



Source: Rory Carroll, 'For once, families in Baghdad phone to check on loved ones in Britain', *Guardian Unlimited*, 09/07/05

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Jan sat at the club table, a number of empty glasses in front of him. The half-filled one in his hand, like the empty ones had, consisted of Southern Comfort and ice. 'Southern Comfort and what?' the bartender had said, leaning forward, straining against the jukebox pop noise. This guy, less than a third of Jan's age, dressed in a cheap black vest, white shirt and bad acne, probably had never served alcohol straight before. Jan was tempted to ask him to make it 'two fingers'. They'd only just started dressing the bar staff this way. Jan missed Ned, the old barkeep. Ned was the bartender when this little shit-hole of a club only needed one bartender. People didn't order drinks on ice anymore, so Ned had reckoned. It was all pre-mix and post-mix, like drinking lolly sugar water. Feeling the burn of straight alcohol down your throat meant something—that you wanted to know the taste of the alcohol, not drink something that covered it over. Meant also you had to drink slow, needed to take your time, gave you time to think. Jan knew that you didn't buy liquid when you bought drinks, you bought time. Jan had bought a lot of time in this club. Now the club had changed hands, was being 're-envisioned'. Shit, these new guys didn't even know how to talk properly. They wouldn't know what 'class' was if it bit 'em on the arse.

Jan sat on the side of the club that hadn't yet been 're-envisioned', where the walls were messy, the carpet worn and sticky underfoot. The way Jan liked it. So far the tables hadn't been taken away either, a terrible plastic wood veneer, cigarette burn marks, some parts chipped away, revealing the particle-board beneath. This was the last night the club was open before closing for the final phase of renovations. Bench top surfaces would be changed to marble; the carpet ripped up, the stage replaced with a dance floor and state of the art light and sound system. They'd take down the faded pictures and autographed photos on the walls. Jan had played here a few times, when he was much younger. He played saxophone in a soul band. This had been his favourite place to play. For a few years he'd made a living as a musician. Good times. He and his band had even made a record, which now resided in the Halls of Obscurity. That didn't matter. They'd got further than most other bands ever would.

Yeah, so, Jan looked around. There were a few faces he knew, regulars. Another group consisted of the new management and their friends, drinking for free. A group of others were there for no particular reason, in their late twenties, maybe, Jan suspected without his glasses. He guessed they were something he'd heard the new owners talking about—transitory drinkers—people who came in for a couple and then left for somewhere else. They'd been discussing ideas about how to keep the transitory drinkers 'on site' for as long as possible when the club re-opened. Shit.

Finally the lights dropped slowly, the jukebox music faded out, and the band ambled on to the stage. This gig was

being honoured as a last request from the old owners. These men were the same age as Jan, and he clapped, like a minority of the crowd. To be looking at them, grey beards, moustaches, bald or balding, unfashionable old jackets, you'd be thinking that there was no life in them. But these guys had an aura that Jan could see. It was a comfortable confidence, a sense about themselves, knowing they'd already proved what needed to be proved in some other, ancient life. They didn't pick up their instruments; it was like the instruments jumped into their hands, wanting to be touched, wanting to be played.

Without an ounce of pretence, the drummer tapped his sticks together four times and the others kicked in perfectly together. The band played a mixture of jazz, soul and blues, the sound swirling around the rafters, in between people then changing abruptly in bizarre twists, some crazy time change. For Jan the years fell away instantly like the sea drawing back from the shore, the past lying just beneath the surface pushing into the present. The club was full once again. Jan sat with friends and a full round of drinks on the table, an almost wall of smoke made it hard to see anything and stung his eyes. He wore his finest suit and the feeling was, ahh, that feeling...

The music they played took him through years of memories and emotions. This music, there was no other way to explain it, he loved every second, note, chord, rhythm, the interplay of sounds, the way it made his pulse quicken and slow. His hands moved involuntarily to the strings of notes quavering in mid-air. Time dissolved...

Before Jan knew it the music had slowly come to an end. He'd closed his eyes and hadn't noticed. When he opened them, the band had already exited the stage.

Jan stood and walked a few metres behind where he was sitting searching for something on the wall and soon found the object of his search. He pulled a nearby chair over, stood shakily on it and pulled a faded autographed photograph of a band with a yellowing newspaper article —'Newcomers Light Up Club'—in the bottom left corner of the frame, from the wall.

A guy from the new management group noticed and came over. 'Hey! Hey, mate! What're you doing? You can't take that!'

Jan held tight to the picture as he stepped down. The guy snatched at the picture but Jan moved out of the way and pulled out his wallet.

'It's not for sale, mate.'

'I know.' Jan showed the guy his name on his license, then pointed to one of the signatures on the photo. 'It's mine.'

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Ross Murray.*