

## *Prologue*

HANGING ON THE WALL in my study is a simple wooden plaque given to me by my teacher, Shunryu Suzuki, a few months before his death in December 1971. Engraved on the plaque are four Chinese characters copied from his calligraphy that roughly translated mean: *this day will not come again; each minute a precious gem*. It is a reminder to me that the Zen student lives in the present moment, his beginner's mind open to the endless wonders of the world around him. Roshi-san had a smile on his face when he translated the characters for me, the same smile that appears in the photo I keep on my desk. For me that smile is as timeless as those words, the Buddha's own smile reminding me of my Buddha nature. Whenever I catch myself getting lost in the dark alleys of the past, an ever-present danger for a jazz historian, I have only to glance at his picture or at his calligraphy to find my way back to the secure mooring of the here and now. It's hard to believe that it's been seven years since he left us, but as Roshi-san himself once said, life and death are the same thing. He is as present now as he ever was, keeping a watchful eye out for me as I begin these pages, trying to reverse the flow of time as Dogen-zenji did in the mountain solitudes of Mount Tiantong when he cast off his mind and stepped into the trackless void.

Earlier this summer my old friend Diana Sartori invited me out to Naropa to accompany her in an evening of poetry and jazz. The poems were new, a long cycle she had recently completed entitled "Samsara and Nirvana," but the night was a throwback, a reprisal of our performances in the late fifties in the clubs and coffeehouses of North Beach where we carried on a tradition that had begun with Kenneth Rexroth and Lawrence Ferlinghetti. It had been

years since we'd performed together but we picked up right where we'd left off nearly two decades earlier, piano and voice cavorting onstage like soul mates in a pagan marriage rite. The crowd was every bit as enthusiastic as the bohemian angels who followed us from coffeehouse to coffeehouse back in the magnificent, scarred fifties when my Zen-inspired jazz had been the perfect complement to Diana's non-intentional poetry, and afterward we repaired to the nearby house that Burroughs shared with Corso for an after-hours party of full-on nostalgia, a chorus of old-timers swapping war stories from the birth of the counterculture while a bevy of twenty-somethings crowded around us in the living room, sipping beers and passing around the occasional joint. Corso was his normal provocative self, the precocious poet playing devil's advocate to Ginsberg's laid-back dharma angel; Burroughs was as irreverent as ever, half mystic philosopher, half alien; and Amiri Baraka did his best to keep us grounded with his maximum-density materialism and his periodic rant against the capitalist machine. But in the end it was a chorale of Buddhist voices that carried the night—myself, Allen, Diana, Orlovsky, even Burroughs in his own way. As the night wore on it became clear to me—and I think to all of us—that the voice that had cried out in the wilderness of the fifties against a repressive culture, in anger and despair and hope and joy, had been the voice of a spiritual longing that had sought its inspiration in the esoteric wisdom of the East, much as the transcendentalists had done more than a century earlier.

Though Allen was the ringleader, Diana and I did our fair share of the talking. She had always been a marvelous storyteller, and I guess I had picked up a certain ability from my years of writing about the colorful characters that people the off-kilter world of jazz—or else my companions that night made a special effort to cede the stage to me since I was only there for a short visit. Allen asked me to tell the story of how I met Elijah, and with Diana providing counterpoint I must have spent close to an hour entertaining the gathering with my introduction to Buddhism through the offices of the most unusual jazzman I've ever met, the man who taught me that blue is the color of nirvana and that a

tenor sax's true purpose is to empty the mind of all but the wind and clouds and rain.

The next afternoon, Peter, Allen, and Diana took me to the airport—three New Yorkers and a lone Californian—and the three of them ganged up on me, as New Yorkers often will when they outnumber their West Coast cousins. Allen was adamant that it was my spiritual duty to write up my early experiences as a kind of Buddhist memoir, and Peter and Diana provided a convincing chorus. Confronted with such overwhelming odds, I opted for Hakuin's answer when faced with the winds of destiny: "Is that so?" And so it proved to be, especially once Diana returned to San Francisco at the end of the summer, determined to remind me of my duty every time we got together at the Zen Center for zazen and crumpets.

This book is dedicated to Elijah, my first mentor on the road to nirvana, and to my teacher, Shunryu Suzuki, the embodiment of all that I hope to be, but it never would have been written without Diana's invitation and her affectionate prodding and constant encouragement. To them my thanks and my love. They are the harmonious background to a world of breathtaking imbalance, the spaciousness in which these words dwell.



