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A Shift in Perspective

By: Ryan Harris

Alarm clocks. For the last few years have been the very bane of my existence. That pulsating “BEEP”. It’s almost a war to not only lift my arm but also reach the snooze button amidst the snugness of my bed. The click signifies the start of my day. I make my way lazily to the bathroom, leaving my bed sheets a crumpled mess on the floor. In my way bumping my head against the low doorway of the bathroom. Never miss a beat with that doorway. I take a long hard look in the mirror. I have to sit on the bathtub directly in front just see my face in the frame of it. I’m reminded of my sad state of affairs. Eyes: accented by years of bags brought on by insomnia. Skin: My light caramel brown skin (bags not included) sprinkled with spots of acne, probably born out of my horrible diet. And finally Hair: the worst of them all. What started out as an attempt to grow it out has been reduced to a displaced, unkempt afro. More a raging wildfire than a condensed controlled flame. I know exactly what will bring shine to my morning. Some music. I search through my phone to find

the exact song fitting of this morning—Ah, some Roots, perfect. I turn the volume up loud enough so music echoes through my apartment. As soon as that chorus breaks out, I can already feel a jolt of energy:

“When I wake up, I look into the mirror

I can see a clearer, vision

I should start living today”

The fridge is on the low while the eviction notices seem to get higher and higher. I turn on the ceiling light. Broken, the flickering light is almost like a rhythm. I slap some instant ramen in the microwave, I need to get *some* food in my system. I look out the window at the train tracks that run above my room. The dilapidated row homes that line the block. The sun rising above the tracks in the distance. I look down to see two men on the street. One briskly walking. Getting home from work shift it seems. The other slowly, almost calculated. Only one thing could be on his mind. Without hesitation, the first raises his hands in fear, rendered immobile by the sight of a pistol.

¹ Barnes, Johnson; Newman, Katrin; Trotter, Tarik. *“The Day”*. 2010.

Though I'm few floors above ground level, I can see the fear and anxiety overcome this man. Even amidst the quietness of the neighborhood I can only barely make out their rambling. With the worker man shaking constantly, the gunman shoves the piece into the worker's face. My whole time witnessing this I *could* do something. But I don't or maybe I can't. My inner savior wants to run downstairs and risk my life for this man. Yet...I don't know this man; I owe him nothing and he's not family. To risk my life for him would be a stupid decision when I can't protect myself. Not a day goes by amongst these streets. It always seems that for those making their way, there's another primed to take it. Heh,

"Cash rules around me

C.R.E.A.M.

*Get the money dollar dollar bill y'all"*²

I guess. These dollars won't get themselves, right? As the man runs away with the money, I hear my microwave ding. I scarfed down my ramen and get dressed for work. I take a look at my phone to check the time – Dammit, 6 o' clock. I'm definitely late. Doesn't help I've also got 3 missed

² Grice, Gary; Hunter, Jason; Smith, Clifford. "C.R.E.A.M. (Cash Rules Everything Around Me)". 1992-3.

calls from work. No doubt it's the boss blaring the usual "Get Your Ass Over" speech. My daily routine usually consists of rushing to appear somewhat decent in a cramped amount of time. All except for one thing: my headphones. Putting on my headphones must be a process handled with utmost care. They represent the true start to my day. I can only truly embrace the world once I hit that play button. Instantaneously, the ills of my life are sucked away. My world instead consists of the boom-bap, break-beat and bars birthed from ills I'm trying to escape. I head out the stairs. "*Dancing in the Rain*", a song that never plays without being on repeat. Only for the first verse is it deserving of its repeat status.

"I guess my bills ain't paid

No ride to work for the day

*Second option, hop the bus but there's a traffic delay"*³

The hustle and bustle of the city feeds into the music almost seems like is chronicling my life, or least I want it to. The music as if it's narrating in real-time:

"My boss is tripping cause I'm running late and ain't no excuse

³ Barnes, Johnson. "*Dancing in the Rain*". 2006-2007.

*When I'm 'bout to be twenty-two without a whip I
can swoop*⁴

And as the lyrics progress, my lips move as the
words were my own:

*"Feel like I'm finna shoot my own dome with
chrome to escape*

*Zoning out 'cause working working out ain't worth
what I make*⁵

The music understands me more than probably
any person I know. What I'm going through.
What it's like to exist paycheck to paycheck, all
this potential cooped up, spending the early
hours of the day to haunting evening slogging
away and for what? Some hellhole of an
apartment, in a more shithole neighborhood
where I've become so desensitized to a stick-up
that the mere sight is just an everyday
occurrence? How can I call this living if I'm not
living to my fullest potential?

