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Naima's Rhythm

by Graham Eng-Wilmot

Les absentmindedly rubbed the yellowing receipt between his thumb and forefinger as he read the store sign. "Blue's Memories – 6 St. Mark's Place." He looked down at the slip of paper in his hand and thought, "I'll be damned – it's still here."

A metallic bell rang as he pushed open the door to the shop. A photo of Louis Armstrong's grin and the sweet swoon of an Aretha Franklin chorus, "Daydreaming and I'm thinking of you, Daydreaming and I'm thinking of you," drifting from the in-store soundsystem greeted him. The walls were covered with album covers, '60s and '70s music posters and memorabilia. And the display shelves were packed with neat stacks of records, all bagged in protective plastic sleeves, carefully sorted by category – soul, r'n'b, jazz, funk, rock, blues, gospel.

Les, who was the only customer in the store, was immediately struck by the nostalgic atmosphere of the place. His eyes widened to take in all the photos of black musicians: Jimi, Ella, and James Brown, BB King, Sade and Al Green, Miles, Coltrane and Bill Cosby. He'd never seen such an assortment of history packed into one place. But it aggravated him. He was too used to the open space of his immaculately clean apartment – minimal and uncluttered in every way.

"What kin I do fo yuh youngblood?" asked a raspy voice from the back of the store. A short, older black man conservatively dressed in a wool sweater vest, slacks and

driving cap stepped around a cabinet and approached Les. "Yuh lookin fo sumpin special?" he said, adjusting his small rimmed glasses to size up Les. "Yeah I knows yuh are. Yuh done came to the right place. Yuh's searchin for some memories of yuh childhood I bet. Ol Blue here will fix yuh right up. What tunes yuh tryin to remember?"

"I didn't come for records today Sir."

"Son, I gots the best vinyl selection in the Village aight? But if yuh came fo posters or somethin else I gots that too. And yuh don't have to call me 'sir' youngblood. Yuh done makin me feel old – Blue will do."

"Sure ... Blue. Actually I didn't come for anything musical. I ... well ... someone sent me one of your old store receipts and I was in the area, so I thought I'd come by and see if you were still here."

"I still be here son, Blue's Memories since 1963, but I don know bout yuh receipt. Lotta peoples come through here sell all they records one day then come and buy em back the next. So what's so special bout the receipt? Somebody break the bank on vinyl?"

"No. Nothing like that. I think it may have belonged to my mother. But I'm not sure. It's been a long time since she passed."

Aretha's sonorous voice faded out and Oliver Nelson's "Stolen Moments" ushered in an atmosphere of melancholy over the speakers. The mellow, but intense melody line silenced the honks, squeals and yells of the bustling crowd on the streets outside with one musical sigh.

"Well let me see the receipt an see what I kin remember. My memories is as good as anyone elses. Man listen to Freddie Hubbard blow that horn. I love this here solo."

Les handed the old man the yellow slip.

"Oh see here son. This ain't a receipt for purchase. This is a receipt fo sale. Somebody musta sold me some records back there in ... let's see ... slip says October 17 of '73."

Blue started rummaging behind the counter muttering the date over and over—stopping to look at the slip again—checking the date and then back to rummaging.

"Ah here it is. Muh box of records here from '73. Yuh gotta keep these kinda things kid. Yuh never know what the taxman gone ask you bout. Here we are. October 17. Oh man."

Blue went silent. He slid his glasses down so they barely remained perched on his nose as he looked over the scrawled records of transactions—the vinyl he had bought and traded nearly 30 years ago. Les stared at the storeowner and began drumming his fingers on the glass counter-top, starting to get annoyed with the rummage of the old store and its keeper's ancient recordkeeping system. But he was also curious about what information the receipt might yield. He somehow knew it was his mother's. Although he wasn't quite sure why. He only remembered broken fragments of her. Bits and pieces of images and sounds, touches and evoked feelings. Needle drops of memories spanning the six short years between his birth and her death.

"Yuh moms name Naima youngblood?" said Blue as he read out of his notebook.

"Yes, Naima Harris," Les said, surprised that the old man could decipher the 38-year-old scribbles of notes.

"I was wrong fore youngblood. I know all bout this receipt. Or at least that day I

wrote it. Yuh moms, Naima Harris, came up in here and sold off her entire collection of vinyl. All soul music son. I member it clearly cuz she had a shopping cart — one of those silvuh chrome deals with the wheels that don't roll straight and squeak up a storm. Yeah man. That cart was overflowing with albums and she rolled it right in the same door yuh came in today. She musta had everything. Yuh could tell they been played, but they was all clean. I almost didn't have the heart to buy 'em all from her."

