



So there I was in old Paris, gazing over the gypsy's glowing crystal ball with Rex.

"What do you see, Madame?" Rex asked her, shooting me a wink.

The wrinkly woman looked up. "Do you like hamburgers?" she asked.

Rex chuckled. "Well, sure—who doesn't?"

Two bloodshot eyes lingered first on me, then on Rex. I could feel the tingles zig-zagging up my spine.

"Don't," she said. "That will be ten francs."

"Can you believe that old crow?" chuckled Rex, as we stepped back onto the rue de l'Harpe. I easily kept up with my chubby yet fleet friend.

"Man, she had eyes like an angry old muskrat's," I said.

It was April, 1939, and Rex and I—along with the

Mick Carlon

rest of the Duke Ellington Orchestra—had been in Paris a week. For me, an eleven-year-old boy from the back woods of Georgia, the trip had been one wonder after another.

“Your belly’s not *that* big, Rex,” I said, trying to find *some* explanation for the old gypsy’s words.

Checking out his round reflection in a bakery window, Rex frowned. “Cootie’s got a bigger gut than me—and Sonny out-eats us both. Anyways, I’m hungry—let’s find a café.”

The afternoon was cool and breezy, with plump blimpy clouds floating over the city. Finding a café on the Boulevard St. Michel, we were soon both diving into bowls of onion soup and frothy mugs of *café au lait*.

“Beats chitlins, doesn’t it?” I asked.

“Actually, Daniel, I’m partial to Southern cooking,” said Rex, who talked like a professor, read four or five books at once, and was constantly jotting down his impressions of the world in a calf-skin journal. (Not to mention playing one of the most supple, lyrical cornets in all of jazz). A few stray crumbs fell onto his shirt. “Remember, both Duke and I hail from Washington, which is decidedly a Southern town.”

“Did you know him when you were my age?” I asked.

Riding on Duke's Train

Two lovely French gals smiled at Rex as they sauntered by. Tipping his hat, he smiled back—an action that could get a black man lynched back home in Georgia. I was liking Paris more all the time.

“Remember, lad, I’m eight years younger than the Gov’nor—with a few less bags beneath my eyes. But one broiling summer day when I was a wee lad, I dove into the deep end of the YMCA pool—where I had no business being, seeing that I couldn’t swim. Man, everybody was having so much fun that they didn’t notice little old me going down for the last time. But then Duke—his pals called him that even back then—dove in and yanked me up to the fresh air. Now, he swears he doesn’t recall that day—but I sure do! And that was my introduction to Edward Kennedy Ellington. Hey, speaking of the man, we have a rehearsal in about thirty minutes. Let’s scarf down this chow, Daniel, and scram.”



I figure now's a fine time to tell you about *my* introduction to Edward Kennedy Ellington. I don't quite believe the details of this tale myself, so if you're a bit disbelieving, I can't say that I blame you.

Now please don't bother feeling all weepy for me (because I have no memory of it), but when I was ten months old my folks died in a car wreck in Tennessee. I was asleep in the back seat and stayed in the car, but my mom and pop were thrown through the windshield and died. The drunken white man who plowed his truck into our Tin Lizzy never spent a day in jail either.

My pop's mom grabbed a train to rescue me from the orphanage. Turned out that old Pop had purchased a healthy life insurance policy so Granny and I lived snug and comfortable in her rented cottage in the woods outside of Helen, Georgia.

Riding on Duke's Train

One afternoon in late May of 1937, I walked home from school to find old Granny dead in her rocker on the front porch. Her eyes were wide open and she was smiling, so I figured her end hadn't been too tough to take. Naturally, I was sad—but old Granny had been reminding me that this day was coming for years, so I wasn't too surprised.

After burying her in the woods behind the cottage, I grabbed a gunny sack and threw in some clothes and all the cash money Granny kept in her strong box beneath her bed. Then, after locking up our old cottage good and tight, I hit the road.

A Georgia dusk in May can snatch your breath away, with the sky as red as the clay beneath your feet. I walked for hours, not seeing a soul, hearing only the insects and the owls. A crater-filled moon lit my way.

Are you up there, Granny? I thought to myself—but if she was, she wasn't letting on.

Near midnight I came to a clearing—and rightly gasped. For before me stood a sleek silver train—a silver engine pulling four silver cars, each one soaking up and shooting out all that moonlight.

“Shoo, now! Get going!” yelled the conductor to a mother cow and her calf who had decided that the tracks were a fine place to spend the night.

Hidden in the shadows, I noticed that one of the train's car doors was ajar. *Hmm*, I thought to myself.

Mick Carlon

This train is headed North—the same direction I'm headed. Why don't I just hitch myself a ride?

Making a dash for it (I'm rather speedy), I hoisted myself up and into the train, gently sliding the heavy door closed. Absolute blackness. The car smelled of wood and leather and was so cozy that almost as soon as the train began to move, I was asleep.