ISAAC BABEL

I dinner father told a new story about Jascha Heifetz. Just before he got to’s he had met Mendelssohn, Jascha’s uncle. It appeared that the lad was get-itt hundred doubles a performance. Just work out how much that comes to at concerts a month!

It, and the answer was twelve thousand a month. Multiplying and carrying my head, I glanced out of the window. Across the cement courtyard, his yaring in the breeze, his ginger curls poking out from under his soft hat, on his cane, Mr. Zagursky, my music teacher, was advancing. It must be ac- dhe had taken his time in spotting my truancy. More than three months had since the day when my violin had grounded on the sand by the breakwater.
r. Zagursky was approaching the main entrance. I dashed to the back door, lay before it had been nailed up for fear of burglars. Then I locked myself in.

y. In half an hour the whole family had assembled outside the door. The were weeping. Aunt Bobka, exploding with sob, was rubbing her fat should-ast the door. Father was silent. Finally he started speaking, quietly and dis-
he had never before spoken in his life.
am an officer,” said my father. “I own real estate. I go hunting. Peasants pay I have entered my son in the Cadet Corps. I have no need to worry about

was silent again. The women were sniffing. Then a terrible blow de-on the privy door. My father was hurling his whole body against it, step-k and then throwing himself forward.
am an officer,” he kept wailing. “I go hunting. I’ll kill him. This is the end.” e hook sprang from the door, but there was still a bolt hanging onto a single wmen were rolling about on the floor, grasping father by the legs. Crazy, ryng to break loose. Father’s mother came over, alerted by the hubub.
y child,” she said to him in Hebrew, “our God is great. It has no bounds.
d was lacking in our house. I do not wish to see blood in our house.”
der gave a groan. I heard his footsteps retreating. The bolt still hung by its
at it out in my fortress till nightfall. When all had gone to bed, Aunt Bobka to grandmother’s. We had a long way to go. The moonlight congealed on unknown to me, on trees that had no name. Some anonymous bird emitted a and was extinguished, perhaps by sleep. What bird was it? What was it does dew fall in the evening? Where is the constellation of the Great Bear? side does the sun rise?

were going along Post Office Street. Aunt Bobka held me firmly by the that I shouldn’t run away. She was right to. I was thinking of running away.

QUESTIONS

Why does Babel have the narrator belittle many of the characters? The narrator tells us “In this crew [of violin students] I was quite out of place.” How limited or universal is his declaration?

Does it matter that the narrator and his family are Jewish?

Is Nikitich’s admonition about nature appropriate? Why or why not?

To what is the narrator “Awakening”?

JAMES BALDWIN

Sonny’s Blues

I read about it in the paper, in the subway, on my way to work. I read it, and I couldn’t believe it, and I read it again. Then perhaps I just stared at it, at the newspaper spelling out his name, spelling out the story. I stared at it in the swinging lights of the subway car, and in the faces and bodies of the people, and in my own face, trapped in the darkness which soared outside.

It was not to be believed and I kept telling myself that, as I walked from the subway station to the high school. And at the same time I couldn’t doubt it. I was scared, scared for Sonny. He became real to me again. A great block of ice got settled in my belly and kept melting there slowly all day long, while I taught my classes algebra. It was a special kind of ice. It kept melting, sending trickles of ice water all up and down my veins, but it never got less. Sometimes it hardened and seemed to expand until I felt my guts were going to come spilling out or that I was going to choke or scream. This would always be at a moment when I was remembering some specific thing Sonny had once said or done.

When he was about as old as the boys in my class his face had been bright and open, there was a lot of copper in it; and he’d had wonderfully direct brown eyes, and great gentleness and privacy. I wondered what he looked like now. He had been picked up, the evening before, in a raid on an apartment downtown, for peddling and using heroin.

I couldn’t believe it: but what I mean by that is that I couldn’t find any room for it anywhere inside me. I had kept it outside me for a long time. I hadn’t wanted to know. I had had suspicions, but I didn’t name them, I kept putting them away. I told myself that Sonny was wild, but he wasn’t crazy. And he’d always been a good boy, he hadn’t ever turned hard or evil or disrespectful, the way kids can, so quick, so quick, especially in Harlem. I didn’t want to believe that I’d ever see my brother going down, coming to nothing, all that light in his face gone out, in the condition I’d already seen so many others. Yet it had happened and here I was, talking about algebra to a lot of boys who might, every one of them for all I knew, be popping off needles every time they went to the head. Maybe it did more for them than algebra could.

I was sure that the first time Sonny had ever had horse, he couldn’t have been much older than these boys were now. These boys, now, were living as we’d been
living then, they were growing up with a rush and their heads bumped abruptly against the low ceiling of their actual possibilities. They were filled with rage. All they really knew were two darkesses, the darkness of their lives, which was now closing in on them, and the darkness of the movies, which had blinded them to that other darkness, and in which they now, vindictively, dreamed, at once more together than they were at any other time, and more alone.

When the last bell rang, the last class ended, I let out my breath. It seemed I'd been holding it for all that time. My clothes were wet—I may have looked as though I'd been sitting in a steam bath, all dressed up, all afternoon. I sat alone in the classroom a long time. I listened to the boys outside, downstairs, shouting and cursing and laughing. Their laughter struck me for perhaps the first time. It was not the joyous laughter which—God knows why—one associates with children. It was mocking and insular, its intent was to denigrate. It was disenchanted, and in this, also, lay the authority of their curses. Perhaps I was listening to them because I was thinking about my brother and in them I heard my brother. And myself.

One boy was whistling a tune, at once very complicated and very simple, it seemed to be pouring out of him as though he were a bird, and it sounded very cool and moving through all that harsh, bright air, only just holding its own through all those other sounds.

I stood up and walked over to the window and looked down into the courtyard. It was the beginning of the spring and the sap was rising in the boys. A teacher passed through them every now and again, quickly, as though he or she couldn't wait to get out of that courtyard, to get those boys out of their sight and off their minds. I started collecting my stuff. I thought I'd better get home and talk to Isabel.

The courtyard was almost deserted by the time I got downstairs. I saw this boy standing in the shadow of a doorway, looking just like Sonny. I almost called his name. Then I saw that it wasn't Sonny, but somebody we used to know, a boy from around our block. He'd been Sonny's friend. He'd never been mine, having been too young for me, and, anyway, I'd never liked him. And now, even though he was a grown-up man, he still hung around that block, still spent hours on the street corners, was always high and raggy. I used to run into him from time to time and he'd often work around to asking me for a quarter or fifty cents. He always had some real story of his own, much less a sad one, and I asked, quickly, "What's going to happen to him now?"

He didn't answer this. He was off by himself some place. "Funny thing," he said, and from his tone we might have been discussing the quickest way to get to Brooklyn, "when I saw the papers this morning, the first thing I asked myself was if I had anything to do with it. I felt sort of responsible."

I began to listen more carefully. The subway station was on the corner, just before us, and I stopped. He stopped, too. We were in front of a bar and he ducked slightly, peering in, but whoever he was looking for didn't seem to be there. The juke box was blasting away with something black and bouncy and I half watched the barmaid as she danced her way from the juke box to her place behind the bar. And I watched her face as she laughingly responded to something someone said to her, still keeping time to the music. When she smiled one saw the little girl, one sensed the doomed, still-struggling woman beneath the battered face of the semi-whore.

"I never give Sonny nothing," the boy said finally, "but a long time ago I come to school high and Sonny asked me how it felt." He paused. I couldn't bear to watch him, I watched the barmaid, and I listened to the music which seemed to be causing the pavement to shake. "I told him it felt great."

