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THE MIDNIGHT POOL

Every two years or so during my childhood, my father made a concerted effort to get back into our house. I'm not sure what had caused him to leave, or get thrown out, in the first place — my father's version changed each time I asked him, though the kernel of his story remained an adamant denial of fault, and my mother would only say, "Your father couldn't understand the importance of sunrise in a marriage." She was a cryptic woman, particularly to an eleven-year-old, and I didn't find out until years later that she meant he stayed out all night long one night too many. I never did know whether she felt another woman was involved — I do know that no one turned up in his life with any regularity after he left — or whether she simply wasn't going to share the benefits of a family with a man who wanted none of the responsibilities. I'm inclined to believe the latter, because he spent a great deal of our time together trying to convince me that he had matured or, more accurately, trying to convince me to tell my mother that he had matured. This I was more than willing to do, usually just after I ran into the house, because he liked to wait at the curb for word on whether he could come in and spend Sunday dinner with us.

"I really believe him this time," I would say while Mom peeked through the blinds to get a glimpse of the reformed man.

"So tell me what the two of you did today." Once in a while he might take me to the zoo or a ballgame, depending on the season, but usually we went to a bar or nightclub, where I sat by the hour and watched my father's jazz quartet. Charlie Rossen played tenor, and he was determined that his son would play it as well. I was the only kid who needed to get the smoke washed out of his clothes every week, and the only one who knew why Coleman Hawkins owned "Body And Soul."

"And what makes you think he's serious this time?"

"Well, for one thing he's got a steady gig at Nat's Hole Card Club now."

This is the way I talked — about gigs and breaks and even modality when I got older — and I don't think it helped my father

get back into the fold. My mother didn't much object to my taking up music, although she implied that it was an itinerant, and thus trivial, profession, but she certainly didn't think that hanging at some underground club was an appropriate way for an eleven-year-old to spend Sunday afternoons. Charlie and I explained to her at great length that the band had to practice, and sometimes I went on about the work ethic that was necessary to achieve art. I thought that the more I could make the music sound like a job, the better chance I had of getting her to reevaluate the way we spent our days together. But this was twenty years before the concept of "quality time" poked its head into the deteriorating orbit of traditional family structure; all my mother understood was that she had a hip fifth grader on her hands six days a week with an annoying penchant for drumming on the kitchen table.

"Why should a steady gig indicate a new sobriety on your father's part?" She pronounced "gig" as if it had two syllables.

"He hasn't had a drink for six months," I said. This was a slight exaggeration, since he always had a beer nearby to wet his lips after a solo, but a good-faith lie on my part. He had not actually been drunk since New Year's Eve, when he was forced to play a bowling alley, and lately he had taken to lecturing me on the evils of heroin, "a powder that sapped the dreams of many great players." I judged his efforts at walking the straight and narrow to be sincere.

"Sobriety doesn't apply just to drinking," she said. "I'm really referring more to whether he is ready to be a serious person." Louise Rossen was no euphemist — a person who was not serious was not worthy of attention, and a man who played non-classical music in a circuit of dive bars was not a serious person. For this reason, Charlie's newly acquired steady gig at Nat's meant very little to my mother. She wanted to know about his attitude.

"Well, he wants to be great, if that's what you mean," I said.

She just smiled, an enigmatic smile I saw often when I was growing up, almost always following a comment about my father. "Not exactly," she said.

WHEN YOU GET OLDER, it's easier to understand how couples come together, how the unlikeliest of pairings might be explained by loneliness or compatibility or that inner-ear sense of

timing that leads even the truest of lovers to the altar at the sublime moment when they condense into one person. But such percipience comes to me these days only late at night when I review my own failings, and when I was a fifth-grader it came about as often as the big ball dropped on Times Square. In short, it was only very rare instances that I could comprehend how my parents ever got married.

They met, according to my father, in a jazz club, and, according to my mother, in a public library. Both are hard to imagine, but I suppose Charlie might have wandered into a library to read a newspaper or chart a song that came to him as he walked down the street. Louise, on the other hand, could only have walked into a jazz club thinking it was something else. He surely did not have the guile to deceive her about his profession, and I cannot believe that the subject didn't come up, even among the most oblivious of lovers, before vows were exchanged. Which leaves as the lone explanation that one of them changed. My mother.

