

Prologue

October 21, 2082

My name is Joe January. I was a private investigator from the South Bronx, circa 1940. Was once described as an indignant Humphrey Bogart. Who am I to argue? The difference between Bogie and me is that I was the real McCoy. Where he took the scripts that Hollywood wrote for him, I took on the tough cases nobody else would. Unlike Bogie's, my bumps and bruises were the real deal, not makeup. Although in retrospect I can see that this could be construed as a Hollywood type script Bogie might've been interested in bringing to the screen were he alive today.

In truth, I'm no Joseph Conrad, but I wrote every word on these pages. This is my story; but make no mistake, it's anything but make believe. Not being a scientist, I can't tell you the how behind what happened, only that it did happen. I know, it reads like science fiction, spanning two centuries and dealing with time travel and alternate realities, while the denouement is less than satisfactory. But such is life: a happily ever after, while often promised, is never a given.

I've been accused of arrogance in my self-depiction, creating a sort of comic book superhero of myself. But in truth, in youth we often view ourselves as invincible. It isn't until later that we realize how fragile life is; furthermore, that we see the repercussions of our actions. Yet given the chance to live life over again, avoiding the mistakes made during the first go-around, well, I found I couldn't turn my back.

As a youth, someone told me that man spends far too much time thinking and worrying about the future, and that he also spends too much time in the past, dwelling on mistakes and regretting missed opportunities. Yet in order to move into the future a man must spend a certain amount of time in the present looking at his past. I wish I'd done that more often. Now, at my age, with so little future to which to look forward, I have little else but the past and all my regrets to mull over—the

missed opportunities and how, through my own foolishness, I lost the two women who meant the most to me; the first not once, but twice.

December 6, 1941

The man jerked and twitched—an epileptic in seizure. His right foot stomped in rhythmic time; shoulders bunched as fingers flew in a frenzied attack on black and white ivory. Sweat poured from beneath the stocking that was a cap and ran in torrents down his face. A brief respite from his self-perpetuated paroxysm, and he mopped from his face what moisture he could with the stained handkerchief that lay beside him, before giving way to another fit of spasms.

Whether the demented cacophony that spewed from the piano he assailed with a vengeance was a result of the convulsions he initiated or the notes themselves responsible for the musician's spastic throes, I only wondered. For all the split notes, all the crazy chromatic chord changes, for all the irregular intervals and rhythms that made his music unique, Thelonious Sphere Monk, the expectant father of modern jazz, would be scorned by critics, his music laughed at, misunderstood and unappreciated by the uninitiated for years. Until his death in 1982, when with the advent of the compact disk much of his music would be reissued and embraced by a new generation, proving that all great artists enjoy their greatest success posthumously.

I sat and watched, amused, as Monk now stood and danced in a tiny circle, lost in a world of eccentricity as profound as his music, his arms swinging in time as tenor saxman Don Byas blew notes that rivaled Monk's own in their dissonance ...

"I just *love* Monk, don't you?" the young woman across the table from me said.

I'd agreed to meet the woman here, at Minton's Playhouse in Harlem, to discuss locating her missing father. I don't normally take on missing persons, but if the voice on the other end of the phone looked

as good as it sounded and she was willing to meet my price, I was willing to make an exception. I'd been right about the voice. Its owner was Melissa MacIntyre, who didn't look at all Scotch but to me looked sweet enough to taste. Her auburn hair, cut in a neat pageboy, framed features more childlike in their innocence than matured glamour. Thin lips painted a deep shade of red parted to reveal straight white teeth as she waited for my approval of her musical taste.

"That's not music," her brother said.

I had taken an immediate dislike of Melissa's older sibling. Like his nose his arrogance preceded him. He was overbearing, opinionated, self-righteous and, where his sister was concerned, authoritative. All of this I had deduced through observation; his snide comment merely lent weight to my summation.

"It has no style," he continued, although neither Melissa nor I had prompted him for edification. "There's no cadence and it lacks intellect."

"I think it's angular," Melissa said.

I smiled. The purity of Melissa's rejoinder, the result of youthful exuberance, sounded as if she were repeating something she had read in conjunction with Monk. Whether critical acclaim or disparaging condemnation didn't matter. Apparently her brother had gotten far too used to having his own way. She would use whatever weapons at her disposal to counter his offensive.

"Why must you always be so rigid and traditional, Benjamin Junior?"

"En garde," Benjamin said. Then, with a conspiratorial wink at me, he added, "The avant-garde in defense of the accused."

Monk was now back at the piano, pounding at the keys with a savage wrath to prove to all those present in the tiny club that the instrument he played was indeed a percussive one.

In truth, I didn't care for Monk or his music, and for all the same reasons Benjamin Junior had just smartly ticked off. But I didn't like Benjamin Junior.

“Oh, I don’t know, Ben,” I said. “Maybe Melissa is right. Maybe you should loosen up.”

Melissa was smiling triumphantly. Her newly formed alliance outnumbered the opposition two to one; while Benjamin’s eyes threw daggers at me from across the table.

“Don’t call me that!” he snapped. “My name is Benjamin.”

“Oh, Benjamin, why must you always be so pretentious?”

“I didn’t say I agreed with her taste,” I said. Melissa looked crestfallen—her champion was about to betray her. “I just think she has a right to like what she likes.” Melissa brightened. In the span of a heart-beat I had gone from traitor to hero again. I thought that this was perhaps the first time in her life anyone had supported her right to her own opinion. That it had come in outright defiance of her brother only made it that much more gratifying.

