

The Trumpet Player

He was playing a club when he first saw the monster.

It was Davis's *So What*, a jazz standard. Not the monster, the song. James Harris considered it as close to perfect as a song could get. It was something about the meditative calm of the bassline, the careless two-note refrain — a mantra — that made him feel like he was floating above the music. It was only when he was performing that he was actually happy; before and after weighed him down, but in between he was floating. He was alone and nothing existed except the moment and the cool valves of the trumpet under his fingers and the heavy reassurance of metal on his lips. He did not worry. He played.

He played into a microphone, and the speakers were in front of the stage, so he couldn't hear himself very well. That was good. James Harris hated the sound of his own music the way others hate the sound of their own voice on tape. Most people thought he had a great jazz tone, but it wasn't clean enough. The spotlights were harsh, almost enough that he had to squint, and he couldn't make out the audience through the club's darkness. That was good, too. He liked it that way.

He also couldn't see the hulking outline silhouetted against the window. It smashed through with a huge furry paw, sending shards of glass soaring across the room. His quintet lurched to a stop. The lights went out; sparks cascaded to the floor like fireflies. The crunching shriek as the monster dug its claws into the red brick window frame and dragged itself through the hole was a concert E.

Tables went flying as people ran. James Harris stood in the center of the tinkling glass dust as it settled, frozen, watching, transfixed. His drummer, Noah Gerver, tripped over the snare drum as he tried to escape. The hi hats crashed to the floor, and a young red-haired waitress screamed as a black tentacle lashed around her torso. She tugged at it uselessly as the monster

hauled her into its — mouth? He couldn't tell. Something snapped, audibly, and her screams halted.

He ran towards the neon EXIT sign to his left, the monster's shrieks echoing in his brain. In the narrow side alley, he found Noah putting his sticks back in his bag.

"What are you doing?" he said. "We have to go."

"What?" said Noah.

"Did you not see that?"

"I thought it was okay." Noah smiled. His teeth were covered in blood, and a piece of the waitress's red hair was plastered with spit to the corner of his lips.

"What *was* that?"

"It's nothing," said Noah. He zipped his bag shut and walked back to the van. James Harris stood in the alley and thought about being eaten.

He was afraid. That night, he sat in the practice room and played Miles Davis's *On Green Dolphin Street*, again and again because something wasn't quite right. He had first played this song in the ninth grade, with a small ensemble performing at a PTA dinner. It had sounded different then, like there was more room to breathe. He wished he could remember exactly how he had played it, but there was something wrong now, and he couldn't recall.

He went back to the top and played the unison of each scale. He played the fifths. He played the thirds and then the fourths. There was a snarl at the door. He ignored it, even when the wood started to creak menacingly. He closed his eyes and danced across the minor scales to the tick of his metronome heart. It was getting faster and faster. He couldn't seem to keep up. He

opened his eyes. The small glass window in the door was covered in black tentacles, like an invasive growth.

James Harris stood up. He picked up the piano bench and wedged it under the doorknob. He sat back down and played thirteenthths. He did not know when he fell asleep, but its many black eyes glittered through the darkness. He floated through strange sonic landscapes that were not quite Davis. That was the first time he slept in a practice room.

Three weeks later, James Harris met Arthur Becker. He was leaving through the side door after a performance when he saw the old man alone at the end of the bar. “Oh my God,” said James Harris. “Are you Arthur Becker?”

Becker smiled. He didn’t really smile. The corners of his lips tightened in a way that might have been considered an approximation of a smile. It did not look like the grin worn by contemporary jazz legend Arthur Becker, the greatest pianist of the twenty-first century. That grin had draped itself carelessly over his lips, but now his face was close and hard.

The rest of the man didn’t resemble his old self much either. His limbs had shriveled and his belly had swelled. His hair was white and thin and gathered in a greasy ponytail, and his nose and ears sprouted fantastic tufts of white bristles. “Yeah,” he said. “I guess so.”

James Harris sat down next to him. The club was playing something recorded, Coltrane’s *Locomotion*, while they waited for the next band to come on. “You’re one of my favorites,” he said. “You were amazing.”

Becker made a noise of amusement, a sharp exhalation through his nose. He finished a glass of something and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “Apparently.”

“I’m at the Rinberg conservatory. Playing jazz.” He didn’t like Rinberg. The college conservatory was world class, the best in the nation; that was why he’d come, but the town depressed him. It was small, with nothing around for miles except fields of dirt too dry to farm. The concert hall was the largest building by far. The rest of the town was a pale echo of the college’s prestige. Jazz clubs sprung up only because the students wanted places to play. There were no landmarks of note. It was forgettable. Sometimes, he felt the expanse of the emptiness around him, a vacuum of *nothing* and *nowhere*, and it made him want to scream. The nothing sucked at his feet like mud. He wanted to tell Becker this, somehow. He thought the old man might understand.

Becker glanced up and pointed at his glass; a barista refilled it with the same pale amber liquid. He took another drink. He swallowed. Coltrane tore through the changes.

“Do you still play? I mean, you haven’t performed in years, are you going to? Ever?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

Instead of answering, Becker finished his drink in silence. James Harris watched the old man. There was a low growl and a thumping noise under the floorboards. The air took on the scent of an abandoned basement, the scent of old meat rotting. James Harris knew the smell. He stood up. “I have to go.”

“It’ll find you again,” said Becker. “It’s everywhere.”

James Harris stopped. The banging noises got louder. “Do you see it?” he said. “Can you stop it?”

“You can’t kill it,” said Becker. “Nobody can.” The floor trembled. The bottles on the shelves clinked together as they shook.

“Why does it want me?”

Arthur Becker’s eyes were ice over an endless lake. He suddenly seemed deeply sad. “It’s part of you.”

The bar exploded in a cloud of sawdust; the shelves behind it split with a shattering of bottles. The monster dragged its swollen body out of the pit, clawing its way across the floor toward him. The old man did not move as it rose up behind him. “What are you doing?” shouted James Harris, backing away.

“There’s no point,” said Arthur Becker. “I’m already dead.” His eyes were boarded-up windows over an abandoned house. The monster lashed out and Becker’s limp body toppled from his stool, his chest ripped open by the wicked claws.

James Harris turned and ran away from the hideous beak, creaking open and closed as if calling his name, and from the little old dead man, humming to himself on the ground.

James Harris ran alone. The crashing of the monster followed close behind him, never more than a block away. He thought about being eaten. The snap of the beak, a toothy embrace. Then a warm darkness; the stomach a soft cradle. A mother’s voice, promising that it was okay. He could live like that, adrift in the ebb and flow. After enough time, his friends would forget about him. So would his family. He could stop running.

He thought about being eaten, but he knew he couldn’t do it. A survival instinct, some deep ancestral need to live, moved his legs. It was funny. He imagined that instead of running away, he was running towards something. He believed he could run forever.