

Paul Martin

Daddy's Home

I don't know when I first became conscious of the sound; a white-hot, passionate voice mingling on the streets of this ghetto. The hipsters, petty thieves, street people, all with the eternal glow which surrounds those types of humans, trapped forever in poverty. The glow is dream-like, constant; the inhabitants of the streets come and go. Some will die tomorrow, but others will take their places the day after.

And the voice over it all . . .

I walked towards the smoky, white-hot blade of sonic passion, past Quido's Pawn Shop, the flop-house on 119th and Jefferson, the rock house on Quentin Ave. Old Blackwomen with missing teeth stare out busted, rusted windows at my well-dressed figure, moving through the dark streets. I wasn't a pimp; they knew that.

I entered the center, hub, of the red-light district. Al's Nude Bar and Grill screamed at me in yellow neon sinfulness. As I passed the door, a man and woman stumbled out, drunk and groping, dripping with sweat and impending carnal satisfaction. A voice from across the street interrupted my thoughts.

"Hey baby! Drop a dime on me! I'll do things you've only dreamed about, sweetheart. Come on over and see Penny."

The memories flooded back. Penny tricked fifteen years ago when I was growing up here; queen of the streets, everyone knew her and loved her. The Virgin Mary would have touched a lot more people if she had been a street whore in a Harlem ghetto. Penny was the caretaker of broken souls, fixing them up with her brand of street love.

I crossed the street and walked over to her. She was

very surprised when the street light flooded my face.

"My God, child! Is that you? What the hell are you doing here? I thought you were on tour with your band, blowing the gospel of soul, baby. What brings you here, Clinton?"

I smiled at her. The face was lined and worn, the body aged. "I am off for a month or so. I came down here to see Sandman. How's life, Penny?"

She laughed loud and raucous. "Life sucks baby, and so do I. Why don't you drop a dime on Penny?"

I knew she said this more for the benefit of the passer-by's than mine. Penny and I together would be like incest. "Where's your baby, Clinton? How many kids you all have now?"

"I got two, Penny and my wife is filing for divorce."

She became serious. "Clinton, what happened? I thought you was doing good."

I choked on my words. "It's falling apart, Penny."

Just then, a nervous-looking white man approached Penny. "How much, lady?"

Penny looked reluctant. "Clinton, Sandman is on the corner of Jefferson and 19th playing away. There is no place like home to heal yourself, child."

She walked off into the darkness with her Woody Allen trick. I remained behind, desperately searching for answers to the questions that assailed me. I fought all my life to escape the poverty and now I find my life empty with success. Down here, I could stand on a street corner at two a.m. and play my horn and people would come, laugh, cry, listen to my voice. I took some chances, got some breaks, and became a studio musician, playing on everyone's albums, and starting my own groups. Now, I walk on stage and I have thousands of people waiting to hear my voice, my horn, but the voice is silent. The lament of the struggling black man from a Harlem ghetto is over. I

am just another commodity who puts out a product once a year, tours for seven months, drinks too much, and tries to survive in a world that sucks the life out of us, leaving emptiness and pain. I loved my wife and kids but now they are leaving me and I am so empty I can't find the tears to cry.

The sound drew me out, and I walked on. I rounded the corner and there stood Sandman. He glowed like the mystic he was, the heart of the streets, the voice of the poverty-stricken people. He was playing his beloved horn; his love for all these years. There was a woman once, but she died while he was serving in the army. He became the musical spokesperson for the ghetto after that, preaching in every Jazz club and dive in Harlem. As always, tonight he had a small crowd listening to his musical testimony, and throwing small change in his sax case.

I stood in the crowd, my eyes closed tight, my hands buried deep in the pockets of my coat, hiding against the December chill. The familiar refrain of "Thanks For the Memory" circled out of Sandman's horn and wrapped me in a warm embrace. This was my home, my life force.

I opened my eyes and looked at Sandman. The years had left their mark on the man. He remained — with his dark glasses ever present even now after night had fallen, deeply lined face, checkered flannel shirt, cotton trousers, and white, or maybe more like sepia brown sneakers. If anyone could help me make sense of my life it was this man before me, a combination sage, prophet, and mystic, who blazed the trails of white-hot sonic passion, never failing to inspire a deep-felt emotion of one kind or another.

The Sandman finished up with a flourish, the crowd wandered away, and I stood alone with him. Although I

didn't see him look at me, he gently put his instrument down and without looking, said, "Hello Clinton, I knew you would come."

