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### New Musical Express

The subway grooves to bebop. In its square-tiled stairwells, the rumble of far off trains comes low and fast. Pungent tobacco smoke stews thickly with the sweet mist of filth and the dank stench of fresh sweat and urine. Black leather shoes tap a ceaseless cadence up and down the smooth, rounded steps. The air itself seems taut with a palpable rhythm, charged by the motion of a million impartial souls in transit.

I stood within a crowd on a jam-packed platform. It was Thursday; a vandalized display terminal read 7:05. All around me, sallow faces tinted by dark metro lights cast their eyes to the floor.

Curled in a corner, arms around his knees, a man sat apart from the great shoal of commuters. He shrouded himself in a lotus of soiled fleece and wool, out beyond the pools of light trickling down from the ceiling. A slow, plaintive wail issued from his hidden mouth, a frail warble raw with pride and sorrow.

*“Eeee, aaah,”* he sang. *“Dee dee dee, ah ah...”*

No one payed him any notice, and soon his gritty lament was drowned under a hoarse roar of rushing metal and spinning wheels from the murky depths of the tunnels. A train was coming.

The crowd had blocked the man from view, but at times his voice still cut through the intricate polyphony of talk and scrape and clang. Every instant that it did, each moment that his vocalise of blues lashed at my ears, it carried with it all of his desolation and suffering.

*“Eeee aah, ah dee dah, ah oo bla dee, dah dah...”*

Up slid the train; the doors fell open. In rushed the crowd; the doors snapped shut. I found a seat, and the train, shaking and jerking, plunged into the dim.

Once settled, I looked around. Across the aisle from me, a woman clutched a Blackberry to her face, murmuring anxiously into it. The man next to her seemed captivated by his shoes; his neighbor glared intently at the advertisement signboards above my head. In the seat next to me sat a small, gaunt old woman. Dressed in filthy, rumpled tatters, she smelled faintly of nicotine and roses. As the train gently rocked and shifted, she swayed back and forth and tapped her feet irregularly on the flecked linoleum floor. I knew I was wrong to judge her, to

assume from her appearance alone that she was unstable and threatening, but nevertheless, I found myself worrying what heinous diseases she might have been carrying, wondering whether, at any moment, she would try to bite me or, even worse, talk to me.

I realized that I was staring at her, and looked away.

“The next stop,” droned a computerized voice over the intercom, “is One Forty-Fifth Street. One Forty-Fifth Street. This is the 3 Train, Seventh Avenue Express, Harlem to Brooklyn.”

The woman coughed loudly, and I jumped. She sat back in her seat, wheezing, and the light caught her face, which I saw was wreathed in something like burn scars. I did not cringe, but lowered my eyes, my uneasiness mounting.

The train arrived at its stop. Men and women grappled their way off and on, gnashing their teeth behind tightly pursed lips. When the commotion settled, I saw that the Blackberry woman had gone; a hoary, jowled old man in a worn wool jacket now filled her seat.

It was then, as the train pulled away from the 145th Street station, that I first heard something, a sound far off in the tunnels. It was a measured thudding, a soft, rapid pulse beneath the white noise of the subway. I blinked and shook my head, convinced it just was a trick that the soft clamor was playing on my ears. Looking around, I saw no indication that anyone had noticed anything beyond the usual reverberation of the train.

Just then, the woman next to me stopped tapping her foot, stopped rocking in her seat, and held very still. I sat up straighter in apprehension, poised for a swift escape in case she suddenly snapped or dissolved into fits of violence. In addition, it seemed that the harder I tried to ignore the sound, that thumping, throbbing, thrumming rhythm, the louder it grew. More layers soon joined the first, higher pitches that ricocheted through the train. There was a muscular, harsh one, and another, more muted but shriller. A fourth emerged as these voices grew ever clearer, segregating themselves from one another; this one sounded like fine sandpaper circling and slapping a smooth face of wood in time.

Other people started to look around.

Craning my neck, I could see a commotion in the next car through the rear door window. As the standing passengers parted, I saw the crozier-like mast of a double bass swinging left and right above the congregation of heads. Between their shifting bodies, I glimpsed the burnished bell of an unlaquered trumpet as it caught the dull, stuffy light.

The door opened, and the smothering noise of the tunnels rushed in to fill the car. A tall man entered. Lanky and bespectacled, he held a tarnished alto saxophone to his chest with scraggly hands. Behind him came the trumpeter, horn to his face, blowing a solo that through

his Harmon mute sounded like mirthful gales of laughter ringing out beneath the clamor from the open door. The bassist followed him in, bending low and ducking through the doorframe while still tearing at his strings. Last came a young woman, strapped into a large white harness from which dangled an immense silver snare drum. It bobbed about in front her as she slapped and raked it with a pair of brushes. Her hair was a feral tangle, swinging heavily about her squarish face.

