that whenever everything goes well for Johnny, I feel immensely content. I'm not so innocent as to think this is merely a friendly reaction. It's more like a truce, a breather. I don't need to look for explanations when I can feel it as clearly as the nose on my face. It makes me sore to be the only person who feels this, who is hung with it the whole time. It makes me sore that Art Boucaya, Tica or Dédée don't realize that every time Johnny gets hurt, goes to jail, wants to kill himself, sets a mattress on fire or runs naked down the corridors of a hotel, he's paying off something for them, he's killing himself for them. Without

knowing it, and not like he was making great speeches from the gallows or writing books denouncing the evils of mankind or playing the piano with the air of someone washing away the sins of the world. Without knowing it, poor saxophonist, as ridiculous as that word is, however little a thing it is, just one among so many other poor saxophonists.

What's terrible is if I go on like that, I'm going to end up writing more about myself than about Johnny. I'm beginning to compare myself to a preacher and that doesn't give me too big a laugh, I'm telling you. By the time I got home I was thinking cynically enough to restore my confidence, that in my book on Johnny I mention the pathological side of his personality only in passing and very discreetly. It didn't seem necessary to explain to people that Johnny thinks he's walking through fields full of urns, or that pictures move when he looks at them; junk-dreams, finally, which stop with the cure. But one could say that Johnny leaves these phantoms with me in pawn, lays them on me like putting a number of handkerchiefs in a pocket until the time comes to take them back. And I think I'm the only one who can stand them, who lives with them and is scared shitless of them; and nobody knows this, not even Johnny. One can't admit things like that to Johnny, as one might confess them to a really great man, a master before whom we humiliate ourselves so as to obtain some advice in exchange. What is this world I have to cart around like a burden? What kind of preacher am I? There's not the slightest bit of greatness in Johnny, I've known that since I've known him, since I began to admire him. And for a while now this hasn't surprised me, although at the beginning the lack of greatness upset me, perhaps

because it's one quality one is not likely to apply to the first comer, and especially to jazzmen. I don't know why (I don't know why) I believed at one time that Johnny had a kind of greatness which he contradicts day after day (or which we contradict, it's not the same thing really; because, let's be honest, there is in Johnny the phantom of another who could be, and this other Johnny is very great indeed; one's attention is drawn to the phantom by the lack of that quality which nevertheless he evokes and contains negatively).

I say this because the tries Johnny has made to change his life, from his unsuccessful suicide to using junk, are ones you finally expect from someone with as little greatness as he. I think I admire him all the more for that, because he really is the chimpanzee who wants to learn to read, a poor guy who looks at all the walls around him, can't convince himself, and starts all over again.

Ah, but what if one day the chimp does begin to read, what a crack in the dam, what a commotion, every man for himself, head for the hills, and I first of all. It's terrible to see a man lacking all greatness beat his head against the wall that way. He is the critic of us all with his bones cracking, he tears us to shreds with the opening notes of his music. (Martyrs, heroes, fine, right: one is certain with them. But Johnny!)

Sequences. I don't know how better to say it, it's like an idea of what abruptly brings about terrible or idiotic sequences in a man's life, without his knowing what law outside the categories labeled "law" decides that a certain telephone call is going to be followed immediately by the

arrival of one's sister who lives in the Auvergne, or that the milk is going to be upset into the fire, or that from a balcony we're going to see a boy fall under an automobile. As on football teams or boards of directors, it appears that destiny always appoints a few substitutes when those named to the positions fall out as if by themselves. And so it's this morning, when I'm still happy knowing that things are going better and more cheerfully with Johnny Carter, there's an urgent telephone call for me at the paper, and it's Tica calling, and the news is that Bee, Johnny and Lan's youngest daughter, has just died in Chicago, and that naturally Johnny's off his head and it would be good of me to drop by and give his friends a hand.

I was back climbing the hotel stairs—and there have been a lot of them during my friendship with Johnny—to find Tica drinking tea, Dédée soaking a towel, and Art, Delaunay, and Pepe Ramírez talking in low voices about the latest news of Lester Young, Johnny very quiet on the bed, a towel on his forehead, and wearing a perfectly tranquil and almost disdainful air. I immediately put my sympathetic face back into my pocket, restricting myself to squeezing Johnny's hand very hard, lighting a cigarette, and waiting.

“Bruno, I hurt here,” Johnny said after a while, touching his chest in the conventional location. “Bruno, she was like a small white stone in my hand. I'm nothing but a pale horse with granulated eyelids whose eyes'll run forever.”

All of this said solemnly, almost recited off, and Tica looking at Art, and both of them making gestures of tender forbearance, taking advantage of the fact that Johnny has his face covered with the towel and can't see them.