Louise Rossen was not a carefree woman, and no amount of revisionism allows me to recast her as an easygoing single parent out for a good time between PTA meetings. She spent most of her waking hours seeing to it that our life together was routine, an attribute I now understand she needed like a safety blanket; but life with her was not grim, and not always predictable. When she turned thirty, four days after I began my own second decade, we spent a celebratory weekend at a Howard Johnson's in Hershey, Pennsylvania, a motel memorable only because they kept the pool open until midnight. Of course we toured the factory, laughed at the budded streetlights, breathed deep the defining odor of this greatest of company towns; but it was that pool, turquoise blue and lit from the bottom by one huge domed bulb, that stands out like azure against the phony black velvet of my memory. Late into the night we swam alone, measuring our watery shapes against the overhanging trees as we floated motionless on the surface, casting shadows up instead of down. Every few minutes she climbed out and took a drink from a bottle of wine she had placed under the empty lifeguard's chair, but I could not gauge her drunkenness, due at least in part to the fact that I had never even seen her drink before, let alone out of the bottle; and the rest because I was only eleven, after all, and had no sense of

a drunken woman swimming in a motel pool at midnight, even if that woman was my mother. But then, as if our quarter had run down on the "magic fingers" in our motel bed, the light clicked off, the mysterious whirring of the heating jets shut down, the pool went dead. And from behind the diving board stepped my father.

"Happy birthday," he said. He was wearing a Hawaiian shirt and a pair of over-sized Bermudas, and looked very much like a shuffleboard tournament organizer exiled from the Catskills.

"Thanks," I said. I heard a giggling behind me.

"Oh, her," I said.

"Both of you," Charlie said, but he was looking my mother up and down as if she had just emerged from the water with a fish tail where her legs used to be. It was at that moment I realized what a beautiful woman she was: long blond-red hair worn Sixties loose and easy, eyes big and wide as a river, she was dripping wet and had Charlie ready to dive into the pool just to cool off. This was a far cry from the scarf-wearing A & P shopper who answered the phone, "Louise Rossen."

"Nice of you to come," she said; I immediately understood that this meeting, this family reunion, was not an accidental one.

"Nice of you to have me," Charlie said. They might have gone on like this for another hour, my mother puddling at the side of the pool while my father dripped from the steamy night, but like a message from the heavens all of the outer motel lights, including the orange HoJo's sign, blinked out for an instant before returning with a crackle, as if the moment had required the sacrifice of a few mosquitoes.

"I guess we'd better go in," Charlie said.

Louise came from behind me and gave me a big squeeze. "Mickey insists on his own room tonight," she said, "so I got us the adjoining one."

I did not know my mother. I did not know her at all.

IF YOU KNOW JAZZ clubs, picture a darker, deeper Village Vanguard with sheet-music wallpaper and a fat impresario at the door and you have the Hole Card Club. Directly below the old Cronley's Deli at Broad and Locust, the Hole lasted ten years as host to Lee Morgan, Hank Mobley, Joe Jones and every other great Philadelphia player, Charlie Rossen being a lesser light of

these but still capable of sharing a bandstand with Coltrane the night of June 3, 1961, as captured by a photograph he kept taped to the inside of his sax case. In fact Charlie played with all of them at one time or another; according to Nat, it was his unreliability, rather than his playing, that kept him out of steady work. Not the unreliability of a needle in the arm before the second set, though. For Charlie it was the unreliability of the art form itself; he wouldn't play unless everything was exactly right — with him, the band, the sound system, one night even his reed. This was worse than heroin, because you could follow somebody into the bathroom or hide their works, but you couldn't very well control the line of a new bass player.

"It's jazz, not a Bach etude," Nat said one night when Charlie wouldn't go back out after blowing the changes to "Yardbird Suite," a song I actually heard him play backwards once, he knew it so well. "It's not supposed to be perfect."

"No, but it is supposed to be 'Yardbird Suite'," Charlie said. For the next half hour he locked himself into the bathroom and played the song over and over, finally coming out only when the band refused to face the crowd without him. Somehow, in spite of his temperament and perhaps because of it, he had become an attraction. Just like that, three months after he started playing Nat's on a regular basis, Charlie Rossen had suddenly caught on. One Saturday twelve people sat in the audience, the next thirty, the one after that standing room, and soon every time Nat caught me in the club he would spin me over his head like a helicopter propeller. He was making real money for the first time and there was no explaining it other than to say that the Charlie Rossen Quartet had stumbled onto a sound people needed to hear. This Nat said over and over.

