

About 1200 words

The Brass Haven

I rip the polyester tie from my neck like a free man sidestepping a noose; my phone's already buzzing, mind's racing. I wish I didn't work a nine to five—that's not why I came to New York—but a lot of people can tell that story: retail poets chirping in disinterested coffee shops and fast-food thespians honing their craft in empty playhouses. Working days for food and nights for love.

The phone buzzes again. A text from Jarvis. "You ready???"

"On my way," I type back and grab my sax from the closet. It's the only thing in my place with any shine other than the nickels and dimes hiding in the couch cushions. I put on my sharpest button-down and a pair of slacks with a nice crease. I'm like a whole new man, the sweat and struggle of the day washed clean with a simple change of clothes.

I meet up with Jarvis in the alley behind the apartment complex, chain smoking cigarettes and splitting a sixer. We vent

about the day and play "that's nothing," trying to top each other's stories of who had it worse. We finish the beer and toss the bottles against the bricks, scattering the brown glass like confetti, and then head out into the east village.

"Cab?" Jarv asks.

"Nah, let's hoof it." I say, scampering across the street to a chorus of car horns. I don't have the money for it anyway.

The night turns into a series of bars with neon lights and no covers, places with prick bartenders and well drinks that make you cringe as they slide down your throat.

"Cocktail list?" the bartender always asks.

"Whisky and Coke," I say.

"Preference on whisky?"

"Whatever's cheapest." We never let'em sell us that top shelf shit. Doesn't matter if it comes out of a golden goblet or a plastic carton, it gets you drunk just the same. Why pay extra for the smooth?

We pass a dozen places peddling sugar bands and sweet sounds for the tourists, elevator jazz meant to be muffled by headphones and clattering college keyboards at coffee shops.

"Damn, you can hear the rim shots from across the street," Jarvis says with a chuckle and puff on his cigarette, kicking a pebble over the cracks in asphalt. The clinkers echo into the

night like a chorus of rusty gates and mix with the smoke trail we leave in our wake.

"Nothing but pretenders," I say as we pass'em by. Just fakes trying to turn a quick buck with a "Live Jazz" sign on the sidewalk and twelve dollar cocktails at the bar.

The concert halls let out when we cross into midtown and the artists flood into Hell's Kitchen carrying their cases; bowties swinging, cummerbunds dangling, the girls with their hair hanging down. We saunter along behind them, swapping quips and trading sips off the flask in Jarv's back pocket. The alcohol runs everything together like a wandering jam session until we finally make it to the Brass Haven, a tiny jazz hideaway tucked between converted lofts and a Chinese takeout joint. Climb a flight of stairs and tip our lids to the bouncer out front like a couple sinners smooth-talking St. Peter and a few moments later we're through the pearly gates and inside the promised land.

We snag a table in the corner and ride the buzz from the flask, milking the cheapest drinks on the menu and frustrating the cocktail waitress, until the real musicians finally show up—the ones that play amphitheaters 'til ten and the bars 'til three. They stroll in noodling random tunes and telling jokes to the regulars like they own the place—because they do own the place—and when they kick off the set it's like the city's heart

starts beating, the streets and alleys pumping tunes like veins and arteries.

The combo gets the whole bar swinging, trading eights and passing out solo time like candy canes on Christmas. The drummer hits the hide, the trombonist works his slide, and the trumpeter blows 'til his lips are chapped. There's no set and no sheet music, just five artists getting lost in notes like a man losing himself under the covers with a beautiful woman. The music evolves, changes, adapts, falls behind and catches up; I've come here twice a week for three years and never heard the same song played the same way twice.

The man on the sax nods to the bartender and hops off the stage and out of the rhythm. The bartender drops every order like a hot skillet and makes a dirty martini for him. I hop to the bar, snag it, and shuffle it up front so he can get back to whaling. He sizes me up, takes a glance at my case tucked beneath our table, and slides me a wry smile.

"How you doing, Percy?" he says over the music and takes a sip of his martini, finishing the swallow with approving pursed lips and a nod.

"Doing great, boss," I say, handing him the martini.

"I'm taking five," he says, taking a sip of the martini and finishing the swallow with approving pursed lips and a nod.

"You wanna hold my place?"

I can only smile and nod my head as race back to the table, take out my sax like a young squire unsheathing a broadsword, and bound up the steps on the side of the stage.

The trumpeter pulls his lips from the brass and says "E flat. Can you keep up?"

I start in slow, feeling my way around the tune like the soft curves of a beautiful woman, until I find the rhythm and start to standout. I drift and sway like I'm floating in a pool of cool water and my fingers flutter over the keys like I'm reading brail. When the song ends I snap out of my trance and turn to the drummer.

"You need a break?" I ask over the applause.

He gives me a curious look, then sees Jarv with his sticks in his hands sitting so close to the edge of his seat that a gentle breeze would knock him on the floor.

"You know I could use a drink," he says. "Tell Jarv not to mess up my set."

Jarv slides me five, sits down at the drums, and shows'em what a desperate man can sound like. We trade glances and smiles throughout the set like two conmen working the room at a poker table. We're almost professionals. It's like we got the whole house fooled.

Outside, the cars passing by blast the same hip hop, rock, and bubblegum pop that swirls around Time Square like the flu,

but the door to the Haven is where we make sure it stops. It makes me long for the good days, when brass was gold and jazz was king. It makes me wonder if these are my good days, playing for free in a hole in the wall jazz club, knowing how much the hangover is gonna hurt tomorrow while I try to scrape together enough coins to do it all over again. It makes me scared of the bad days and whatever tuneless hell they have waiting for me, but not scared enough to stop playing.