

So What?

by Theo Gangi

Below the surface of ninety-sixth street and Broadway is a train station. Julian sits on one of the grimy wooden benches lost in himself sad eyes lidded and fixed on the gloomy tracks whose stillness reminds Julian of home. The thick tracks roam on in their eternal circle, familiar and unsettling. His head sways wobbly to one side, and in his numbness he still feels the cool glass of the Jack Daniels bottle in his left hand. With all his concentration he, swings the heavy bottle in the air up to his lips and lets a little bit slide down his throat. The liquor warms him to his chest, along with the knowledge that he's way too sick. A smile brews across his jawline and he starts to giggle a bit, out loud. The sound echoes in the vacant four AM train station and rings in his ears, so he starts to listen to himself talk, mumbling strange meaningless phrases about spilled milk and "Don't worry, Mama, I ain't gonna cry anyway. I'll just sit here alone with my garbage and my dirt and my dim subway lights to keep me company." He starts to laugh, then forgets the joke and sits back.

A long, beat-up old red train pulls into the express track. The conductor pokes his head out and looks both ways to make sure it is okay to shut the doors. Julian makes eye contact with him and nods. The conductor nods back. Julian has always identified with train conductors, as they are the only ones on the train who aren't going anywhere. They are the only ones who, in a few hours, will be back where they are right now.

"So What?" Julian mumbles to himself, getting up. "So what if I don't go home tonight. I know nobody's going to be waitin'." As he rises he is overcome by a harsh rush of lightheadedness and dizziness. He stumbles as fast as he can into the train, and collapses onto one of the seats. He is breathing heavily and he feels sleep coming over him. As his heavy eyelids fall he hears the soft bell of the closing doors. His eyes and the doors shut in perfect sync.

Elizabeth had a kind warm face which gave the impression that she could never hurt anyone. Her eyebrows were curved upward and her lips parted in an expression of innocence. Julian sometimes made fun of how she had the face of a puppy do just disciplined with no idea what it had done wrong. Julian couldn't place what it was, but for some reason he had absolutely no desire to be with Elizabeth today. He sat in the pizzeria where they usually met. It had a long counter in the front and an area of chairs and tables behind it. There was a large garbage can where the counter ended and the seating area began. Julian sat behind it with a lit cigarette, his back to the door.

He was facing a huge mirror, and when Elizabeth walked in she couldn't see him because the garbage can was in the way, but he could see her in the mirror. Her reflection was slightly distorted, because Julian's angle towards the mirror was bad. She walked over to where Julian was, looking for him. She stood right next to him but did not see him. Julian started to laugh at her. When she heard him she turned around. "Oh, there you are," she said and kissed him on the

mouth. A condescending smile remained on his face. She sat down, and when she looked up and saw his expression, she began to feel self-conscious. "What?" she said.

"Nothing," Julian answered. "Just you," he added with the same crooked smile. As she got her lipstick out of her purse his condescending grin turned into a spiteful sneer. She doesn't understand me at all, he thought, And if she did, she'd leave.

Then he thought how he didn't need her; how stupid she was.

"Well, I'm going to go get some pizza. Do you want anything?"

"Yeah," he said laughing, "Grab me a slice and a Coke."

"What's so funny?" she asked.

"Nothing, I just thought of a joke I heard."

As Elizabeth went to do his bidding, Julian sat back with a sick smile on his face. When they first got together she was his wholesome little perfect girl who had very nice parents and had all her shit together. She was cute, shy but willing. Most of all, Julian wanted to have her life and be her. What stood out in Julian's jumbled mind was that now he really didn't want to be her anymore. She home to him for a while, but that time was definitely over, because he couldn't see her as wholesome once he realized she loved him. He felt deceived.

Elizabeth noticed Julian was acting strange. She felt scared and self conscious. She looked over to him. She felt her boyfriend was troubled. Although she felt he was in some way or another always troubled, this time she felt it directed towards her. She wanted to know what she had done wrong. She looked to the back of the pizza parlor where the mirror was. She saw her reflection, and she was amazed at how awful she looked. She felt suddenly panic-stricken. Her whole body looked out of proportion, she had too many pimples, her hair was a mess! The slices were ready. She picked them up and a mild nausea came over her; she couldn't tell if it was because of the pizza or from her repulsion herself.

She brought them to him.

