

New Fiction: Beethoven and the Beggar

A handsome couple strolled arm in arm down Central Park West. The man, tall and athletic with a thick, well-brushed mane, wore a black, fur-trimmed cloak over an Armani smoking jacket. The lady, slim but curvy with lustrous blonde hair done in a complicated braid, wore white mink over a low-cut black Prada gown. Though bedecked in high-heels, the lady adeptly kept up their brisk pace past tourists, joggers, baby-strapped mothers, and other assorted humanity either living in or making their pilgrimage to the world capital of wealth and culture. Curious eavesdroppers would have been able to hear snippets of the couple's conversation as they passed.

Did you see who Angelica left with last night?

You mean the French gentleman? What's his background?

Apparently his family owns the Laurent-Perrier champagne house. Why else would she look at him? By the way, what's on the playbill tonight?

Let's see, there's Handel, Ravel, Mussorgsky, and of course Beethoven.

Is that the best Alan could come up with? Which Beethoven are they doing?

The Fifth.

How uninspired! We can't be staying for the entire show, surely? I'd like to change before Camilla's soirée. Oh look, is that Dmitri and Sveva over there?

They continued across the piazza, stepping past a beggar at the base of the steps before going up and into the packed lobby of the Lincoln Center.

The beggar's name was Daryl Jack. He started sleeping in his car two years ago; after it was compounded by the police he began sleeping outside. At first he stayed in North Harlem, then gradually worked his way down Central Park and the Upper West Side—much greener panhandling pastures. The last two months his main turf had been the prime territory around the Lincoln Center, which he worked along with his friend and ally, Mikey McAdams. The two men had met at the Saint Ignatius soup kitchen and hit it off right away. They found that they had been in the same infantry division and had both been to Iraq for the same deployment. They joked about the division Sergeant Major Fat-Ass who had called out Private McAdams more than once for uniform violations—dirty boots, crooked beret, badly shaven face. Private Jack had got to know that senior NCO much more intimately during his second Article 15 hearing when he had been accused of smoking marijuana on the night shift. No one had actually seen him smoking or found any weed, but he had the misfortune of already possessing a disciplinary record—drunk on duty and fighting with a white sergeant in his platoon. The case was sent up to the division commander who quickly recommended Private Jack for a Dishonorable Discharge from the U.S. Army. Three months later he found himself back at the Washington Heights housing projects he grew up in. For a while he didn't think about work and drank away the little money he had left to his name. By the time he got around to looking for a job he found that nobody was interested in a high school dropout and former infantry grunt with a bad record.

Daryl Jack and Mikey McAdams took shifts pulling alms duty in front of the Center, while the other one set up camp across Broadway near the edge of the Park. Daryl had already developed his go-to gimmick—a big Louie Armstrong grin with bobble-headed nod. He supposed it made people feel safer and happier, which made them more generous on the whole. Somehow, Mikey, a former supply sergeant's assistant, had recently scored costumes for both of them that brought in even greater

returns. A jacket with tails fit for a butler and a tattered top hat for the tall, wiry Daryl; a threadbare tweed jacket and deerstalker for the short, stocky Mikey.

The first day after sporting the new (old) threads they raked in a combined \$37.35, an all-time record. That night was an unforgettable bash for the "Baghdad Boys", as they had taken to calling themselves. They each splurged on burgers and fries at an all-night joint; they chugged their way through a couple bottles of Olde English malt liquor; after midnight Mikey found a local pusher to score a few grams of herb. They parked themselves in some tree-cover a stone's throw from Tavern on the Green and lit up a sizeable blunt. It was life itself they were celebrating—tonight they felt good, no matter what tomorrow would bring. Around 3 am, they located a prostitute near the pond and spent most of their last earnings on a two-for-one bargain trick.

The next morning the bright sun was not kind to the two revelers who had camped safely through the night without being spotted by police. Parched mouths and pounding headaches limited their mobility until park security finally zeroed in and sent them packing. Daryl dragged himself vaguely westward, towards the Center. Incredulous passersby looked on when he stopped to lap up a stomach-full of water from a public fountain on the way out of the park. He found a good marble step on the shady side of a Deutsche Bank branch, where he spent the next twelve hours alternately sitting and dozing. He exchanged few smiles and even fewer words for the better part of the otherwise crisp autumn day, his energy still sapped from the previous night's blow-out. Darkness fell and he peered into his upturned hat set out in front of him; near emptiness is what he saw. A few coins that totaled \$3.51. He cursed to himself and then to some of the few walkers in the area, who exited the scene warily glancing over their shoulders. "Food or booze?" he thought to himself. "Let's go see what Mikey's got going on."

Daryl remembered his friend telling him about a new rendezvous point, further up the west side. Apparently there were some new gangs trying to work the area and it was better to stay one step ahead of them. Daryl joked that those suckers would have their hands full if they scrapped with the Baghdad Boys, but Mikey thought avoidance was the best strategy. He had heard those other boys were playing for keeps. Daryl dragged his skinny body up block after block, keeping to the middle of the sidewalk, mostly looking down at his feet. Couples coming from the other direction had to suddenly split up and jump to the side as Daryl ominously and unrelentingly advanced. One man reacted too slowly and got shoulder-bumped, after which he berated Daryl in an angry but ultimately non-threatening manner.