Personally, I dislike cheap sentimentality and its whole vocabulary, but everything that Johnny had just said, aside from the impression that I'd read it somewhere, felt to me like a mask that he'd put on to speak through, that empty, that useless. Dédée had come over with another towel to replace the one plastered on there, and in the interval I caught a glimpse of Johnny's face uncovered and I saw an ashy greyness, the mouth twisted, and the eyes shut so tight they made wrinkles on his forehead. As always with Johnny, things had happened in a way other than what one had expected, and Pepe Ramírez who doesn't know him very well is still flipped out and I think from the scandal, because after a time Johnny sat up in bed and started slowly, chewing every word, and then blew it out like a trumpet solo, insulting everyone connected with recording *Amorous*, without looking at anyone but nailing us all down like bugs in a box with just the incredible obscenity of his words, and so for two full minutes he continued cursing everyone on *Amorous*, starting with Art and Delaunay, passing over me (but I ...) and ending with Dédée, Christ omnipotent and the whore who without exception gave birth to us all. And this was profoundly, this and the small white stone, the funeral oration for Bee, dead from pneumonia in Chicago.

Two empty weeks will pass; piles of work, journalism, magazine articles, visits here and there—a good résumé of a critic's life, a man who only lives on borrowed time, borrowed everything, on novelties for the news-hungry and decisions not of one's making. I'm talking about what happened one night Tica, Baby Lennox and I were together in the Café de

Flore humming *Out of Nowhere* very contentedly and talking about a piano solo of Bud Powell's which sounded particularly good to all three of us, especially to Baby Lennox who, on top of being otherwise spectacular, had done herself up à la Saint-Germain-des-Prés, and you should have seen how great it looked on her. Baby will see Johnny show up with the rapturous admiration of her twenty years, and Johnny look at her without seeing her and continue wide of us and sit alone at another table, dead drunk or asleep. I'll feel Tica's hand on my knee.

"You see, he started shoving needles in his arm again last night. Or this afternoon. Damn that woman ..."

I answered grudgingly that Dédée was as guilty as anyone else, starting with her, she'd turned on with Johnny dozens of times and would continue to do so whenever she goddamn well felt like it. I'd feel an overwhelming impulse to go out and be by myself, as always when it's impossible to get close to Johnny, to be with him and beside him. I'll watch him making designs on the table with his finger, sit staring at the waiter who's asking him what he would like to drink, and finally Johnny'll draw a sort of arrow in the air and hold it up with both hands as though it weighed a ton, and people at other tables would begin to be discreetly amused, which is the normal reaction in the Flore. Then Tica will say, "Shit," and go over to Johnny's table, and after placing an order with the waiter, she'll begin to talk into Johnny's ear. Not to mention that Baby will hasten to confide in me her dearest hopes, but then I'll tell her vaguely that she has to leave Johnny alone and that nice girls are supposed to be in bed early, and if possible with a jazz critic. Baby will laugh

amiably, her hand stroking my hair, and then we'll sit quietly and watch the chick go by who wears the white-leaded cape up over her face and who has green eyeshadow and green lipstick even. Baby will say it really doesn't look so bad on her, and I'll ask her to sing me very quietly one of those blues that have already made her famous in London and Stockholm. And then we'll go back to *Out of Nowhere*, which is following us around tonight like a dog which would also be the chick in the cape and green eyes.

Two of the guys from Johnny's new quintet will also show up, and I'll take advantage of the moment to ask how the gig went tonight; that way I'll find out that Johnny was barely able to play anything, but that what he had been able to play was worth the collected ideas and works of a John Lewis, assuming that the last-named could manage any idea whatsoever, like one of the boys said, the only one he having always close at hand being to push in enough notes to plug the hole, which is not the same thing. Meanwhile I'll wonder how much of this is Johnny going to be able to put up with, not to mention the audience that believes in Johnny. The boys will not sit down and have a beer, Baby and I'll be sitting there alone again, and I'll end up by answering her questions and explain to Baby, who is really worthy of her nickname, why Johnny is so sick and washed up, why the guys in the quintet are getting more fed up every day, why one day the whole shebang is going to blow up, in one of those scenes that had already blown up San Francisco, Baltimore and New York half-a-dozen times.