"What do you mean, that's all?"

But I knew what he meant.

"I mean, that's all." He turned his head and looked at me, pulling down the corners of his mouth. "Don't you know what I mean?" he asked, softly.
JAMES BALDWIN

"How the hell would I know what you mean?" I almost whispered it, I don't know why.

"That's right," he said to the air, "how would he know what I mean?" He turned toward me again, patient and calm, and yet I somehow felt him shaking, as though he were going to fall apart. I felt that ice in my guts again, the dread I'd felt all afternoon; and again I watched the barmaid, moving about the bar, washing glasses, and singing. "Listen. They'll let him out and then it'll just start all over again. That's what I mean."

"You mean—they'll let him out. And then he'll just start working his way back in again. You mean he'll never kick the habit. Is that what you mean?"

"That's right," he said, cheerfully. "You see what I mean."

"Tell me," I said at last, "why does he want to die? He must want to die, he's killing himself, why does he want to die?"

He looked at me in surprise. He licked his lips. "He don't want to die. He wants to live. Don't nobody want to die, ever."

Then I wanted to ask him—too many things. He could not have answered, or if he had, I could not have borne the answers. I started walking. "Well, I guess it's none of my business."

"It's going to be rough on old Sonny," he said. We reached the subway station. "This is your station?" he asked. I nodded. I took one step down. "Damn!" he said, suddenly. I looked up at him. He grinned again. "Damn it if I didn't leave all my money home. You ain't got a dollar on you, have you? Just for a couple of days, is all."

All at once something inside gave and threatened to come pouring out of me. I felt that ice in my guts again, the dread I'd felt all afternoon; and again I watched the barmaid, moving about the bar, washing glasses, and singing. "Listen. They'll let him out and then it'll just start all over again. That's what I mean."

Sonny. Maybe I'll write him or something."

"Sure," I said. "You do that. So long.""Be seeing you," he said. I went down the steps.

And I didn't write Sonny or send him anything for a long time. When I finally did, it was just after my little girl died, he wrote me back a letter which made me feel like a bastard.

Here's what he said:

Dear Brother,

You don't know how much I needed to hear from you. I wanted to write you many a time but I dug how much I must have hurt you and so I didn't write. But now I feel like a man who's been trying to climb up out of some deep, dark hole and just saw the sun up there, outside. I got to get outside.

I can't tell you much about how I got here. I mean I don't know how to tell you. I guess I was afraid of something or I was trying to escape from something and you know I have never been very strong in the head (smile). I'm glad Mama and Daddy are dead and can't see what's happened to their son so, you and a lot of other fine people who were nice to me and who believed in me.

I don't want you to think it had anything to do with me being a musician. It's more than that. Or maybe less than that. I can't get anything straight in my head down here and I try not to think about what's going to happen to me when I get outside again. Sometime I think I'm going to flip and never get outside and sometime I think I'll come straight back. I tell you one thing, though, I'd rather blow my brains out than go through this again. But that's what they all say, so they tell me. If I tell you when I'm coming to New York and if you could meet me, I sure would appreciate it. Give my love to Isabel and the kids and I was sure sorry to hear about little Gracie. I wish I could be like Mama and say the Lord's will be done, but I don't know it seems to me that trouble is the one thing that never does get stopped and I don't know what good it does to blame it on the Lord. But maybe it does some good if you believe it.

Your brother,

Sonny

Then I kept in constant touch with him and I sent him whatever I could and I went to meet him when he came back to New York. When I saw him many things I thought I had forgotten came flooding back to me. This was because I had begun, finally, to wonder about Sonny, about the life that Sonny lived inside. This life, whatever it was, had made him older and thinner and it had deepened the distant stillness in which he had always moved. He looked very unlike my baby brother. Yet, when he smiled, when we shook hands, the baby brother I'd never known looked out from the depths of his private life, like an animal waiting to be coaxed into the light.

"How you been keeping?" he asked me.

"All right. And you?"

"Just fine." He was smiling all over his face. "It's good to see you again."

"It's good to see you."

The seven years' difference in our ages lay between us like a chasm: I won't be able to cross it unless I'm able to get close to Sonny. Maybe I'll write him or something."

And I didn't write Sonny or send him anything for a long time. When I finally did, it was just after my little girl died, he wrote me back a letter which made me feel like a bastard.

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I can't tell you much about how I got here. I mean I don't know how to tell you. I guess I was afraid of something or I was trying to escape from something and you know I have never been very strong in the head (smile). I'm glad Mama and Daddy are dead and can't see what's happened to their son
And he laughed again. "They damn sure knew what they were doing when they got rid of it."

Years ago, when he was around fourteen, he'd been all hipped on the idea of going to India. He read books about people sitting on rocks, naked, in all kinds of weather, but mostly bad, naturally, and walking barefoot through hot coals and arriving at wisdom. I used to say that it sounded to me as though they were getting away from wisdom as fast as they could. I think he sort of looked down on me for morning him, but I hoped he wouldn't take the west side—I haven't seen the city in so long."

"Do you mind," he asked, "if we have the driver drive alongside the park? On the west side—I haven't seen the city in so long."

"Of course not," I said. I was afraid that I might sound as though I were humoring him, but I hoped he wouldn't take it that way.

So we drove along, between the green of the park and the stony, lifeless elegance of hotels and apartment buildings, toward the vivid, killing streets of our childhood. These streets hadn't changed, though housing projects jutted up out of them now like rocks in the middle of a boiling sea. Most of the houses in which we had grown up had vanished, as had the stores from which we had stolen, the basements in which we had first tried sex, the rooftops from which we had hurled tin cans and bricks. But houses exactly like the houses of our past yet dominated the landscape, boys exactly like the boys we once had been found themselves smothered, men exactly like the men we had first tried sex, the rooftops from which we had hurled tin cans and bricks. But houses exactly like the houses of our past yet dominated the landscape, boys exactly like the boys we once had been found themselves smothered, men exactly like the men we had first tried sex, the rooftops from which we had hurled tin cans and bricks. But houses exactly like the houses of our past yet dominated the landscape, boys exactly like the boys we once had been found themselves smothered, men exactly like the men we had first tried sex, the rooftops from which we had hurled tin cans and bricks.

We hit 110th Street and started rolling up Lenox Avenue. And I'd known this avenue all my life, but it seemed to me again, as it had seemed on the day I'd first heard about Sonny's trouble, filled with a hidden menace which was its very breath of life.

"We almost there," said Sonny.

"Almost." We were both too nervous to say anything more.

We lived in a housing project. It hadn't been up long. A few days after it was up it seemed uninhabitable new, now, of course, it's already rundown. It looks like a parody of the good, clean, faceless life—God knows the people who live in it do their best to make it a parody. The beat-looking grass lying around isn't enough to make their lives green, the hedges will never hold out the streets, and they know it. The big windows fool no one, they aren't big enough to make space out of no space. They don't bother with the windows, they watch the TV screen instead. The playground is most popular with the children who don't play at jacks, or skip rope, or roller skate, or swing, and they can be found in it after dark. We moved in partly because it's not too far from where I teach, and partly for the kids; but it's really just like the houses in which Sonny and I grew up. The same things happen, they'll have the same things to remember. The moment Sonny and I started into the house I had the feeling that I was simply bringing him back into the danger he had almost died trying to escape.