When Julian looked into her eyes he knew at a glance how uneasy with herself she was, how she thought she had too many pimples at this particular time. His plundering of her private emotions was so powerful and overwhelming that Elizabeth could feel herself shaking.

"H-Here," she managed. Julian remained silent. There was a five minute silence during which he snickered once in a while and Elizabeth felt completely uneasy. "You know," Julian said with confidence overflowing, "I'm not really all that hungry. I think I have to go to the bathroom." She looked at him curiously.

He grabbed her hand and rushed her across the street and back to school without looking her in the eye once. He opened the door to one of the individual bathrooms with locks on the

doors in the lobby and pushed her in. Her back slammed against the linoleum wall. Her mouth opened to say "Ouch" but Julian kissed her before she could. He locked the door and turned off the light while he was still kissing her. He grabbed her button-down blouse and ripped it straight down, but then ignored her breasts. He unbuttoned her jeans and took down her panties and soon he was inside her. He rocked ferociously back and forth, kissing her all the while. Within moments he was done. He stopped kissing her for the first time since they entered the bathroom and looked at her, breathing heavily.

In Elizabeth's memory the look lasted forever. Terror, anger, hatred, sadness and desire were among the emotions which moved around inside her body like an electric current. She thought he wanted her to say something. Trembling with fear and with her head shaking back and forth she heard her own stumbling voice say, "I-I love you."

She was amazed herself that these words had escaped her lips. Her hand reached over and turned on the lights. Julian backed away and got himself together. He glanced to the left and saw the mirror, which had been watching him the whole time. Julian took a second to look at the flat and glazed eyes of his reflection. He didn't say a word to Elizabeth. He didn't make eye contact or so much as glance in her direction; he did nothing to acknowledge her existence before he left, except that he turned the light off.

Toward twelve forty five in the afternoon, Julian's situation had not improved. Walking the halls of school and sitting in classes usually annoyed him, but this day he was hung over as well. When he arrived at jazz rehearsal, he went directly to his stool and avoided eye contact with everyone around. Their gazes, their opinions and their expectations were a looming presence around him. He sat with his forearms crossed and his elbows resting one in each hand. With his back hunched over, he resembled a vulture waiting for something to die. As the presence lingered, his mood worsened and his bitter gaze fell on the trumpet case next to him. He broke from his stiff pose of resentment and took out the trumpet. It lay in his lap he examined it as he had done uncountable times before. While the other instruments warmed up he ran his fingers over the shiny brass. It was the first bright thing his eyes had seen all day.

The room fell silent. The sound of rhythmically swishing drum brushes soon filled the void, echoing in Julian's ears. A smooth bass line followed, then a piano. After a minute the music came to a halt. Julian arrived with the first four colorful high pitched notes to "Autumn Leaves". The delicate notes lingered in the air around him, displacing the former presence like a sunrise. He continued to play and the arch in his back straightened as he took off.

The focus of his whole being and of the world around him was now dedicated to each individual sound which came from the trumpet. With no second guessing, he soared high and free of that dense weight, yelled "So long" to all that he carried, "I'll see you in a couple of bars".

Where Julian left off, the piano took over with a friendly complement to him. The full chords played off Julian's trumpet, carrying his passionate lyricism with a livelier and less melancholy edge. Then Julian came back in for an elegant finale.

The applause of the teacher filled the room and Julian turned and gave Marcus a huge smile at the piano bench. They both knew that was the best that either of them had ever played.

Each morning he walked to school he saw her sitting on her steps. Sometimes she was writing something, sometimes painting, sometimes listening to her Walkman, sometimes sipping coffee, and sometimes just sitting, doing nothing but being the perfect untouchable creature that Julian believed her to be. Every curve on her face, every crease in her skin, every bone in her body looked as if she was created as a definition of beauty. Julian was sure her eyes too would be gorgeous, but he had never seen her without her sunglasses.

Julian was now approaching the part of the routine when he told himself he was going to try to talk to her, got flushed with anxiety and walked by her without so much as a gesture.

"This is it," he told himself. As he walked by her dark brownstone staircase his feet stopped.

Then they kept going.

After about ten paces his legs raced him back to the spot where he had stopped before and he stood on the first step. With his head down, never making eye contact with her once, he said to her the whatever-thing that came into his mind.

