

## Brownie's Blues

### **brownie**

Each time the VA deems him healthy enough and releases him to the civilian world, my younger brother Andy concocts a new theory to explain his mental problems. The latest: he claims that some years back, while taking his mandatory identification photo, a military camera snapped his image and snatched his soul. The ghost of jazz trumpeter Clifford Brown discovered the vacant location, took up residence inside him and stayed. Andy hides himself within a second-hand, aqua blue three piece suit with accompanying porkpie hat and Ray Bans. He carries a cracked vinyl trumpet case with a loose handle. And today he's telling me to call him Brownie.

“That's my name, dig?”

“Thought you wanted to be called Clifford Brown,” I say. “Not Cliff, or Cliffy, but the whole thing. Clifford Brown.”



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“No, man,” he says, “Clifford Brown is what my fans call me. It’s the name that goes on the albums. But we’re brothers. You’re in the know. You call me Brownie.”

Andy has rooted himself on the couch in my apartment in the months since I volunteered to take him. Shelly and Jess, my mom’s kids from the man who came after my dad, claimed Andy would frighten their own children. Half siblings possess half of the responsibility. Plus, they both live in San Francisco, and anytime he’s down in the City, Andy spends his nights in the few remaining jazz clubs and usually he comes home beaten up for having taken the stage uninvited. So I took him in thinking the small town and natural environment would do him some good. I’m the only one of our family who stayed by the trees and ocean in Arcata, who didn’t move away from where we grew up fishing the streams, driving the beaches, and hiking the hills. Mom is the next closest relative, being down in Southern Humboldt and harvesting this year’s pot crop with her new boyfriend, but Andy won’t stay with her. He never believed in breaking the law.

Brownie doesn’t either, apparently.

### **the photograph**

“When are you going to take that down, baby?” Brownie asks at dinner. He jabs his forkful of BeefyMan TV Entrée at the picture of himself, or Andy rather, stern in his black and shiny Marine outfit. He sent the photograph to me not three weeks before shipping off to the Persian Gulf in 1990 and insisted I put it on my wall.

I’ve never liked photos and displaying them only reminds me of that fact. Pictures make me feel like I’m being watched when I’m doing private things. I say if you can’t remember an event or a person, then he, she or it deserves forgetting. But this was my brother asking. So I hung it up over The Cat’s litter box, a spot I visit at least once a day.



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“I’m not taking it down,” I tell him after chewing enough of my Salisbury Steak to speak. “It’s staying right there.”

Keeping his Marine photo on the wall is good for him. It’s a dose of reality. None of us knew what was wrong after he returned from the first Gulf War those years ago. “I hurt,” is what he’d say to anyone who’d listen. Sometimes Mom, but usually I, would take him to the VA in Eureka. The doctor wouldn’t find anything wrong. Then Andy would shuttle between family members until he said he hurt again and one of us would relent and ask to have him readmitted. This cycle was only broken on the few occasions when he found work as a laborer at a construction site or shifts as a busboy at one of the restaurants that hadn’t yet hired and fired him.

Mom decided Andy probably got dusted with chemicals when he was over in Iraq. This last pass-through the VA, the one that gave us Clifford Brown instead of Andy, finally saw the bastards admitting the possibility that our troops were exposed to nerve agents, because Andy wasn’t the only one complaining. Other Gulf War vets reported fatigue, body aches and mood swings, too. And still others felt fine themselves, but saw their children born with miniature arms and legs.

Brownie says now of the photograph, “I don’t dig that.” The sunglasses shield his eyes, but his mouth crunches into a snarl. “That’s the hoodoo picture, man. That’s right when they stole this boy’s soul. And you’ve got it up on your wall.”

I tell him that cameras can’t steal a man’s soul. You’d have to be from some third world country to believe that.

He leans way back in his chair and jams his arms into a slithering X across his chest.

“I thought you got it,” Brownie says, “thought you were in the know.”

“Got what?”



He shakes his head, stands, and finds his trumpet case.

