

Downbound A

by Michael Downing

Fall came early that year. The edge in the air wasn't just the cold, raw wind cutting down the street — the unity and collective embrace briefly shared after September 11th had faded. The weight from the smoldering rubble a few blocks south was still heavy as Tommy Gallagher descended into the Church Street Station.

Making his way below, collar turned up and head down, Gallagher avoided the faces and stares of those around him. The darkness of the stairway paralleled the mood of the city.

It was out of that darkness that he heard the soft wailing sound of a saxophone. Haunting and edgy with bite like something by Coltrane or Sonny Rollins, the melody stirred something deep inside. Gallagher turned the corner and slowed before finally stopping alongside others who stood unmoving, listening in rapt silence.

A tall, black musician in a well-worn tee shirt and leather jacket, with dreadlocks and a wispy goatee stood across the platform, a small leather case open at his feet. He held his sax like a dance partner, hips swaying slightly as he dipped from side to side while the notes cascaded throughout the caverns of the station. With more than the usual thirty second sound bite Gallagher was accustomed to from subway performers, this was as if the A train had paused up the tracks to let him play. Gallagher held on each note as the music carried him to a time and place where warmth and beauty found its way into his heart again. A place where hope made its presence felt.

Business executives, secretaries, students, messengers, and laborers all stood together as one. For those few minutes on the platform each of them was taken far away where they could forget about hurt, pain, and memories of friends lost in the Towers.

The A pulled into the station and Gallagher quickly joined the rush for seats, but the music continued as the doors closed and the train started down the tracks; when he turned he could still see

the saxophonist moving slowly back and forth. They continued towards Brooklyn and the musician disappeared from view as Gallagher settled back into his seat. His eyes moved from passenger to passenger, and in each expression he saw the same thing he felt inside — something that had been missing.

And for the first time in weeks, Gallagher smiled.