"I walk by your stoop every day. Just once I want to look up and see you in just some kinda distress. You know, like a guy trying to hurt you or a piece of a building falling above you. Then I could kill whoever was trying to hurt you, or swoop you up into my arms and carry you to safety." Julian's voice was fast and nervous. He suddenly felt that he was talking like a little boy. "I mean, because then you'd have to notice me." After his speech was done he squeezed his eyes tightly shut and cringed. Brewing with fear, he finally lifted his head and gazed deeply into her sunglasses. She had a smile on her face that Julian did not know what to make of.

"You're cute," she said.

"So I just walked up to her steps, real cool, gave her a few lines and she gave me her number," Julian told Marcus.

"Yeah? Just like that man? Shit, I don't believe it." Marcus said in his deep rich voice. Marcus was about six foot one, had light black skin. Julian felt a sense of perfection about him. It seemed like Marcus never slipped or tripped. He never knocked something over accidentally.

"And you saw how good she looked.

"Yeah, I saw how good she looked. That's why I should tell you to be careful." Marcus told him.

"Yeah, yeah. Don't hate me, though, I'm doing my thing."

"I'm just saying, you know, sometimes you get attached to girls who are no good. Like take Caroline. I'll bet you still aren't over her. And I don't even know what the fuck happened with Elizabeth. Shit, she looks at you like you were fuckin' Lucifer or something."

"What is this? Are you trying to make me feel like a piece of shit?"

"Nah, nah. You know, I'm just trying to tell you to be careful. That's all. I didn't mean, you know, I didn't mean it to sound like all that."

The two boys got to Marcus' house. Julian was always happy at Marcus'. He felt more at home there than at his own house. Marcus' mom greeted them. She was tall, about five foot ten. She had the same skin color as Marcus and similarly striking features. Their nose and eyes were almost exactly the same. There was a heavenly aura to them. Julian sometimes dazed out and found himself lost in their divinity. They represented kindness and warmth, one of the very few things of that caliber in

Julian's life.

"Hi guys. How are you?" she asked. "I made sandwiches."

"Hi Ma." Marcus said.

"Hi Ma." Julian imitated. The three of them laughed. Coincidentally, the television in the other room echoed with studio audience laughter.

"Guys, you won't believe what happened to me today. I was almost mugged. Really. I walked out of the building and right there there was a man pretending to have a gun in his pocket, 'Gimme your pocket book,' he said."

"My God, what happened?"

"Well listen to this. You know Eliot, the custodian? Well, he happened to be walking out of the lobby right after me. When the guy saw him he just ran. We ran after him, and I was screaming, you know, 'Stop, thief!' just like in the movies. Then, a really nice New York thing happened. People just started running after him with us. Just people off the street, it was really nice."

"Wow," Julian said.

"Did you catch him?" Marcus asked.

"Well, listen to this. The guy just ran into a bunch of cops. There were about six of them who happened to be standing right there. He turned the corner and knocked one of them down." She said, laughing.

"That's amazing," Julian said. "And you still had time to make us sandwiches."

Marcus's Dad walked in from the back room. He was a large man, about six foot four and two hundred pounds. He had very dark skin, and the same thick wide jawline as Marcus's. He was a famous jazz drummer, and he practiced with Marcus and Julian often.

"Hi, guys. Did you hear what happened to your mother?"

"Yeah, she just told us."

"Some story, isn't it. You guys want to play?" Julian grabbed his trumpet case and the three of them went into the other room.

Julian found himself intently staring at the only thing in this small studio apartment that he could relate to, this apartment whose steps he had only seen and whose interior he had only imagined. What would have been a collection of talentless paintings to someone else appeared to him as a gallery of undiscovered art too good for him to understand. The walls and ceiling were painted a blinding bright white. The confidence which the woman smoking the cigarette in the chair next to him emanated was making Julian nervous, and the floorboard of the room were shaky and creaked loudly. Julian felt like he could fall through at any moment.

"Muffy, get away from him."

So after worshipping this fantasy of his for so long, after her sensual lips only had opened to say no more than a collection of ten words to him; after dreaming about being this close to her and in her apartment all week, all he could bring himself to do right now was get hopelessly lost in the blank, vacant eyes of her pet dog Muffy.

"So what's your name?" he finally asked. The woman cocked her head back and let out a giggle with her exhaled smoke.