Daryl turned left at 82nd Street and entered a shuttered construction site. As he negotiated a broken chain-link fence he heard the sound of glass and someone screaming inside the building. He continued without speeding up or slowing down through the doorway, where he saw Mikey holding a broken bottle surrounded by three dark figures.

“What’s going on here?” Daryl asked Mikey. They all looked up at him, while simultaneously a bald man took the opportunity to stick a blade into Mikey’s blind side. Mikey howled.

Daryl watched his friend struggle to stay upright. Daryl felt rage take control of him. He grabbed a length of metal piping that was lying in the rubble around the entrance and ran towards the unknown trio. Two of them split up to handle his onslaught while the knife-man covered Mikey. Daryl swung the pipe at the nearer of the two men. The man tried to dodge but was nonetheless caught offguard by Daryl’s ferocity and sunk to the ground after taking a crunching blow to the shoulder. The second man came from behind trying to stick his own knife into Daryl, who swiftly brought the pipe down on an over-extended arm to a loud cracking sound.

Meanwhile, Mikey was attempting to fend off the original attacker with his bottle but had proved too slow. He received another quick counter-stab to the upper back and dropped the bottle, after which the bald man immediately pounced with a final thrust to the chest. Daryl witnessed this last action just after dropping the second man to the ground. Mikey's eyes widened and then rolled back as he buckled and hit the ground. The last man remained relatively calm as Daryl, in full berserker mode, closed in on him. The man narrowly avoided Daryl's first swing and made a long gash down Daryl's arm with his blade. Daryl's second strike connected and knocked the man back. As he stumbled Daryl continued the assault with a wild overhead swing. The man violently lurched upwards with his knife and caught Daryl across the face just as Daryl brought his own weapon solidly down on the bald head of this unknown combatant. Daryl knelt beside his friend while the man twitched unconsciously nearby. The two others had fled the building at some point during the climax of the battle. Daryl reached out for Mikey's hand, now lifeless on the cold ground.

Daryl awoke in the back of an ambulance, and then later in a hospital ward. After being patched up he was interviewed by a detective. He told the whole story, including the party the night before and his and Mikey's shared service in Iraq. The detective didn't say much as he jotted down notes, but the next day a social worker stopped by and offered to help Daryl get his life back together. She spoke of the range of opportunities there were to earn his keep honestly, like helping a construction clean-up crew, for example. Daryl told her to get lost; he wasn't cleaning up for anybody. The social worker left a card in Daryl's jacket pocket with her name and number. That night Daryl exited the building and walked back onto the street without anybody noticing or taking account of him. The nasty scar on his face didn't make it easier to beg, but some people still took pity and gave.

By the night of the concert a week later, Daryl had been

pondering his life for the better part of the day. He watched well-dressed people and happy families walking past. Where had he gone wrong? Why hadn't he been born into money, or happiness? He had never known his father. His stepfather drank and often beat him, until he and Daryl both got too old for that game. Daryl had friends, but never the kind that a mother would have wanted for her son. They always seemed to get into trouble together, with Daryl typically catching the blame. Mikey was the first one he could remember who actually cared about Daryl as a person, who gave back as much as he took. Now he was dead, and Daryl didn't even know why. He started from his trance by the sound of high-pitched laughter and looked up at a particularly beautiful couple that had just brushed past him. He imagined that the man and woman were mocking his ugliness and squalor as they floated up the steps into the opulent sanctuary above. He looked down at his upturned hat on the sidewalk—total emptiness. "Goddammit all to hell," he said aloud to himself in a raspy voice. "I'm gonna jump in the river."

He struggled to his feet and shuffled around the corner of Amsterdam Avenue and 65th Street towards the dark waters of the Hudson. At the edge of the sidewalk at the end of the block he glanced left and saw two men coming out of a door and jumping into a large white van parked on the curb. The engine started and the van lurched forward onto the road just a few inches from Daryl's face. He didn't notice this close call; he was looking intently at the still slightly cracked open door. There was no one else on the sidewalk. He turned back and crossed the threshold. There was no one inside the corridor in which he now found himself. He had entered a rear service entrance of the Lincoln Center, the mysterious palace outside which he had spent so many futile hours manning his post. He never connected the geography or even the purpose of the building itself to his own situation. He walked aimlessly down the corridor, like an escaped zoo animal on a temporary reprieve. He stopped short of a junction ahead and instead

tried the handle to a side door, which was unlocked. He entered and found scattered pieces of orchestral and theatrical bric-a-brac: chairs, music stands, a set of kettle drums, unmarked wooden boxes, folding set backdrops, bundles of heavy curtains, a fake marble statue, and an old couch, beside which someone had left a half-empty box of chocolate chip cookies. Daryl made for the box with the quickness of someone who hadn't eaten all day. Having devouring its contents, he was then content to lie back and take a moment's rest. He had almost forgotten the comfort of reclining on a soft divan—he closed his eyes and entered a timeless, dreamless sleep.