Other musicians who work in the quarter'll come in, and some'll go to Johnny's table to say hello to him, but he'll look at them from far off like some idiot with wet mild eyes, his mouth unable to keep back the saliva glistening off his lips. It will be interesting to watch the double maneuvers of Tica and Baby, Tica having recourse to her domination of men to keep them away from Johnny, turning them off with a quick explanation and a smile, Baby whispering her admiration of Johnny in my ear and how good it would be to get him off to a sanitorium for a cure, and all because she's jealous and would like to sleep with Johnny tonight even, something impossible furthermore as anyone can see and which pleases me considerably. For ever since I've known her, I've been thinking of how nice it would be to caress, to run my hand over Baby's thighs, and I'll be a step away from suggesting that we leave and have a drink someplace quieter (she won't care to, and at bottom, neither will I, because that other table will hold us there, attached and unhappy) until suddenly, no notice of what's coming, we'll see Johnny get up slowly, looking at us, recognizing us, coming toward us—I should say towards me, Baby doesn't count—and reaching the table he'll bend over a little naturally as if he were about to take a fried potato off the plate, and we'll see him go to his knees just in front of me, with all naturalness he'll get down on his knees in front of me and look me in the eye, and I'll see that he's crying and'll know without any say-so that Johnny is crying for little Bee.

My reaction is that human, I wanted to get Johnny up, keep him from making an ass of himself, and finally I make myself the ass, because there's absolutely nothing more

ridiculous than a man trying to move another who is very well off where he is and comfortable and feels perfectly natural in that position, he likes it down there, so that the customers at the Flore, who never get upset over trifles, looked at me in a rather unfriendly fashion, none of them knowing, however, that the Negro on his knees there is Johnny Carter, they all look at me as if they were looking at someone climbing up on the altar to tug Christ down from his cross. Johnny was the first to reproach me, just weeping silently he raised his eyes and looked at me, and between that and the evident disapproval of the customers I was left with the sole option of sitting down again in front of Johnny, feeling worse than he did, wanting to be anywhere else in the world but in that chair face to face with Johnny on his knees.

The rest hadn't been so bad, though it's hard to tell how many centuries passed with no one moving, with the tears coursing down Johnny's face, with his eyes fixed on mine continuously, meanwhile I was trying to offer him a cigarette, to light one for myself, to make an understanding gesture toward Baby who, it seemed to me, was on the point of racing out or of breaking into tears herself. As usual, it was Tica who settled the problem, sitting herself down at our table in all her tranquillity, drawing a chair over next to Johnny and putting a hand on his shoulder, not pushing it, until finally Johnny rose a little and changed from that horror into the conventional attitude of a friend sitting down with us, it was a matter only of raising his knees a few centimeters and allowing the honorable comfort of a chair to be edged between his buttocks and the floor (I almost said "and the cross," really this is getting contagious). People had gotten

tired of looking at Johnny, he'd gotten tired of crying, and we of sitting around like dogs. I suddenly understood the loving attitude some painters have for chairs, any one of the chairs in the Flore suddenly seemed to me a miraculous object, a flower, a perfume, the perfect instrument of order and uprightness for men in their city.

Johnny pulled out a handkerchief, made his apologies without undue stress, and Tica had a large coffee brought and gave it to him to drink. Baby was marvelous, all at once dropping her stupidity when it came to Johnny, she began to hum *Mamie's Blues* without giving the impression that she was doing it on purpose, and Johnny looked at her and smiled, and it felt to me that Tica and I at the same time thought that Bee's image was fading slowly at the back of Johnny's eyes, and that once again Johnny was willing to return to us for a spell, keep us company until the next flight. As usual, the moment of feeling like a dog had hardly passed, when my superiority to Johnny allowed me to be indulgent, talking a little with everyone without getting into areas rather too personal (it would have been horrible to see Johnny slip off the chair back onto his ...), and luckily Tica and Baby were both acting like angels and the people at the Flore had been going and coming for at least the length of an hour, being replaced, until the customers at one in the morning didn't even realize that something had just happened, although really it hadn't been a big scene if you think of it rightly. Baby was the first to leave (Baby is a chick full of application, she'll be rehearsing with Fred Callender at nine in the morning for a recording session in the afternoon) and Tica had downed her third cognac and offered to take us

home. When Johnny said no, he'd rather stay and bat the breeze with me, Tica thought that was fine and left, not without paying the rounds for us all, as befits a marquesa. And Johnny and I ordered a glass of chartreuse apiece, among friends such weaknesses are forgiven, and we began to walk down Saint-Germain-des-Prés because Johnny had insisted that he could walk fine and I'm not the kind of guy to let a friend drop under such circumstances.

We go down the rue de l'Abbaye as far as the place Furstenberg, which reminds Johnny dangerously of a play-theater which his godfather seems to have given him when he was eight years old. I try to head for the rue Jacob afraid that his memories will get him back onto Bee, but you could say that Johnny had closed that chapter for what was left of the night. He's walking along peacefully, not staggering (at other times I've seen him stumble in the street, and not from being drunk; something in his reflexes that doesn't function) and the night's heat and the silence of the streets makes us both feel good. We're smoking Gauloises, we drift down toward the river, and opposite one of those galvanized iron coffins the book-sellers use as stands along the quai de Conti, some memory or another or maybe a student whistling reminds us of a Vivaldi theme, humming it, then the two of us begin to sing it with a great deal of feeling and enthusiasm, and Johnny says that if he had the horn there he'd spend the night playing Vivaldi, I find the suggestion exaggerated.