"Are you sure about that Sir? I recall playing with a couple Beatles albums my mother had, but our living room cabinet always seemed empty."

"Needle drops of memories spanning the six short years between his birth and her death."

"Son. I told yuh sure as sheetrock is hard I member. I even got some of the albums written down here — the Impressions, Nite-lighters, Isaac Hayes, Funkadelic, all them James Brown records, yeah ... Every single James Brown release up to then, even the foty-fives — 'Mother Popcorn,' 'Sex Machine,' 'Super Bad,' 'I Got that Feelin,' 'Out of ...'"

"Did she tell you why she was selling them?" interrupted Les.

"Yeah son, jus calm down. She just kept looking at me with a half-hearted smile and I axed her if she was sure about sellin em. She said yeah — she needed the money fo her baby. An I told her that ain't no man worth as much as these here musics, but she told me it wasn't fo no man man, but her six-year-old baby. Youngblood — that musta been fo yuh."

"It must have been. I wasn't exactly living in Brooklyn Heights then."

"Hey now, fo some people music is life youngblood. I member thinking that bout yuh mother as I looked in muh cash box trying to give her everything I had fo them slabs of plastic. She bout looked like her heart was gone burst when she walked out that door with a couple hundred bucks. Yeah. It took me near a month just to put those records out to sale—I kept hoping she would come back fo em. But she never did."

"She must not have had time. She died that December of a heart attack. I was only six."

"Now that's a shame son. But peoples do what they got to. Getting by. But yuh gotta member, life's just a moment in time. And we go round and round. Yuh come to the right place fo memories youngblood. Yuh gotta go back to go fowad's what I always says. Yuh sure I cain't find yuh something to listen to—maybe jog yuh mind?"

"Thanks, but no. I don't listen to much music. I don't have a record player. All I have is a clock radio."

"That hurts youngblood. Diffrent strokes for diffrent folks I guess. Well yuh know where I'm at. And where I'll be for a while. Devil don't have too much on me yet."

"Yeah sure," Les said, moving toward the door. "I don't get into the Village much—stocks and all. I appreciate your help though. I've never known much about my mother—Who she was you know? But I don't expect to find out too much these days. I need to get going."

"Well life's a funny thing youngblood, I shore knows that," Blue said as he handed the receipt back to Les. "When yuh least spect it yuh'll learn somethin."

Les took one last look around the store

of memories—the records, posters and photos. There in the corner flipping through the funk records was a tall, bearded black man with permed hair. He was garishly dressed in a tight '70s outfit of all white with a 5-inch wide silver belt buckle, silver necklaces and a floppy, felt women's hat with a peacock feather stuck in the brim.

"Ain't you got any mo Funkadelic records up in here Blue?" asked the funky-looking black man in a deep baritone.

"What yuh see is what I got."

"Now ain't that a damn shame. I fly my black ass all the damn way down here and cats ain't got my shit."

"That's funny," Les thought as stepped onto the sidewalk. "I was sure there were no other customers."

He shut the door and the bell tinkled. Blue put away his box of records and sat down behind the counter, staring vacantly into space, contemplating the last few statements of Bill Evans' piano solo and the quiet ending of the "Stolen Moments" melody.

Les slowly walked down the sidewalk toward 6th Ave. He had his head down, not even noticing the jostles and bumps from the teeming street crowds. All the while he stared at the yellow slip of paper.

"What the hell is this," he thought. "First this receipt arrives and then I talk to this old record dealer about my mother. Strange."

Les hadn't thought about her in years. He hadn't wanted to. As a motherless 6-year-old, he'd harbored a feeling of abandonment toward her. He'd been shipped from one foster home to another—each with a measured sympathy for a black boy from

Brooklyn. He was taken in simply to increase the dollar amount on the government checks that arrived each month. By the time he was a teenager he'd grown accustomed to the transitory shuffle of his life. But he hated it. He cursed his mother for dying and leaving him to be raised by one foster family after the next. But with every new bed, every new sibling, every new father and every new mother, memories became less important to him. Les learned how to shut the past out, almost ignore the present and remain focused on the future.

Usually he would have taken a taxi back across the Brooklyn Bridge, but he didn't feel like it today. He stopped walking at 6th Avenue and looked both ways past the rows of shops and their respective window shoppers. The subway didn't seem like such a bad idea to him—especially at this time of day.

