

WHILE HIS KNUCKLES WERE CLAMPED ON THE HANDLE OF HIS TRUMPET case, and the rest of his band unloaded their gear from the back of the rust-brown pickup truck, Dewey searched for his reflection in the toe of his glossy-black dress shoes. He pivoted and twisted his ankle whilst craning his neck to catch a glimpse of himself in his tuxedo as a single light above the door was all that lit the alley.

‘Knock again,’ Dewey said.

‘Somebody come look at this,’ Uncle called, holding back a desperate laugh. ‘Negro, who you tryin’ to see . . . in black leather . . . in the dead of night?’

Pebble blurted out a laugh as he hugged his double bass off the tailgate, and Lock just smiled to himself as he paid the driver.

‘You’re just jealous you couldn’t get a shine like this—’ said Dewey.

‘Entirely wrong riff, my brother; I’m not the one performing,’ Uncle replied. ‘Seems like you even polished the bottoms—the way you slipped off that truck. Careful you don’t go sliding off the main kick!’

Uncle and Pebble whooped with laughter again.

‘I’ll be just fine on that stage, dummy. Just knock again!’

Uncle hit the steel door and the thuds reverberated through the alley.

‘Producer or not . . .’ started Pebble. He took a large bite out of his butter-fried sardine sandwich and continued with a clogged mouthful, ‘I don’t see why we gotta truck all the way out here to play!’

‘Producer or not,’ replied Dewey, ‘the man Robert Johnson sold his soul to came here for a drink to celebrate after. *This* the place to play!’

‘So, you’s sayin’ this place haunted or something—’ asked Pebble.

‘Man, I can’t talk to you!’

‘Why would he come to a white’s only club on the edge of Mississippi?’

‘Forget about it!’ replied Dewey. The paper around Pebble’s sandwich crinkled as he prepared it for another bite. ‘And get that greasy, oily slop outta here!’

‘Darlene says I gotta eat more fish—’

‘I ain’t gonna let Darlene let you stain that tux, so help me! No, sir.’

Unc, talk some sense into this boy.'

Uncle turned to Pebble and put on a generous smile.

'Pebble, I must admit, it do look mighty delicious,' Uncle began. 'You's really lucky to have a good woman looking after you the way Darlene is—'

'Get it gone, Jack!' Dewey snapped. 'It ain't a discussion! Always loading his face!'

Pebble retreated and Uncle focused on Dewey noticing Dewey's thumbnail picking at his leather handle.

'Hey, Hoof?' Uncle said quietly, 'You good, man?'

'I'm good,' replied Dewey.

'You nervous?'

'I'm good, Unc!'

'It's just us tonight, a'ight?' Uncle continued, 'I mean, they got a house band, probably not hep to the jive, so we already know they don't mess around with nothin'. Don't need no help when there ain't no creativity,' he gently chuckled. Dewey didn't even smile. 'It's just us. No troubles.'

'I heard you already, I'm straight!' said Dewey as he charged towards the door to pound it once more, but there was a thud from the other side just in time.

The boys quickly readied themselves. Pebble took one more bite and then threw the wrapped leftovers at the trash cans behind them.

There was another thud. And then another one followed by dampened curses. The boys backed up and waited patiently, catching each other's eyes. The door eventually burst open and swung out against a stack of old barrels revealing a stocky man with rolled sleeves and bushy forearms.

'It's janky,' he mumbled, rubbing his shoulder whilst chewing a stub of a cigar. Without a moment of interest, he turned back inside and headed down the dimly lit service corridor. 'This way.'

Uncle stepped in first and the rest followed, ending with Lock shutting the door behind them. The walls were scuffed and scarred from decades of deliveries and removals having been trafficked up and down the corridor, and every so often the tacky linoleum floor desperately

attempted to hold its prey in place. Halfway down the hallway, the stocky man opened a door to the left, stepped in and held it open. The band quietly entered with curious eyes, and their ears were piqued with the dampened sounds of a saxophone and drum kit working harder than they needed to.