"I'm Eleonore. Nice to meet you."

"Eleanor?"

"No. Eleonore." She seemed to speak with some sort of foreign accent, but Julian could not place where she could be from. What he knew was that she was driving him insane with desire. She wore a short plain white T-shirt which accentuated her perfect breasts, and tight jeans which hugged her thighs and ass. And of course, her sunglasses stayed glued to her face, like Julian couldn't even have pried them off with a crowbar. Quickly he moved his eyes away. But he did not want to seem like he was avoiding looking at her, so his eyes fell clumsily all over the place.

"Do you want a cigarette?" she asked.

"Uh, no. I've got one." Julian said, patting himself up and down looking for his pack. He found it and lit one. The cigarette was very welcome to him. He didn't know what to do with his

eyes, but now he knew what to do with his mouth. He smoked and started to relax. He leaned back in his chair and he saw Eleonore take care of her dog. She yelled something at him, grabbed him by the neck and tied him up outside.

"I like your art," Julian told her. He stood up next to one with her.

"Yes. This one is by Rachard. He is a friend of mine. He's a genius."

"Really? How about this one?"

"That's mine. These are all mine except the Rachard and this one," She said, pointing. "By Danel, also a genius."

They stood there admiring the artwork, even though Julian couldn't figure out what he was admiring. He just thought it must be something.

"So, Julian, what do you do?" She asked him, running her fingers through his hair.

"I, uh, play the trumpet."

"Ow, sexy. come here." She brought him closer to her and kissed him. Julian knew how to kiss.

Julian heard the faint sound of music and people applauding.

Groggily he dragged himself to hear the welcome, familiar sound. It was jazz, Bebop. The band was rather good, for an underground performance. There was a drummer who only had one drum and one cymbal to play on. There was a guitar player, a bass player, a saxophone and a girl who played slide trombone. Julian found himself staring at the female trombone player. She wasn't attractive. She had pale skin, big hips and thighs, and an oily complexion with bad acne. It wasn't any sort of desire that drew Julian to her. She was tall in a clumsy way and shaped somewhat like a pear. The feeling that drew Julian's attention was some strange unplaceable sense of recognition.

Julian watched as she leaned with her back against the wall with her arms limp and her big trombone looking heavy in her blundering hands. Her eyes darted right to left, surveying the crowd which she soon had to perform for. She straightened her back as the guitar solo finished, and with completely unexpected grace she played her first few notes. As she continued, her persona changed entirely. She played some interesting and emotional riffs, with a gruff sound and a fast pace. She kept going faster and faster, surprising the audience which was previously ready to dislike her or feel sorry for her. Her solo had fire and passion, tearing apart the limits of the instrument and her own body. Her body was getting into the music. Not awkwardly, but with a real sense of rhythm, bobbing back and forth and crouching when her solo climaxed emotionally. When she was done her trombone fell back to its previous unwieldy position. She took a breath and darted her eyes from right to left, self-consciously surveying the crowd. She seemed to ask with her eyes, "Did you like me?" She waddled her way back to the wall, looking

weak and vulnerable. She might have been uncomfortable in the real world, but when she had her horn pressed against her lips she was cool like Miles and flew like Bird.

Julian was comfortably tucked in under his covers. He stretched his legs and toes, rubbed his face against his pillow, then wiggled his torso. He was lying on the couch in Marcus's room, and he had rarely felt so much at home. Marcus was in the corner of his room getting a record from one of his shelves.

"Here, I've got something that's perfect." Marcus stated, putting the record on the turntable. Julian heard the first three piano chords and recognized the album immediately.

"Ahh, Miles. Miles is the king." The song that was playing was called "So What," and it was Julian's favorite song.

The two friends lay in the dimly lit room hopelessly absorbed in the music on the turntable.

"You know my mother saw him live." Marcus said while the music played.

"Really? Wow. I would kill to see him play."

"Too bad he's dead." Marcus said, chuckling.

"Yeah, too bad." Julian replied somberly. They didn't speak for another moment, during which Julian thought about what inspired him to start playing the trumpet.

"So, what did your mother think?"

"She liked him, of course. But he was playing with his back to the audience." Both of them took a minute to picture what it would be like playing for an audience you couldn't see. The notion really irritated Julian.