He descended the stairs just as the F train to Brooklyn screamed up to the stop. Hurriedly, he bought a token and squeezed through the closing silver doors. The train lurched away from the platform as he sat down on the molded, hard plastic seat.

He hunched forward rubbing the receipt between his fingers. "Who in the hell would have sent this to me?" he thought.

The train shifted back and forth over the tracks as it sped under the streets and Les found himself rocking in the seat in time with the vibrations of the car. As the train shrieked around a curve, the paper slipped from his hands. He bent over to pick it up just as the train came to halt at the next stop and the momentum threw him into the stainless steel hand pole in front of him.

By the time he brought himself to his knees the train had left the platform and the rocking sensation kicked in again. A flow of images flashed over his inner mind's eye like

electricity coursing through the third rail. He remembered.

Walking into the main room of the small apartment and finding the wooden doors to the stereo cabinet open. Three Beatles albums lying haphazardly on the now empty shelves. His mother staring at the void with red eyes shedding tears. Asking, "Momma—what's wrong?" Her scooping up his 6-year-old body and rocking him against her shuddering chest. "Nothing baby. Nothing. The world breaks us gently sometimes baby." Her gently breaking and vibrating like the shuddering of the subway car racing through the tunnel.

*But with every new bed,
every new sibling, every new
father and every new mother,
memories became less
important to him.*

The Bergen Street stop was as it always was—pleasant. The sunlight reflected so hard off the blacktop that the surface appeared stark white. He didn't notice the change though. He was too focused on simply walking the few blocks to his apartment. But so tense that he was now clutching the receipt, bending permanent creases into the 30-year-old slip. He didn't care whether he preserved it anymore. The impact of the memory had been made. He couldn't forget what he had just remembered. And he had to know more.

He fumbled with the key to his door, finally slotted it and then crashed through into the immaculately organized setting he called home. The structured arrangement was an involuntary response to the constant shifting of his seemingly chaotic child-

hood—a resulting compulsive desire for order. His eyes panned across the exactness, the perfection of it all. Everything had its place and it was there, untouched since he had left that morning.

The blank envelope that the receipt had arrived in was still in the stack of letters by the phone. He swiped it off the counter and held it up to the kitchen light trying to discern any markings. A 32-cent Malcolm X stamp and no return address. He sniffed it, then ran the tips of his fingers over the paper's surface trying desperately to discover some distinguishing feature that might reveal the sender. But the questioning confounded him and out of a sudden frustration he tore the envelope in half.

The utterance of a low growl escaped from deep in his throat as he rubbed his eyes, feeling a pressure building in the sockets. He rubbed so hard a spectrum of bright lights began to strike through the darkness on the back of his eyelids. The change began to throw off his balance so he stopped the force of his hands and opened his eyes. The red blinking light on his answering machine startled him.

He punched the mailbox button, impatiently ignored the feminine, but mechanical voice on the machine and wished that this plastic box of transmitters and dials would work faster. He wanted the damn message. Now.

Finally the beep signaled the beginning. A clamor of guitar feedback and loud drum breaks emanated from the speaker. "What in the hell?" Les thought as it continued for about 30 seconds.

Finally a smooth, deep voice that was hauntingly familiar called out, "Aight dat shit will do for the take. I finally got this here nigga on the phone. Ay yo Les. This is Eddie. Eddie Hazel. Look here cat. I'm a

friend of your moms. I know you got my letter and shit. My bad on not letting you know how to hit me back, but I do a lot of traveling cat. A lot of flying. He moves in mysterious ways if you know what I mean. Anyhoo—I'll be on the ground for a minute and I think we should meet up, kick it about your moms and such. I'll check in with you later. Aight? Chill."

In his haste to listen to the message again, Les accidentally erased it. As he raised his fist to pummel the machine a wave of exhaustion swelled through his body—from the toes to the tips of his neatly trimmed hair. He lowered his clenched fingers and lightly pounded the counter, berating himself for being so careless. For losing control.

"A shower will do me good," he said almost commanding himself to try to relax. He stepped out of his clothes, leaving them on the kitchen floor. But when he turned on the hot water in the bathroom, he decided to grab his portable phone and left it on the sink as he stepped into the steaming water. He let the nozzle drench his forehead with a blast of searing liquid and his knotted muscles began to loosen. The phone never rang.