Wait, what am I saying? I'm no thug-
turned-street poet or conscious revolutionary
looking to inspire the youth. I'm not about to
drop the music that will re-define the world; let
only rip me from my life right now. I'm just a
regular dude: unimpressive, highly middle of the

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

road. Work takes up my entire life with listening
to hip-hop being the only break in mediocrity. To
be real, hip-hop is *only* music I listen to right now.
But, why just hip-hop? Is it just because I like the
music? Beats, instrumentals and all that? Maybe
the lyrics? Am a just sucker for some cool bars or
a catchy hook? What is it? What keeps bringing
me back? I look up to the sky amidst the gloomy
weather as if some higher power will magically
drop the cure to what ails me. Instead, I feel a
drop of water. Not actually what I wanted, but a
nice change of pace nonetheless. Within seconds
that one drop turned into several drops, several
drops to light drizzle, so on and so on. The rain
engulfs me completely. Everything from the top
of my head to my socks now drenched. Whereas
any other day, I'd be infuriated at how I could
forget my umbrella, compounded by the fact that
I'm already "God knows how long" late for work
and the bus *still* isn't here yet. Today
was...different. Everything was more calming at
this moment. The feeling of raindrops dropping
upon my face...the music pulsating...I haven't felt
this at peace in a long time. Maybe today *will*
actually be different for a change. I close my eyes
to bask in serenity if only for a short time.

(HONK HONK)

Jesus Christ. Quite a way to re-engage with human society: The blaring and honking of public transit. And the smell of city gas and air—my God, that’s terrible. Ok, now I’m back with the real world.

Stepping on the bus, I take a second to at least somewhat dry myself off the rain. I rustle through my book bag in order to get my wallet. Searching through my wallet for my bus pass—Dammit, I can’t find it. Searching deeper in my wallet, I can’t even seem to find enough change for bus fare. On this day of all days. The bus driver stares at me with a look unsympathetic to my situation. I managed to scrounge up about two dollars in quarters. Her eyes glazed over as she pulls back her hair. Really kinky, with a long red streak. Deep Crimson almost. Her lipstick had same color of deep crimson; it really accented her medium brown skin tone. I’m somewhat infatuated by her looks. This woman’s a bus driver? Surely her good looks couldn’t be ignored, staring out into streets driving people around? What a waste of beauty. I can’t help but have my eyes fixated on this woman. Her face seemed to cancel out everything but my music except for a faint voice I can only sort of make out. “Sir...sir...sir...SIR!” Once again, a return to

the world of functioning human beings. “Sir, the fare is two dollars twenty-five cent, please.” I hear a voice say. Of course, it’s the bus driver asking for the fare as I stand there blankly. “Sir, the fare is two dollars twenty-five cents. You’re holding my route.” She says once again. I gather up my consciousness and present her the two dollars in quarters in my hand and say: “I’m sorry this is all I got, must’ve lost my bus pass while I was in hurry.” She rolls her eyes something fierce. Here I am: some knucklehead who’s not only holding a bus that’s *already late* for its route *compounded* by the fact that I don’t even have enough bus fare to ride. What am I doing? She tells me to forget about it and gestures me to get on the bus. I promptly do, place my meager change back into my pocket, thank her and lumber to the back of the bus. The back of the bus is always the best place to sit. Work’s about a forty-five minute bus ride away and the back is certainly the most comfortable. Here I become engulfed by the various personalities who inhabit this city. There’re kids all huddle together as they make their way to school. Sectioned off my age groups as kids tend to be, discussing, rather loudly, whatever young kids like to blather on about. Amongst the kids are the middle-aged working

class. Sprinkle throughout, they aren't too hard to spot out on account of their uniforms. Janitors, receptionists and the like for anywhere from fast-food to high-end hotels. Going to or coming from work I can't really tell. Their faces seem blank, wiped of any expression: not even for the obnoxious youth surrounding them. All except for this one woman, dressed in scrubs has to be close to sixty, seventy years old. She's smiling and even talking with the younger children. Her hair tied up in a tight bun further highlights her smile. Ear to ear. A deep dimple on the right cheek. Even from afar her smile has a warming quality to it. I wonder if she has young ones of her own at home. No doubt working at her age just to support them. I remember the man from this morning. He was in their position not too long ago. Just a human being trying to make some headway in life. Trying to provide for not just himself, but maybe a family of his own. I wonder if this woman had ever been in that situation, or anyone else on this bus? Hell, what if I'm ever put into that situation? Jesus, I don't even know how I would respond to it. I need to stop because I'm getting way to into my head. Thankfully I've got forty-five minutes to clear my head.