"What the fuck? How could someone do that? He's putting all these people through this incredible emotion but it's like he doesn't even know he's doing it." Julian broke out, half serious, half laughing. "He can't even see the people he's touching. And it's not like he's blind, he chooses not to look at them. Like they don't matter. It's ridiculous." Marcus threw a smile at Julian, and patted him on the leg.

"Take it easy, Cannonball," he said to him. Julian started to laugh. 'Cannonball' was Julian Adderly's nickname, who was playing the saxophone at the moment on the record. They listened to "So What" end.

"You know what always gets me about that song?" Marcus asked. "How the beginning and the end are exactly the same but they still sound so different. You hear the beginning and it sounds real nice. You know, the horns sound good, you might start tappin' your foot. Then you start listening to the solos and you get so wrapped up in it that by the time the ending comes it's

like you're exhausted. You hear it again, but with all the shit you just went through. It is the same, but it sounds different."

Marcus looked over to his friend and saw that his eyes were shut.

Julian hadn't been to his house in a while. He walked through his lobby, which was cold and foreboding. The walls were an unfriendly gray cement, and the floor tiles were beige and black. Leroy the doorman was an old dying black man who used to scare Julian. He was sitting in his favorite chair half asleep when Julian walked by. His eyes opened and once he saw Julian his lips broke into a huge smile. Julian looked over and saw the shiny white teeth gleaming in his mouth.

"Hello, Julian," he said in his deep raspy voice, without changing his smile. Julian nodded a greeting and the elevator door opened. He got in, listening to the old man's vicious cough. In the elevator he wondered when Leroy was finally going to die.

Every time Julian got to his front door it looked even bigger, and less inviting. As he opened the door he felt the presence of lingering ghosts. No lights were on except for his father's bedroom. He smelled marijuana smoke. He put his stuff down in his room, which was right next to his Dad's, not bothering to turn on any lights himself. He walked into the other room, where he heard the voices of his father and his girlfriend.

"Hi, Dad," he said in a low monotone.

"Oh, Julian!" he said, somewhat stunned. "Uh, hi, how are you? You remember Nancy, don't you?" He stumbled a bit, getting up.

"Yeah, hi," Julian responded, not changing his tone. "I'm going into my room." He went inside and lay down on his bed in the middle of his dark room, which was lit only by the blue moonlight which came from his window. His father came in.

"Yeah, so Julian. Hi," he said with glazed eyes. "So where were you last night?"

"Don't you mean where was I last week?"

"Heh, yeah." He sat down on the bed next to Julian. "So how have you been? How is the trumpet?"

"Fine." Julian's father looked into Julian's face for a long time, split between the blue moonlight, and the black darkness of his room. A feeling of painful nostalgia came over him. He saw in the features of the boy's face the remembrance of his lost love. Quickly he turned away from his son's image and left the room. This reaction from his father was quite familiar to Julian as well.

It was midday, and Julian was walking home from school. He was eleven years old. He walked into his lobby and saw Leroy standing by the door.

"Hi, little man!"

"Hello, Leroy."

"How was your day? he said, laughing.

"Good. Bye." Julian got in the elevator. He got to the front door and took out the key on a chain around his neck. He opened the door and walked in.

"Hi Ma, I'm home!" he yelled. He put his stuff in his room. He didn't see his mother until he walked into the bathroom. Her placid eyes were looking right at him, but they did not see him. In an instant Julian felt his whole body drop into his stomach.

He had no idea of how long he stood there. It could have been for a minute or for an hour, but the sight would be embedded in Julian's mind like a tattoo, forever. He would try sometimes to forget, but no matter how hard he tried, he would never forget her eyes. There was no feeling, no emotion behind them, no understanding of what had been done. They just looked right at Julian and didn't see a thing.

Below the surface of Ninety sixth street and Broadway there is a train station, and Julian is feeling at home in his favorite seat there. There is a bottle of some random alcohol in his hand, and on his thigh rests his Walkman, nearing the end of "So What". Julian thinks how Marcus was right, that the end is the same but it does feel different.

A long, beaten up old red train pulls into the express track. The conductor pokes his head out and looks both ways to make sure it is okay to shut the doors. Julian meets eyes with him and nods. The conductor nods back. Julian has always identified with train in conductors, as they are the only ones on the train who aren't going anywhere. They are the only ones who, in a few hours, will be back where they are right now.