He took a long shower—longer than usual. Afterward he walked around his apartment while he dried himself and knocked the water from his ears. When he came to the kitchen he saw the pile of clothes and his compulsive cleanliness drive peeked out. As he stooped to gather the coat, tie, shirt, pants, socks and white briefs, he noticed the red blinking message light. "Well I'll be damned," he thought, "Didn't I erase that message?"

He pressed the mailbox button and immediately the same familiar baritone voice came sailing out of the speaker: "Damn Les.

This is Eddie, I left a message earlier. Sheeit. Look I'm only in town for a minute so we need to connect. I'm playing this gig out in Brooklyn tonight. You need to come with. Aight? The club's called 'The Aphrodite's Child'—kinda freaky huh? I hadda put in some major prayin to land that name. He's got a sense of humor though. Don't you forget. Shit is kinda cool—warehouse style on the 9th floor at 10 Jay Street. Tell the man at the door who you are and that you's meetin me. Aight? Chill."

There was no line outside the venue. A light sweat broke out on Les' forehead as the freight elevator scraped through the shaft to the 9th floor. With a rumble and clang the trip ended and the doors scraped open to the loud, pulsing sounds of crackly, vintage funk.

The jet-black bouncer with long matted dreadlocks and tight Peter Tosh t-shirt looked quizzically at Les in his casual khakis and button-up shirt. "Yuh gut duh wrung flour me tinks."

Taken aback by the muscled man's high voice, Les hesitated then quickly launched into his name: "I'm Les. Les Harris. I'm trying to find Eddie Hazel."

The bouncer looked at Les from his brown leather loafers to the flat top of his hair, finally muttering, "Lawd ah mercy. It teake all kinds." Then in a booming bullhorn tone that cut through the crowd, the speakers and the funk, he yelled, "Eddie yuh guest be heah," and pushed Les through the entranceway into the loud, dimly light club.

Les immediately felt overdressed. Black women and men in tight leather pants and studded jean shirts were dancing like crazy to the sounds of the DJ—the only white person in the club. The crowd was a mix of folk with differing shades of skin color all

wearing distinctly '70s clothes. Some, like the waitress in African dress, others in jeans and shredded t-shirts. There were afros and perms, dreds and kinky long hair. Some shaded their eyes with huge round sunglasses and floppy brimmed hats while others sported headbands or knit wool caps.

"Heah dis niggah is," the bouncer said pointing at Les as he waved to a man across the room who was setting up a guitar amp on stage. Les tried to ignore the eyes of the crowd wanting to get a look at whose arrival had been announced as he focused in on the tall black man whom the bouncer gestured to.

"It's the guy from Blue's," Les thought, staring at the man. His tight white suit had been replaced by an entire white cowboy outfit complete with a 10-gallon white cowboy hat, white chaps and 12-inch long fringe that hung from all over his body—a Sly Stone lookalike—but it was unmistakably the man from the record store. The man grabbed the arm of a nearby waitress—the largest black woman Les had ever seen. She was decked in a Zulu dress and headdress. Eddie mouthed something to her and then pointed at Les. Before she turned away, he sounded a lion-like roar and jokingly made a biting motion at her. She laughed with her whole body and came over to Les.

"You betta watch out for Eddie. That nigga can't keep his mouth closed. But he told me to tell you that he'd find you after the show—he's gotta warm up. But you can sit anywhere you like and drinks are on the house."

She was much larger in person, Les thought.

"Thanks. Do you have a smaller table that's out of the way?"

"Sure thing baby," she said and led him to a table and bar stool in the corner of the

dance floor. "You'll be able to see everything from here. Whatcha drinkin'?"

"I'll just have a beer if you have one."

"Course I do baby, we got everything here."

Les watched her rear end switch from left to right as she took each step back toward the bar. He was amused by the way such a large mass looked moving. Then he turned his attention back to the DJ. He was shiny-headed bald, looked to be about 35 but with sunken eyes and a dark, almost skeletal face. And he had a seemingly never ending supply of 45 after 45 of Northern soul and deep South funk that—like a magician and the white rabbit—he pulled out of a tiny, cardboard 45 box placed on the table next to the turntables.

His tight white suit had been replaced by an entire white cowboy outfit complete with a 10-gallon white cowboy hat, white chaps and 12-inch long fringe that hung from all over his body...

"Funny," Les thought, "the lone white guy's got the whole crowd moving."