# 1

MY INTRODUCTION TO ZEN began with the sound of a horn. To be more explicit, the sound of a tenor sax. It was the first Saturday in January, 1956, two days before the beginning of my second semester at UC Berkeley, where I was enrolled as a music major, and I had just moved into my first apartment, a fifteen-by-twenty garret over a detached garage with a cubicle for a bathroom, a small gas stove, and a 1903 Hornung Bros. upright against the back wall that had been recently tuned. It had a skylight, which I found very cool, and a window on either side, one facing north toward the campus and the other south toward People's Park. And it was sufficiently isolated that I could play my instrument without unduly disturbing the neighbors. The perfect pad for a single-minded young jazz musician sold on the virtues of practice and dedicated to his art.

I was unpacking my books when I heard the faint sound of a sax coming from somewhere down the block. Still giddy from the elixir of having my own place, I didn't pay much attention at first, but after a few minutes my curiosity kicked in. I went to the north window and opened it. Whoever it was, he was practicing a minor scale but there was something odd about it, a Middle Eastern or oriental color I wasn't familiar with. I stood there and listened until I figured it out: a minor scale with a sharp fourth, a flat sixth, and a sharp seventh, something I had never run across before. I went to the piano to confirm what I'd heard and played around with it for a few minutes, intrigued by the possibilities. When I went back to my unpacking, my unknown colleague had moved on to practicing patterns, modulating one by one through the different keys. That's when I realized he had some major chops, well beyond

what I or any of my fellow students were capable of. He was too fluid, too fast, and even from that distance I could tell that his tone was stronger and fuller than that of any of my classmates. One of my teachers, perhaps, or a local musician, maybe even someone I had seen playing in one of the Fillmore clubs. It seemed a happy coincidence, moving into my first apartment and having it turn out to be just down the street from a first-rate saxophonist.

I went on with my unpacking until he started soloing over imaginary changes, and moments later I lost all interest in the apartment. A few bars were all it took to realize that he wasn't one of my teachers. We had a couple of professors in the department who could really blow but this guy's style was too distinctive. Nor was he one of the local saxophonists, someone who had made a name for himself in the San Francisco jazz scene. By now I had heard them all and I would have recognized his style if I had heard it before. In fact, as I sat down by the window on the twin-size mattress that I had bought secondhand the previous day to stand in as a bed, it dawned on me that I couldn't remember ever hearing anybody quite like him. He was using the same scale for the most part, giving his lines an ethereal, Arabian Nights flavor, but it wasn't the scale that impressed me—it was the ideas. They were as inventive as any I had heard on vinyl and as stylistically unique. I had spent countless hours trying to cop the style of every great saxophonist who caught my ear, beginning with Bird when I was still learning my scales and most recently Stan Getz and Paul Desmond, who were the epitome of that West Coast cool that was all the rage among the jazzophiles at Berkeley. But except for Bird and Prez and maybe one or two others, I could always hear echoes of other musicians' ideas in the solos that I was learning—a little Charlie Parker, a little Lester Young, an echo or two of Coleman Hawkins. But whoever it was, he didn't sound like anybody I had ever heard. I had no clue where his ideas were coming from. It was like he was his own school of jazz, and before long I found his solos so arresting that I gave up trying to dissect them and just lay back on the bed and let the distant music flow over me like an invitation to another world. My mattress became a magic carpet, floating me

up and out of my window, carrying me into whatever landscape he was imagining as he played, making me feel as if I were overflying the earth with an unaccompanied tenor sax for a soundtrack. When he finally stopped, at precisely one-thirty, I felt like the wind had suddenly failed, sending me plummeting back to earth where I was rudely deposited once again in my Berkeley apartment.

I had missed my lunch break by more than an hour but I didn't care. Somewhere down the block a master of the music had just finished practicing his horn and that was all I could think about. I even got on my bike and took a quick ride around the block on the odd chance that I might run into some hip jazz angel exiting a suburban Berkeley house with a tenor sax under his arm and an aura of majesty on his face but I had no such luck; nor, I realized, did I have any real idea where the sound had been coming from, though I knew it couldn't have been very far away. When I returned home and wolfed down some leftovers from the fridge, I was barely aware of what I was eating. Who could it have been? An up-and-coming East Coast saxophonist that the music department had invited to Berkeley for the spring semester as a visiting professor? Some hot new sideman that I had yet to discover, getting ready to burst onto the jazz scene like a comet shooting across the heavens? Did he actually live somewhere down the block—a stroke of luck seemingly too good to be true—or was he just passing through, staying in a friend's house whose walls were still smoking from the music? I was dying to find out but there was nothing I could do except hang around the apartment until the unknown sax man broke his silence. The thought that it might have been a one-time deal, that I might be less than a hundred yards from a truly great saxophonist and not have the chance to meet him was almost excruciating, but there was nothing I could do other than marshal my patience and let my chips ride.

