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English IV

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The Saxophonist

The saxophonist stood at his tribunal, the unseen jury and executioners hidden behind three stage lights that covered the stage in heavy layers of yellow and gold light. On all sides the world was covered in inky, swallowing darkness, leaving the six figures alone under sweltering suns. Once overbearing, the dull hum of the audience evaporated and vanished as the theater began to hold its breath. Sweeping his gaze across the stage, eyebrow raised slightly asking a silent question the portly trumpet player examined his friend’s faces. In turn, each figure nodded slightly and raised their instrument. He raised a hand and snapped. Once. Twice. The familiar clicking seemed to echo and the faint sound filled the room, sounding more like the looming footsteps found in nightmares rather than the simple setting of a tempo.

Click, click, click. Three more tapped out at double speed before a moment of silence ran through the chamber, the beat suspended where all could see. Crack. Catching the pickup note, one of the drummer’s sticks slammed into a tom before dancing with its mate around the grooved sides of a cymbal, opening the piece in a shimmering wave of accelerating sound before pulling back and letting the sound ring.

The saxophonist swiftly raised the shining instrument to his lips, easily formed the loose embouchure, and began pushing out the first breathy chord. Tidewaters of sweat had already begun to gather, not yet flowing, but forming in shining enclaves along the saxophonist’s forehead. A squat man to the saxophonist’s right held a smaller, higher pitched alto saxophone, the corners of his mouth twitched slightly as he filled the higher end of the chord in an ethereal vibrato call. The taller saxophonist’s fingers twitched as his lower harmony began to shift, the sound melting from a joyous tone into a somehow sinister voice. As long pale fingers gently, almost imperceptibly, moved, the chord grew increasingly powerful as lines moved separately. Chords grew grotesque; the notes grating against each other like tectonic plates in the midst of an earthquake, becoming gradually more and more dissonant. Finally, when it seemed that this song would conclude in one spiteful joke, the saxophonist moved one finger on his left hand and the chord instantly returned to its original form, a declaration of victory.

Sweat flowing freely down his bony neck, the saxophonist lowered his instrument and cast expecting eyes toward a trio of musicians behind him. The drummer, pianist, and bassist began laying down time together, a bouncy swing rhythm entering the now stark theater. Thick hands stretched over the neck of the bass as powerful plucking released subtones that shook the whole stage. Pushing her thick brown hair behind her ear, the pianist began riffing over the bassline, finding color notes and creating small phrases as a steady groove emerged.

The trumpet player raised his horn, pursed his lips around the mouthpiece, and undulated his left foot slightly to the beat; pinstripe shirt barely covering his paunchy gut, he let out a stream of notes marking the beginning of his solo. A cloud of notes and imagination obscured the trumpeter and entranced the members of an invisible audience. After introducing himself with a series of arpeggiated scales, he let out a simple, but soulful idea. Slowly he began to repeat this idea, but this time turning into a new idea that led into a completely different direction. The solo grew increasingly more active and complicated as he slowly built momentum; the notes climbing higher and higher, louder and louder, as he brought the audience up a musical mountain. His face red and dripping with sweat from exertion, a vein in his forehead bulged as he grasped for more and more power from a rapidly decreasing supply of air. After a series of screaming high notes, he let out a blistering run all over his instrument’s register, concluding his solo in an explosive finish. As the saxophonist and his shorter comrade raised their instruments for the first statement of the melody, the trumpet player revealed a wide grin with a set of perfect teeth, beaming into the unseen crowd before giving a slight bow.

Riding the sonic wave just beginning to crash in a roar of applause, the two saxophonists instantly launched into a spinning chorus, the two musicians outlining opposite patterns in harmony before the lines condensed down to a single unison note for a single moment, then immediately continued the line. The trumpet player entered with the other two laying down accents and embellishing the melody, meanwhile the short alto saxophonist—his brown hair lying flatly in a widows peak—once again climbed the scale to a stratospheric height as the lankier tenor player walked down the scale in careful support.

The helix shaped melody continued to spin and grew increasingly frantic and complex as it picked up in both speed and volume, the trumpet more closely doubling the alto until the three were harmonizing in rich chords. As the form ended, the taller saxophonist took a moment to breathe, wiping his damp forehead with the sleeve of his black dress shirt and adjusting his neck strap one final time, he brought the saxophone back to his mouth right as the melody rose to a climax with two sharp sixteenth notes.

Stretching out on that note, the saxophonist wailed, the tone bending as he relaxed his jaw slightly before pinching again and redirecting the pitch of the note upwards. Leaping off of that note, the saxophonist climbed chromatically upwards at a dizzying pace before landing on a dissonant sharp 7th step of the key. Playing from that note, he began spinning out little ideas, but carefully ended them on notes just half-steps from the tonal notes of the scales. The audience leaned forward, petrified in their seats, as the saxophonist stubbornly refuse to resolve a single run or flourish.

Palpable tension built in the room as he began launching into vast runs over the length of his instrument, inserting mordents and turns turning a simple circuitous scale into a sea of myriad notes. A complex patterns of rapid-fire high hat hits, forming a tenacious clicking that drove the tempo forward percolated from the background as the music grew increasingly erratic. Emerging from the run, the saxophonist paused for a millisecond before sounding out a triumphant lick, but instead of resolving it, he paused and then chose a note just off from the root, the second. A jarring, biting sound hung in the air before the trumpet entered with a lower harmony note, then the alto entering with another; combined these tones revealed a striking ninth chord as the music finally resolved.

The note filled the dark theater and then cut off without warning, six musicians gazed up at the impassive stage lights, standing under the weighty rays, as the first sounds of applause began to fill the shrouded hall.