DA-DA-DA-DUH. Daryl rolled off the couch and jumped to his feet after being awoken by a thunderous sound just above his head, the likes of which he had never before heard. His instinct told him that it couldn't be human in origin. He squatted at the foot of the sofa, holding his quivering hands to his temples, hounded by incessant horn calls above and all around him. He rocked back and forth, more conscious than usual of his nearly permanent state of headache and hunger. "Is that you, God?" he said aloud looking up at the shaking ceiling. The cacophony continued unabated, seemingly oblivious to his question. Inchoate rage bubbled from his brain and down his spine, eventually taking control of his whole body. It was of a different species altogether from the emotions surrounding the recent murder of his friend. This rage was directed towards the world at large, to the heavens, to his fate, which had never cut him a break and now was pounding him over the head, literally, in mocking, pitiless tones. He gnashed his teeth and pulled at the unwashed curls of his hair and beard. A collage of wordless images and scenes passed through his racing mind, stoking his hatred: his mother, his stepfather, his sanctimonious half-brother, all the white cops who ever harassed him, shopkeepers who watched his every move even when he wasn't shoplifting, the self-satisfied army recruiter who lied to Daryl and unconcernedly modified records

to facilitate his enlistment, the black drill sergeant at basic training who always singled him out for extra duties, the other drill sergeants who laughingly went along with it, his racist squad leader, who in Iraq constantly uttered the phrase "sand nigger" in Daryl's presence, and escaped punishment while Daryl got busted down and docked one month's pay for fighting, the fat sergeant major who called Daryl a "worthless piece of shit" to his face during his Article 15 hearing, the baby-faced captain who barely looked at Daryl as he calmly signed chapter papers and said "That's your problem, sport," when Daryl asked what he was supposed to do outside the army, the rich bastards and their gold-digging women who never even threw him a dime, the constant hordes of tourists who didn't know there was more to New York City than lower Manhattan, the gangs that roamed Harlem and further afield, the bald man, who could burn in hell.

Daryl collapsed and bent over double in front of the sofa, not exactly relaxed but at least mollified for the present. Lyric string arpeggios above sounded like chords of despair. The heat of his anger subsided as he realized, unconsciously at first, that the music was now softer and sweeter. He began to weep. Mysteriously, Daryl's anger at his own fate transformed into a profound sorrow for the fate of all living things. He extended his own feeling of doom to everything else. He had wanted to kill himself tonight, to end the tragic joke of his life. He understood now, instinctively, that everyone else around him and everyone he had ever known would perish just like him, no matter their fortune or station in life. Somehow, though he remained in the same hunched position, a change was happening inside him, unbidden and inexplicable. The time of his tears and anger seemed ephemeral, and now he reentered the flow of time's stream. Spontaneously, his fingers started tapping to the surrounding rhythm. He started swaying in time to a braying theme that sounded like the hunting horns of some dark deity. An elephantine passage of low strings moved almost imperceptibly slowly upwards, from darkness to light, like

leaving the underworld for the solid earth.

Daryl leaped to his feet as a thunderbolt struck and charged him with its primordial energy rather than smiting him. A wall of sound louder than anything he had ever heard—a shrieking fanfare worthy of the gods. The mighty New York Philharmonic was more overpowering than the Chinook helicopters, the tank columns, or the 155mm howitzers that used to buzz, grind, and explode all around his plywood hut in Baghdad. He raised his arms and waved them vigorously as if he were conducting the unseen orchestra. He hummed along to the music as he perceived it, eventually howling as the melody carried him away faster and faster, a runaway train, building to a fire-breathing cadence that left him gasping for air at its triumphant conclusion.

A security guard entered the room after the finale and took a moment to make sense of the dark, wraithlike intruder with bloodshot eyes. Daryl, opening his mouth and speaking to another person for the first time that day, asked, “What was that music?” The guard, looking at him with either pity or indifference, said, “Beethoven.” “BAY-TOV-EN,” Daryl sounded out the vaguely familiar syllables to himself in a hoarse voice. He tried to think when he had heard this name before. After a moment he said, “I thought it was God.” The guard chuckled and said, “Plenty of folks around here probably think they’re one and the same.” He took his arm and gently led him down the corridor towards the exit. When they reached the door, the guard said in a conspiratorial voice, “Listen, I don’t usually do this—I’m supposed to wait for the police, but, to tell you the truth, I think it’d be better off if you just disappeared. Don’t try anything like this again though.” Daryl, looking down at the floor, reacted with neither surprise nor gratitude, but shuffled slowly out of the building towards the road and the river. He felt a small piece of paper deep in his jacket pocket, which he turned over slowly. Suddenly he raised his head, looked the guard in the

eyes for the first time, and asked, "Can I use your phone, brother?"