"You found it, Char, you're playing your heart and they're coming to see it, you've got an answer, do you understand what I'm saying," he yelled, sounding like the perfect cross between a jazz-seeking dharma bum and a greedy nightclub owner.

"Found *what*, Nat?" Charlie wasn't buying in. He had been playing his music for fifteen years — be-bop to cool to hard to free but always his and always without concern for what the public wanted — and acclaim seemed so unlikely at this point that he suspected something was wrong. (Only a few weeks before, a tiny jazz label called Tomorrow Records had released *Holed Up*, a live

album cut and pasted together in less than a month. The cover had an insipid picture of Charlie, in prison drag, holding a Tommy gun in one arm and a beautiful redhead in the other, standing under a neon Hole Card Club sign. Charlie insisted, to me at least, that the redhead kept whispering to him during the shoot that she was a man but no one could spot her. He took it as an omen, and though the album sold more than a thousand copies he never owned even a single one.) Although I have since met some people who could muster a certain aloofness in the face of personal success, Charlie was that rare one who handled it as if a waitress had just dumped a bowl of hot soup in his lap.

"Charlie, Charlie, Charlie," Nat said, in a tone I often heard him use with his bartenders when they asked him for raises. "You've got success by the throat and all you can think of doing is strangling her, when you should be kissing her deeply on the mouth."

"Who, Nathan?" It was my mother, just arrived through the service entrance and already pulling my arms through the sleeves of my jacket while she interrupted the conversation.

"Success, Louise. Charles feels compelled to rape her, when she would be quite content to bed him voluntarily."

"Lovely analogy, Nathan, just lovely," my mother said, zipping my windbreaker and nudging me out the door. "If there are any vulgarities you haven't yet mentioned in front of Mickey, please write them down so you won't forget to repeat them, in case his father decides to take him out for more cultural evenings here." This was a shot at Charlie, who had convinced her less than a month before to allow me out on Saturday nights so that I might hear the fruits of his endless practice sessions. Those were his words, "cultural evening;" she had a real memory for phrases.

"You wouldn't stop him from coming just for that, would you?" Nat asked. It was the purest of fortuity, but Charlie's popularity had coincided with the start of my visits, and Nat was the sort of guy who might wear the same underwear every night if things were going well; he was practically chasing us out of the club to get her answer as he pleaded with her. In the meantime Charlie had drifted away from the conversation back to the bandstand, and as we headed out the door he broke into "That Old Black Magic." Which froze Louise at the threshold for six minutes.

"Your father," she said finally, as if she were reading her horoscope, "is a piece of work."

IT DIDN'T LAST. I convinced my mother to let me continue visiting the club Saturday nights, but a few weeks later the Charlie Rossen Quartet had peaked anyway, those evanescent jazz fans moving on to British pop or Motown or the latest garage band to rent a warehouse. Nat kept him on for another month, half out of appreciation and the other half because you never knew; but soon Charlie had returned to the itinerant life that annoyed my mother so, an annoyance grounded not at all in envy or even astonishment so much as a gut feeling that anyone living his way was a threat to an ordered society.

"Is he working?" she asked after I returned from another Sunday afternoon stinking of smoke and beer.

"There might be something opening Tuesdays and Thursdays down in Media," I said.

"A *job*, Mickey, is he working at a *job*? You don't remember this, but your father used to sell cars for a living, and he was pretty good at it. He used to wake up in the morning and go to work, do you understand? He had responsibilities, and he fulfilled them. He didn't always like getting up, but he did it. I was important to him, Mickey, I was a part of his life then."

I didn't say anything after that; in fact I remember giving my mother a little hug before running out to tell Charlie that dinner this night did not seem like a very good idea. I almost asked him if he really did sell cars once — it sounded as unlikely as if she'd said he used to be the Governor of Pennsylvania — but I'm glad I didn't, because Louise was right behind me.

"Are you coming in for dinner tonight, or is there a miniature golf course opening you need to play at?" she asked. Suffice it to say that after her tirade, the question surprised me. I expected a wise-guy answer from Charlie, but instead he turned the motor off somewhat deliberately and said nothing at all. He had a little green gym bag next to him in the car, and I noticed that he brought it into the house with him.

"What are we having?" he asked for my benefit.

"Does it make a difference?" I said sharply, and then, picking up the gym bag: "Should I put this upstairs?" My own feelings didn't make that much sense to me — after all, I had been trying

to talk them into a reconciliation since I could remember — but there was manipulation in the air, and I did not appreciate that stale aroma at all. They could have told me.