Sweat was pouring off their bodies as if the dancefloor had its own high humidity. But because of the dancers' heat, their energy, there seemed to be an immense joy exuding from them—a red glowing aura of copaseticness. They danced as if there was no tomorrow, throwing their bodies into gestures of freedom and physical expression. Their eyes rolled back until only the whites were visible as if receiving a musical transmission from somewhere in outer space through the act of dance.

Les stared at them in wonder. "Where are all these people from?" he thought. "I've never quite seen such a crowd like this."

The waitress returned with a glass of piss yellow liquid and laughed at his wide eyes taking everything in. "You look like a little kid," she said.

"What's that?"

"I said you look like a little kid staring out at all them folk exorcising."

"Yeah. But these are the strangest exercises I've ever seen."

She let out a hearty laugh. "Exorcising baby. I said exorcising. But you came just in time to watch another. Eddie and the band's about ready to play." She winked at him before waddling back to the bar.

Gradually the DJ eased the dancefloor down with soul tracks and the club quieted so that Les could hardly detect the rustle of women shifting in their dresses and the whispers of hushed conversation. Eddie, the lead guitarist sidled to the lip of the stage—fringe shimmering from his shoulders, the sides of his thighs and down his chest. The rest of the stage was extinguished as a floodlight focused on the frontman. Extra noise disappeared. The muffled laughs, scrapes of chairs on the floor, ice clinking in glasses of liquor were all enveloped by the slightest hiss of the guitar amp. A soothing blanket of electricity feeding back over the exhalations of the crowd.

The rhythm guitarist strummed an aching simple 6/8 riff. An ever so quiet minor arpeggio in a slow 1-2-3-4-5-6, 1-2-3-4-5-6 rhythm that trembled across the crowd's ears. On the four, the drummer cracked his stick against the skin of the snare echoing soul vibrations just slightly behind the beat.

And then on one, Eddie sent a piercing note that lanced into Les' skull and heart.

He sat transfixed—as the past began lassoing the present, reining in all movement of time and space as if to try to catch up to the future. The melody sang across the ceiling, the long tones quivering as the guitarist shook his fingers over the frets.

Eddie immediately began to crescendo, almost to an unsurpassable limit as the highs ruptured into crying into screaming into squalling. His eyes pulled shut as if the pressure of his synapses might detonate. And his mouth twisted into a scream that was impossible to hear over the glorious cacophony of feedback that shook the support of the room. The guitarist continued to build momentum—fingers blurring across the frets and the pick slinging across the strings.

Ever so slightly the volume began to come down as he bent the notes. Notes that weren't even notes anymore. Not licks, not riffs, not runs, but sound becoming birth becoming joy becoming soul becoming sadness becoming anger becoming death.

Les blinked his eyes and in that split instant Eddie's feet lifted off the stage. Rising with each thumbed bass note, he began to float. The rest of the band faded out and he launched into a salvo of syncopation – the unexpected rhythm patterns propelling the guitar sound over and back. Rasping from clear to black.

"Holy shit," Les thought to himself. "That nigga's actually flying."

Eddie's foot continued to tap out the 1-2-3-4-5-6, 1-2-3-4-5-6, toes rising and falling as if there was still a floor to bounce off. His body contorted over the guitar wrenching away tone after tone of sound until finally the effort seemed to overstep his physical capability and took on a life of its own.

No one moved. Les shook his head and blinked his eyes again to clear his vision, but

Eddie was still there floating above the stage.

He hovered as if to catch an updraft and strike away, but the guitar cord swayed gently in the air behind him—effortlessly connecting, anchoring him to the amplifier and its sound. Sound that soared into electricity as the solo shrieked though the open progression, feeding back with every scream and squeal. Equaling harmonic pain. Gradually Eddie unclamped his hands from the frets and strings. He spread his arms away from the instrument slung across his chest, stretching his body into a cross. But sound kept cycling out of the amps, bleeding into every molecule of air in the club. Sucking empty air in through the rear of the floor speakers and spraying it back over the patrons in a sonic wash.

A wash that abated drop by drop leaving Les' ears ringing with each metallic vibration of guitar string. Anguish leaked through every note that floated into the audience. Raining against hands and lips, crotches and asses, chests and foreheads. Hearts and minds that swelled and exploded with the song's final decrescendo.

It was a guitar solo that lasted forever and then some.