“She doesn’t know—”

“Not with you force-feeding her your opinions she doesn’t.”

“You must not want this job,” Benjamin said, red with repressed anger.

“I have yet to decide that,” I said. “Nor do I need it,” I added, countering his inference regarding the scruples of private investigators.

“I’m not sure I want to hire you.”

“And I’m emphatic about not wanting to work for you.”

“Mr. January ...”

Melissa’s expression was a compromise between amusement—that I would have the audacity to face down her insolent brother—and dismay. Obviously taken in by my willingness to speak out on her behalf, I surmised she would’ve hired me then and there but for her brother. I guessed that Melissa was just learning to flex her independence, but had not yet gotten to the point where she could stand in outright insubordination of her brother’s authority.

From her conflict I immediately recognized my danger. I’m a sucker for a woman in distress.

“Come along, Melissa,” her brother said. “I’ll not tolerate someone working for me who exhibits a lack of respect for me.”

“You don’t *hire* respect,” I said.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means first and foremost that I work for myself. Should I choose to help you find your father and you agree to pay my fee, plus expenses, then we have a business arrangement. But we do it *my* way. After all, that’s what you’re paying for, my expertise. I don’t want any interference from you. I’m taking all the risks; that’s also part of what you’re paying for. But I don’t need someone increasing those risks.” Sensing Benjamin’s unspoken skepticism, I added, “And if you don’t think you’re getting your money’s worth you can sever our agreement.”

“That’s not good enough.”

“Benjamin!”

“I’m sorry, but that’s the way it’s done in this business. However, if you believe you might find a better deal elsewhere, I suggest you shop around.”

A poor response, I knew, since I also knew what game Benjamin Junior was playing. By stating my terms, I’d let slip my desire to take the job, and Benjamin Junior had picked up on that. He would now use that knowledge to try to take back control of the center of the negotiation table—revenge for having been shown up in front of his sister. In his dementia, might and right were confluent. Such convoluted rationale justified any plot against both his sister and me.

The world is full of assholes, I thought.

I’ve always loved that word, asshole, for the amusing visual that accompanies it. But I wasn’t amused, not this time. Not with Benjamin *Junior* sitting there, his lips parting like a pink sphincter to reveal the putrid knowledge that he knew he had me off balance and on the ropes. I hate being on the ropes, like a boxer with his face beaten to a pulp, unable to cover up.

Suddenly I no longer wanted the job. I had more than enough work to keep me busy. I’d been a fool to allow myself to be taken in by the sound of a pretty voice on the phone. No, I certainly didn’t need this job—not at this cost. I drew in a breath, prepared to withdraw my

proposal, but was stopped short by Melissa's trepidation.

My own credo had always been that right is might, as penned by August and Julius Hare over a century before—the original translucence of their transcript lost through transposition—ever was and ever would be wrong. Hence my preoccupied obsession with the oppressed. My experience often showed the righteous underdog to be a casualty of the corruption might frequently engenders.

As I looked across the table at the waning hope on Melissa's face, fearful that the might I attempted to wield on behalf of the righteous would one day come up short, I felt my own hope for the future waver. The world was a gloomy place because of people like Benjamin Junior. Dismal as it was, it was no match for my own dark mood, which was threatening to grow darker by the moment.

"Ben," I began, and then quickly amended it to Benjamin. "You and I have gotten off to a shaky start here." God, how I hated having to suck hind teat. "To tell you the truth, since it was Melissa I spoke with on the phone, and since she didn't mention a brother, I'm a little taken aback by your appearance here. I assumed I would be meeting with her alone."

"So *that's* what this is about."

I only stared as Benjamin's eyes glowered with malice.

"Benjamin—"

"You think that because you get a call from a woman who arranges to meet you in this ... this *dive* ... you think that gives you the *right* ... the *free reign* to ... to ..."

"Benjamin, it's not like that, not like that at all. You know I wouldn't—"

"Shut-up, Melissa, this doesn't concern you!"

"I think it does," I said.

"This is my *sister* here, not some hussy you can pick up and take home to *use* and *degrade* for the price of a few drinks." Benjamin's face was turning a dangerous shade of purple.

"I had no intention of using and degrading her."

“But you intended to take her home?”

“Benjamin, how could you think such a thing?”

None of it mattered any longer—not the job, not the girl. Pretty as she was and as taken as I was by her youthfulness, she was far too skinny for my taste.

“The thought crossed my mind,” I said. My vulgarity was intended to brutalize. It did.

“*Bastard!*” Benjamin roared, drawing the notice of a few more of our fellow jazz aficionados. Standing, his tipped chair resting against the railing behind him, such was his tirade he was completely unaware, or perhaps he simply chose to ignore the fact, that he was upstaging the featured artist at Minton’s.

“She’s my *sister!*” he shouted, leaning forward, hands flat on the table. He towered menacingly over me, but I betrayed no sense of being menaced. “My ... my ...”

Suddenly aware of the startled glances of those around us, Benjamin quickly, awkwardly, regained a caricature of composure, and finished quietly, “Come along, Melissa, we have nothing further to discuss with the likes of him.”

Trotting after her brother, Melissa mouthed the words *I’ll be in touch*, and then she, too, was gone. Leaving me to ponder the peculiarity of what I’d just witnessed.

A woman of her word, Melissa did indeed get in touch with me. But her contact wouldn’t come for five-and-a-half years.