Smoke-stained sage green paint chipped and peeled in mysterious patterns revealing cracks in the walls emerging from the corners of the room, and the leather couches were haggard and abused offering a slanderous lie of comfort. The boys stood squarely in the centre of the green room with their instruments close for fear of damaging anything further.

‘You the manager, sir?’ asked Uncle. ‘The owner?’

‘What of it?’ the man replied, closing the door and traversing across the room to the other door.

‘Just wanted to thank you for providing us the opportunity. We won’t disappoint.’

The band nodded graciously and politely smiled. An act they knew they had to nail the first time, every time.

The man opened the door and turned back to the band. He pointed to another door at the rear end of the room, ‘Restroom,’ he grunted, and then to the nearest corner to him at a small counter with cups and a hot water urn and a brown jar, ‘Coffee,’ and then he threw a thumb behind him into the corridor he was about to trudge down, ‘Stage.’

‘Sure thing,’ said Uncle. ‘Thank you, sir.’ The man grumbled and started out. ‘Oh! What time are we on, boss?’

‘We’ll let you know,’ he replied, and without a second thought, he was gone.

The door closed and the band waited a few moments more to ensure his distance.

‘Forget that salty bucket,’ said Uncle, as Dewey and Pebble began to relax and unpack their instruments, ‘this our night. Didn’t I do good?’ His arms were outstretched and his showbiz grin was wide as if a wire connected the corners of his mouth to his wrists.

Dewey placed his trumpet case on a coffee table. *HOOFMAN* was

printed in large white text on the side of it. He flicked open the latches and pulled out his horn from its black velvet lining.

‘You hear that corny dirge they playin’ out there?’ Pebble scoffed.

‘Unc, I don’t know how you locked this gig, and I don’t care how!’ said Dewey. ‘We here, and they ‘bout to hear!’

Uncle clapped his hands once and then hollered into an imaginary microphone, ‘Ladies and gentlemen, the doctor *knows* y’all are poorly, he *knows* y’all are hurtin’. But fear no mo’, yo’ elixir has arrived. Now, open wide for yo’ first dose o’ what the doctor ordered! Side effects: sudden inflation of mind, body and *soul!*’ Dewey’s lips got sucked into his horn and he blew a sharp and saccharine solo. ‘Go give it to ‘em, Hoofman! Play that back!’

Pebble’s left hand slid up the neck of his double bass and his chubby fingers rolled across the fingerboard.

‘Watch out now, ladies and gentlemen,’ Uncle continued, ‘Nurse Pebble has just entered the ward . . . now bend over, he ‘bout to check yo’ temperature!’ Dewey’s horn popped a high note as he laughed through the mouthpiece. Pebble shook his head but stayed on time. Uncle then turned to Lock. ‘Calling Doctor Lock, you’s needed in the operating theatre. Go ‘head and check the people’s pulse, let’s hear that beat!’

Lock stomped his size twelve shoes on the lino and beat and slapped his barrelled chest and thighs. Uncle clapped along and exclaimed nonsensical flourishes in any window he could find, no matter how small Dewey made them. And then a loud thwack popped from Pebble’s bass. Everybody stopped, permitting the house band to resume emanating from the bar.

‘Ah, dang!’ said Pebble, pulling the snapped string through his fingers.

‘S’all good,’ said Dewey as he wiped the spit off his lips. ‘Just swap it out.’

‘. . . Hoof . . . it ain’t good,’ Pebble started, ‘. . . I done run outta wire back in New Orleans.’

Dewey blinked in disbelief, and it was as if that flicked a switch inside of him.

‘No! Not tonight, Pebble! You ain’t doing this to me tonight! I got too

much riding on this!

Uncle stepped in to mediate but Dewey wanted more of it. His excitement mutated into stress and he had to let it out on someone, but before Pebble could feel the heat the milky lights above flickered as if they were about to blow. The door opened and the boys automatically regained their composure and put on their entertainer smiles.