Les blinked his eyes again and then forgot whether they had been closed or open or for how long or whether he had been dreaming or if he had moved at all. But he realized Eddie Hazel was now standing squarely on stage, hunched over the final noodles of sound. Picking out the last, subtle notes of the solo. The past slowly loosened the stranglehold on the present, relinquishing the struggle to catch up for another time. Movement once again crept back into the club.

But no one clapped. The peaceful calm of the amp hissed until someone across the

room uttered in a hushed tone, "Go maggot brain ... Go maggot brain." The phrase spread through the crowd like a reverent amen and the end of the evening began. The crowd quietly filed out of the club, dissipating into the night.

Les sat dumbstruck on his stool. He slowly shook his head in disbelief, picked up his glass and slowly began to swirl the liquid. As he sat there staring into the tiny whirlpool in his glass, Eddie came over, suddenly blocking the lights leaving his black silhouette outlined in a stunning golden aura.

"Les. My nigga Les. It's me Eddie. Eddie Hazel. I been lookin all over for you. Shoulda known you be sittin in a corner.

Something wrong with that drink of yours? Here have some a mine. I'm just sippin on some sizryup. Ha ha. Gotta keep up with the new jacks you know?"

As Les' quickly thought of formally introducing himself, Eddie thrust his glass under Les' nose and he caught the stale blueberry scent of Robitussen, but with an unhealthy dose of added alcohol. The sniff was enough to make Les feel queasy, but Eddie just kept knocking back gulps.

"Uh, Eddie. It's ... uh ... nice to meet you," Les said thinking that Eddie didn't look older than 25. "That was one hell of a solo you just played."

"Sheeit my negro. Hell ain't have nothin to do with it," Eddie replied as his eyes wan-

dered from Les to a slim, light-skinned female in a low-cut dashiki strutting by. "Damn. Every time I makes it back to Earth all the honeydips come out—they knows I'm here my man. Now that's something to make a hungry nigga's stomach stop hurting."

"Eddie, you said on your message that you knew my mother and Blue told me that receipt you sent me was hers and I'm trying to find out more about her because she died when I was young and—"

"Like woah cat," Eddie said shifting his gaze back to Les. "Slow your roll here cat. I knows your whole story. Your moms died when you was six and you can't remember much about her, except for how you done always felt abandoned and blah blah. Yeah yeah. I know man. Life goes on. But I know her back in the day. Relax. I ain't seen her in a minute, but she ain't changed much. No offense brother, but the man keeps a nigga like me busy—I gotta make up for some crazy living in my time. Penance an all. But what I'm a tell you is the most important shit about your moms. Think you can handle some a this shit cat?"

"Look Eddie," Les said starting to get frustrated, "this entire day has been upside down from the moment I walked into Blue's Memories with that receipt you sent me and then your messages and I just realized that you were in the store the whole damn time and ... I just want to know. This not-knowing shit throws me all out of wack and ... and I need to know about my mother. More than the pictures of her and me smiling together. More than the abandonment. And certainly more than her selling a bunch of old records for money."

"Well damn nigga. You bout as uptight as they get. Those were more than just old records dun ain't you figured that out?"

"They were records. Big pieces of black plastic with grooves. They don't make them anymore."

"They was more than that to your moms Les."

"Please Eddie."

"Aight. Forget it. You'll figure it out sometimes or anothers. I betta just lay it on you then huh? You ever heard of Jimmy Nolen?"

"No. Was he someone my mother dated?"

"Sweet Jesus no. What the fuck did I bother askin for?" Eddie said as he looked up into the rafters of the warehouse. "Course you don't know who the fuck Jimmy Nolen is. The whole majority of peoples ain't know who the fuck he is. A damn shame. Look, Jimmy played in James Brown's band startin in '65. Right around the time he invented funk. You heard 'Papa's Got a Brand New Bag' right?"

"I think I've heard of it—he grunts a lot doesn't he? Not really singing?"

"Lord have mercy on ya brother. You know 'Papa's got a brand new bag,'" he sings out the lyric. "The rhythm guitar plays a 9th chord on a 'ting-aling-aling-aling-aling' riff and then the rest of the band cuts in. That's somethin folk live to hear. You tellin me you ain't never heard no 'ting-aling-aling-aling-aling' guitar sound?"

"Look Eddie I don't listen to much music, maybe I heard it when I was young, I don't know. What does this have to do with my mother?"

