

## Take the A Train.

The ghost of Saint Cuthbert stared down from his cathedral at the lanky rehab, freshly evicted from HMP Durham. Ray gazed back at the soaring sandstone tower he'd coined Sugar Hill, his inaccessible Harlem. D block's barred view of the Minster and the bassline in his head, the only way he'd kept sane. He waved in thanks and acknowledgement of Cuddy's benediction throughout his incarceration.

Ray lugged his double-bass through the station barrier and flashed his travel-warrant. The station master touched his cap and waved him through. The first respect anyone had shown him in a lifetime.

'Newcastle sir? Platform two. Instruments don't need a ticket; they just take the A train.'

Ray half smiled, half scowled and found a nook to shelter from the North Sea blow.

With a deep clunk the carriage door shut.

Ray smoothed the seat down and nestled his double-bass in the crook of the compartment and took the seat opposite.

At Chester-Le-Street, the ticket-inspector slid his head around the door and stared at the purloined seat.

'Haway...'

'Seat's taken.' Ray's gruff interruption joined the waft of his prison travel-warrant. The inspector's lips thinned.

'Just got out?'

'Why aye man, twelve years, with good behaviour.'

The ticket-inspector ran timescales, then pointed accusingly, 'tell me there's not a Tommy Gun in the case?'

Ray's gravel profundo voice whispered. 'Nah, sawn off twelve-bore. The Guvnor let me play it in the prison orchestra. Not bebop but needs must.'

The ticket-inspector took the hint and disappeared pronto.

The train tip-toed over the sleepless, dark eyed Tyne. It looped the points with a syncopated clickety-clack disturbance to its natural rhythm.

Ray breathed deep, cradled his double-bass and alighted.

Would she? Wouldn't she?' He'd pleaded for no visits, would despair at her upset; truth said, prison survival was a solitary confinement.

The dejected platform cut not an ounce of soul. Humid steam-engine mizzle clung to the fug of coalsmoke. Whistles shrilled, doors slammed, trains departed North and South. Ray blinked away a Newcastle Central brief encounter.

‘Haway pet, you’re playing the Prince of Wales tonight.

Ray turned and looked down into topaz blue eyes; matched to a baby-blue twinset and pearls. An angel personified.

‘You waited.’

‘Said I would.’ You’d nay be incarcerated if it wasn’t for me.’

‘Do it all again.’

‘Ahh know pet.’

Ray took her hand as they exited the station and turned up the Westgate Road.

Ray squinted at the pub. ‘We divin need return to the scene of the crime.’

A perfectly made-up face beamed. ‘We do. This is our home. Folk know the score. Underworld gangland hoodlum shot dead in crime of passion by gentle giant. You’ve earnt respect. Toon’s well rid, besides, I canny live without you. Haway hinny, there’s a pint of Exhibition Ale inside; your name on it.’

Her smile melted heart and soul. Now restored to his Birdland, double-bass and best-girl held tight; Take Five swung in his southpaw hands to a standing ovation.

Time to Take the A train.