

Jinks

Tom Abrams

NINETEEN HUNDRED AND TWENTY: the jazz-crazy age, when a kid with a hock-shop horn and a keen ear lived well—too well. This is about one of those kids, a very gifted one called Jinks, Jinks of the pale face and the black eyes, Jinks of the golden horn. Here I tell only of my first meeting with Jinks.

We were a jazz band, a very good jazz band. We called ourselves The Bent Eagles, and we bent life to our liking. Professional jazz musicians, the off-scourings of Mississippi riverboats and water fronts, developing a new kind of music called Chicago Dixieland, wilder and hotter and more sophisticated than anything north of New Orleans.

Our chief Bent Eagle trumpet had bent himself into the wrong bedroom and departed by order of the management, the management that is of the night club where we entertained six hysterical nights a week. We advertised in a local paper and spent the following afternoon auditioning, but none of the aspirants had an ear for our kind of jazz. So about four o'clock we gave up and started rehearsal on a wicked little piece just out of St. Louis called "Wa Da Da." Frank, big chief Bent Eagle himself, played the trumpet part on a C-melody sax. We wound up the closing bars and were deep in a post mortem when I noticed a Chaplinesque figure standing almost in the center of the deserted ballroom.

The figure had one of those intolerably wistful faces you instinctively laugh at: large, sad black eyes; a complexion the color of paste; a soft, weak chin; and a mouth twisted up at the corners in a constant wooden smile. The ears and the shabby tuxedo were both several sizes too large. In short, the little guy—who couldn't have been over eighteen or nineteen years old—looked like an underfed albino monkey with black eyes, dressed in a black circus outfit and standing bewildered in the center of the ring. He held a stubby, scuffed-up trumpet case under one arm.

Gradually the chatter at the bandstand subsided as one by one we paused to look up at the strange new arrival. Then Frank said, throwing up his arms dramatically, "Well, Eagles, our troubles are over. Gabriel has arrived!"

But the humor was quite lost on pale Gabriel. He stared incomprehendingly at Frank.

"Wanna audition, kid?" Frank asked softly.

"I like that p-piece you just did," the small, high-pitched voice stuttered.

"Th-thank you, k-kind sir," mimicked Frank with a deep, theatrical bow. "We are all quite good, but I am the best." Then seriously, "Get out your horn, kid. Let's hear some scales."

"Whatcha call it?" Gabriel persisted.

"Why . . . why we call that one 'For Christ's Sake Potatoes!' Now are you here to audition or not?"

"Oh," was the only response to Frank's weird sense of humor.

"We play that too," said Frank. Then snapping his fingers impatiently, "Let's go, Gabriel. Blow thy horn or fly hence." He paused thoughtfully. "Get out 'Goose Pimples,' men. Charlie here must be able to read music, he's got a tux on. Come, be seated at yon music stand, your holiness, and uncase thy clarion."

Jinks seated himself, unsnapped the case, and pulled out a battered, tinny-looking cornet. Stretch, the banjo player, grimaced. "And in which heavenly pawnshop did you pick up that monstrosity?"

The pasty face grinned slightly and gazed down at the instrument as if seeing it for the first time. He adjusted the mouthpiece and laid the horn across his knees.

Seated next to him, I leaned over and pulled out "Goose Pimples" from the folder on his music stand. Frank grabbed his clarinet and shouted: "Let's go, Bent Eagles, one, two, one, two . . ."

We played about five bars, then one by one the instruments quavered out like a record running down. The drummer pulled up with a disgusted crash on the cymbals. Then silence. Frank stared hard at pale Gabriel, who sat granite still, the cornet lying untouched across his knees.

"Whatcher name, kid?" Frank drawled menacingly.

"Jinks."

"You play that sick-lookin' thing, kid?"

"Jinks!"

"Well! Pardon me if you please, your most exalted holiness Jinks! I'll try again. You play that thing, Jinks!"—his right eyebrow cocked a stormwarning—"or did you come here to sell it? If so, we ain't interested. And we're rapidly getting very bored with you, JINKS!"

"Play a f—f—few more bars, willya?"

"Oh for god's sake," Frank snorted. "His m-m-most ex-ex-exalted holiness would rather listen, Eagles." Then solemnly, "I'm gonna start this thing once more, KID!, and we're gonna play it all the way through. And if you're still sittin' there when we're finished, with that goshawful hunk of twisted pipe on your knees, so help me Helen, I'll wrap it around your neck."

Jinks met his stare, then glanced down at the sad cornet and began fingering the valves uneasily. Suddenly, his mouth flickered an impish grin. "Let's g—g—go, Bent Eagles!"

Choking to control his laughter, Frank counted off again: "One, two, one, two . . ."

