

Jazz and Desire

By Karla Angurell

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My shift ends after a long day surrounded by demanding tourists hurling racial insults at me. I head to Café Du Monde in the heart of New Orleans for a sandwich and some coffee. The brisk weather chilled more than usual that day as I adjusted my sweater more tightly. I watched the drummer on the corner play enthusiastically, his head bobbing up and down rhythmically. Passersby ignored him but I observed the young artist pleasingly.

It was the last time I experienced normalcy before I got home to my lonely studio apartment. Before getting ready for an upcoming gig at the jazz club, I had an electrifying urge to call my good friend Harrison. It's been a while since we caught up, especially since we both live in different parts of the country. Last time we did speak he was busy trying to get more of a standing at the University and writing dissertations. I picked up the phone and dialed his home number.

"Hello?" The voice was unfamiliar.

"I'm calling for Harrison. It's Charles."

There was a long pause. "It's his mother. Harrison is sick." She sounded monotone.

Sick with what, I was not sure. His mother dodged around that question as if it was going to spread to her as well. That really made me consider that it could be way worse than she communicated.

We grew up in bustling New Orleans together. We went to school and planned fishing trips down in the bayou. There was always some mischief to make. Of course, his family was skeptical of the friendship between me, a Black boy whose parents worked meager jobs, and him, a White kid who already had a decent standing in life. He was fascinated by books. The times I met up with him at his home he was busy reading or writing. I learned a lot from him. He studied a lot, fueled by a lust for culture and knowledge. That's what got him to Cornell.

That is when we went our separate ways, about 10 years ago. I stayed in New Orleans, with little ambition for the future while he went to pursue his dreams in New York. He was doing pretty good for himself, graduating, getting married, and having a nice job all before the age of 30. He is living a life anyone would be envious of. I was invited to his wedding a few years ago but could not attend because I was in a tough patch with the two jobs I had been juggling. During the day I worked as a hotel porter and during the night I played the jazz bass at clubs and bars. It was enough to barely make ends meet. I wonder if he ever resented me for that.

That evening, I went to the club to play. The atmosphere was dull and mundane. As I plucked the heavy strings my mind became occupied with the thought of Harrison being sick and of the limited time he may have left. Jazzy tempos filled the air and for a moment I was the only one in the room. I let my imagination linger. In the front windows for a moment, I saw the faces of a young Harrison

and I, when we used to peer into the bars to see the band. I saw my young eyes sparkle with inspiration and determination, with grand hopes to be on the stage. I snapped back into reality. I am on the stage now, but I have never felt that grandeur, that longing. It feels like I do this more for the small monetary gain than the actual enjoyment of the arts. I scanned the venue. There were less patrons than usual, the remaining ones with serious and lifeless expressions. It felt so dull, I felt like it was suffocating me.

Jazz is a dying art.

March 1

More than a month has passed since that phone call. I continued working my two jobs to save some money to travel to New York. I finally managed to get the plane ticket, and feeling the emptiness in my wallet, I went to go see my friend. Although I wasn't sure what I would find of him.

As soon as I touched down, I called his mother again from the airport. She sounded bland and serious, speaking in a flat voice and taking long pauses again. She finally admitted to me he had been staying in a clinic. As I was walking to the clinic, I saw protesters and activists laying in the middle of the street, chanting, and holding signs. Many wore the pink triangle symbol on their shirts. I always respected protesters.

I walked into a small run-down clinic settled by an alley. A young nurse greeted me at the front desk. The whole place looked shabby. I saw some people in the waiting room with tired expressions on their faces. I asked her for Harrison Jacobs and her eyes widened.

"Nobody's come for him in a long time."

She led me to a room in a corridor. There he was laying on a hospital bed, hooked up to plenty of medical machinery. Some sunlight entered the room through the half-opened dusty curtains.

"You have a visitor, Harrison."