As it turned out, I had no cause for worry. I spent the rest of the afternoon practicing my sax and then the piano, and in the evening I got in my car and headed over the Bay Bridge to San Francisco where I visited some of the local clubs, wondering if I might run across him smoking up the bandstand. I didn't hear him

or anyone else of any particular note that night, at least not anyone on his level, but the next morning, just after ten-thirty, I heard the sound of a tenor sax present itself at the open window, breathing life into an altered scale. This time I was ready to seize the moment. I waited until he started playing patterns with that unmistakable fluidity. Then I put on the fur-lined jacket and scarf my parents had given me for Christmas and descended the stairs to the street like a five-year-old enthralled by the enchanted timbre of the pied piper's magic flute.

It didn't take me long to locate the source of that enchantment. At the other end of the block, on the same side of the street, surrounded by a plank fence covered with ivy and flowering vines, stood a dark-green, two-story Victorian with a steeply pitched roof, spired turrets, gable dormers, and a wraparound porch with spindlework banisters. It was a beautiful relic from a legendary era, the glory days of the gay nineties, that I had stopped to admire when I first checked out the apartment. The music was coming from out back so I took the liberty of letting myself in through the side gate. I followed a white-stone walkway that ran alongside the house to the backyard where I emerged into a landscape that startled me almost as much as the unseen sax had the previous day. There, in the middle of Berkeley, hidden to the eyes of anyone passing by on that small suburban street, was a secluded Japanese garden, as finely sculpted and meticulously cared for as any you might find in Kyoto or Osaka. The walkway continued on past gracefully trimmed shrubs, flower beds, and oddly shaped boulders of different sizes sitting in beds of raked sand. There were several bonsai perched on pedestals and a small pool with brightly colored fish, ringed by stones. A rivulet of water flowed into the pool from a cluster of tall boulders, like a mountain river emptying into a secluded lake. On one of those boulders, flatter and wider than the rest, sat a stone Buddha about three feet tall, his hands folded on his lap and his eyes half-closed, sunk in some mysterious inner silence. At the rear of the property, flush against the back fence, was a small redwood cottage that someone had remodeled to make it look like a medieval Japanese temple. It had a curved tile roof, a shaded front



porch, a slatted sliding door fitted with opaque paper instead of glass, and a red paper lantern decorated with Chinese characters hanging above an engraved wooden sign that read: leave your ego at the door. For a moment I thought I must have misread it, but a second glance confirmed my initial reading. Leave your ego at the door. Whoever was in that cottage playing that otherworldly tenor clearly had a sense of humor.

It was a chilly, overcast day, in the mid-forties at best, and the music he was playing seemed to reflect the weather: grave, penetrating, as weighty as the oppressive cloud cover that sapped the day of any vestige of warmth. I didn't dare interrupt, not with the closed door and that unusual sign, so I sat down on one of the steps that accessed the raised porch to listen to the rest of his session, marveling at the warmth and clarity of his deep, rounded tone, which hadn't been perceptible from my apartment. It was elegant and sad at the same time, solemn and thoughtful, and the weight of that tone seemed to anchor me to the music, as if it were the center of gravity rather than the earth beneath me. He was playing free-form now, long sinuous melodies that seemed as oriental as the garden, as if he were a thousand miles from Berkeley wandering through unfamiliar landscapes that rose up in the shadows of my imagination, filling me with a bittersweet longing that was almost too poignant to endure.

When he finally stopped, at exactly one-thirty, I felt a kind of a shock, as if I had just been ushered out of a movie theater, forced to readjust to the harsh light of the outside world. I sat there for several minutes trying to get my bearings, a little unsure of myself now, until I heard the sound of running water coming from inside the cottage. I got up and was about to knock when a voice called out: "You can come in now, but be sure to leave your shoes outside." That I could do. My ego I wasn't so sure about. I slipped off my shoes and slid the door open to find an imposing black man in a loose-fitting robe standing over a small sink, washing vegetables with his back to the door. He had a shaven head and looked to be in his early thirties, and he was at least six foot four with a powerful frame, the kind of person I might have instinctively steered clear

of had I passed him on the street, but the robe—a coal-black Japanese kimono with wide sleeves and silver borders—made him seem surprisingly benign.

Oddly enough, he didn't turn around to see who it was. "You hungry?" he asked without lifting his head from the sink.

"I don't want to be a bother," I said, surprised by his offer. "I just stopped by to introduce myself."

"Okay, but I'm accounted a pretty fair cook." He spoke in a musical southern drawl and his voice was soft and measured, not what I would have expected from a man built like an NFL linebacker. "I've put on some rice to steam and I'm about to stir-fry some vegetables. It'll be ready in ten minutes. You're welcome to join me, brother. Or not. Your call."

"Okay, sure, why not? I'd love to."

"I'm Elijah," he said, finally turning around to look at me as he took the vegetables out of the sink and set them on a cutting board, "though most folks round here call me Preacher. And who are you, exactly?"