Sonny has never been talkative. So I don't know why I was sure he'd be dying to talk to me when supper was over the first night. Everything went fine, the oldest boy remembered him, and the youngest boy liked him, and Sonny had remembered to bring something for each of them; and Isabel, who is really much nicer than I am, more open and giving, had gone to a lot of trouble about dinner and was genuinely glad to see him. And she's always been able to tease Sonny in a way that I haven't. It was nice to see her face so vivid again and to hear her laugh and watch her make Sonny laugh. She wasn't, or, anyway, she didn't seem to be, at all uneasy or embarrassed. She chatted as though there were no subject which had to be avoided and she got Sonny past his first, faint stiffness. And thank God she was there, for I was filled with that icy dread again. Everything I did seemed awkward to me, and everything I said sounded freighted with hidden meaning. I was trying to remember everything I'd heard about dope addiction and I couldn't help watching Sonny for signs. I wasn't doing it out of malice. I was trying to find out something about my brother. I was dying to hear him tell me he was safe.

"Safe!" my father grunted, whenever Mama suggested trying to move to a neighborhood which might be safer for children. "Safe, hell! Ain't no place safe for kids, nor nobody."

He always went on like this, but he wasn't, ever, really as bad as he sounded, not even on weekends, when he got drunk. As a matter of fact, he was always on the lookout for "something a little better," but he died before he found it. He died suddenly, on a drunken weekend in the middle of the war, when Sonny was fifteen. He and Sonny hadn't ever got on too well. And this was partly because Sonny was the apple of his father's eye. It was because he loved Sonny so much and was frightened for him, that he was always fighting with him. It doesn't do any good to fight with Sonny. Sonny just moves back, inside himself, where he can't be reached. But the principal reason that they never hit it off is that they were so much alike. Daddy was big and rough and loud-talking, just the opposite of Sonny, but they both had—that same privacy.

Mama tried to tell me something about this, just after Daddy died. I was home on leave from the army.

This was the last time I ever saw my mother alive. Just the same, this picture gets all mixed up in my mind with pictures I had of her when she was younger. The way I always see her is the way she used to be on a Sunday afternoon, say, when the old folks were talking after the big Sunday dinner. I always see her wearing pale blue. She'd be sitting on the sofa. And my father would be sitting in the easy chair, not far from her. And the living room would be full of church folks and relatives. There they sit, in chairs all around the living room, and the night is creeping up outside, but nobody knows it yet. You can see the darkness growing against the windowpanes and you hear the street noises every now and again, or maybe the jangling beat of a tambourine from one of the churches close by, but it's real quiet in the room. For a moment nobody's talking, but every face looks darkening, like the sky is creeping into the room. For a moment nobody's talking, but every face looks darkening, like the sky is creeping into the room. For a moment nobody's talking, but every face looks darkening, like the sky is creeping into the room. For a moment nobody's talking, but every face looks darkening, like the sky is creeping into the room.
ing room, talking about where they've come from, and what they've seen, and what's happened to them and their kindfolk.

But something deep and watchful in the child knows that this is bound to end; is already ending. In a moment someone will get up and turn on the light. Then the old folks will remember the children and they won't talk any more that day. And when light fills the room, the child is filled with darkness. He knows that every time this happens he's moved just a little closer to that darkness outside. The darkness outside is what the old folks have been talking about. It's what they've come from. It's what they endure. The child knows that they won't talk any more because if he knows too much about what's happened to them, he'll know too much too soon, about what's going to happen to him.

The last time I talked to my mother, I remember I was restless. I wanted to get out and see Isabel. We weren't married then and we had a lot to straighten out between us.

There Mama sat, in black, by the window. She was humming an old church song, Lord, you brought me from a long ways off. Sonny was out somewhere. Mama kept watching the streets.

"I don't know," she said, "if I'll ever see you again, after you go off from here. But I hope you'll remember the things I tried to teach you."

"Don't talk like that," I said, and smiled. "You'll be here a long time yet."

She smiled, too, but she said nothing. She was quiet for a long time. And I said, "Mama, don't you worry about nothing. I'll be writing all the time, and you be getting the checks. . . ."

"I want to talk to you about your brother," she said, suddenly. "If anything happens to me he ain't going to have nobody to look out for him."

"Mama," I said, "ain't nothing going to happen to you, or Sonny. Sonny's all right. He's a good boy and he's got good sense."

"I know for a fact that he ain't a question of him being a good boy," Mama said, "nor of his having good sense. It ain't only the bad ones, nor yet the dumb ones that gets sucked under. She stopped, looking at me. "Your Daddy once had a brother," she said, and she smiled in a way that made me feel she was in pain. "You didn't never know that, did you?"

"No," I said, "I never knew that," and I watched her face.

"Oh, yes," she said, "your Daddy had a brother." She looked out of the window again. "I know you never saw your Daddy cry. But I did—many a time, through all these years."

I asked her, "What happened to his brother? How come nobody's ever talked about him?"

This was the first time I ever saw my mother look old.

"His brother got killed," she said, "when he was just a little younger than you are now. I knew him. He was a fine boy. He was maybe a little full of the devil, but he didn't mean nobody no harm."

Then she stopped and the room was silent, exactly as it had sometimes been on those Sunday afternoons. Mama kept looking out into the streets.

"He used to have a job in the mill," she said, "and, like all young folks, he just liked to perform on Saturday nights. Saturday nights, him and your father would drift around to different places, go to dances and things like that, or just sit around with people they knew, and your father's brother would sing, he had a fine voice, and play along with himself on his guitar. Well, this particular Saturday night, him and your father was coming home from some place, and they were both a little drunk and there was a moon that night, it was bright like day. Your father's brother was feeling kind of good, and he was whistling to himself, and he had his guitar slung over his shoulder. They was coming down a hill and beneath them was a road that turned off from the highway. Well, your father's brother, being always kind of frisky, decided to run down this hill, and he did, with that guitar banging and clanging behind him, and he ran across the road, and he was making water behind a tree. And your father was sort of amused at him and he was still coming down the hill, kind of slow. Then he heard a car motor and that same minute his brother stepped behind the tree, into the road, in the moonlight. And he started to cross the road. And your father started to run down the hill, he says he don't know why. This car was full of white men. They was all drunk, and when they seen your father's brother they let out a great whoop and holler and they aimed the car straight at him. They was having fun, they just wanted to scare him, the way they do sometimes, you know. But they was drunk. And I guess the boy, being drunk, too, and scared, just kind of lost his head. By the time he jumped it was too late. Your father says he heard his brother scream when the car rolled over him, and he heard the wood of that guitar when it give, and he heard them strings go flying, and he heard them white men shouting, and the car kept on a-going and it ain't stopped till this day. And, time your father got down the hill, his brother weren't nothing but blood and pulp."

Tears were gleaming on my mother's face. There wasn't anything I could say.

"He never mentioned it," she said, "because I never let him mention it before you children. Your Daddy was like a crazy man that night and for many a night thereafter. He says he never in his life seen anything as dark as that road after the lights of that car had gone away. Weren't nothing weren't nobody on that road, just your Daddy and his brother and that busted guitar. Oh, yes. Your Daddy never did really get right again. Till the day he died he weren't sure but that every white man he saw was the man that killed his brother."

She stopped and took out her handkerchief and dried her eyes and looked at me.

"I ain't telling you all this," she said, "to make you scared or bitter or to make you hate nobody. I'm telling you this because you got a brother. And the world ain't changed."

I guess I didn't want to believe this. I guess she saw this in my face. She turned away from me, toward the window again, searching those streets.