He turned his face towards me. It felt like I was looking at a completely different person, not the Harrison I knew. His face was sunken, and his body was frail, nothing like the handsome physique he was known for.

He faintly smiled at me. "Charles."

The nurse closed the door and left us alone. I pulled up a chair next to his bed. His face was scruffy, but I saw a twinkle behind those dark eyes of his.

"How you feeling?" I asked, unsure on how to start the conversation.

He shrugged. "It's not nice wasting away in a bed all day. The pain comes and goes, but when it does it hurts like hell."

I thought about the comment the nurse made and his mother's strange attitude. "Has your wife come by? Your parents?"

"It's been a month. No calls, nothing." He stared at me intensely. "My recent events have made me think of you. People criticize you for the color of your skin, and I have sympathized with you but I have never truly felt how alienating it is. Until now." He frowned and turned his face away. "It's tough seeing the people in my life turn their backs on me because of a sickness."

"I feel you, man. The nurses seem they treat you well at least."

He smiled. "They're awesome. They treat me with respect and kindness. But it's not the same." He reached for my arm. "I'm glad you're here."

Everything in the world seemed to have stopped for one moment. I haven't felt his friendly touch in a long time. I put my hand on his, knowing he needed comfort.

He broke the silence. "How's the jazz stuff going?"

I sighed. "It's not as nice as I thought it would be. Feels like I'm in an endless cycle. Play bass, get money, play bass, get money. It sucks because I thought it was something I enjoyed."

"It all depends on your outlook."

I turned my head, dumbfounded. "What do you mean?" Harrison always had a way of wording things that my not-so-intellectual brain couldn't understand.

"Do you know Tennessee Williams?"

"Of course I do, we're from New Orleans! But you know I am not much for books." He chuckled at my comment. Williams is treated like a saint in New Orleans. He died a few days before I visited Harrison and I remember seeing memorials and parades dedicated to him.

"He is one of the greats." Harrison reached out for the stack of books placed next to a wilting flower on the nightstand. It was the famous *A Streetcar Named Desire*. He flipped to an already marked page shown by the fold in the corner.

"The opposite of death is desire."

I looked at the page and then at him, confused as to where this was going.

"If you don't desire something, then you're basically dead. We humans yearn and dream and that is what sets us apart from just being animals. Charles, I know you've struggled your whole life, but I think you should be more ambitious. You'll be happier."

I stopped to take in what he said. "But you're dying, Harrison."

“I know that. I think I’ve come to better terms with it now. But I am happy with the life I lived because I worked hard to achieve my goals. I’m happy that many of my hopes and dreams have been accomplished and that I have had an impact on people. Like you.”

We continued talking and catching up. He had a smile on his face the whole time. When night came, I slept next to him in a chair. I knew he needed somebody and did not want to be alone. I continued to ponder about what he said, deciphering his words. Desire. Life. Death.

March 2

Harrison passed away in the night.

With a heavy heart, I got a plane ticket and went home. There was nothing left for me in New York. I remember looking out the window solemnly, wondering if I could meet him far up above the vast sea of clouds. I like to think he died after seeing me because it was all he wanted and needed. It was closure. He died happy.

I thought about what he told me about desire. I had to do something with my life instead of being a shell of a man, existing instead of living.

I began to seize opportunities and to value myself. I began to appreciate the smaller things in life instead of dwelling on the problems, being gracious for what I have. I quit my draining job at the hotel and focused more on getting into the music industry. I felt happier when performing at the gigs, knowing that I was being myself. I began to get in touch with people who supported me and appreciated my craft. Life is looking up.

September 8, 1990

I am writing this from a hotel room in New York City. I never thought I would be back, but it was my success that brought me here. I joined a jazz band and we have sold hundreds of thousands of records. We’re going to perform at Madison Square Garden, the world’s most famous arena.

It took the death of my best friend for me to realize my true potential, as morbid as it sounds. But I am forever grateful he told me what I needed to hear in his dying moments. Now I have built a life worth living, with jazz and desire.