"Oh Lord give me the goddamn courage to change the things I can't. That choppy sixteenth 'ting-aling-aling-aling-aling' strumming was none other than Jimmy Nolen scratchin the soul out his damn guitar strings. Nigga invented the choke-rhythm guitar. And that shit was your

moms grits and gravy. She kept tellin me not to sound like Hendrix when I soloed and more like Nolen. That's the hella important shit about your moms."

"Eddie. I don't understand this. Is this another thing I'm going to have to figure out like that receipt?"

"No my negro. Fuck that damn receipt. You done probly torn it up anyway by now. This is much more important and it's easy. You woulda figured it out by now if you owned more than a clock radio."

"That's somethin folk live to hear. You tellin me you ain't never heard no 'ting-aling-aling-aling-aling' guitar sound?"

"I need more than this Eddie. What's the point? Look can you tell me something more ... I don't know. Something more 'concrete' about her?"

"Naw man. I done told you everything you really need to know."

"Please," Les begged.

"Aight," said Eddie, rolling his eyes and grimacing like he was hit with a sudden panging stomach cramp. "Just go to Blue's first thing tomorrow and tell him you want some Jimmy Nolen shit. Put it on real loud and feel the vibrations. Okay? This isn't hard man. Trust me. And look, I gotta go. Everybody's done left and I ain't even get to smoke a sack. Damn I hate you hardheaded ones. They make these trips such a pain in the ass. Getting my insides all twisted up again."

With that Eddie headed back to the stage and picked up his guitar from the stand.

"Eddie, wait. Are you sure there's noth-

ing else?"

Eddie looked back over his shoulder and said, "Naw cat. I bared all I got. That's all we ever can do. I'll be peepin you later."

"Eddie. One last question. I promise."

He turned, ax in hand.

"Were you really flying during that solo? I mean ... I couldn't tell, the lights were flashing and ... well I was sure your feet left the stage."

With a sly grin, Eddie looked Les square in the eye and said, "My feet were never on the stage. I told you on the message. He moves in mysterious ways," he said gesturing upward with his guitar. "You'll figure it out. Trust a nigga like me and have a little faith."

He turned away and walked off the stage.

Les looked down into his glass and caught a distorted reflection of his face—smoothly abstracted into a swirl of hair, eyes, ears, nose and mouth. He decided not to take any swigs of alcohol. Instead he gently set the glass on the table and left the venue quietly, not even noticing that the crowd had somehow disappeared into the city lights, into the stars. He didn't speak to anyone on the street as he walked the 10 blocks back to his apartment. The exhaustion drained any feeling he had during the evening. He barely made it to the couch where he collapsed into a deep sleep, still wearing his cigarette odor-ed clothes.

Back so soon again youngblood?"

"Yeah, I need some more help with the past Blue," said Les as he craned his neck to see if any other customers were browsing through the shrine of memorabilia.

"First yuh gotta get focused on the present son. Why don't yuh try lookin at me

stead of rubberneckin round muh store?"

"Sorry, I was just checking. Do you remember that other customer who was looking for records yesterday? A real bugged out looking guy?"

"Hmmm ... Oh yeah, dude in all white, '70s looking stuff? Askin fo Funkadelic records?"

"Yeah, yeah. That's him."

"Yeah, he comes in here every now and then. Sorta shows up outta nowhere—he don't even set off the doorbell ringing. Always looking fo Funkadelic jams. 'Specially 'Maggot Brain.' Wonder how many copies of that gem he needs? But yeah, I never talked much with him. He looks and he leaves. Never bought a damn thing. But diffrent peoples is always comin up in here. Why you askin bout him?"

"Just curious, he looked interesting that's all."

"Okay. So what kin I do fo you? You got more receipts from your moms?"

"Not today. I actually came for music. I need something with Jimmy Nolen playing guitar."

Blue's eyebrows arched into a quizzical expression.

"Jimmy Nolen youngblood? Now ain't too many folk ask fo him by name. Usually it's James Brown this and James Brown that. Now how yuh get started lookin for Jimmy Nolen if yuh only owns a clock radio?"

"I met someone last night that mentioned I should check him out."

"Who?"

"This guy Eddie. Maybe you've heard of him? He may be a local, I don't know. Eddie Hazel – plays a really wild guitar."

"Eddie who?"

"Hazel. Eddie Hazel."

"That's what I thought yuh said. Yuh sure bout this?"

"Well yeah. He's the guy looking for Funkadelic records. I saw him play over in Brooklyn last night."

"Now I done heard it all. That cat in muh store is just some crazy nigga who likes '70s style and Funkadelic. And I don't know who yuh saw, but he wasn't no Eddie Hazel."