"But I praise my Redeemer," she said at last, "that He called your Daddy home before me. I ain't saying it to throw no flowers at myself, but, I declare, it keeps me from feeling too cast down to know I helped your father get safely through this world. Your father always acted like he was the roughest, strongest man on earth. And everybody took him to be like that. But if he hadn't had me there—to see his tears!"

She was crying again. Still, I couldn't move. I said, "Lord, Lord, Mama, I didn't know it was like that."

"Oh, honey," she said, "There's a lot that you don't know. But you are going to find out." She stood up from the window and came over to me. "You got to hold on to your brother," she said, "and don't let him fall, no matter what it looks like happening to him and no matter how evil you get with him. You going to be evil with him many a time. But you don't forget what I told you, you hear?"

"I won't forget," I said. "Don't you worry, I won't forget. I won't let nothing happen to Sonny."
My mother smiled as though she were amused at something she saw in my face. Then, "You may not be able to stop nothing from happening. But you got to let him know you know where he's at."

Two days later I was married, and then I was gone. And I had a lot of things on my mind and I pretty well forgot my promise to Mama until I got shipped home on a special furlough for her funeral.

And, after the funeral, with just Sonny and me alone in the empty kitchen, I tried to find out something about him.

"What do you want to do?" I asked him.

"I'm going to be a musician," he said.

For he had graduated, in the time I had been away, from dancing to the juke box to finding out who was playing what, and what they were doing with it, and he had bought himself a set of drums.

"You mean, you want to be a drummer?" I somehow had the feeling that being a drummer might be all right for other people but not for my brother Sonny.

"I don't think," he said, looking at me very gravely, "that I'll ever be a good drummer. But I think I can play a piano.

I frowned. I'd never played the role of the older brother quite so seriously before, and scarcely ever, in fact, asked Sonny a damn thing. I sensed myself in the presence of something I didn't really know how to handle, didn't understand. So I made my frown a little deeper as I asked: "What kind of musician do you want to be?"

"He grinned. "How many kinds do you think there are?"

"Be serious," I said.

He laughed, throwing his head back, and then looked at me. "I am serious."

"Well, then, for Christ's sake, stop kidding around and answer a serious question: I mean, do you want to be a concert pianist, you want to play classical music and all that, or—or what?"

Long before I finished he was laughing again. "For Christ's sake, Sonny!"

He sobered, but with difficulty. "I'm sorry. But you sound so—scared!" and he was off again.

"Well, you may think it's funny now, baby, but it's not going to be so funny when you have to make your living at it, let me tell you that."

I was furious because I knew he was laughing at me and I didn't know why.

"No," he said, very sober now, and afraid, perhaps, that he'd hurt me, "I don't want to be a classical pianist. That isn't what interests me. I mean—" he paused, looking hardly at me, as though his eyes would help me to understand, and then gestured helplessly, as though perhaps his hand would help—I mean, I'll have a lot of studying to do, and I'll have to study everything, but, I mean, I want to play with—jazz musicians."

He stopped. "I want to play jazz," he said.

Well, the word had never before sounded as heavy, as real, as it sounded that afternoon in Sonny's mouth. I just looked at him and I was probably frowning a real frown by this time. I simply couldn't see why on earth he'd want to spend his time hanging around nightclubs, clowning around on bandstands, while people pushed each other around a dance floor. It seemed—beneath him, somehow. I had never thought about it before, had never been forced to, but I suppose I had always put jazz musicians in a class with what Daddy called "goodtime people."

"Are you serious?"

"Hell, yes, I'm serious."

He looked more helpless than ever, and annoyed, and deeply hurt.

I suggested, hopefully: "You mean—like Louis Armstrong?"

His face closed as though he'd struck him. "No. I'm not talking about none of that old-time, down home crap."

"Well, look, Sonny, I'm sorry, don't get mad. I just don't altogether get it, that's all. Name somebody—you know, a jazz musician you admire."

"Bird."

"Who?"

"Bird! Charlie Parker! Don't they teach you nothing in the goddamn army?"

I lit a cigarette. I was surprised and a little amused to discover that I was trembling. "I've been out of touch," I said. "You'll have to be patient with me. Now. Who's this Parker character?"

"He's just one of the greatest jazz musicians alive," said Sonny, suddenly, his hands in his pockets, his back to me. "Maybe the greatest," he added, bitterly, "that's probably why you never heard of him."

"All right," I said. "I'm ignorant. I'm sorry. I'll go out and buy all the cat's records right away, all right?"

"It don't," said Sonny, with dignity, "make any difference to me. I don't care what you listen to. Don't do me no favors."

I was beginning to realize that I'd never seen him so upset before. With another part of my mind I was thinking that this would probably turn out to be one of those things kids go through and that I shouldn't make it seem important by pushing it too hard. Still, I didn't think it would do any harm to ask: "Doesn't all this take a lot of time? Can you make a living at it?"

He turned back to me and half leaned, half sat, on the kitchen table. "Everything takes time," he said, "and—well, yes, sure, I can make a living at it. But what I don't seem to be able to make you understand is that it's the only thing I want to do."

"Well, Sonny," I said, gently, "you know people can't always do exactly what they want to do—"

"No, I don't know that," said Sonny, surprising me. "I think people ought to do what they want to do, what else are they alive for?"

"You getting to be a big boy," I said desperately, "it's time you started thinking about your future."

"I'm thinking about my future," said Sonny, grimly, "I think about it all the time."

I gave up. I decided, if he didn't change his mind, that we could always talk about it later. "In the meantime," I said, "you got to finish school." We had already decided that he'd have to move in with Isabel and her folks, and I knew this wasn't the ideal arrangement because Isabel's folks are inclined to be dicty and they hadn't especially wanted Isabel to marry me. But I didn't know what else to do. "And we have to get you fixed up at Isabel's."

There was a long silence. He moved from the kitchen table to the window.

"That's a terrible idea. You know it yourself."

"Do you have a better idea?"

He just walked up and down the kitchen for a minute. He was as tall as I was.

He stopped at the kitchen table and picked up my cigarettes. Looking at me with a kind of mocking, amused defiance, he put one between his lips. "You mind?"
"You smoking already?"

He lit the cigarette and nodded, watching me through the smoke. "I just wanted to see if I'd have the courage to smoke in front of you." He grinned and blew a great cloud of smoke to the ceiling. "It was easy." He looked at my face. "Come on, now. I bet you were smoking at my age, tell the truth."

I didn't say anything but the truth was on my face, and he laughed. But now there was something very strained in his laugh. "Sure. And I bet that ain't all you was doing."

He was frightening me a little. "Cut the crap," I said. "We already decided that you was going to go and live at Isabel's. Now what's got into you all of a sudden?"

"You decided it," he pointed out. "I didn't decide nothing. He stopped in front of me, leaning against the stove, arms loosely folded. "Look, brother. I don't want to stay in Harlem no more, I really don't." He was very earnest. He looked at me, then over toward the kitchen window. There was something in his eyes I'd never seen before, some thoughtfulness, some worry all his own. He rubbed the muscle of one arm. "It's time I was getting out of here."

"Where do you want to go, Sonny?"

"I want to join the army. Or the navy, I don't care. I say I'm old enough, they'll believe me."

Then I got mad. It was because I was so scared. "You must be crazy. You goddamn fool, what the hell do you want to go and join the army for?"

"I just told you. To get out of Harlem."

"Sonny, you haven't even finished school. And if you really want to be a musician, how do you expect to study if you're in the army?"