"Your father is going to live with us for a little while," Louise said, "and we'll see how things go."

"And all that stuff about whether he was working or not, that was for me, not you," I said, addressing my mother as if my father weren't even in the room. The way people who have lived together for a long time talk to each other.

"Car salesman," I went on. "He couldn't sell a car to a millionaire stranded on the highway in the middle of a thunderstorm." Charlie looked at my mother and raised an eyebrow, but her only explanation was to laugh loudly and punch me in the arm. Then Charlie put his arms around both of us, pulled us to him, and held us there in a lopsided triangle until I ducked below his elbow and jumped back, an eleven-year-old who didn't like to be touched, especially under sentimental circumstances, which this definitely was. We were a family again, at least for a little while, while we saw how things went.

THAT FIRST MEAL stayed with me. Charlie kept saying how terrific the food was, causing my mother to cast me some surreptitious glances until finally, after being complimented on the texture of the roast beef, she sprayed the water she had been drinking across the table. An honest if cartoon-like gesture.

"C'mon, Charlie," she said between convulsions.

"What?" he said. "I like the roast beef, okay?"

"I set the table," I said, laughing with my mother.

"And you did a beautiful job," Charlie said. "I was just about to comment on what a hell of a nice table you set. Keep this up and you may have to set it every meal."

Things got back to normal after that, but what was normal for a family who had never spent much time together? We were each careful not to take too much time in the bathroom, not to walk into a room without knocking, not to leave the table until the others were done eating, but soon even these formalities faded away in a hail of takeout food and background music. Charlie was a dominant gene, and as much as my mother tried to run the show her way it was no use. The takeout food was an inevitable result of schedules that intersected, like the routes of cross-

country truckers, at rare and unusual hours. My mother held a series of jobs during these years — travel agent, receptionist, secretary; once I remember she ran a flower store for a few months — but always it was eight to four because we had no one to watch me when I came home from school. Charlie's days were on a less intricate timetable, and Louise soon gave up the idea of keeping a dinner warm while we waited for his arrival. Instead we would turn on Charlie's music. He had a very modern reel-to-reel contraption with an extensive collection of tapes — now at least we know where he spends his money, my mother said, as if we both had been curious — and it soon became our habit, following Charlie's lead, to play music at different volumes virtually all day long. Loud Buddy Holly for cooking, quiet classical for reading, old muddy blues for fooling around after dinner — the house inevitably became his house, the ways we lived his ways. I came to understand that my mother actually loved music — somehow she knew the words to songs by Big Bill Broonzy! I had never seen this side of her before and I felt we were having more fun than we'd had only a few weeks ago; it seemed that Charlie was bringing us a new life. But with our new life came parts of the old, at least as it had been related to me, which is to say that the second Friday after Charlie moved back he didn't come home.

I was allowed to stay up a little later on Friday nights, but I didn't perceive anything out of the ordinary when I went to sleep and he had not yet returned from wherever he was. Certainly my mother let on no concern. Other than asking me if he'd "checked in" while she had been at the store, she did not even mention him that night. The next morning, while I was watching cartoons, he walked in as if it were dinner time and kicked himself down on the floor next to me. "Whadda we got?" he said, turning to the television. I didn't have time to answer.

"This is exactly what I'm talking about," Louise shouted, sticking her head dripping wet out of the shower, somehow sensing his arrival like a baseball player senses a hanging curve. Once again I found myself in the middle of a conversation that had started without me.

"Not just this second," Charlie yelled back. He pulled some sheet music out of his saxophone case and handed it to me. I still remember the arrangement of Oliver Nelson's "Stolen Moments," those mysterious opening bars that sounded so good even when I butchered them.

"I want you to work on this so we can play it together next week," he said. Then he went in the bedroom to talk to my mother.