"How do you know?"

"Cuz Eddie Hazel been dead since December 23, '92. That's how."

"Oh."

"Yeah youngblood. Eddie Hazel was born in Brooklyn, raised in NJ and done joined George Clinton and Funkadelic when he was only 19. Played a mean-ass guitar. Sorta sounded like Hendrix. Yeah man, his jam was 'Maggot Brain' off the second album. Crazy beautiful solo. I heard George asked Eddie to play the saddest thing he could imagine so Eddie played his momma dying on his guitar. Ain't that some shit. And in one take too. The rest of the band wasn't playin so hot, so George faded the 'em out on the recording an let him wail. Cried his soul out a that Gibson guitar for 10 minutes and 10 seconds. Saddest thing yuh'll ever hear."

"Are you sure he's dead Blue? That sounds exactly like the guy I heard last night."

"Son. Eddie Hazel is dead as dead. He went to Lampoc prison for a while. Story has it he was high on angel dust on a plane ride, couldn't keep his mouth shut and bit the damn hostess. Crazy nigga. Did so much cocaine and dust and drugs and shit. Yeah youngblood. Nigga done killed himself slowly. He was only 42, but he was all bleeding up inside, faulty liver and all kinds a stomach problems."

"Jesus. What is happening to everything around me?"

"Hey look son. Yuh probably saw some cat that looked like him—yuh know that guy that comes in muh store and yuh got yourself confused with thinkin bout yuh moms an all that. But ain't no damn devil way yuh coulda seen Eddie Hazel."

"Blue it had to have been him. He played that solo so long and sad that I thought he would fly away. He knew about my mother. But then he looked so young."

"Nigga don't be crazy. Ain't no such thing as a angels. The mind can play tricks on yuh youngblood. Don't worry bout that. Just some crazy dream or memory yuh had and now yuh gots it confused with the present. I'll get yuh that Jimmy Nolen jam and we'll get yuh on yuh way. Yeah don't sweat this. Some good 'ol soul music will set yuh straight. Jimmy Nolen yeah. Shootfire he's a damn fine player. He passed in '83," Blue said as he quickly filed through a box of 45s. "Yeah here we go. James Brown on the King label. 'Papa's Got a Brand New Bag.' That's what yuh want. Here I'll even play it fo yuh on the in-store so yuh know what yuh's gettin."

Les, whose mind was still mulling over the receipt and Eddie and the solo, watched respectfully as Blue took the 45 out of the sleeve and placed it on the turntable. Ever so carefully he hooked the needle with his right index finger and gently placed the tip on the outer edge of the disc. Immediately a light crackle filled the store. "Just some record dust that's all," Blue said.

A crisp blast of ten horns—saxes and trumpets erupted, out of which followed the uptempo groove of the bass and funky drummer. Brown's vocals growled over the rhythm and the bari sax honked on beat two. Fifteen seconds into the song, Les closed his eyes and felt his hips and shoul-

ders involuntarily sway to the drums. Sound-tendrils of groove snaked around his entire body, dragging his feet into rhythm with the beat. A beat so strong his head nodded in time, his chin bouncing off his chest and then jutting outward. The corners of his lips stretched as if to snag his earlobes in a smile that said he was finally remembering.

"Ain't no drag ... Papa's got a brand new bag," sang Brown. Then the "ting-aling-aling-aling-aling" of Jimmy Nolen's choppy chord work broke the barrier of the band, soloing so on point. So on the beat.

So on the rhythm that Les threw his hands out in front of himself and shook them along with the scratch of the pick over the strings. His body crashed into the store cabinets and stacks of records, but he shrugged it off like he was on the dancefloor and just happened to bump into another dancer. Blue just smiled, almost knowingly, as he watched the younger man lose himself in the music. And watched him find himself in the past, which didn't have to struggle to flood Les' soul with memory as it had the night before. Jimmy Nolen's rhythms came naturally and they entranced Les. He embraced them as he grooved along, dancing through the aisles of the store. Twirling and spinning in time like he'd grooved to the tune of his mother's heartbeat from the womb when she went out dancing. As he'd felt the song thrusting his little five-year-old body back into his mother's outstretched arms as she funk'd around the living room with him, the stereo cabinet still brimming with records. As he'd felt the song fusing through his blood as it had hers, pumping straight from the heart to his mind to his soul. Fleeing his physical essence and flying away like a funky black angel.