"Well, okay, I'd also play a little Bach and Charles Ives," Johnny says condescendingly. "I don't know why the French are not interested in Charles Ives. Do you know his songs?"

The one about the leopard, you have to know the one about the leopard. ‘A leopard ...’ ”

And in his weak tenor voice he goes on at great length about the leopard, needless to say, many of the phrases he’s singing are not absolutely Ives, something Johnny’s not very careful about while he’s sure that what he’s singing is something good. Finally we sit down on the rail opposite the rue Gît-le-Coeur and smoke another cigarette because the night is magnificent and shortly thereafter the taste of the cigarette is forcing us to think of having a beer at a café, just thinking of the taste of it is a pleasure for Johnny and me. I pay almost no attention when he mentions my book the first time, because right away he goes back to talking about Charles Ives and how numerous times he’d enjoyed working Ives’s themes into his records, with nobody even noticing (not even Ives, I suppose), but after a bit I get to thinking about the business of the book and try to get him back onto the subject.

“Oh, I’ve read a few pages,” Johnny says. “At Tica’s they talk a lot about your book, but I didn’t even understand the title. Art brought me the English edition yesterday and then I found out about some things. It’s very good, your book.”

I adopt the attitude natural in such a situation, an air of displeased modesty mixed with a certain amount of interest, as if his opinion were about to reveal to me—the author—the truth about my book.

“It’s like in a mirror,” Johnny says. “At first I thought that to read something that’d been written about you would be more or less like looking at yourself and not into a mirror. I

admire writers very much, it's incredible the things they say. That whole section about the origins of bebop ..."

"Well, all I did was transcribe literally what you told me in Baltimore," I say defensively, not knowing what I'm being defensive about.

"Sure, that's all, but in reality it's like in a mirror," Johnny persists stubbornly.

"What more do you want? Mirrors give faithful reflections."

"There're things missing, Bruno," Johnny says. "You're much better informed than I am, but it seems to me like something's missing."

"The things that you've forgotten to tell me," I answer, reasonably annoyed. This uncivilized monkey is capable of ... (I would have to speak with Delaunay, it would be regrettable if an imprudent statement about a sane, forceful criticism that ... *For example Lan's red dress*, Johnny is saying. And in any case take advantage of the enlightening details from this evening to put into a new edition; that wouldn't be bad. *It stank like an old washrag*, Johnny's saying, *and that's the only value on the record*. Yes, listen closely and proceed rapidly, because in other people's hands any possible contradiction might have terrible consequences. *And the urn in the middle, full of dust that's almost blue*, Johnny is saying, *and very close to the color of a compact my sister had once*. As long as he wasn't going into hallucinations, the worst that could happen would be that he might contradict the basic ideas, the aesthetic system so many people have praised ... *And furthermore, cool doesn't*

*mean, even by accident ever, what you've written, Johnny is saying. Attention.)*

“How is it not what I've written, Johnny? It's fine that things change, but not six months ago, you ...”

“Six months ago,” Johnny says, getting down from the rail and setting his elbows on it to rest his head between his hands. “Six months ago. Oh Bruno, what I could play now if I had the kids with me ... And by the way: the way you wrote ‘the sax, the sex,’ very ingenious, very pretty, that, the word-play. *Six months ago. Six, sax, sex.* Positively lovely. Fuck you, Bruno.”

I'm not going to start to say that his mental age does not permit him to understand that this innocent word-play conceals a system of ideas that's rather profound (it seemed perfectly precise to Leonard Feather when I explained it to him in New York) and that the paraeroticism of jazz evolved from the washboard days, etc. As usual, immediately I'm pleased to think that critics are much more necessary than I myself am disposed to recognize (privately, in this that I'm writing) because the creators, from the composer to Johnny, passing through the whole damned gradation, are incapable of extrapolating the dialectical consequences of their work, of postulating the fundamentals and the transcendency of what they're writing down or improvising. I should remember this in moments of depression when I feel dragged that I'm nothing more than a critic. *The name of the star is called Wormwood*, Johnny is saying, and suddenly I hear his other voice, the voice that comes when he's ... how say this? how describe Johnny when he's beside himself, already out of it, already gone? Uneasy, I get down off the rail and look at him

closely. And the name of the star is called Wormwood, nothing you can do for him.

“The name of the star is called Wormwood,” says Johnny, using both hands to talk. “And their dead bodies shall lie in the streets of the great city. Six months ago.”