HE MUST HAVE smoothed things over. They stayed in the bedroom long enough so that I finally knocked on the door to tell them I was going out to play, but I got no response. I was at an age where I always suspected the worst — had he taken her out with a silencer and left by the window, had they both drunk poison in a final death dance, were they having sex? — but this time I thought it was best to leave without pressing the issue, and I occupied myself with stickball and jungle gyms for the next two hours. When I returned, covered with a very fine layer of dirt and sweat, I found them sacked out at opposite ends of the sofa in the living room while roller derby hummed along silently on television. I clicked it off, showered, changed, and they were still sleeping on the sofa, which told me all I needed to know about how much sleep each had gotten the night before. I went back to my room and turned on an Oliver Nelson tape, softly, softly, until I could barely hear it, and I listened over and over to the beginning of "Stolen Moments," imagining myself on stage with Charlie trading solos. After a while my father walked in, rumpled but well rested, and flopped down next to me on the floor like he had earlier that morning. He didn't make any attempt to turn the music up, and neither did I; every few minutes I reached over, rewound the tape, and started it from the beginning. My father just sat there nodding his head.

"That's the way to do it," Charlie whispered finally, as Freddie Hubbard's trumpet solo began again.

THEN HE STAYED in every night for a month. He didn't play, he didn't practice, he didn't even go out for a beer; the only income he had was from a few charts he'd been able to sell to the Basie band and some daytime session work scoring a local movie that never made distribution. I supposed this was the compromise he had struck with my mother, but it hardly seemed financially or spiritually feasible, and every night he kicked his feet up on the easy chair affirmed my conviction that our nuclear unit was disintegrating. Charlie wanted to make it work, he loved us and even liked the idea of us, but he wanted it on his terms — sitting

in his chair night after night practically giving us the silent treatment was his way of begging to be let off the hook, and finally Louise threw him back into the ocean. Six Sundays after he moved in, Charlie packed the same little gym bag he had come with and moved out.

"It wasn't my fault," Louise said to me almost as the door was closing on Charlie. It never would have crossed my mind that it was. Charlie was cut out to be my father, and maybe even Louise's husband, but surely not both at the same time.

"Well, it wasn't mine, either," I said, speaking for the rest of us.

SIX YEARS LATER I shared a bandstand with my father for the first time. He had been in and out of our house twice during that period — once for a week when the leases on his apartments didn't overlap, the second time for most of my sophomore year of high school when Louise hurt her back in a car accident — but the last two years had been strictly Sundays, and I was close enough to graduation to view any change in our living arrangement as a needless obstacle in my relentless pursuit of college away from home. In other words, I was happy to see Charlie every seven days, but like most seventeen-year-olds I was intent on limiting rather than expanding my family life. Playing music with my father, once the pivotal event of my week, had ceased to be a priority; and when Nat organized a "Next Generation Of Jazz Family Night" at the Hole, I was not interested. Aside from what I thought was the obvious stupidity of the idea — I had no intention of playing counterpoint to some thirteen-year-old with sunglasses passing himself off as a free-wheeling junior member of the avant garde — I didn't need to hear a bunch of strangers whispering to themselves about the similarity of our sounds, nodding sagely about musical roots and Charlie's influence and how kids who hear music in the crib hear it all their lives. It was bad enough I looked just like him.

"I think it will be fun, that's all," Charlie said when I told him I had planned a canoe trip for that weekend. He wasn't going for it.

"I'll make Nat promise not to tape; then you can deny the whole night when you get older."

"Don't be pathetic, Charlie, it sure as hell doesn't become you," I said, all those Tennessee Williams plays I had been reading finally finding their outlet.

"I'll buy some matching outfits," Louise chimed in. "The two of you will look cute as buttons." A hilarious woman, my mother.

But I did play after all. The audience was scattered and conversational, the sort of ice-clicking crowd that club musicians are used to, and for me this was a relief; the last thing I wanted was a packed house and a sweating spotlight. We grazed through a few war horses, ending, of course, with "Stolen Moments," and the set was over. Polite applause. A painless effort, really; I was glad to have the whole thing behind me.

Thinking back on that night, I'm surprised at how little I remember. Although I formed my own quartet soon after, Charlie and I never played together in public again, mainly because I finally did leave town for college out west a few months later, and on the rare occasions I returned it was *sans* sax. The one moment I do recall came at the end of my first solo — an off-balance thirty-two bars during which I strayed quite far from the melody. Charlie looked around, addressing no one in particular, and said, "That's my son on tenor." A few people clapped out of courtesy; after all, we had been announced as father and son only minutes before. I thought at the time that he was saying it for Louise's sake, since she was the only one in the audience paying attention and might get a kick out of it. I think now, though, that he was talking to himself. Charlie was not a man prone to second guessing, and I never for a moment sensed that he wished his life had taken a different course. But he had a son who played music like he did, and every once in a while he felt he should remind himself about that.