"My name's Dan, Dan Hennessey. I just moved in down the block. I could hear you playing from my apartment. It was pretty impressive."

"You a student at the college?"

"Music student."

"I heard somebody playing a sax yesterday. Was that you?"

"That was me."

"Didn't I hear a piano also?"

"That was also me."

"Thought so. Well, why don't you have a seat, Brother Dan. It'll be done before you know it."

I looked around for a chair but there wasn't one. Apart from the tiny kitchenette where Elijah was deftly chopping vegetables with a butcher's knife, the room was empty, just a bare floor covered with tatami mats, a small bookcase with a few cushions stacked up beside it, a tenor sax in a stand in the far corner, and a single wall hanging—a Japanese scroll with some elegant ink calligraphy, what I later learned was called a *tatemono*. There was a back room divided

off from the main room by a slatted wall with the same opaque paper and a bathroom no bigger than mine next to the kitchenette, but no furniture whatsoever. I grabbed a cushion and sat down rather awkwardly on the floor while he stir-fried the vegetables in a large wok. I was no cook—after three days on my own I still hadn't gotten past warming up a can of chili beans—but the big man looked like he knew what he was doing and the pungent aroma that wafted from the sizzling wok reminded me how hungry I was.

When the vegetables were ready he pulled out a folding table with foot-high legs that was tucked in between the refrigerator and the stove and set it up in the middle of the room. From beneath the counter he took out a tray with lacquered bowls and tableware inscribed with Chinese characters and proceeded to set the table in a meticulous, almost ceremonial manner. There was something very graceful about his movements that I wouldn't have expected from a man that large, but it seemed to fit with his unusual dress and the exotic surroundings, a sense of quiet solemnity that made me reluctant to interrupt the ritual with any irreverent chatter, despite the questions that were buzzing in my head. I had no idea how well-known he was but after a second straight day of listening to him play I certainly knew how good he was. And he was black, like virtually all the great jazz musicians that I had grown up idolizing and unlike any of my teachers at Berkeley—the first honest-to-God black jazzman I had ever met. There were a million things I wanted to ask—had he recorded any albums, who had he played with, was he in a group I might have heard of or had he ever been in one, how had he developed his unique style—but other than the quick lesson he gave me on how to use chopsticks, I spent the entire lunch answering his questions while I fidgeted on my cushion, trying to keep myself from rambling: What kind of music did I listen to? Who were my favorite musicians? Why the piano, why the sax? What was the music program at Berkeley like? Where was I from and what got me started playing an instrument? What did I think of San Francisco after growing up in the Valley? Here I was, a nineteen-year-old kid from an all-white suburb who had led a thoroughly uneventful life sitting on the floor across the lunch

table from a shaven-head black saxophonist in a Japanese kimono who had as unique a sound as I had ever heard—and he was asking me questions? Listening to my every word as if nothing else in the world mattered? Wanting to know the tiniest details—the name of my high school band director, what tune we played for the finale of my senior year concert—and nodding at my answers as if he had just acquired a piece of priceless knowledge? I had no idea how to react other than to continue rambling on about my high school dreams to one day become a professional jazz musician.

After we cleared away the meal, he invited me out to the porch where we sat on a couple of wooden benches and looked out on the garden. I was still rambling when we sat down, explaining how my real teachers had been the records I'd listened to, but my long dissertation had drained the nervousness out of me and eventually I collected myself enough to ask him a question that had been on my mind since I first heard his sax floating in through an open window.

“There was one thing I wanted to ask you, if you don't mind. Actually there are a lot of things, but one thing I really noticed was your use of space when you play. Most of the guys at school seem to feel like they have to fill up the bar with as many notes as they can. I'm the same way. Even my teachers are, for the most part. But when you play, the music really breathes. Is that something you think about when you play, something you've worked on, or does it just come naturally? I've only heard you a couple of times, but it seems to be a real trademark of your style.”

“I don't think about it when I play, brother. The whole point of playing an instrument is not to think. But if the music doesn't breathe, if you can't hear the silence behind the sound, then how can you hear anything? It's the silence that makes the music.”

I don't know what I expected for an answer, but that wasn't it. When I expressed my puzzlement, Elijah tried to simplify it for me.

“Do you see my hand?” he asked, holding it up in front of him.

“Sure.”

“And do you see what surrounds it?”

“Yes.”

“Well without that background you wouldn’t be able to see my hand. If it were all ground, no background or foreground, there would be no perception. No perception, no hand. It’s the contrast that differentiates the ten thousand things into this and that. You follow?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

“Silence is the background of sound. Without silence there is no sound. According to the Hindus, silence and sound is the first duality. So if you really want to understand music then you have to first understand silence, because without silence there *is* no music.”

I was still baffled but some small ray of understanding made it through a chink in my mind. “Now that I think about it, when I was listening to you, it felt like the space was adding resonance to what you were playing. I don’t know if that’s the right way to say it. Could that have something to do with what you’re talking about?”