I awake to find the bus about to pull up to my stop. I jolt out of my seat, request my stop and sprint directly out of the door as opens. I made sure to thank the beautiful bus driver once again. I make my way to work knowing full well that my boss is going to give a piece of his mind once I get there. This part of town always perplexes me. Definitely much more well off than where I'm coming from, a well-situated concrete jungle. But there's a familiarity to it all as well. Probably because I see so many faces of the people back home working here. Work's not too far the bus stop so hurrying isn't imperative, even though I'm *already massively late*. I finally reach it. The place that profits off my slave wages: some "four-star" hoity-toity restaurant, whose owner (my boss) seems content with paying employees slightly above minimum wage whilst customers pay for overpriced "food". I don't eat I just serve it. I wrap around the back door "Employee's Entrance" to hopefully get changed and wrangle myself into the thick of the commotion. Stepping through, I'm greeted almost immediately by the homie: Shaun. He's holding up a tray covered in dirty dishes. He greets with a smile. "Yo, Benny! You finally decided to show up to work!" he says jokingly. "You're only about an hour and half

late...this time. We had to open without you, man. Boss was pretty pissed at the lack of hands". I look back at him watching as the overhead light gleamed this powerful shine of his clean-shaven head. I give out a little snicker. "I'm well aware. His *three* voicemails on my cell are pretty indicative of that. Now would you kindly let me get situated and would you *please*—that cue ball of yours is damn near blinding me". Shaun lets a hearty guffaw at my statement. He puts down the tray and wipes off his hands partly in shock to what I had to say. "Don't hate bro, just because *your hair* is a sad, sorry excuse. Shit makes Don King's hair look like gorgeous locks compared to you" he replies back rather snidely. "And besides my hairstyle's more manageable *and* the ladies are digging the no hair look. Don't sleep on it homie." Besides the slight to my hair, Shaun kind of has a point. Adjusting my clothes, I can't help but nod my head in agreement. Maybe a new hairstyle is good idea. I most definitely some more manageability in my life right now. He smiles at me at utters some familiar lyrics to me:

*"The first rule is win, the second's don't forget the first"*⁶

That's some Dilated Peoples right there. Before I can even utter a response to Shaun, the one-and-only Mr. Boss-Man comes charging through. The moment I've been trying to avoid. This burly Italian man comes storming through the back room with eyes deadest on *me*. "Look who finally decided to show his face to me after how many—*three* phone calls? What were you doing?" he bellows at me across the room. To be honest, He's more mouth than he is any other part of his face. "Sorry, Boss. I overslept this time. I've been having some sleeping troubles lately, the bus was late, I lost my bus pass—" He cuts me off mid-sentence. "I don't want to hear it right now, Bennet. You can't keep coming in whenever you feel like. I've got a business to run dammit. I swear, you keep this up, I'm letting your ass go." I have no words to return with. I could respond with words of anger or even words of sympathy. But I can't. Part of me really wants to just get my stuff, clock out and never come back again. But at the same time, this job is the only thing allowing me to life somewhat comfortably. That is comfort

⁶ Asllani, Arian; Cole, Dominique; Evans, et al. "Hallelujah". 2014.

in knowing that I'm at least not homeless at the end of the day, yet. I just clench up my fist, swallow my pride and get to work.

A few hours into the shift we finally get a lunch break. Shaun and I post up near the back of the restaurant. Shaun decides to take a smoke while I decide to sit on the ground, back to the restaurant, trying piece together the day I've been having. "So how's your day been man?" Shaun asks me as he takes another puff. I start off with how I witnessed yet another robbery and just watched it happen. Shaun takes another puff and takes a minute to process. "Man Benny, don't sweat it. I think you did right thing. I mean what else could you have done? You trying to die too? That's foolish, man. It's none of your business." His words are somewhat affirming. What use am I in helping that guy if I lose my life in the process? That makes sense. He wasn't family or anything. Family makes it personal. "But the same time...don't you think I should have something? I could see the dude perfectly, I could have told someone at least" I try to plead with him to hopefully actually feel a sense of guilt about it all. He takes a long puff this time. "Yo man, I'm going to tell you again. Don't worry

about it. Your life isn't worth losing over somebody you *don't even know*. You got to protect you and yours." I nod again, but this time somewhat pensive. Shaun continues on: "But if I was that man I would've..." He puts the cigarette in his mouth, brandishing is left hand like a pistol. "I would've pulled out on that man like:

*"Ugh, nice watch, run it"*⁷

No way he's taking away from me or my own". After that he puts out the last of the cigarette with his foot and brandishes his finger pistol at me. I can't help but reply: "So you're just going to shoot at anybody who threatens you? What kind of good is that?" He looks at me for a second and lets out another hearty guffaw. "It's not that simple, Benny. Right-think about this way: What's that Madvillain line you're always obsessed about?" I thought about it for a second and knew exactly the line he was talking about:

"How DOOM hold heat then preach non-violence?"

*Shhh, he about to start the speech c'mon silence"*⁸

⁷ Cole, Jermaine; Hernandez, Anderson. "A Tale of 2 Cities". 2014.

⁸ Dumile, Daniel; Rodriguez, Nick. "Raid". 2002-2004.

Of course he would remind me of this line specifically. Shaun's right. It's not about shooting out on everything and everybody you see. People getting stuck up doesn't come out of nowhere. "You're right, man. I guess it isn't that simple. People are just want to protect themselves and their own. The robber certainly got that. But that sense of selfishness is it what gets me. Both you are living in an equally terrible situation but one of you decides to take from someone who has just as much as you do? I can't get down with that man". Shaun sits down next to me. He gives out a long sigh, looks directly at me. With a comforting pat on the back he says to me: "That's just the way it is around here, man. Now I see you got to let that sink in for you for a little bit, but it looks like we've got to get back to work." We most definitely do. I head back with Shaun through the back room.

Work is finally over here. It's late the streets of the concrete jungle are nearly empty save for a few people. I part ways with Sean as we head our separate paths back home. The quietness of the streets actually gives me some time to reflect my conversation with Shaun. Thankfully, when I get to the bus stop it actually

arrives on time. However, this time, no attractive bus driver. As well, Shaun let me borrow some money so that I can actually make it back home. Much like the streets, the nearly empty seats of the bus give me more time to sit on Shaun's words. I head towards the back seat, put on my headphones and vibe out. This time, the bus ride seemed so much more faster. Probably because I wasn't wasting looking around for bus fare or ogling beautiful bus drivers. As I head down the street back home, I see how the darkness has creped onto the row homes of the neighborhood. Everything is coded in shades of dark blue, black and purple. The only thing breaking this up are the streetlights every few yards or so. I'm only a few feet away from home when I spot another person on the sidewalk as me. He has kind of mean look to him but nothing I've seen around here before. Still I'm a little apprehensive. As we cross paths, I feel hard brush on my shoulder. I look over to the man. His distinctive look of an all white tracksuit seemed to radiate under the streetlights. I give him a look of confusion while I hold on to my shoulder still pulsating from the pain. His face remains not phased by my reaction. Instead of an apology, he reaches into his track jacket. Oh god. Don't tell me...it can't be...it is.

Dammit. The man removes what he had in his pocket. It's official: This is a hold-up. His gun pointed directly at me, finger ready on the trigger. He glares at me and he says to me slowly: "Give me all you got. I don't want any games". I drop everything on my person: headphones, jacket, phone even the jacket I'm wearing. Next thing I know, all my stuff's on the ground and my hands are in the air. I'm paralyzed with fear at the sight of this man but still; somehow, find a way to utter some words. "Hey, man. I don't want any problems. I'm just trying to go home right now. I've had long day" I meekly to explain to the man. My statement seems to have made him more upset. He presses the gun barrel firmly at my mid-section. "Is this all you got? I want to know right now". the man says to me softly but coldly. This is becoming too real right now. Beads of

sweat are drizzling down my forehead now. I look out into the dark abyss of row homes to find anybody—*anybody* who can help. Through the abyss I spot on home to my left. Second floor, right side. The lights are on, window open. I see a young girl frighteningly peeking her head out of the window. Wow. It's all come back to me now. This morning. But now I've become the man paralyzed in fear of losing his life and this girl is myself. Someone who can *do something* to help me out in my dire time of need. But instead has to value hers over mine. I don't know this girl and she for sure doesn't know me. My, my how the tables have turned. I close my eyes in agonizing anticipation as to come of next.

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