Though no one see me, though no one knows I’m there, I shrug my shoulders at the stars (the star’s name is Wormwood). We’re back to the old song: “I’m playing this tomorrow.” The name of the star is Wormwood and their bodies’ll be left lying six months ago. In the streets of the great city. Out, very far out. And I’ve got blood in my eye just because he hasn’t wanted to say any more to me about the book, and truly, I don’t know what he thinks of the book, which thousands of fans are reading in two languages (three pretty soon, and a Spanish edition is being discussed, it seems that they play something besides tangos in Buenos Aires).

“It was a lovely dress,” Johnny says. “You do not want to know how beautifully it fit on Lan, but it’ll be easier to explain it to you over a whiskey, if you got the money. Dédée sent me out with hardly three hundred francs.”

He laughs sarcastically, looking at the Seine. As if he hadn’t the vaguest idea of how to get drink or dope when he wanted it. He begins to explain to me that really Dédée is very goodhearted (nothing about the book) and that she does it out of kindness, but luckily there’s old buddy Bruno (who’s written a book, but who needs it) and it’d be great to go to the Arab quarter and sit in a café, where they always leave you alone if they see that you belong a little to the star called Wormwood (I’m thinking this, and we’re going in by

the Saint-Sévérin side and it's two in the morning, an hour at which my wife is very used to getting up and rehearsing everything she's going to give me at breakfast, along with the cup of coffee, light). So I'm walking with Johnny, so we drink a terrible cognac, very cheap, so we order double shots and feel very content. But nothing about the book, only the compact shaped like a swan, the star, bits and hunks of things, that flow on with hunks of sentences, hunks of looks, hunks of smiles, drops of saliva on the table and dried on the edge of the glass (Johnny's glass). Sure, there are moments when I wish he were already dead. I imagine there are plenty of people who would think the same if they were in my position. But how can we resign ourselves to the fact that Johnny would die carrying with him what he doesn't want to tell me tonight, that from death he'd continue hunting, would continue flipping out (I swear I don't know how to write all this) though his death would mean peace to me, prestige, the status incontrovertibly bestowed upon one by unbeatable theses and efficiently arranged funerals.

Every once in a while Johnny stops his constant drumming on the tabletop, looks over at me, makes an incomprehensible face and resumes his drumming. The café owner knows us from the days when we used to come there with an Arab guitarist. It's been some time now that Ben Aifa has wanted to go home and sleep, we're the last customers in the filthy place that smells of chili and greasy meat pies. Besides, I'm dropping from sleepiness, but the anger keeps me awake, a dull rage that isn't directed against Johnny, more like when you've made love all afternoon and feel like a shower so that the soap and water will scrub off everything

that's beginning to turn rancid, beginning to show too clearly what, at the beginning ... And Johnny beats a stubborn rhythm on the tabletop, and hums once in a while, almost without seeing me. It could very well happen that he's not going to make any more comments on the book. Things go on shifting from one side to another, tomorrow it'll be another woman, another brawl of some sort, a trip. The wisest thing to do would be to get the English edition away from him on the sly, speak to Dédée about that, ask it as a favor in exchange for so many I've done her. This uneasiness is absurd, it's almost a rage. I can't expect any enthusiasm on Johnny's part at all; as matter of fact, it had never occurred to me that he'd read the book. I know perfectly well that the book doesn't tell the truth about Johnny (it doesn't lie either), it just limits itself to Johnny's music. Out of discretion, out of charity, I've not wanted to show his incurable schizophrenia nakedly, the sordid, ultimate depths of his addiction, the promiscuity in that regrettable life. I set out to show the essential lines, emphasizing what really counts, Johnny's incomparable art. What more could anyone say? But maybe it's exactly there that he's expecting something of me, lying in ambush as usual, waiting for something, crouched ready for one of those ridiculous jumps in which all of us get hurt eventually. That's where he's waiting for me, maybe, to deny all the aesthetic bases on which I've built the ultimate structure of his music, the great theory of contemporary jazz which has resulted in such acclaim from everywhere it's appeared so far.

To be honest, what does his life matter to me? The only thing that bothers me is that if he continues to let himself go

on living as he has been, a style I'm not capable of following (let's say I don't want to follow it), he'll end up by making lies out of the conclusions I've reached in my book. He might let it drop somewhere that my statements are wrong, that his music's something else.

“Hey, you said a bit back that there were things missing in the book.”

(Attention now.)

“Things are missing, Bruno? Oh yeah, I said there were things missing. Look, it's not just Lan's red dress. There're ... Will there really be urns, Bruno? I saw them again last night, an enormous field, but they weren't so buried this time. Some had inscriptions and pictures on them, you could see giants with helmets like in the movies, and monstrous cudgels in their hands. It's terrible to walk around between the urns and know there's no one else, that I'm the only one walking around in them and looking for ... Don't get upset, Bruno, it's not important that you forgot to put all that in. But Bruno,” and he lifts a finger that does not shake, “what you forgot to put in is me.”