He looked at me, trapped, and in anguish. "There's ways. I might be able to work out some kind of deal. Anyway, I'll have the G.I. Bill when I come out." "If you come out." We stared at each other. "Sonny, please. Be reasonable. I know it ain't far from perfect. But we've got to do the best we can."

"I ain't learning nothing in school," he said. "Even when I go." He turned away from me and opened the window and threw his cigarette out into the narrow alley. "At least, I ain't learning nothing you'd want me to learn." He slammed the window so hard I thought the glass would fly out, and turned back to me. "And I'm sick of the stink of these garbage cans!"

Sonny," I said, "I know how you feel. But if you don't finish school now, you're going to be sorry later that you didn't." I grabbed him by the shoulders. "And you only got another year. It ain't so bad. And I'll come back and I swear I'll help you do whatever you want to do. Just try to put up with it till I come back. Will you please do that? For me?"

He didn't answer and he wouldn't look at me. "Sonny. You hear me?"

He pulled away. "I hear you. But you never hear anything I say."

I didn't know what to say to that. He looked out of the window and then back at me. "OK," he said, and sighed. "I'll try."

Then I said, trying to cheer him up a little. "They got a piano at Isabel's. You can practice on it."

And as a matter of fact, it did cheer him up for a minute. "That's right," he said to himself. "I forgot that." His face relaxed a little. But the worry, the thoughtfulness, played on it still, the way shadows play on a face which is staring into the fire.

But I thought I'd never hear the end of that piano. At first, Isabel would write me, saying how nice it was that Sonny was so serious about his music and how, as soon as he came in from school, or whenever he had been when he was supposed to be at school, he went straight to that piano and stayed there until suppertime. And, after supper, he went back to that piano and stayed there until everybody went to bed. He was at the piano all day Saturday and all day Sunday. Then he bought a record player and started playing records. He'd play one record over and over again, all day long sometimes, and he'd improvise along with it on the piano. Or he'd play one section of the record, one chord, one change, one progression, then he'd do it on the piano. Then back to the record. Then back to the piano.

Well, I really don't know how they stood it. Isabel finally confessed that it wasn't like living with a person at all, it was like living with sound. And the sound didn't make any sense to her, didn't make any sense to any of them—naturally. They began, in a way, to be affrighted by this presence that was living in their home. It was as though Sonny were some sort of god, or monster. He moved in an atmosphere which wasn't like theirs at all. They fed him, and he ate himself, he walked in and out of their door; he certainly wasn't nasty or unpleasant or rude. Sonny wasn't any of those things; but it was as though he was all wrapped up in some cloud, some fire, some vision all his own; and there wasn't any way to reach him.

At the same time, he wasn't really a man yet, he was still a child, and they had to watch out for him in all kinds of ways. They certainly couldn't throw him out. Neither did they dare to make a great scene about that piano because even they dimly sensed, as I sensed, from so many thousands of miles away, that Sonny was at that piano playing for his life.

But he hadn't been going to school. One day a letter came from the school board and Isabel's mother got it—there had, apparently, been other letters but Sonny had torn them up. This day, when Sonny came in, Isabel's mother showed him the letter and asked where he'd been spending his time. And she finally got it out of him that he'd been down in Greenwich Village, with musicians and other characters, in a white girl's apartment. And this scared her and she started to scream at him and what came up, once she began—though she denies it to this day—was what sacrifices they were making to give Sonny a decent home and how little he appreciated it.

Sonny didn't play the piano that day. By evening, Isabel's mother had calmed down but then there was the old man to deal with, and Isabel herself. Isabel says she did her best to be calm but she broke down and started crying. She says she just watched Sonny's face. She could tell, by watching him, what was happening with him. And what was happening was that they penetrated his cloud, they had reached him. Even if their fingers had been a thousand times more gentle than human fingers ever are, he could hardly help feeling that they had stripped him naked and were splitting on that nakedness. For he also had to see that his presence, that his music, which was life or death to him, had been tortured for them, and that they had endured it, not at all for his sake, but only for mine. And Sonny couldn't take that. He can take it a little better today than he could then but he's still not very good at it and, frankly, I don't know anybody who is.

The silence of the next few days must have been louder than the sound of all the music ever played since time began. One morning, before she went to work, Isabel was in her room for something and she suddenly realized that all of his records were gone. And she knew for certain that he was gone. And he was. He went as far...
as the navy would carry him. He finally sent me a postcard from some place in
Greece and that was the first I knew that Sonny was still alive. I didn't see him any
more until we were both back in New York and the war had long been over.

He was a man by then, of course, but I wasn't willing to see it. He came by the
house from time to time, but we fought almost every time we met. I didn't like the
way he carried himself, loose and dreamlike all the time, and I didn't like his friends,
and his music seemed to be merely an excuse for the life he led. It sounded just that
weird and disordered.

Then we had a fight, a pretty awful fight, and I didn't see him for months. By
and by I looked him up, where he was living, in a furnished room in the Village,
and I tried to make it up. But there were lots of other people in the room and Sonny just
lay on his bed, and he wouldn't come downstairs with me, and he treated these
other people as though they were his family and I weren't. So I got mad and then he
said he was mad, and then I told him that he might just as well be dead as live the way
he was living. Then he stood up and he told me not to worry about him anymore in
life, that he was dead as far as I was concerned. Then he pushed me to the door and
the other people looked on as though nothing were happening, and he slammed the
door behind me. I stood in the hallway, staring at the door. I heard somebody laugh
in the room and then the tears came to my eyes. I started down the steps, whistling
to keep from crying, I kept whistling to myself, You going to need me, baby, one of these
cold, rainy days.

I read about Sonny's trouble in the spring. Little Grace died in the fall. She was
a beautiful little girl. But she only lived a little over two years. She died of polio and she
suffered. She had a slight fever for a couple of days, but it didn't seem like any-
things and we just kept her in bed. And we would certainly have called the doctor,
but the fever dropped, she seemed to be well. So we thought it had just been a
cold. Then, one day, she was up, playing. Isabel was in the kitchen fixing lunch for
the two boys when they'd come in from school, and she heard Grace fall down in the
living room. When you have a lot of children you don't always start running when
one of them falls, unless they start screaming or something. And, this time, Grace
was quiet. Yet, Isabel says that when she heard that thump and then that silence,
something happened in her to make her afraid. And she ran to the living room and
there was little Grace on the floor, all twisted up, and the reason she hadn't
screamed was that she couldn't get her breath. And when she did scream, it was the
worst sound, Isabel says, that she'd ever heard in all her life, and she still hears it
sometimes in her dreams. Isabel will sometimes wake me up with a low, moaning-
strangled sound and I have to be quick to awaken her and hold her to me and where
Isabel is weeping against me seems a mortal wound.

I think I may have written Sonny the very day that little Grace was buried. I
was sitting in the living room in the Dark, and my self and I suddenly thought of
Sonny. My trouble made his real.

One Saturday afternoon, when Sonny had been living with us, or, anyway,
been in our house, for nearly two weeks. I found myself wandering aimlessly about
the living room, drinking from a can of beer, and trying to work up the courage to
search Sonny's room. He was out, he was usually out whenever I was home, and
Isabel had taken the children to see their grandparents. Suddenly I was standing still
in front of the living room window, watching Seventh Avenue. The idea of searching
Sonny's room made me still. I scarcely dared to admit to myself what I'd be
searching for. I didn't know what I'd do if I found it. Or if I didn't.