I tried to hold back my amazement at his guessing my return. "What's happening, Sandman? You're sounding great!"

"How come you didn't bring your horn and play with me, Clinton? I could have used a partner."

I couldn't answer the question, so I tried to brush it off. "My axe is back at the hotel, man."

"Hotel? Did you and your lady move? Last I heard you lived in the Heights, kid."

"My lady threw me out," I choked. "She filed for divorce. I'm kinda down on my luck, man."

"So you thought you'd come see Sandman, huh? Sorry, babe, I ain't got no money to lend."

The Sandman started to walk away. I stood alone in the soft yellow street light, trying to ask for help, but not knowing how. I was alone, completely alone. This man helped me as a child and I thought he could help me now, but he was walking away.

He stopped for just a moment and half-turned back. "If you need a place to stay my pad is open, as long as you don't eat too much."

I said thanks, but he was already gone into the night. I returned to my hotel and checked out. About an hour later I sat in Sandman's one-bedroom apartment two blocks from the street corner concert hall. As he prepared some tea I walked around the dimly lit room. The furniture was old and worn, but soft like an old friend or favorite blanket. I had spent many hours here practicing, learning my trade from this teacher. On top of an old upright piano in the corner were Sandman's possessions of greatest wealth: pictures. There were pictures of Sand-

man with every musical star of the Thirties and Forties. Duke was there, so was Dizzy, The Count was smiling: all memories, all old and decrepit, but alive nonetheless.

"I picked up Miles' new album Tuesday." I looked up as Sandman entered with the tea. "What's all this electronic shit now? You ain't got musicians anymore, you got computer programmers. How are you supposed to develop your sound when you sound like everyone else who owns the same computer? Shit!"

I smiled. Sandman was always outspoken. "You playing anywhere besides street corners, man?"

"Don't you knock street corners, child! The club scene is dead but the corners are still alive. Maybe you should try it. You don't need no sound check or any of that shit, you dig. You just play! Maybe if you did some more of that you wouldn't be in the shape you are now!"

"That's what I came to talk to you about, Sandman."

"Your life is on fire, son. Am I right?" I looked down. "Some of us never know when our lives are on fire, Clinton, until they burn down to ashes around us. I remember when you were eight years old. Your dad had left your mom years before, and you and her were living in one room on Jefferson Ave. I don't know how she did it, but that Christmas she bought you a third-hand horn from Quido's. Remember that?"

The Sandman took off his glasses, eyes glistening a liquid brown. He was old. It was not that apparent on the street, but inside and out, he was really old. I looked into his eyes, lost and far away, back through the years to another time.

"Them was good times. You ever notice, Clinton, that when you're living it, everything looks bad but later when you think back, it was the best time of your life, just like a circus." He gestured to the piano. "Those were good

times, sure enough.”

I could appreciate what he was saying, but I wanted my answers. My impatience was growing. All of a sudden, the light left his eyes and he stood up.

“I am going to bed now. Goodnight.”

“Wait a minute.” I jumped up, “What about me? Sandman we need to talk. My life is falling apart and I thought you could help me.”

“Son, I don’t have those kind of answers. I taught you how to play, helped you get your first horn, and introduced you to some connections. You come back ten years later burnt out and I am supposed to give you inspiration too? You want me to save your marriage? I am an old man, child! Somedays I can’t even save myself.” He walked into his bedroom and shut the door, leaving me standing alone in the darkness.

When I got up from Sandman’s couch it was eleven a.m. the next morning. Sandman had long since left for any of the various odd jobs he did around town. For me, I had a lunch date with my wife to discuss the impending divorce. I felt worse today than yesterday. I’d come here desperately seeking some thread of sanity, and found only loneliness.

I took a cab to the sidewalk cafe where my wife, Cheryl, waited. I was thirty minutes late and she was upset.

“Where the hell have you been?”

“I’m sorry. I overslept.”

“Well, well! It’s nice to know someone is sleeping soundly these days. Your daughters and I sure don’t!”

I quickly wrote down Sandman’s phone number on a napkin and passed it to her. “I’m staying at Sandman’s. You can call me there.”

She looked puzzled. “Why there and not a hotel?”

I figured now was as good a time as any. “Cheryl, I want

you to be open-minded about this. I love you and I don't want to lose you. Please hold off filing for awhile. Let me try to get my life together."

"Clinton, you're forty years old! Your daughters need a father. You go out on the road seven months a year. You come home and you're there, but you are drunk all the time, or gone to the studio."