‘Ah, yes,’ said Uncle to the manager, ‘So what time we on, boss?’

‘Bad news, folks. You’ve been bumped. Pack up your shit.’

The air was sucked out of the room and within the vacuum, the band’s veneer cracked, but only a little.

Uncle calmly stepped forward in a measured posture and said, ‘But we’re all ready to go, boss—’

‘That’s right!’ said Dewey, ‘We’ve come all this way to play!’

The manager turned to the corridor and beckoned. ‘In here, boys,’ he said to the mystery guests.

Dewey curiously stepped forward and joined Uncle towards the front of the room. One by one, three men of uniform shape and size entered. Each one seemed surprised to see Dewey’s band already occupying the space. The colours of their luxurious velvet tuxedos reflected along the ridges of their porcelain jawlines, and two of the men fashioned pompadours that held steady like candle wax. The last man that entered wore a trilby so black that the contours of the pinch were hardly visible, and only when he looked up and caught Dewey’s eyes did the satin ribbon momentarily shimmer in the light.

‘Hi, there!’ he said, with a slender hand reaching out to Dewey. ‘The name’s Tex.’ He sounded exactly as one would expect a confident, blue-eyed country boy to sound as if always talking through a cornered grin. Nobody moved, but Tex’s fingers subtly began to furl. ‘Seems I’m missing a few details . . .’

Dewey ignored Tex and switched on to the manager, ‘Sir, they ain’t takin’ our slot.’ Uncle tried to sedate Dewey with a firm hand on his wrist, but it was no use. ‘It’s been booked and signed for. An agreement was made and we intend to honour that, and I hope it’s not too much to ask

for you to go ‘head and do the same—’

‘Now, you listen here,’ the manager started, ‘you boys were booked as stand-ins. We had no guarantees that Tex and his boys were gonna make it back home tonight, but luckily they did.’

‘Lucky for who?’ said Dewey, his knuckles beginning to tremble. ‘Unc, what the heck is this ofay talkin’ ‘bout?’

Now with an audience, Uncle had to come clean.

‘They were coming from St. Louis. How was I supposed to know they would make it in time? I even called the bus company—said with the storms they’d be delayed for sure!’

Dewey could feel everyone’s eyes on him as they awaited his response, and he delivered exactly what was expected.

‘Unc, I could *kill* you—’

‘Now, Marty,’ started Tex. He placed a hand on the manager’s shoulder. ‘I’m sure Hoofman, here, has—’

Without missing a beat, Dewey stressed, ‘Hoof-*man*.’

‘That’s right, Hoofman and his band must have travelled some distance to get here, and this appears to mean a lot to ‘em. I mean, would you just take a second to admire their duds? Togged to the bricks, as they say. They don’t even *look* like rentals! And look how shiny them shoes are! Like a couple’a sweatin’ beetles in the jungle! Something tells me they won’t let you down.’ Tex regarded them for a few more moments. ‘Hell! *I’ll* vouch for them, Marty!’

‘We don’t *need*—’ started Dewey, but Uncle quickly grabbed his arm again and continued to watch the negotiations play out.

‘Come come, now, Marty,’ said Tex, ‘Surely we can work something out. Give ‘em half a set. You can squeeze ‘em in before us.’

Marty appeared to consider his options, but it was apparent he wasn’t really given a choice.

‘They get fifteen,’ Marty sighed. ‘But I’m only paying twenty per cent . . . And it’s coming outta *your* envelope.’

Tex held Marty’s eye. ‘Happy with that, boys?’ he asked. Tex’s bandmates stopped tinkering with their instruments and mumbled their

agreement. 'I ain't asking y'all!'

Tex turned to Dewey and his band, and after a long pause, Dewey reluctantly nodded on their behalf. Dewey glanced over at Uncle who gave him a slow nod in solidarity, and then out of the tense atmosphere, an ashy chortle broke out of Marty. He patted Tex on his lower back and trudged back to the front of house.

*Thanks for reading.*

*The entire short story is available upon request or online at leading eBook stores...*

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