On the sidewalk across from me, near the entrance to a barbecue joint, some
people were holding an old-fashioned revival meeting. The barbecue cook, wearing a
dirty white apron, his coarse hair reddish and metallic in the pale sun, and a cigara-
rette between his lips, stood in the doorway, watching them. Kids and older people
paused in their errands and stood there along with some older men and a couple of
very tough-looking women who watched everything that happened on the avenue,
as though they owned it, or were maybe owned by it. Well, they were watching this,
too. The revival was being carried on by three sisters in black, and a brother. All
they had were their voices and their Bibles and a tambourine. The brother was testifying
and while he testified two of the sisters stood together, seeming to say, amen, and
the third sister walked around with the tambourine outstretched and a couple of
people dropped coins into it. Then the brother's testimony ended and the sister who
had been taking up the collection dumped the coins into her palm and transferred
them to the pocket of her long black robe. Then she raised both hands, striking the
tambourine against the air, and then against one hand, and she started to sing. And
the two other sisters and the brother joined in.

It was strange, suddenly, to watch, though I had been seeing these street meet-
ings all my life. So, of course, had everybody else down there. Yet, they paused and
watched and listened and I stood still at the window. "Tis the old ship of Zion," they
sang, and the sister with the tambourine kept a steady, jangling beat, "it has rescued
many a thousand!" Not a soul under the sound of their voices was hearing this song for
the first time, not one of them had been rescued. Nor had they seen much in the
way of rescue work being done around them. Neither did they especially believe in
the holiness of the three sisters and the brother, they knew too much about them,
and they lived, and how. The woman with the tambourine, whose voice domi-
nated the air, whose face was bright with joy, was divided by very little from the
woman who stood watching her, a cigarette between her heavy, chapped lips, her
hair a cuckoo's nest, her face scarred and swollen from many beatings, and her
black eyes glittering like coal. Perhaps they both knew this, which was why, when,
as rarely, they addressed each other, they addressed each other as Sister. As the
singing filled the air the watching, listening faces underwent a change, the eyes fo-
cusing on something within; the music seemed to soothe a poison out of them; and
time seemed, nearly, to fall away from the sullen, belligerent, battered faces, as
though they were fleeing back to their first condition, while dreaming of their last.
The barbecue cook half shook his head and smiled, and dropped his cigarette and
disappeared into his joint. A man fumbled in his pockets for change and stood hold-
ing it in his hand impatiently, as though he had just remembered a pressing appoint-
ment further up the avenue. He looked furious. Then I saw Sonny, standing on the
edge of the crowd. He was carrying a wide, flat notebook with a green cover, and

"Tis the old ship of Zion," they sang, and the sister with the tambourine kept a steady, jangling beat, "it has rescued many a thousand!" Not a soul under the sound of their voices was hearing this song for the first time, not one of them had been rescued. Nor had they seen much in the way of rescue work being done around them. Neither did they especially believe in the holiness of the three sisters and the brother, they knew too much about them, knew where they lived, and how. The woman with the tambourine, whose voice dominated the air, whose face was bright with joy, was divided by very little from the woman who stood watching her, a cigarette between her heavy, chapped lips, her hair a cuckoo’s nest, her face scarred and swollen from many beatings, and her black eyes glittering like coal. Perhaps they both knew this, which was why, when, as rarely, they addressed each other, they addressed each other as Sister. As the singing filled the air the watching, listening faces underwent a change, the eyes focusing on something within; the music seemed to soothe a poison out of them; and time seemed, nearly, to fall away from the sullen, belligerent, battered faces, as though they were fleeing back to their first condition, while dreaming of their last. The barbecue cook half shook his head and smiled, and dropped his cigarette and disappeared into his joint. A man fumbled in his pockets for change and stood holding it in his hand impatiently, as though he had just remembered a pressing appointment further up the avenue. He looked furious. Then I saw Sonny, standing on the edge of the crowd. He was carrying a wide, flat notebook with a green cover, and
‘Hey,’ he said.
’Hey, yourself. You want some beer?’
‘No. Well, maybe.’ But he came up to the window and stood beside me, looking out. ‘What a warm voice,’ he said.
They were singing If I could only hear my mother pray again!
‘Yes,’ I said, and she can sure beat that tambourine.
‘But what a terrible song,’ he said, and laughed. He dropped his notebook on the sofa and disappeared into the kitchen. ‘Where’s Isabel and the kids?’
‘I think they went to see their grandparents. You hungry?’
‘No.’ He came back into the living room with his can of beer. ‘You want to come some place with me tonight?’
I sensed, I don’t know how, that I couldn’t possibly say no. ‘Sure. Where?’
He sat down on the sofa and picked up his notebook and started leafing through it. ‘I’m going to sit in with some fellows in a joint in the Village.’
‘You mean, you’re going to play, tonight?’
‘That’s right.’ He took a swallow of his beer and moved back to the window.
He gave me a sidelong look. ‘If you can stand it.’
‘I’ll try,’ I said.
He smiled to himself and we both watched as the meeting across the way broke up. The three sisters and the brother, heads bowed, were singing God be with you til we meet again. The faces around them were very quiet. Then the song ended. The small crowd dispersed. We watched the three women and the lone man walk out. ‘What a warm voice,’ he said.
‘No.’ He stood up and walked to the window and remained silent for a long time. Then he sighed. ‘Me,’ he said. Then: ‘While I was downstairs before, on my way here, listening to that woman sing, it struck me all of a sudden how much suffering she must have had to go through—to sing like that. It’s repulsive to think you have to suffer that much.’
I said: ‘But there’s no way not to suffer—Is there, Sonny?’
‘I believe not,’ he said and smiled, ‘but that’s never stopped anyone from trying.’ He looked at me. ‘Has it?’ I realized, with this mocking look, that there stood between us, forever, beyond the power of time or forgiveness, the fact that I had held silence—so long—when he had needed human speech to help him. He turned back to the window. ‘No, there’s no way not to suffer. But you try all kinds of ways to keep from drowning in it, to keep on top of it, and to make it seem—well, like you. Like you did something, all right, and now you’re suffering for it. You know?’ I said nothing. ‘Well you know,’ he said, impatiently, ‘Why do people suffer? Maybe it’s better to do something to give it a reason, any reason.’
‘But we just agreed,’ I said, ‘that there’s no way not to suffer. Isn’t it better, then, just to—take it?’
‘But nobody just takes it,’ Sonny cried, ‘that’s what I’m telling you! Everybody tries not to. You’re just hung up on the way some people try—it’s not your way!’
The hair on my face began to itch, my face felt wet. ‘That’s not true,’ I said, ‘that’s not true. I don’t give a damn what other people do, I don’t even care how they suffer. I just care how you suffer. I just care how you suffer.’ And he looked at me. ‘Please believe me,’ I said, ‘I don’t want to see you—do—trying not to suffer.’
‘I won’t,’ he said, flatly, ‘dying not to suffer. At least, not any faster than anybody else.’
‘But there’s no need,’ I said, ‘trying to laugh, is there? in killing yourself.’
I wanted to say more, but I couldn’t. I wanted to talk about will power and how life could be—well, beautiful. I wanted to say that it was all within; but was it? or, rather, wasn’t that exactly the trouble? And I wanted to promise that I would never fail him again. But it would all have sounded—empty words and lies.
So I made the promise to myself and prayed that I would keep it.
‘It’s terrible sometimes, inside,’ he said, ‘that’s what’s the trouble. You walk these streets, black and funky and cold, and there’s not really a living ass to talk to, and there’s nothing shaking, and there’s no way of getting it out—that storm inside. You can talk it and you can’t make love with it, and when you finally try to get with it and play it, you realize nobody’s listening. So you’ve got to listen. You got to find a way to listen.’
And then he walked away from the window and sat on the sofa again, as though all the wind had suddenly been knocked out of him. ‘Sometimes you’ll do anything to play, even cut your mother’s throat.’ He laughed and looked at me. ‘Or your brother’s.’ Then he sobered. ‘Or your own.’ Then: ‘Don’t worry. I’m all right now and I think I’ll be all right. But I can forget—where I’ve been. I don’t mean just now and I think I’ll be all right. But I can forget—where I’ve been. I don’t mean just the physical place I’ve been, I mean where I’ve been. And what I’ve been.’
"What have you been, Sonny?" I asked.

