

Prologue

Art Pepper was feeling really sick. His stomach kept jumping and lurching as he wandered along Beacon Street in San Pedro. He thought he might feel a little better if he threw up, but even after chugging down a gallon jug of Don Francisco Red Table Wine, nothing wanted to come back up for him. A quick fix was the only answer, the only way he was going to get himself straight and onstage tonight for the gig which would pay him almost enough to cover the heroin he needed right now. It had been almost four days since his last score and fix.

Art paced nervously between the Red Door West jazz club and the Bayside Pawn Shop. Both were on the same block of Beacon, between 5th and 6th Streets. He mumbled a sort of mantra softly to himself as he walked, "Can't play strung out, can't play without a horn. Can't play strung out, can't play without a horn."

A fix would require \$50. Art had \$4 and change in his pocket after spending the 49-cents for the jug of wine that didn't do shit for him. The only answer was to borrow against his Martin Alto Sax. Someone could loan him another horn for the gig at the Red Door tonight, then tomorrow he could buy his Martin back. Maybe his friend Lester Koenig would help him get the alto back again. That would be easy as all Lester ever asked in return was another recording session for his Contemporary Records label.

Mario, the "Uncle" at Bayside Pawn was no stranger to Art. Mario was an old friend of Art's father, Dick. They used to hang together at The Swan, just a few doors down on Beacon Street, back when Art was just a lad. Art's granddad, Moses, had bought him a clarinet so that he could play in the San Pedro Cleveland Boys Band. Dick and Mario would drag Art and his clarinet along to The Swan where Art would stand on the bar and play the songs he knew while Dick and Mario would cage free drinks from Art's performance.

Art borrowed money for his drug habit at Bayside Pawn more times than he could remember. At first, Mario would just slip him a few dollars “for old times sake,” but as the price of a fix went up Art needed more money and larger amounts. Mario started taking Art’s saxophone for collateral.

Mario was familiar with the routine; he had dealt with Art often. But he thought to himself that Art had never appeared so desperate. Mario noticed that Art kept glancing anxiously out at the street. At one point, when a police car passed by, Art rolled his body around to half hide behind a shelf stacked with carpenter’s tools.

Of course Mario agreed to help out. He actually offered Art \$75 for the gold lacquered Martin alto saxophone Art presented. Mario dutifully filled out the card, writing the saxophone’s serial number, 472666, from memory and handing him the buff colored pawn ticket with three twenties, a ten and a five.

Art grabbed the proffered bills and ticket, coughed, mumbled a soft, brief “Thanks” and moved quickly out the door. With a couple furtive glances each direction, he hurried across Beacon Street where a huddled figure in trench coat, dark shades and feathered fedora held up a lamppost by the Alexander Hotel. Art placed money in the man’s leathery, black hand and waited while “Trenchcoat” reached into the garment’s inside breast pocket and produced two pale gray condoms before melting into a nearby alleyway between the old hotel and Tommy’s Goodfellows Bar.

Art looked both ways at the curb once more, preparing to cross back to the Red Door. He felt calmer now, just holding the drug in his hand. Escape was close at hand. His euphoria was, however, short lived.

Black Ford sedans approached where he stood from either direction, traveling far too fast for this busy thoroughfare. The westbound Ford crossed over to the wrong side, making for a head-on with its likeness traveling east. Both cars screeched to a halt as bookends to Art’s curbside stance and more men in coats and fedoras poured out of them. White men holding out badges. Art

turned to the alley, but it was too late to escape and besides, his nausea made running nearly impossible. The men twirled Art deftly to face the Alexander Hotel's brick facade, ran hands over his body and snagged their prize. The two condoms of China White were passed around, tasted and pocketed by the officers who then laced bracelets on Art's wrists and shoved him into the back of the eastbound Ford, hitting Art's head on the door frame as they shoved him in. The time was 4:30 pm on October 24,1960.