“I'm gone,” he says.

“Where're you going?”

“Gotta play,” he says and leaves.

### **the trumpet case**

I need to know what's inside that case. I don't believe that there is a trumpet in there, but Brownie won't let me near it. I tried asking, but he ignores the request, so I decide to steal it from him when he's asleep.

I set my alarm to wake me early and succumb to the drapery of dreams. The mill has been running all of us industrial painters overtime. My days flit by like the airborne flakes of enamel thrown off from our sanders. Prepping and sanding is more important than the new wash of color. You can't cover crappy workmanship with more of the same. New layers won't cover the shoddiness beneath. That knowledge is why I get more jobs than anyone else at the factory. I don't rush the new coat. I am steady and even.

The alarm blasts. The Cat rolls off my face. A long bleary moment follows as I try to figure out why I'm up before the sun. Then I remember: the trumpet case.

Brownie's splayed on the couch. The case is resting on his chest. He's still dressed in his suit. He's even wearing his sunglasses. I freeze. Something's not right.

He smells different. We shared a room from the time he was born right up until I moved out of Mom's place. His scent was always like an orange rind, even when that scent soured during his adolescence. He looks like Andy, but the way he's lying there, with no citrus odor emanating from him whatsoever, makes me think that maybe this man



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is not my brother. Maybe this man is exactly who he claims to be. A stranger with a different name stuck inside my brother's face.

I conclude I got up too early.

My hands settle on the case real quiet, and then I yank. The cracked vinyl box wallops into my chest. I fall backwards over the coffee table and sit through one of its glass squares. Shards gouge my butt and leg. I drop to the floor and howl.

Brownie bolts up, springs from the couch and dives over the table. He rips the case from my arms and throws it to the other side of the room. Then he cinches his hands around my throat. My air stops. I'm going to die with pieces of glass poking my ass and my possessed brother on top of me.

But Brownie stops, jolting like he himself just woke up. He removes his hands. He straightens his tie and stands.

“You don't touch another man's piece,” Brownie says. “You dig?”

“You can't even play, Andy,” I wheeze. I call him Andy on purpose. I call him Andy because I want him to be Andy.

“Oh I play, baby,” he says. “And you call me Clifford Brown from now on. No more Brownie for you.”

### **clifford brown**

After my shift the next day, I stop at the record store that doesn't carry records any more even though the word is in the name of the shop. They do carry jazz CDs, and there are posters of solemn black men posed with their instruments on the walls. These guys have got to know about Brownie.



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The man behind the counter asks me if I need something. With his shaved, gray stubbled head and salt and pepper goatee, he looks like he'd know something about jazz.

“Clifford Brown?”

“Always stock the entire catalog. What’re you looking for? The quintet with Max Roach and Sonny Rollins. That’s great, great shit.”

“Not sure. I don’t even know who he was. Just that he plays jazz.”

“One of the greatest trumpet player ever. Played in the late forties, early fifties. Could have been as big as Miles, maybe bigger, but he was killed in a car wreck when he was twenty-five.”

I’m considering how a person could be bigger than miles. Then the other part of what the man said hits me.

“Twenty-five?” I ask. Andy was twenty-five when he came back from the Gulf and went into the VA for the first time.

“Happened a lot in those days. Musicians driving from city to city, gig to gig. Brownie was just doing what he had to do.”

“Brownie,” I repeat. I thought Andy made this up, including the name.

“That’s what the other musicians called him.”

How could Andy have known this? He used to like good music, like country western and rock and roll. The Gulf War really screwed him up.

The goatee guy hands me a set of headphones and sets a CD in the player on the counter.

“Listen,” he tells me.

I slip on the headphones. A whole jumble of blares and crashes spin between my ears. A thousand car wrecks heap one onto the other. Then the drums and the rest of it even out, start to groove.



“Well?”

“Noisy,” I say.

He laughs and says, “Jazz is different things to different people.”

I thank the man and leave.