“Come on, Johnny.”

“About me, Bruno, about me. And it's not your fault that you couldn't write what I myself can't blow. When you say there that my true biography is in my records, I know you think that's true and besides it sounds very pretty, but that's not how it is. And if I myself didn't know how to blow it like it should be, blow what I really am ... you dig, they can't ask you for miracles, Bruno. It's hot inside here, let's go.”

I follow him into the street, we wander a few feet off and a white cat comes out of an alley and meows at us; Johnny stays there a long time petting it. Well, that does it; I'll find a taxi in the place Saint-Michel, take him back to the hotel and go home myself. It hasn't been so awful after all; for a moment there I was afraid that Johnny had constructed a sort of antitheory to the book's and that he was trying it out on me before spilling it at full speed. Poor Johnny petting a white cat. Basically, the only thing he said was that no one can know anything about anyone, big deal. That's the basic assumption of any biography, then it takes off, what the hell. Let's go, Johnny, let's go home, it's late.

"Don't think that that's all it is," Johnny says, standing up suddenly as if he knew what I was thinking. "It's God, baby. Now that's where you missed out."

"Let's go, Johnny, let's go home, it's late."

"It's what you and people like my buddy Bruno call God. The tube of toothpaste in the morning, they call that God. The garbage can, they call that God. Afraid of kicking the bucket, they call that God. And you have the barefaced nerve to mess me up with that pigsty, you've written that my childhood, and my family, and I don't know what ancestral heritage of the Negro ... shit. A mountain of rotten eggs and you in the middle of it crowing, very happy with your God. I don't want your God, he's never been mine."

"The only thing I said is that Negro music ..."

"I don't want your God," Johnny says again. "Why've you made me accept him in your book? I don't know if there's a God, I play my music, I make my God, I don't need your

inventions, leave those to Mahalia Jackson and the Pope, and right now you're going to take that part out of your book."

"If you insist," I say, to say something. "In the second edition."

"I'm as alone as that cat, much more alone because I know it and he doesn't. Damn, he's digging his nails into my hand. Bruno, jazz is not only music, I'm not only Johnny Carter."

"Exactly what I was trying to say when I wrote that sometimes you play like ..."

"Like it's raining up my asshole," Johnny says, and it's the first time all night that I feel he's getting really sore. "A man can't say anything, right away you translate it into your filthy language. If I play and you see angels, that's not my fault. If the others open their fat yaps and say that I've reached perfection, it's not my fault. And that's the worst thing, the thing you really and truly left out of your book, Bruno, and that's that I'm not worth a damn, that what I play and what the people applaud me for is not worth a damn, really not worth a damn."

Truly a very rare modesty at this hour of the morning. This Johnny ...

"How can I explain it to you?" Johnny yells, putting his hands on my shoulders, jerking me to the right and to the left. (Cut out the noise! they scream from a window). "It isn't a question of more music or less music, it's something else ... for example, it's the difference between Bee being dead and being alive. What I'm playing is Bee dead, you dig, while what I want to, what I want to ... And sometimes

because of that I wreck the horn and people think that I'm up to my ears in booze. Really, of course, I'm always smashed when I do it, because, after all, a horn costs a lot of bread."

"Let's go this way. I'll get a taxi and drop you at the hotel."

"You're a mother of goodness, Bruno," Johnny sneers. "Old buddy Bruno writes everything down in his notebook that you say, except the important things. I never would have believed you could be so wrong until Art passed that book on to me. At the beginning I thought you were talking about someone else, about Ronnie or about Marcel, and then Johnny here and Johnny there, I mean it was about me and I wondered, but where am I?, and you dish it out about me in Baltimore, and at Birdland, and my style ... Listen," he added almost coldly, "it isn't that I didn't realize that you'd written a book for the public. That's very fine, and everything you say about my way of playing and feeling jazz seems perfectly okay to me. Why are we going on talking about the book? A piece of garbage floating in the Seine, that piece of straw floating beside the dock, your book. And I'm that other straw, and you're that bottle going by bobbing over there. Bruno, I'm going to die without having found ... without ..."

I catch him under his arms and hold him up, I prop him against the railing above the pier. He's slipping into his usual delirium, he mutters parts of words, spits.

"Without having found," he repeats. "Without having found ..."

“What is it you want to find, brother,” I tell him. “You don’t have to ask the impossible, what you have found is enough for ...”

