



ENGLISH-SPEAKING UNION

Queensland Branch

PROMOTING INTERNATIONAL UNDERSTANDING & HUMAN ACHIEVEMENT THROUGH ENGLISH

THE ESU ROLY SUSSEX SHORT STORY COMPETITION

2023

Highly Commended in the Secondary Schools Division

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St Louis Blues

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St Louis Blues

It was a late June evening in the dusky underbelly of New Orleans when the musician would first enter the club. The Angel Room was a well-hidden secret from the lawmen, a sanctuary of cigarette-smoke ether where whiskey trickled down every surface of the bar, binding your boot to the floor with every step. The musician stood out from the mess, a youthful, tall, bony spectre of a man, his dark skin glistening in the many fiery lights above. His presence alone was enough to quiet the bar – the sounds of his feet now deafening as he stomped on stage. Carrying but a singular – and not so well kept – guitar, he perched himself on a stool and began to play. No introduction, just music. And what a joy his music was. His thin, arachnid fingers danced along the fretboard, arpeggiating between freeform stabs and chords, creating sounds never to be replicated by guitarists before or since. Between his leads, he would move to rhythms, between rhythms he would move to bass, hypnotising the crowd until his voice pierced through and broke the spell. The sound of a four-piece band reverberated in our ears as his vocals shared musings of a past life. The guitar, looking not a day over a century old, jangled its way through his set, before the artist slung the beast up and over his shoulder by its strap and exited backstage without a word said. Slowly but surely, silhouetted heads popped out of the crowd, as the audience rose to their feet, showering the vanishing artist with a level of applause reserved only for performances of a truly divine calibre. Impossible music. Physically, implausibly impossible music. What a story, what a grand story – a story that I would be the first to tell.

The music column of the *Advocate* was a starved husk of its former glory. I joined in its heyday as a young student of journalism and, much like myself, the paper had gone greedy and dried up with age. The fame, the popularity this man and his music could have, and to think I would be the first to report on it, the prestige something like that would come with. Hell, I could revive the whole company. The only problem was that, outside of his music, I had no idea who the man was. An impossible, nameless musician.

Laying in bed, the blue glow of the moon now peaking through my curtains, I braced for a restless night.

A week more of these restless nights would lead me to the North Rocks. That was the place where I would see him once more. A far smaller establishment than the Angel Room, the Rocks provided the quiet delights of a cold drink and none of the hassle of the wild nightlife swingers. A loud set of footsteps leading to the stage would alert me to his presence. Taking glass in hand, I went to get a seat in view of the musician to quietly observe his practice. From my positioning, I was able to view in great detail the man's face. His hairline sat high above his brow with his creaseless skin concave around his eyes. Rings of tired, darkened flesh opened into the sad, distant eyes of a punished man. His pupils were dark, almost black, and seemed to beset the small crowd with either fear or excitement as he gazed across the room. Once more, atop a stool, the man looked downward, placing his fingers in a chord position and prepared to play. Not moving, the man began to speak.

"My name is Benjamin Baumfree. You men may not know me, but I've been travellin' and playin' for many years now. This is a song about my home, which I miss very dearly." Taking a small breath, he started playing.

Well I left my woman
Back in Kernstown
I left my woman
And stopped the fire comin' down.
Broke off my bindings
And with wrathful clenched jaw
I ran from them hellhounds
And ran forevermore.
The spirit-man, he told me
To go hitch a ride
For the day I stop playin'
Will be the day that I die.

These new clues had sent me on late night ventures from library to library, researching maps, townships, locations – anything I could find. In my research, Kernstown became my primary fixation in piecing this puzzle together. Through some studies, I was able to find a library with an open public record in the nearby town of Winchester and sent them a letter as follows:

22 July 1931

Mr Harold F. Blake, Columnist

New Orleans Advocate

New Orleans, LA

To whomever may be reading, My name is Harold F. Blake, a Columnist for the *New Orleans Advocate*. I'm currently in the process of putting together an article regarding one Benjamin Baumfree, a musician claiming your neighbouring Kernstown, VI.

Any information regarding official documentation, criminal records, photographs or the like are both welcome and appreciated.

If for any reason documentation of this kind is unable to be entrusted, feel free to write back. My address is listed on the envelope.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

H.F Blake

I spent the following weeks falling behind the grind – sleeping through the day and writing throughout the night. On the nights where I wasn't writing, I was locked in my burrow or boozing at the clubs. Still, I couldn't escape the mystery that so encompassed Baumfree's ghastly existence. It was on one of these nights in late September, that, while stumbling down an alley, I bumped into none other than the musician himself. He stood poorly postured, gangly and elongated, leaned against the brick exterior of the Angel Room about two yards from the back entrance.