### **the gulf**

When I return to the apartment, I find that Andy has had one of his bad afternoons. His attack targeted the living room. The cushions of the couch are pulled out. He has torn the web-like fabric beneath, exposing the springs. He left the stereo alone, but he toppled the TV and scattered my videotapes onto the floor. None of this makes me angry. Not until I find his marine photograph broken and scattered in The Cat's litter box. The Cat is perched beside it, pawing into the mass of broken glass and wood. I rush over and pull the box away before The Cat can de-Tom himself on the shards.

My brother appears in the doorway of the bathroom, lurking behind his suit, sunglasses and hat. He leans against the door frame and drags on his cigarette.

“Dammit, Andy.”

“Clifford Brown,” he says.

I recover the ripped picture of Andy’s grim face from the ammonia-scented litter. A dose of sadness swims beside my anger.

“I didn't want you to enlist. Or go to the Gulf.”

“This ain't about you,” he says. “Why you cats always think everything’s about you?”

“Stop talking like that,” I say. “You're not Clifford Brown. Or Brownie. You’re just Andy.”



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He shifts his body to the other side of the door frame, says nothing. I set the litter box on the previously damaged coffee table.

“What happened over there?” I ask. “You never told me.”

He smiles. Not the friendly smile he used when he tried to pick women up at the bars or when he was talking us out of a possible fight. This smile has no fun in it.

“You never asked, baby,” he says.

I cross my arms over my chest and say, “So, I’m asking.”

The smile disappears.

“Shooting. Killing,” he says. “Dying. That’s what happened. You dig?”

“No.”

Andy takes the cigarette from his mouth and waves it at his ruined photograph in my hand.

“That boy there wanted something different for himself.”

He straightens, his voice becomes louder.

“That boy there wanted something more than a factory job. That boy there,” he pauses, “thought he might make enough money to go to college. Unlike his brother.”

The sadness finally overpowers the anger.

“I didn’t know,” I say.

His hand shakes as he brings the cigarette back to his lips.

“That boy is gone, anyhow. Now it’s just me.”

“Andy,” I say. Maybe I should get him back to the VA or something.

“Clifford Brown, you asshole,” he says. “Andy’s gone.”

Anger rushed back. I don’t hit him. I can’t hurt him like that anymore. It wouldn’t be right. I grab the litter box off the coffee table, and I leave my brother alone.



**andy**

After I dump The Cat's litter and Andy's picture in the apartment complex's dumpster, I head downtown. The bars are quiet, not even the college kids are out yet. I go to *The Jambalaya* and sit for a beer.

*The Jambalaya* has a stage. One of the barkeeps is setting up for the open-mike blues jam. I've never been. Guys at work say that some of the music students at the college come and play alongside some of the older musicians in town. Sometimes it's even good. The thought reminds me of Brownie and Andy. I turn from the stage and order a bourbon to go with my beer.

The night Andy told me he was enlisting years ago was one of many when we had swigged too much beer and over-traveled the claustrophobic bar circuit. Although he was underage, I knew all of the bartenders, and they thought he looked old enough anyway, so we didn't have trouble. He told me he had signed on with the Marines, as if he was reporting the next day's weather forecast. He never mentioned it again until one day he shipped out. I don't recall him ever saying anything about wanting to go to college.

When the time came for him to graduate high school, the course of Andy's life must have revealed itself to him. He probably considered my days at the factory, my nights at the bars, and got scared. He enlisted and went to war because he didn't want to become me.

That military camera may have taken his soul, I suppose that's just as possible as anything, but those dashed hopes dumped in The Cat's litter box were all Andy's. I have to believe, because it scares me if I don't, that Brownie's soul will move on, and my brother's soul will find its way back to the body he left behind. I have to give him that chance.



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The beer is good. The bourbon better. I order another.

### **brownie's blues**

I'm on my third bourbon with beer chaser when the blues jam starts. I realize it's getting dark outside and crowded in the bar all at once. A guy settles behind the drum set and dribbles a beat. It doesn't take long before others join him. The music isn't bad. Maybe the alcohol is easing it down.