“For you, I know,” Johnny says bitterly. “For Art, for Dédée, for Lan ... You donno how ... Sure, every once in a while the door opens a little bit ... Look at the two straws, they’ve met, see they’re dancing, one in front of the other ... It’s pretty, huh ... It began to open out ... Time ... I told you, it seems to me that time business ... Bruno, all my life in my music I looked for that door to open finally. Nothing, a crack ... I remember in New York one night ... A red dress. Yeah, red, and it fit her beautifully. Okay, one night we were with Miles and Hal ... we were carrying it for about an hour I think, playing the same piece, all by ourselves, happy ... Miles played something so lovely it almost pulled me out of my chair, then I let loose, I just closed my eyes and I flew. Bruno, I swear I was flying ... And I was hearing it like from a place very far away, but inside me just the same, beside myself, someone was standing there ... Not exactly someone ... Look, the bottle, it’s incredible how it bobs along ... It wasn’t anyone, just that you look for comparisons ... It was the sureness, the meeting, like in some dreams, what do you think?, when everything’s resolved, Lan and the chicks waiting for you with a turkey in the oven, you get in the car and never hit a red light, everything running as smooth as a billiard ball. And who I had beside me was like myself but not taking up any space, without being in New York at all, and especially without time, without afterwards ... without there having to be an afterwards ... for a while there wasn’t anything but always ... And I didn’t know that it was a lie, that

that happened because I was lost in the music, and that I hardly finish playing, because after all I had to give Hal his chance to do his thing at the piano, at that same moment my head would fall out, I'd be plunged into myself ...”

He's crying softly, he rubs his eyes with his filthy hands. Me, I don't know what to do, it's so late, the dampness coming up from the river, we're going to catch cold, both of us.

“It felt like I wanted to swim with no water,” Johnny murmurs. “It felt like I wanted to have Lan's red dress but without Lan inside it. And Bee's dead, Bruno. And I think you're right, your book really is very good.”

“Let's go, Johnny, I'm not getting offended at what you think's bad about the book.”

“It's not that, your book is okay because ... because it doesn't have urns, Bruno. It's like what Satchmo blows, that clean, that pure. Doesn't it seem to you that what Satch's playing is like a birthday party or a decent action? We ... I tell you I felt like I wanted to swim without water. It seemed to me ... no you have to be an idiot ... it seemed to me that one day I was going to find something else. I wasn't satisfied, I thought that the good things, Lan's red dress, even Bee, were like rat traps, I don't know how to put it any other way ... Traps so that you would conform, dig, so that you would say everything's all right, baby. Bruno, I think that Lan and jazz, yeah, even jazz, were like advertisements in a magazine, pretty things so that I would stay conformed like you stay because you've got Paris and your wife and your work ... I got my sax ... and my sex, like the good book say. Everything that's missing. Traps, baby ... because it's

impossible there's nothing else, it can't be we're that close to it, that much on the other side of the door ..."

"The only thing that counts is to give whatever one has that's possible," I say, feeling incredibly stupid.

"And win the poll every year in Down Beat, right," Johnny agrees. "Sure, baby. Sure. Sure. Sure. Sure."

I'm moving little by little toward the square. With any luck there'll be a taxi on the corner.

"On top of everything, I don't buy your God," murmured Johnny. "Don't come on to me that way, I won't put up with it. If it's really him on the other side of the door, fuck it. There's no use getting past that door if it's him on the other side opening it. Kick the goddamn thing in, right? Break the mother down with your fist, come all over the door, piss all day long against the door. Right? That time in New York I think I opened the door with my music, until I had to stop and then the sonofabitch closed it in my face only because I hadn't prayed to him ever, because I'm never going to pray to him, because I don't wanna know nothing about that goddamned uniformed doorman, that opener of doors in exchange for a goddamned tip, that ..."

Poor Johnny, then he complains that you can't put these things in a book. Three o'clock in the morning, Jesus Christ.

Tica went back to New York, Johnny went back to New York (without Dédée, now happily settled at Louis Perron's, a very promising trombonist). Baby Lennox went back to New York. The season in Paris was very dull and I missed my friends. My book on Johnny was selling very well all over,

and naturally Sammy Pretzal was already talking about the possibility of an adaptation for Hollywood; when you think of the relation of the franc-rate to the dollar, that's always an interesting proposition. My wife was still furious over my passage with Baby Lennox, nothing too serious overall finally, Baby is promiscuous in a reasonably marked manner and any intelligent woman would have to understand that things like that don't compromise the conjugal equilibrium, aside from which, Baby had already gone back to New York with Johnny, she'd decided that she'd enjoy returning on the same boat with Johnny. She'd already be shooting junk with Johnny, and lost like him, poor doll. And *Amorous* had just been released in Paris, just as the second edition of my book went to press and they were talking about translating it into German. I had thought a great deal about the changes possible in a second edition. To be honest within the limits permitted by the profession, I wondered whether it would not be necessary to show the personality of my subject in another light. I discussed it at different times with Delaunay and with Hodeir, they didn't really know what to advise me because they thought the book terrific and realized that the public liked it the way it was. It seemed I was being warned that they were both afraid of a literary infection, that I would end up by riddling the work with nuances which would have little or nothing to do with Johnny's music, at least as all of us understood it. It appeared to me that the opinion of people in authority (and my own personal decision, it would be dumb to negate that at this level of consideration) justified putting the second edition to bed as was. A close reading of the trade magazines from the States (four stories on Johnny, news of a new suicide attempt, this time with tincture of