The ferocity of a two-beat rhythm, the mood-making power of a simple melody, and the exhilaration of speed: mix them all together, and then boil—jazz. Jazz—a glorious, magic word to him who listens with his feet. Jazz: defy and forget. Jazz: the ugly duckling of music.

We broke into "Goose Pimples" with a vengeance, deviating from the written music now and then to heat things up. Frank on clarinet, Stretch on banjo, Jock on drums, Tram at the piano, and myself on trombone, we poured hot panic into that empty ballroom. Then, gradually, beautifully, there rose above this mad sound the clear bell tones of a cornet. His ex-ex-exalted holiness Jinks was putting goose pimples on "Goose Pimples."

With an intuition known only to Dixie devotees, all other instruments diminished volume. An occasional "run" of unbelievable speed and clarity, but otherwise it was "Goose Pimples" note for note. Yet every note distinct, every note a surprise, an inspiration in itself. It was all strictly legato, down in the middle register, as soft and throaty as a french horn, but fast, devastatingly fast.

Suddenly I was hearing something new. The old "Goose Pimples" became a pleasant memory. Jinks was playing something like it but infinitely better and infinitely sweeter. Frank's clarinet slid from his teeth; his mouth hung open. He stared over at Jinks with a puppy-like expression on his face, half-sad, half-sick, and all adoration. All eyes were on Jinks, but Jinks' eyes were popping and staring glassily ahead, as if he could see the notes that flew like rising bubbles of gold from his cornet bell.

Tram hopped from his bench and began pounding a rhythm on the piano top. I looked at Stretch, his spidery fingers working like a spasm on the banjo strings, the cords swelling and multiplying in his neck, his clenched teeth, his tight-closed eyes. A group of waiters, who had been setting up tables in a distant corner, were clapping their hands and rolling their eyes like idiot babies. Offhandedly I observed I wasn't sitting down any more. In fact I was standing bolt upright. In fact I was standing on Tram's piano bench, gesticulating like a mad impressario. Lord knows how I got up there. I think I must have been blown there. How clear things looked! How good I felt! How right everything was! The drum went boom, boom, boom, clash, clickety, boom, boom, boom, boom!

Then it was all over. At the logical moment Jinks stopped. Never mind what I mean by "logical moment." You just sort of feel it in your toes. Jock let out a banshee howl and tossed his drumsticks clear across the ballroom. Tram was spinning like a Dervish. "Keeriist Kate," he yelled. Frank stared reverently at the ceiling. The match flame palsied on the tip of my cigarette.

"Where," asked Jock haltingly, "where, oh where did you learn that kinda horn? I—" He shook his head and sighed violently.

"Let's p—p-lay that 'For Christ's Sake Potatoes' thing," Jinks stuttered. His face, pasty and pale before, was almost livid now and his black eyes shone like onyx.

"Here, you play it by yourself," Tram suggested, spreading the music for "Wa Da Da" on Jinks' music stand. "We'll listen," he added lovingly.

Jinks looked down at the music, lifted the cornet to his lips and began to doodle. It was a sweet, clever little melody, quick and spritely, but it wasn't "Wa Da Da."

"Hold everything," Frank interposed. "That's nice kid—I mean, Jinks—but that ain't 'Wa Da Da.'"

"It's 'For Christ's Sake Potatoes,'" Jinks grinned.

"It's for His sake you can't read music, you mean," exclaimed Frank.

And he couldn't.

THE FAMILIAR

Ina Marshall

Not as a stranger do I come to love;
 Not sighs nor midnight tears nor passion's rage
 Will make me serve again as humble page
 To any lord. Nor can ideals move
 A heart drained ruthlessly by master hands
 Of milk of kindness. Frozen now, I take
 All roses freely sent, too wise to make
 A wish, too self-contained to risk demands.

Think not that fire can spring in Dantean ice
 Or smiles reflect a feeling long since slain,
 Martyred on the Stone beneath the blade
 That stops not short of total sacrifice.
 Marvel not if empty glances rove;
 Not as a stranger do I come to love.

TO A GEOLOGIST FRIEND

Robert Petty

How often in our talks I hear you say,
 That man should loom the less and nature more,
 As though it were through some unravished shore
 His stumbling feet forever plod their way:
 That earth's still whispered vows shall not betray,
 That in the dim-lit caves which you explore,
 You never deem yourself inheritor,
 Nor sense your destiny in their twilight clay.

Dear friend, the mist of birth is ever lifting,
 The mountains of creation are at hand;
 The boulders of their peaks have long been shifting,
 And ever shook the jungles of the land;
 Still to the clouds the echoed roar is drifting,
 Listen—it is the avalanche of Man. . . .