Then the record store guy squeezes in beside me and orders a pitcher.

“Blues fan?”

“Sure,” I say. It seems easier than anything else.

“You don't play, do you?” He asks. “We're hurting for a bass player.”

I shake my head, dumbfounded to be asked. He returns to his table. I listen for awhile longer. Then the record store owner, toting an electric guitar, takes the stage with some others. I'm actually enjoying it when Brownie walks in.

He struts over and sets his trumpet case on the bar beside me. He slides his sunglasses closer to his eyes.

“Beer?” I ask.

“After I blow.”

“Show me,” I say.

Brownie pops open his case and pulls out a trumpet. It's tarnished and one stem is slightly bent, but it is a trumpet.

“Let's hear it,” I say.



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The record store owner finishes his jam. One of the barkeeps scans a list, notes that no one else has signed up, and asks if any players want to join. Brownie jumps off his stool. He raises his arm and walks to the stage.

Brownie leaps up and tips his hat to the crowd. He points to the drummer, who begins a swinging beat. A bass player discovered among the crowd follows along, and the record store owner strums his guitar to match the rhythm. They lock in, like a train gaining momentum. Clifford Brown steps forward.

At first, nothing happens. Then a wheezing buzz catches somewhere inside the horn and a warbled blare drops out the end like a flat racquetball. Brownie's face blossoms red from the exertion. He fingers the buttons, takes a breath, doubles over and lets out a loud farting burst.

The crowd laughs. A few of them clap. I'm immobile, unfeeling stone, unsure of what to do or how to react. This doesn't sound like the CD I heard. Doesn't sound like the music that was playing earlier, either. This sounds like crap.

Brownie pulls the trumpet away so he can lick his lips. He fingers the valves in a quick flurry. Then he continues, blasting these staccato, awkward tones that sound like Andy's voice did when he went through puberty.

He tilts his head back, takes another breath and lets out a wail, which alternates between foghorn and siren. His face has gone from red to purple. Then he blows again and evokes a heard of humpbacked whales, singing into the lonely depths of the ocean.

The crowd is really laughing now. Some raise their beers and hoot, shout.

I want to tell them to shut up. That's my brother, and they don't know what he's been through. But Andy, or Brownie rather, he's completely inside himself, oblivious to the crowd or the jeers. Or maybe he's completely in tune with them. Maybe he needs the ridicule, the shame. Maybe he needs to expose his flaws on stage so everyone knows



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about them. Maybe if everyone witnesses his fears shining in those stage lights, they won't haunt Brownie any longer.

Regardless of why, my brother is completely inside his own blues.

As the song nears its end, Brownie takes one final breath, bends his knees and sends out the highest, sharpest shriek I've ever heard. Everyone inside the bar plugs his ears as the squeal reverberates everything else away, leaving us with nothing but that desperate and passionate cry.

The conclusion of Brownie's song is met with a smattering of applause, the crowd no longer entertained by the train wreck on stage. With his free hand, Brownie pushes the sunglasses back up his nose, straightens the hat, and cinches the tie. He jumps from the stage a victor.

He makes his way back to me and sits. Other musicians approach the stage. The jam recovers.

"Beer," he says.

I order him what I'm having. The barkeep conducting the jam tells me and Brownie that it's on the house. I don't understand jazz or blues. He sounded awful.

"Can't get this boy's lips to work right," Brownie says, tapping his mouth.

"Watch yourself," I say, my brain slushy from the booze. "Those lips belong to my brother. And he was a sweet S.O.B."

Brownie sets his beer down and removes his hat.

"That so?"

"Me and him, we're different types, but we had each other's backs. Always."

Brownie removes his sunglasses and sets them beside his hat.

He says, "This jam is going all night."

I place my beer next to the hat and glasses.



“Then let me tell you about Andy,” I say.

“Dig it, baby,” my brother says and shines his old grin.



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