“Absolutely. If you just string a bunch of notes together without any space it won’t mean anything to anybody. Not really. That’s the resonance you’re talking about, brother. Music has to breathe to be comprehended. It has to grow out of silence. The silence you bring with you.”

Again his words threw me. Was this the way southern jazzmen talked when they got together with other musicians? I certainly hadn’t heard anybody talk about music that way at Berkeley.

“So then you *are* conscious about it when you play, at least on some level?”

“I guess that depends on what you mean by ‘conscious,’ whether you are talking about big mind or small mind.”

“Big mind?”

Elijah smiled and added one of his trademark pauses. He was a big man, an imposing figure, but when he smiled it was as if he had slid back the cottage door to reveal the gentleness within. It was as great a contrast as silence and sound, this man with the body of a bouncer who was as gentle as a Buddha.

“Let’s try something,” he said. “You see that cloud over there?”

“Yes.”

“Fix your gaze on the cloud and watch what it does, but don’t lose sight of the sky. Take your time.”

We were silent for the next few minutes, both of us watching a solitary cumulus floating high above the Victorian roof in a lake of iridescent blue. I didn’t know exactly what I was looking for or why, but I had a peaceful feeling while I watched the cloud gradually change shape as it drifted in a southerly direction.

“Now, tell me, brother,” Elijah said softly, breaking the silence, “was the cloud stationary or did it move?”

“It moved.”

“And was the sky in any way disturbed by its movement?”

“Disturbed? No.”

“Would it be disturbed if it were a lightning flash or a flock of birds passing by?”

“No. The sky is the sky.”

“Exactly. The sky is always the sky, no matter what the weather. Just like the ocean is always the ocean, no matter how strong the waves. You may think that the waves are separate from the ocean but they are not. They are just the motion of the water. Just as the clouds are contained in the sky. That’s big mind. You may think that the things you see, the things you hear, are outside you but that is an incorrect understanding. They are just waves in your mind. They are not separate from you; you just think they are. And as long as you think they are, you are a prisoner of your small mind. But when you experience everything within your mind, like waves in the ocean, then you are looking at the world from big mind. And that’s when the music takes off. That’s when you really cook. When there’s no one in the kitchen.”

My confusion must have been painfully evident. Elijah looked at me and laughed, not in amusement but in commiseration.

“Take another look at the sky, brother. Does the cloud decide where it’s going to go? Does the lightning choose where it wants to jump?”

I shook my head.

“No, they don’t. And that’s the secret of their freedom. They have no small mind to bother them. The best jazz improvisation

isn't planned. You don't think it into being. It leaps across the sky like lightning—beautiful, perfect, utterly spontaneous. It makes no difference whether it comes from your horn or mine or from no horn at all. Music is just music, like the clouds are just clouds. Is it any clearer now?"

"No," I said, shaking my head in complete bewilderment.

"No matter. If you don't understand now, you'll understand later. In the meantime, just play. Feel the horn in your hands, listen to the way your breath becomes sound and the way the sound dies and becomes silence. Listen to the space between the notes but above all to the space behind the notes, and let the music play itself. Then come back and tell me how it went."

My head was swimming when I got back to the apartment. By then I had realized that Elijah hadn't been speaking some kind of hip jazz lingo that I wasn't familiar with due to my ignorance or my inexperience but a language of his own that I simply didn't understand. And yet, even though I had no real idea what he had been talking about, those incomprehensible words set my imagination on fire. As I opened my sax case and started assembling my instrument, I saw images of myself on a bandstand, listening to the silence behind the music as my alto borrowed my fingers to let loose an elegant cascade of notes worthy of Elijah himself. The images dissolved quickly enough once I picked up my horn and began to practice—it was still me, after all—but there was a difference in my playing that was not imagined. I made a concerted effort to focus my attention on the space between and behind the notes, and that one little shift in perspective made my playing come alive. The music began to breathe, similar in some small measure to the way Elijah's music breathed, and I could hear musical ideas forming in my mind during the pauses, getting ready to leap out when I bit down again on the reed. There was only one possible explanation for my sudden change in fortune: Elijah. I was a full-time music student in a first-class university with excellent teachers, but the world of academia—white academia—and the world of authentic jazz improvisation were worlds apart, the difference between black

and white. Through blind happenstance I had stumbled onto a bona fide jazzman, a black master of America's greatest and most original art form, one who was capable of teaching me the secrets of the music I loved, and all I could think about when I finally put down my horn was how long I should wait before I went back to visit him. It hadn't occurred to me when I first lay down on my mattress to listen to that dazzling river of notes from an unseen sax that the unseen musician might be black. But now that I knew he was, it made a universe of difference. Through blind dumb luck or the unerring eye of karma, however you choose to explain it, I was now living down the street from a true master of the music, the first I had ever met face to face. This world that had never completely made sense to me before was about to take on a whole new meaning.