He smiled—but sat sideways on the sofa, his elbow resting on the back, his fingers playing with his mouth and chin, not looking at me. "I've been something I didn't recognize, didn't know I could be. Didn't know anybody could be." He stopped, looking inward, looking helplessly young, looking old. "I'm not talking about it now because I feel guilty or anything like that—maybe it would be better if I did, I don't know. Anyway, I can't really talk about it. Not to you, not to anybody," and now he turned and faced me. "Sometimes, you know, and it was actually when I was most out of the world, I felt that I was in it, that I was with it, really, and I could play or I didn't really have to play, it just came out of me, it was there. And I don't know how I played, thinking about it now, but I know I did awful things, those times, sometimes, to people. Or it wasn't that I did anything to them—it was that they weren't real."

He picked up the beer can; it was empty; he rolled it between his fingers, and then his hand moved up to his mouth and chin, not looking at me. "I've been something I didn't know I was. In and out of it, thinking about it now, but I know I did awful things, thinking about it now, but I know I did awful things, thinking about it now, but I know I did awful things."

He began pressing the beer can between his hands, I watched the metal begin to give. It glittered, as he played with it, like a knife, and I was afraid he would cut himself, but I said nothing. "Oh well. If I can never tell you anything but after the bottom of something, thinking and sweating and crying and sweating and crying, and I smelled it, you know? my stink, and I thought I'd die if I couldn't get away from it and yet, all the same, that everything I was doing was just a beginning to it. And I didn't know," he paused, still flattening the beer can, "I didn't know, I still don't know, something kept telling me that maybe it was good to smell your own stink, but I didn't think that was what I'd been trying to do—and—who can stand it?"

He abruptly dropped the ruined beer can, looking at me with a small, still smile, and then rose, walking to the window as though it were the lodestone rock. I watched his face, he watched the avenue. "I couldn't tell you when Mama died—but the reason I wanted to leave Harlem so badly was to get away from drugs. And then, when I ran away, that's what I was running from—really. When I came back, nothing had changed. I hadn't changed, I was just—older."

And he stopped, drumming with his fingers on the windowpane. The sun had vanished, soon darkness would fall. I watched his face. "It can come again," he said, almost as though speaking to himself. Then he turned to me. "It can come again," he repeated. "I just want you to know that.

"All right," I said, at last. "So it can come again. All right."

He smiled, but the smile was sorrowful. "I had to try to tell you," he said. "Yes," I said. "I understand that."

"You're my brother," he said, looking straight at me, and not smiling at all. "Yes," I repeated, "yes. I understand that."

He turned back to the window, looking out. "All that hatred down there," he said, "all that hatred and misery and love. It's a wonder it doesn't blow the avenue apart."

We went to the only nightclub on a short, dark street, downtown. We squeezed through the narrow, chattering, jam-packed bar to the entrance of the big room, where the bandstand was. And we stood there for a moment, for the lights were very dim in this room and we couldn't see. Then, "Hello, boy," said a voice and an enormous black man, much older than Sonny or myself, erupted out of all that atmospheric lighting and put an arm around Sonny's shoulder. "I'm sitting right here," he said, "waiting for you."

He had a big voice, too, and heads in the darkness turned toward us. Sonny grinned and pulled a little away, and said, "Creole, this is my brother. I told you about him."

Creole shook my hand. "I'm glad to meet you, son," he said, and it was clear that he was glad to meet me there for Sonny's sake. And he smiled, "You got a real musician in your family," and he took his arm from Sonny's shoulder and slapped him, lightly, affectionately, with the back of his hand.

"Well. Now I've heard it all," said a voice behind us. This was another musician, and a friend of Sonny's, a cool-black, cheerful-looking man, built close to the ground. He immediately began confiding to me, at the top of his lungs, the most terrible things about Sonny, his teeth gleaming like a lighthouse and his laugh coming up out of him like the beginning of an earthquake. And it turned out that everyone at the bar knew Sonny—or almost everyone, some were musicians, working there, or nearby, or not working, some were simply hangers-on, and some were there to hear Sonny play. I was introduced to all of them and they were all very polite to me. Yet, it was clear that, for them, I was only Sonny's brother. Here, I was in Sonny's world.

Or, rather: his kingdom. Here, it was not even a question that his veins bore royal blood.

They were going to play soon and Creole installed me, by myself, at a table in a dark corner. Then I watched them, Creole, and the little black man, and Sonny, and the others, while they huddled around, standing just below the bandstand. The light from the bandstand spilled just a little short of them and, watching them laughing and gesturing and moving about, I had the feeling that they, nevertheless, were being most careful not to step into that circle of light too suddenly: that if they moved into the light too suddenly, without thinking, they would perish in flame. Then, while I watched, one of them, the small, black man, moved into the light and crossed the bandstand and started fooling around with his drums. Then—being funny, being and being, also, extremely ceremonious—Creole took Sonny by the arm and led him to the piano. A woman's voice called Sonny's name and a few hands started clapping. And Sonny, also being funny and being ceremonious, and so touched, I think, that he could have cried, but neither hiding it nor showing it, riding it like a man, grinned, and put both hands to his heart and bowed from the waist.

Creole then went to the bass fiddle and a lean, very bright-skinned brown man jumped up on the bandstand and picked up his horn. So there they were, and the atmosphere on the bandstand and in the room began to change and tighten. Someone stepped up to the microphone and announced them. Then there were all kinds of murmurs. Some people at the bar shutters raised. The waitress ran around, frantically getting in the last orders, guys and chicks got closer to each other, and the lights on the bandstand, on the quartet, turned to a kind of indigo. Then they all looked different there. Creole looked around him for the last time, as though he were what we mainly hear, or hear corroborated, are personal, private, vanishing evocations. But the man who creates the music is hearing something else, is dealing with the roar rising from the void and imposing order on it as it hits the air. What is the roar rising from the void and imposing order on it as it hits the air? Is it the void and imposing order on it as it hits the air? Is it the void and imposing order on it as it hits the air?
"What have you been, Sonny?" I asked.
He smiled—but sat sideways on the sofa, his elbow resting on the back, his fingers playing with his mouth and chin, not looking at me. "I've been something I didn't recognize, didn't know I could be. Didn't know anybody could be." He stopped, looking inward, looking helplessly young, looking old. "I'm not talking about it now because I feel guilty or anything like that—maybe it would be better if I did, I don't know. Anyway, I can't really talk about it. Not to you, not to anybody," and now he turned and faced me. "Sometimes, you know, and it was actually when I was most out of the world, I felt that I was in it, that I was with it, really, and I could play or I didn't really have to play, it just came out of me, it was there. And I don't know how I played, thinking about it now, but I know I did awful things, those times, sometimes, to people. Or it wasn't that I did anything to them—it was that they weren't real.
"He packed up the beer can; it was empty; he rolled it between his palms: "And other times—well, I needed a fix, I needed to find a place to lean, I needed to clear a space to listen—and I couldn't find it, and I—went crazy, I did terrible things to me, I was terrible for me." He began pressing the beer can between his hands, I watched the metal begin to give. It glittered, as he played with it, like a knife, and I was afraid he would cut himself, but I said nothing. "Oh well. I can never tell you. I was all by myself at the bottom of something, stinking and sweating and crying and shaking, and I smelled it, you know? my stink, and I thought I'd die if I couldn't get away from it and yet, all the same, I knew that everything I was doing was just locking me in with it. And I didn't know," he paused, still flattening the beer can, "I didn't know, I still don't know, something kept telling me that maybe it was good to smell your own stink, but I didn't think that what I'd been trying to do—and—who can stand it?" and he abruptly dropped the ruined beer can, standing up with a small, still smile, and then rose, walking to the window as though it were true. He did not even look at a deadstone rock. I watched his face, he watched the avenue. "I couldn't tell you when Mama died—but the reason I wanted to leave Harlem so bad was to get away from drugs. And then, when I ran away, that's what I was running from—really. And when I came back, nothing had changed, I hadn't changed, I was just—older." And he stopped, drumming with his fingers on the windowpane. The sun had vanished, soon darkness would fall. I watched his face. "It can come again," he said, almost as though speaking to himself. Then he turned to me. "It can come again," he repeated. "I just want you to know that."
"All right," I said at last. "So it can come again. All right."
He smiled, but the smile was sorrowful. "I had to try to tell you," he said. "Yes," I said. "I understand that."
"You're my brother," he said, looking straight at me, and not smiling at all. "Yes," I repeated, "yes, I understand that."
He turned back to the window, looking out. "All that hatred down there," he said, "all that hatred and misery and love. It's a wonder it doesn't blow the avenue apart."