With a cigarette in mouth and a rolled-up copy of the *Advocate* in hand, he chirped: “Your writing’s fallen off a cliff this past month or so ... although I’m sure you know that already.”

In my drunken stupor, I managed to support myself against the wall opposite, “No thanks to you.”

“Music can do that to people.”

“How do you know who I am anyhow?”

Questioning seemed to light up his face, he exhaled a laugh and responded:

“I like to read the paper most places I go, music columns especially. Your feature writings were real good I must say. Y’know I think we have a lot in common.”

“And you can tell that how?”

“Through how you write your pieces. For example, I can tell you don’t like talking. All of your interviews are done by letter, never in person. I can also tell you’re the obsessive type – always going back to concepts or phrases, getting hooked on artists and the like ...”

Seemingly exhausted from speaking more than a few quiet words, he took a drag from his cigarette.

Seeing the chance, I asked, “Isn’t this an in-person interview?”

He began to laugh midway through exhaling. Choking on the smoke, he responded through coughs: “You’re a funny one, mister. Say, what do you want out of this career?”

“Respect, I suppose. A story like this—”

“A story like this might not be what you want it to be,” he interjected. “All my life I wanted autonomy, freedom, to travel, to see things. I got that. Only problem is I don’t have time to rest.”

“Touring can be rigorous. Chased by hellhounds, right?”

“That’s one way to think of it. Y’know, I don’t have any shows tomorrow night. How about you meet me out front of the old Catholic cemetery at St Louis – let’s say eight o’clock – and you can have your first proper interview.”

Checking over my shoulder as if our talking was some great crime, I turned back to face the artist to see that he had completely vanished into the thick fall air. The dark alley

was empty, all but for a few orange leaves blowing along the cobbles and the phantasmical whistle of the wind between the buildings.

I woke up as the sun set, hungover and nauseous. The interaction the previous night had haunted my sleep and the room hadn't stopped spinning in dizzying trails of light around me since I'd arrived home. Everything felt unreal, dreamlike and frightening – yet, despite my state, I wanted no more than to secure that interview. The fame and position that would come from a story like this no longer motivated me like I'd told myself. In its place, obsession had long taken hold. Lurching out of bed, I bathed and clothed myself in my finest most professional-like suit. I slipped a small glossy page snugly up against the cigarette pack in my waistcoat pocket and set out to the St Louis cemetery. It was around eight o'clock when I arrived by taxi cab, just as Baumfree had asked. With no musician around and, rather, no person around, I waited. A chill ran up my spine as I leaned on one of two tall, white pillars, between which lay a set of twisted iron gates, opening up into a deep, entangled web of souls. The blue moon peeked through a thin veil of storm clouds as the taxi drove off, leaving me stranded a few hundred yards from nearest civilisation. It was only after I was totally alone that the musician stepped around the block, guitar on back, and ushered me into the site.

Passing down the rows upon rows of overgrown mausoleums, I dared ask: "What exactly are we doing here?"

"Thought I'd take you to my rehearsal space, sir."

"This is your rehearsal space?"

"Why yes sir. It means I can play for an audience ... An audience that don't have too much mouth to judge."

After a minute of walking silently down the old, crunchy track, the musician stepped off into a side alley. Whipping his guitar over his shoulder, he leaned up against a grave wall and began to quietly play.

"Welcome to St Paul's Aisle – my little getaway."

Placing the guitar down and lighting a cigarette, he continued: "You're not here to ask questions, are you?"

"You said so yourself, interactions aren't my strong suit. I do have one question though."

"Then it'll be one question that I answer."

"How do you know so much about me?"

"I'm an observant person. I see things and you, sir, you do too. There's something you know that you don't know how to share. You have a secret and I have a story."

"What do you suggest I do with that story?"

"I'm afraid you used your one question up. It's up to you from here. You won't see me again, I'm going back on the road. Hellhounds are hot on my heels, mister."

"Then it was an honour meeting you."

"And you."

With that, I bade him farewell and left him to his own. Walking into town, those beautiful melodies bounded over the cemetery walls and into my ears; it would be the last time I'd hear those sounds. A gentle breeze rustled the trees around me, leaves blowing around my feet as I walked away. Reaching into my pocket, I pulled out my cigarettes, my thumb pinning the small glossy paper to the package. Striking a match on my boot, I shielded the flame from the wind and lit my cigarette, and took one last look at the paper. It was a photograph from a time long gone – one of a tall, bony dark-skinned man with his hairline high above his brow. A man with smooth, shiny skin, concave and midnight around his eyes. His pupils were dark, almost black and his spider-like fingers were contorted around the neck of a guitar. The man wore simple clothes and a wide-brimmed hat, and sat perched on a wooden fence. Turning the photograph over, in black ink, the words:

Benjamin Baumfree, 23,
at subscriber's dwelling, 1831

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