IT WAS IN THE 1940s that the American dream officially relocated to the suburbs, and my family was right there in the vanguard. My father moved us from Sherman Oaks to Northridge in the spring of 1939, into a vast expanse of newly cleared farmland that was on its way to becoming one of the San Fernando Valley's most affluent and prestigious communities. We were the first family to buy a house in our development and the third to move in, proud owners of a four-bedroom ranch house on a full half acre with an area set aside for a pool that was completed a few months later. My earliest memory has me standing in the driveway of our new house the day my mother received a brand new 1939 Chevrolet sedan for a birthday present. My father had taken us out to a restaurant in Van Nuys and when we returned home the car was sitting in the driveway with a huge red ribbon around it. I was only two and a half and I don't remember the restaurant but I remember the enormous red bow and my mother's infectious laughter that seemed to sum up our charmed existence: a single-family home with a separate bedroom for each child; a well-manicured lawn out front and a pool and patio out back where my mother sunbathed on her chaise lounge each afternoon; periodic dinner parties and barbecues with the neighbors, whose kids were in our pool nearly as often as we were; and the yearly trip to Yosemite, where we were inevitably reminded of our bounteous good fortune. "This is what everyone in America dreams of," my father would tell us, with a healthy display of self-satisfaction. "I hope you kids know how lucky you are."

But that was our parents' dream, not ours. I suspect we imbibed some of their self-satisfaction through simple osmosis, but for me

and my brother Jack, who was two years older, and for Pauline, who came along three years after I did, life in the suburbs was nothing special. We hadn't moved up in the world, we had just landed in it: acre after acre of empty lots with cookie-cutter houses rising from the barren ground by the power of prophecy, the story of Genesis reenacted each day between sunup and sunset, rolling out a sacred suburban welcome to the new recruits, rosy-cheeked kids who looked and acted just like us. Like the young Siddhartha, whose father went to great lengths to hide the sufferings of the world from his son, we were safe within the borders of a privileged all-white suburb, unaware of the privations and the prejudice that stalked children of color only a few miles away in places like Pacoima and South LA. I was two years old when World War II began and eight years old when it ended but it was too far away to have any real impact in my daily life, beyond the patriotic clamor of a few movie reels and our morbid obsession with killing Germans and Japanese when we got together with our friends in an empty lot to play soldiers. That there could be another kind of war going on just a few miles away, in the cities and towns of America—a war in which basic human dignity was at stake—entirely passed me by.

That all began to change when I was ten years old, and I had a black man's music to thank for it. My father was a supervising engineer in RCA's West Coast Missile and Surface Radar Division but his first love had been the trumpet, and his idea of a relaxing evening was to put on a Harry James record and sip a beer while he read the evening paper. He was a swing aficionado who got my brother and I started on music lessons at an early age, an enthusiastic follower of the big bands that used to tour the country in the thirties: the Dorsey brothers, Woody Herman, Harry James, Glenn Miller, Benny Goodman, and our favorites, Stan Kenton and Artie Shaw, both Southern Californians based in LA who were the idols of every kid on our block with an ear for music. All-white bands, of course, but that was all anybody listened to in the Valley in those days, and by the time 1947 rolled around I was a pretty fair pianist, a mainstay in our school band in which Jack played lead trumpet. One day that summer Jack brought home a seventy-eight

RPM recording by a group called Charlie Parker's Reboppers. I had heard of bebop, but I had never actually sat down and listened to it. It hadn't really caught on yet on the Coast and if there were any radio stations playing that kind of music, my father wasn't about to tune them in. I had been taking sax lessons for about a year by then and my idea of a great jazz side was Stan Kenton's recording of "Painted Rhythm," which Jack and I had nailed note for note. But when my brother fired up my father's turntable and put on side A—"Ko-Ko"—my world spun out of orbit. I remember jumping off the couch near the end of Bird's first chorus with ears as big as saucers, unable to control my excitement, caught in the vertigo of those two minutes and fifty seconds that would redefine my world.