iodine, stomach pump and three weeks in the hospital, working in Baltimore again as though nothing had happened) calmed me sufficiently, aside from the anguish I felt at these ghastly backslidings. Johnny had not said one compromising word about the book. Example (in *Stomping Around*, a music magazine out of Chicago, Teddy Rogers' interview with Johnny): "Have you read what Bruno V— in Paris wrote about you?" "Yes, it's very good." "Nothing to say about the book?" "Nothing, except that it's fine. Bruno's a great guy." It remained to be seen what Johnny might say if he were walking around drunk or high, but at least there were no rumors of the slightest contradiction from him. I decided not to touch the second edition, to go on putting Johnny forth as he was at bottom: a poor sonofabitch with barely mediocre intelligence, endowed like so many musicians, so many chess players and poets, with the gift of creating incredible things without the slightest consciousness (at most, the pride of a boxer who knows how strong he is) of the dimensions of his work. Everything convinced me to keep, no matter what, this portrait of Johnny; it wasn't worth it to create complications with an audience that was crazy about jazz but cared nothing for either musical or psychological analysis, nothing that wasn't instant satisfaction and clear-cut besides, hands clapping to keep the beat, faces gone beatific and relaxed, the music that was driving through the skin, seeping into the blood and breath, and then finish, to hell with profound motives.

First two telegrams came (one to Delauney, one to me, in the afternoon the newspapers came out with their idiotic comments); twenty days later I had a letter from Baby

Lennox, who had not forgotten me. “They treated him wonderfully at Bellevue and I went to fetch him when he got out. We were living in Mike Russolo’s apartment, he’s gone on tour to Norway. Johnny was in very good shape, and even though he didn’t want to play dates, he agreed to record with the boys at Club 28. You I can tell this, really he was pretty weak”—I can imagine what Baby meant by that after our affair in Paris—“and at night he scared me, the way he’d breathe and moan. The only thing that softens it for me,” Baby summed it up beautifully, “is that he died happy and without knowing it was coming. He was watching TV and all of a sudden slumped to the floor. They told me it was instantaneous.” From which one inferred that Baby had not been present, and the assumption was correct because later we found out that Johnny was living at Tica’s place and that he’d been there with her for five days, depressed and preoccupied, talking about quitting jazz, going to live in Mexico and work in the fields (he’d handed that to everybody at some time or other in his life, it’s almost boring), and that Tica was taking care of him and doing everything possible to keep him quiet, making him think of the future (this is what Tica said later, as if she or Johnny had ever had the slightest idea of the future). In the middle of a television program which Johnny was enjoying, he started to cough, all at once he slumped down all of a sudden, etc. I’m not all that sure that death was as instantaneous as Tica declared to the police (Johnny’s death in her apartment had put her in an unusually tight spot she was trying to get out of, pot was always within reach, and probably a stash of heroin somewhere, poor Tica’d had several other bad scenes there, and the not completely convincing results of the autopsy.

One can imagine completely what a doctor would find in Johnny's lungs and liver). "You wouldn't want to know how painful his death is to me, although I could tell you some other things," sweet Baby added gently, "but sometime when I feel better I'll write you or tell you (it looks like Rogers wants to get me contracts in Paris and Berlin) everything you need to know, you were Johnny's best friend." And after a page dedicated to insulting Tica, you'd believe she not only caused Johnny's death but was responsible for the attack on Pearl Harbor and the Black Plague, poor Baby ended up: "Before I forget, one day in Bellevue he asked after you a lot, he was mixed up and thought you were in New York and didn't want to come see him, he was talking all the time about fields full of things, and after he was calling for you, even cussing you out, poor baby. You know what a fever's like. Tica told Bob Carey that Johnny's last words were something like: 'Oh, make me a mask,' but you can imagine how at that moment ..." I sure could imagine it. "He'd gotten very fat," Baby added at the end of her letter, "and panted out of breath when he walked." These were details you might expect from a person as scrupulous as Baby Lennox.

All this happened at the same time that the second edition of my book was published, but luckily I had time to incorporate an obituary note edited under full steam and inserted, along with a newsphoto of the funeral in which many famous jazzmen were identifiable. In that format the biography remained, so to speak, intact and finished. Perhaps it's not right that I say this, but naturally I was speaking from a merely aesthetic point of view. They're

already talking of a new translation, into Swedish or Norwegian, I think. My wife is delighted at the news.