We went to the only nightclub on a short, dark street, downtown. We squeezed through the narrow, chattering jam-packed bar to the entrance of the big room, where the banstand was. And we stood there for a moment, for the lights were very dim in this room and we couldn't see. Then, "Hello, boy," said a voice and an enormous black man, much older than Sonny or myself, erupted out of all that atmospheric lighting and put an arm around Sonny's shoulder. "I been sitting right here," he said, "waiting for you."

"Sonny grinned and pulled a little away, and said, "Creole, this is my brother. I told you about him."

Creole shook my hand. "I'm glad to meet you, son," he said, and it was clear that he was glad to meet me there for Sonny's sake. And he smiled, "You got a real musician in your family," and he took his arm from Sonny's shoulder and slapped him, lightly, affectionately, with the back of his hand.

"Well. Now I've heard it all," said a voice behind us. This was another musician, and a friend of Sonny's, a coal-black, cheerful-looking man, built close to the ground. He immediately began confessing to me, at the top of his lungs, the most terrible things about Sonny, his teeth gleaming like a lighthouse and his laugh coming up out of him like the beginning of an earthquake. And it turned out that everyone at the bar was everybody; or almost everyone; some were musicians, working there, or nearby, or not working, some were simply hangers-on, and some were there to hear Sonny play. I was introduced to all of them and they were all very polite to me. Yet, it was clear that, for them, I was only Sonny's brother. Here, I was in Sonny's world. Or, rather: his kingdom. Here, it was not even a question that his veins bore royal blood.

They were going to play soon and Creole installed me, by myself, at a table in a dark corner. Then I watched them, Creole, and the little black man, and Sonny, and the others, while they huddled around, standing just below the banstand. The light from the banstand spilled just a little short of them and, watching them laughing and gesturing and moving about, I had the feeling that they, nevertheless, were being most careful not to step into that circle of light too suddenly: that if they moved into the light too suddenly, without thinking, they would perish in flame. Then, while I watched, one of them, the small, black man, crept up out of the darkness, crossed the banstand and started fooling around with his drums. Then—being funny and being, also, extremely ceremonious—Creole took Sonny by the arm and led him to the piano. A woman's voice called Sonny's name and a few hands started clapping. And Sonny, also being funny and being ceremonious, and so touched, I think, that he could have cried, but neither hiding it nor showing it, riding it like a man, grinned, and put both hands to his heart and bowed from the waist.

Creole then went to the bass fiddle and a lean, very bright-skinned brown man jumped up on the banstand and picked up his horn. So there they were, and the atmosphere on the banstand and in the room began to change and tighten. Someone stepped up to the microphone and announced them. Then there were all kinds of murmurs. Some people at the bar pushed others. The waitress ran around, frantically getting in the last orders, guys and chicks got closer to each other, and the lights on the banstand, on the quarter, turned to a kind of indigo. Then they all looked different there. Creole looked about for the last time, as though he were making certain that all his chickens were in the coop, and then he jumped and struck the fiddle. And there they were.

All I know about music is that not many people ever really hear it. And even then, on the rare occasions when something opens within, and the music enters, what we mainly hear, or hear corroborated, are personal, private, vanishing evocations. But the man who creates the music is hearing something else, is dealing with the roar rising from the void and imposing order on it as it hits the air. What is evoked in him, then, is of another order, more terrible because it has no words, and triumphant, too, for that same reason. And his triumph, when he triumphs, is ours. I just watched Sonny's face. His face was troubled, he was working hard, but he
Creole wasn't trying any longer to get Sonny in the water. He was wishing him God-speed. Then he stepped back, very slowly, filling the air with the immense suggestion that Sonny speak for himself.

Then they all gathered around Sonny and Sonny played. Every now and again one of them seemed to say, amen. Sonny's fingers filled the air with life, his life. But that life contained so many others. And Sonny went all the way back, he really began with the bare, flat statement of the opening phrase of the song. Then he began to make it his. It was very beautiful because it wasn't hurried and it was no longer a lament. I seemed to hear with what burning he had made it his, with what burning we had yet to make it ours, how we could cease lamenting. Freedom hunkered around us and I understood, at last, that he could help us to be free if we would listen, that he would not be free until we did. Yet, there was no battle in his face now. I heard what he had gone through, and would continue to go through until he came to rest in earth. He had made it his: that long line, of which we knew only Mama and Daddy. And he was giving it back, as everything must be given back, so that, passing through death, it can live forever. I saw my mother's face again, and felt, for the first time, how the stones of the road she had walked on must have bruised her feet. I saw the moonlit road where my father's brother died. And it brought something else back to me, and carried me past it, I saw my little girl again and felt Isabel's tears again, and I felt my own tears begin to rise. And I was yet aware that this was only a moment, that the world waited outside, as hungry as a tiger, and that struggle stretched above us, longer than the sky.

Then it was over. Creole and Sonny let out their breath, both soaking wet, and grinning. There was a lot of applause and some of it was real. In the dark, the girl came by and I asked her to take drinks to the bandstand. There was a long pause, while they talked up there in the indigo light and after awhile I saw the girl put a Scotch and milk on top of the piano for Sonny. He didn't seem to notice it, but just before they started playing again, he sipped from it and looked toward me, and nodded. Then he put it back on top of the piano. For me, then, as they began to play again, it glowed and shook above my brother's head like the very cup of trembling.

QUESTIONS

1. Who is the protagonist?
2. Although the two brothers hold competing philosophies of life, what do they have in common?
3. Is it essential to the meaning of the story that Sonny be a musician? Would the theme be affected if he were a painter or a writer?
4. What does the story have to say about the relationship of art to religion?
5. Explore the implications of the allusion to the book of Isaiah 51:17-23 in the concluding sentence. What has the narrator learned as the result of his experience?

cup of trembling: See Isaiah 51:22.