In the weeks that followed I literally wore that record out, trying to cop Bud Powell's distinctive style—he was the first piano player I'd ever heard who put the rhythmic pulse in the right hand—and dreaming of the day when I would have the chops on the sax to fly like Bird, which was about as close to nirvana as a white boy in the Valley could get in those days. After that, my brother and I saved our entire spending allowance for bebop records. Bird and Dizzy led us to Hawk and Monk and eventually to the Duke, opening our eyes to the real history of the music. It was a real-life adventure that outdid anything in the Hardy Boys mysteries that my brother had turned me on to a few years earlier, but as with most real-life adventures it was not without its perils and its disillusionments. I remember mentioning Bird and Dizzy to my father when I was in the early throes of my fascination with the new music, and I'll never forget his disparaging remarks, how they and their jungle music were a bad influence that I had better stay away from. The reaction we got in school wasn't much different, not only from Mr. Kruger, the band director, a German traditionalist who had come under his own share of suspicion during the war, but also from our friends and bandmates, whose attitudes ranged from dismissive to downright hostile. At first I couldn't understand it. My parents and teachers were from a different generation, but did my friends really have so little ear for music that they couldn't hear how far ahead of everyone else Bird and Dizzy were? I dug Stan Kenton and Artie

Shaw as much as anyone, but it didn't stop me from recognizing real genius when I heard it. Music was the language Jack and I spoke best and it was obvious to us that the black modernists like Bird and Dizzy spoke it better than anyone else alive, just as it was gradually becoming obvious that the white bandleaders our friends and neighbors idolized made their living imitating the black man's music. But my friends couldn't hear it. Or rather, they refused to hear it, refused to open their eyes and ears to their own prejudice. Jack and I learned quick enough to keep quiet about the change in our musical tastes, but it didn't stop us from learning where the music came from and why the men and women who invented it and were changing the way it was being played were looked down on—if they were seen at all—by the smug inhabitants of the all-white communities of the San Fernando Valley.

Siddhartha would have to escape his sheltered existence and confront the realities of human suffering before he would be ready to seek out the path of illumination. In my case, the borders of Northridge proved a good deal more porous than the walls of the future Buddha's Indian palace, but I experienced a similar awakening when I followed my brother to North Hollywood High in the fall of 1951, albeit with far less transcendental consequences. It was in my first few weeks of high school, in social studies class, that I learned about the housing covenants in force throughout the Valley that didn't permit property owners to sell to blacks or Mexicans, and in many places to Jews, a de facto segregation policy that was universally supported but rarely talked about. Housing covenants weren't racist, my teacher was quick to point out. This was California, the most liberal state in the union, not the antediluvian South. Housing covenants were necessary for the public good, a conclusion the US government itself had clearly arrived at, since it was the official policy of the Federal Housing Administration to withhold loans from areas not covered by real estate covenants—on the grounds that they prevented racial violence. There were whispers among my classmates of how they prevented property values from falling as well, but the party line, the one we got from our teachers and our parents, was that they

promoted social welfare. Spoken in perfect earnest in a high school that didn't have a single black or Mexican student, in a state where a Mexican woman and a black man had to go to the California Supreme Court to get a marriage license just two years earlier, the first successful challenge of the anti-miscegenation law that made mixed marriages illegal in the Golden State. I hadn't known about housing covenants or anti-miscegenation laws but I had learned a fair bit about racism in Northridge, the kind practiced by my parents and my neighbors, the understated, cleverly camouflaged intolerance that abhors the KKK but is perfectly comfortable with Jim Crow. Equality for blacks and other people of color—as long as they don't trespass on hallowed ground. What I hadn't known was how institutionalized it was, a realization that made me acutely uncomfortable, as did much of what I learned in high school about the world I had been born into.

Somehow the fact of boarding a bus each morning and traveling beyond the borders of my little hometown opened up the floodgates and allowed the outside world to come pouring in. Not only was I thrown together with kids from all over the Valley, I had a sense that I was finally being allowed to see the adult world that I would soon be joining, a world that our parents and teachers had done their best to keep from us. It wasn't just the unacknowledged but thoroughly institutionalized racism of an all-white world—it was the growing realization that fear was a constant and accepted presence in our lives, like the San Francisco fog that soaks you so insidiously and surreptitiously you don't even realize you're getting wet. We had Joseph McCarthy and the mass hysteria of a public witch-hunt against the country's best and brightest thinkers, a political establishment that played upon our fears of the “communist menace” to give full vent to its own megalomaniacal tendencies, and the pending prospect of nuclear annihilation that hinged on the posturing of politicians from both sides who were drunk on their own hubris. People were afraid to open their mouths, lest somebody accuse them of being anti-American, and they were terrified of the bomb, sure that Southern California, whose vertiginous growth had been fueled by the

defense industry, would be the Soviets' top target after Washington. I was a sophomore when we detonated the first hydrogen bomb in the Pacific, an incoming junior when the Soviets tested their own H-bomb, and a senior when Ho Chi Minh marched into Hanoi and Eisenhower pledged to help South Vietnam stand up against communist encroachment. When the prim, smiling blond asked Marlon Brando in *The Wild One*, "What are you rebelling against?" and he answered, "Whad'ya got?" he was speaking for all of us, even those of us who put on our best Ozzie-and-Harriet smiles each morning and washed down our repression with milk. Something was radically wrong with our world and the anger was building, even if it was buried under a few layers of landfill. In time that anger would send us to the streets, erupting in the bittersweet chaos of the sixties, loosing a tidal shift in consciousness that would eventually end the war and fuel the victories of the civil rights movement. But that was later. It would take another decade before the silent generation would find its voice.