Reaching the dead middle of the car, the four of them halted in their haphazard procession, hunched down, and *played*. I watched dispassionately. They were certainly good, but I found nothing new or fresh in it. Concluding his solo, the trumpeter lowered his horn almost solemnly and stepped back. A fill on the drum, a turnaround in the bass, and the band began a new chorus. Then, without warning, still keeping time relentlessly, the drummer began to sing. Her voice was startling, a low, husky contralto that sounded chillingly like the man crooning in the shadows back on the platform.

The drummer caressed certain words with a silken tenderness; others she heaved from her throat in coarse, guttural barks. As the music blossomed and then unfurled, the train came to stops and then left them, the doors opened and then shut, people shuffled off and then on. Uncaring and unaware, weary riders trudged past and around the band, paying no heed as the derelict subway train became a radiant chariot of the blues.

*“Under-loved, over-fed,”* the drummer moaned, beginning her final verse, *“My man’s gone, so now instead, I got rocks in my bed...”*

Mouth curled into a keen smile, she sighed out her final phrase, softening her blows to the drum.

*“Yeah, under-loved, over-fed, my man’s gone and now instead—”*

The band cut off as one. Only the noise of the train, oblivious of its blunder, violated that sacred silence.

*“—I got rocks in my bed...”*

As horns clashed in the sweet dissonance of seconds and tritones, as fingers fluttered over the depressed strings of the bass, as brushes rolled upon the face of the drum, the drummer indulged herself, prolonging her final vowel rapturously. The end was swift when it came, a soft swish and a pat on the snare.

A few people clapped. Others acted as if no one was there. One man had headphones in his ears, from which emanated a muffled reduction of synthesizers and heavy bass. He was bobbing his head spasmodically, gyrating weirdly to the beat, apparently oblivious to the living musicians present and performing just feet from him.

“Thank you all,” the drummer said, beaming as though their sparse applause had been a riotous ovation. Enunciating crisply and boldly, she spoke as if she were delivering a sermon to a rapt and zealous congregation. “That was Sir Duke Ellington’s truly fine composition ‘Rocks In My Bed.’”

She produced a tattered purple velvet bag, embroidered with the words “Crown Royal” in elegant cursive, and, holding it out, began to pace the cabin. She did not hassle anyone, but merely gazed for a moment into each person’s face, asking with her eyes for what she knew her voice alone could never acquire.

“We are the 3 Line New Musical Express, expressing expressly for you on this fine Thursday night the greatest American form of artistic expression—*jazz*. For after all, as a wise man once wrote—”

The intercom cut in: “The next stop is Central Park North. Central Park North. This is the 3 Train, Seventh Avenue Express, Harlem to Brooklyn.”

“As a wise man once wrote,” resumed the drummer, “the rhythm of life is a jazz rhythm.”<sup>i</sup>

All eyes had fallen to the floor. Nobody made a sound. In that strained, discordant quiet, all that was heard was the rattle of the snare cables on the belly of the drum, the hollow click of the saxophonist’s keys as he and the other two ambled away down the train, the dwindling whirl of the train as it drew near its stop. My stop.

“Here,” croaked a voice. A spindly arm extended from the seat next to my right. With a bitter smile stretched across her disfigured face, the woman held out a wad of crumpled bills. I somehow knew that this was the only money she had seen in many days, and the only money she was likely to see in many more. Gently, the drummer slipped it from that skeletal hand.

“Thank you, sister. Bless you. Bless you,” she said.

The woman’s smile broadened still more.

“You just did,” she whispered.

There was a small lurch as the train stopped before yet another teeming platform. I got to my feet, but the instant the doors opened, hordes of people materialized, blocking my path. I stood there, trapped inside the train with that fetid, scar-faced woman, both of us awaiting our time to exit, to climb through a stuffy square-tiled stairwell and return to our lives above ground. I would go back to work, to my girlfriend, my dog, my Coltrane and Stravinsky. She would shamble through the streets to arrive at some alleyway, some heat vent, some homeless shelter, listening to the wordless songs of sorrowful men in sitting shrouded in shadows. I was overwhelmed and confused by a powerful rush of emotion. I only knew how desperately I

wanted to get away from that train and rid myself forever of the melancholy, the suffering, the blues that it carried.

Then, abruptly, the woman spoke:

“That was Langston Hughes.”

I turned to look at her.

“The wise man she mentioned before,” she explained, “‘The rhythm of life is a jazz rhythm.’ It’s Langston Hughes. ‘Lenox Avenue: Midnight.’”

It took me a few moments just to realize what she was talking about.

“Oh,” I said.

I glanced sideways at her, trying to guess what she wanted from me, but she was looking away, gazing out off the train and beyond the platform.

The flock of people leaving the train had thinned, and I seized my chance. I practically leapt from the train and wound quickly through the swarming station, relieved to be escaping. When I reached the stairs up to the street, I turned and looked back over the crowd just in time to watch the train depart. I saw the woman down at the platform’s edge, shuffling slowly into the crowd, rocking as she went in time to the metro’s swing.

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### Works Quoted

<sup>1</sup> Hughes, Langston. *Langston Hughes: Poems (Everyman's Library Pocket Poets)*. New York: Everyman's Library, 1999.