"I am not happy with myself, Cheryl."

"You have been unhappy for too long, Clinton. Move on, baby. Your daughters are growing up without you."

"What do you want? You want me to give up playing, the only thing I know?"

"No, Clinton. Listen to me, honey. When I first met you, you were the new cat on the scene. I remember listening to you and the passion you had. I cried, Clinton! You reached inside and made me feel something. You came from the streets. You knew, and your horn was telling the world about it."

"God-damn it, Cheryl, but that's over! I am a rich, fat cat now living in a white man's world. I got kids, and you and everything should be wonderful, but it's not! I'm not hungry anymore."

"Clinton, you have to get that hunger back."

"Sure, baby! Why don't you just pull it out of your pocket!" My anger rose in my throat and tears spilled down my face. "Just pull it out and give it to me!"

"I can't, Clinton. You have to find it yourself. Not I, nor Sandman. nor anybody else can give it to you."

She left me alone at the table. I paid the bill and went in search of Sandman.

As I walked through the garbage-strewn streets, I thought about Cheryl. I loved her. I had to get her back. The feeling overwhelmed me: how can I bring them back to me if my life is in shambles?

Up ahead on 109th I saw a police car with its red lights on parked in an alley. I looked in as I walked past and my mind registered both visually and aurally. Sandman was there. I walked by the cop, frantically talking into his radio. I recognized the song as "Coin Home". Sandman stood in the alley, garbage around his feet, and something covered with a yellow blanket in front of him. As I drew closer, I noticed a solitary tear rolling down from underneath the dark glasses Sandman always wore.

He finished the song and stood there, solemnly looking down in the fading twilight. I wanted to reach out and say something but I couldn't. Sandman spoke first.

"This is it! You come here bitchin' and moanin' to me about your lack of inspiration. How's this for inspiration? Ernie and I played in Basie's band together. I told the sonofabitch to quit drinking. He gets a bottle of wine and goes to sleep under some papers and a garbage truck runs him over. I told him! Lord knows, I told him! No one cares anymore! We spend all our time trying to survive this life, hoping it will go on forever, only to find it's gone away. Only memories, man! Only memories!"

He began sobbing heavily. I took him in my arms, his frail body, elderly, aged, shook uncontrollably. He stayed against me for a while, trying to control himself. He pulled away suddenly and took off his glasses. His eyes still held the light, the passion, furious passion for life, a life that had been so hard. He was calm.

"This is it, son. You only get one shot. Stop swinging for the goddamn fence all the time and play!"

"Sandman . . ."

"Clinton," he interrupted, "you say you don't have the feeling. Bullshit! You were born here. Your daddy was an addict, your mother a part-time whore. Look where you came from and look what you have now! You got two

beautiful daughters who are growing up like flowers in the wind. Play it! You've got a beautiful wife who loves you. Sing about it, man! But remember, always remember, where you came from, your history. That's who you are. No one can take away your struggles and your triumphs."

He walked away and I was left with Ernie's body. I left the alley and walked the streets. There was so much to live, and to tell. I walked through the school yard, abandoned now in the chill Christmas air. I watched a swing, with the ghost of some innocent child, sway gently in the breeze. Could the ghost be me? I walked down the avenues: store fronts decorated with Christmas lights and foil tinsel, ready for dreamy little faces to look in and wish for an escape from their poverty. I saw junkies, petty thieves, felons, and street people practicing the art of survival of the fittest, forgetting about the holiday of Peace and Love.

I stopped by Sandman's and picked up my things. I knew I would be sleeping in my own bed tonight. The past is just that: the past. It's there for us to remember and think about, and then move on. I would have to make some changes to save my marriage but this is it man. You only get one shot.

Rounding the corner at Jefferson and 19th I heard the voice. The sax was to my lips almost without thinking and a new voice joined the old in triumphant sonic passion, furious passion. The sounds mingled and melted to form a white-hot blade which cut through the ghetto and poverty to speak directly to each man and woman's heart.

The voice held tradition. Countless thousands who went before rose up to give testimonial to a new day. Ernie was there, and so was my mother.

We told a story that night, Sandman and I. A story of struggle, pain, love lost and gained, survival, and finally, triumph over the doubts that shake us all. The message went out loud and clear across the burning city. It touched lives, hearts and souls, and finally, it brought the message to two little girls and a beautiful woman up in the Heights. The message was very clear: Daddy's home.