I turned eighteen in November of 1954 and that weekend my brother took me to Billy Berg's on Vine Street in Hollywood for one of its last shows before the historic venue closed its doors. It was the first time I had ever set foot in a jazz club and no birthday before or since has meant as much. Billy Berg's was the site of Bird and Dizzy's legendary appearance on the West Coast in December 1945, only a few days after they recorded the Savoy sessions in New York that had served as my initiation into the delirium of bebop. That was the gig when Bird didn't show up for opening night until the end of the second set—not because he was strung out, as some writers have claimed, but because he was in a back room casually working his way through two complete Mexican dinners, the specialty of the house. When he did make his entrance, it was in high style: emerging from the crowd with his sax to his lips, blowing his way through the changes to "Cherokee" with the same verve and brilliance he had shown on "Ko-Ko" and the other Savoy sides. My brother and I were both jazz history buffs, but that was not the only reason he took me to Billy Berg's for my birthday. The headliners that night were Wardell Gray and Dexter Gordon,

the dueling tenors who had left another major milestone for jazz aficionados with their 1947 recording of “The Chase” in which they traded choruses, half choruses, quarter choruses and four-bar turnarounds over seven breathless minutes and both sides of a ten-inch shellac seventy-eight that my brother and I regarded as one of our greatest treasures. They had reprised their duel—a tradition among jazz soloists where each tries to outdo the other to prove who is the baddest, the fastest, the hippest—on a number of occasions in different venues, and though we didn’t know it then, this was to be their last: six months later Wardell was found dead in the desert outside Las Vegas with a broken neck, rumored victim of a mob boss from whom he had borrowed money to support his heroin habit. I knew nothing about his habit at the time and very little about the widespread use of heroin among jazz musicians. All I knew was that he was like a genie who had been let out of his bottle, a born enchanter who cast a spell with his horn. He was called the “thin man” for his gaunt figure and delicate build but his playing was all lightness and joy, reminiscent of Lester Young, who had been his model, but more spirited and unlike any saxophonist who had come before him. Seeing him onstage next to Dexter Gordon was a contrast in appearance as much as a contrast in style. Dexter was tall and imposing. He wore a wide-brim black hat and a baggy yellow zoot suit with a black shirt, and even though he stooped when he played he towered over Wardell. But no matter how impressively he blew, Wardell barely felt the breeze. He came back at him chorus after chorus, spinning dazzling, complex lines that made even the most jaded rednecks in the audience grin with delight.

But as great as the music was and as thrilled as I was to see the inside of what was for me the jazz world’s most important nightclub after Minton’s Playhouse in New York, it was the audience that made the biggest impression. Billy Berg’s was a rarity in Jim Crow LA: a totally integrated club. Los Angeles wasn’t the Deep South but it wasn’t New York either, and Hollywood was only one of many predominantly redneck communities. Interracial couples were routinely stopped by the local police in most parts of the city

and were often brought to the station to be searched. A black man with a fancy car was an automatic suspect, as likely to be pulled in for questioning as he was to be given a ticket—no matter that he hadn't broken any traffic laws. In Glendale it was still illegal for a Negro to be in town without a permit after six—black musicians who played the clubs there were escorted to the city limits as soon as the gig finished. I had heard these and many other stories from my brother, who had abandoned me to the straitjacket culture of the Valley when he began attending UCLA in my junior year, so I was surprised to see how relaxed the atmosphere was inside Billy Berg's oasis. Black couples, white couples, interracial couples, chatting and laughing together at the same tables while they grooved to the music of an all-black band. I was dazzled by the sense of sophistication they radiated, by their clothes and the snatches of conversation I overheard. It was the first time I had ever seen whites mixing freely with blacks, and it was a confirmation of everything I felt was wrong with my world. Billy Berg's was only twenty miles or so from Northridge by the newly opened Hollywood Freeway but it might as well have been the moon in the days before Sputnik, and I knew right then and there that I had to get out—the farther away the better. My father was pushing me to follow Jack to UCLA but Jack's experience of that racially divided city and the freedom that I'd breathed inside Billy Berg's, a freedom that I knew didn't exist outside its walls, sealed the deal for me. I was going as far away as my father would allow. Leaving the state was out of the question—he had already put his foot down when it came to paying out-of-state tuition—but there was a Baghdad-by-the-Bay to the north that had a reputation for freedom that no other city in the West could match. The next day I told my father that I had decided on Berkeley because of the strength of its music program, but all I really cared about was its proximity to San Francisco and the promise of a life that was entirely different than the life I knew.