

## THE KEYS

By Bob Bowersox

The keys are playing easy tonight. Barely have to touch them. A nice feel, he thinks, like someone blew out the grease and dust, or oiled the linkages or something.

Ridiculous thought, of course. This is The Baby Grand, one of the oldest venues in town. There are fingerprints on this keyboard that go back forty years. Hell, it's well-known that Bobby Short himself tripped these ivories back in the day, before he heard the call of the canyons of New York. What fool's going to mess with that juju by Lysoling it?

Something's different, though. It's real nice and easy. He doesn't even feel the arthritic bite across the backs of his hands where the breaks had been. Small blessings. Whatever makes it easier, right?

Probably the booze. The pianoman's lubrication. And if that's what's masking the pain in his hands, fuck it. It's medicinal. The booze never gets in the way, anyway. It never has, so why worry about it? He's hammering out the tune for what...the ten-thousandth time? Like he's done with every show tune in every songbook ever compiled for the last thirty years. God. He could play them in a coma: eyes closed, body lax, breathing minimal – for all the world, a cadaver sitting at a keyboard. But his hands. They can see in the dark. They know every note. They never let him down. So what's a little booze if it dulls the pain for another hour or two?

A hot breeze pushes across the stage as the nearby front door is thrown open by yet another drunk couple looking for the next action of their evening. It carries the smell of the night on it, different than that of the day. The day is infused with the dry, spiced scent of the sun-baked heat of Key West in summer, a topnote of ocean teasing a promise of relief. But in the night there hangs the pungency of moist, foul breath, alloyed to the sharp edge of cigarette smoke and the chemical bite of evaporating alcohol. The perfume of the club, unmistakable and unchanging.

Used to be a colorful place – alive in that special way top-flight performance can provide, fueled by personalities who deserved the attention. But all that's a shadow these days, like the yellowed news clippings framed on the walls, or the once-red velvet drapes dulled by the dust of decades. Nothing stands out over anything else any more. Even the music is a worn, faded fabric...an endless stream of the same notes, the same chords, the same empty renditions of the same songs played the same way for as long as booze-fogged memory can recall.

But the music serves its purpose for him, like the booze. It keeps them all at arm's length. It's prophylactic. Because it's the music they expect something from, not him, and then it's not even the music they're after. It's the memories the music dredges up; the connection to some better time, some more hospitable place, some lost-but-not-yet-acknowledged-as-such youth. They don't want to be here, now. They want to be there, then. The music is simply their transport, and that's just fine with him. Go where you will. I'll offer up the opiates. Just take them and leave me out of it.

There are those who don't see it that way, of course, who would rather *be* the opiate. Who, through the attempt, themselves become addicted, not to the music, but to what the audience is willing to trade for it. But these unfortunates misjudge the audiences' true need by taking the applause they offer as adulation instead of the satiation of the personal hunger that it really is.

These are the Broadway Barbras, the never-ending stream of wannabes. Like the one standing in front of his baby grand right now. The fat girl belts out the song like it's the single most important and the very last thing in her life. Like she will wither and blow away when she finishes and she wants to shine for all she's worth in those last moments. She's pushing it too hard, of course, soaking it in melodrama. They always do. The push masquerades as talent. The melodrama masks a lack of true soul. He understands the mask.

But what does he care? This one will leave and another one will come, and he'll play the same songs the same way, while she tries to give it her special nuance, which, of course, won't be any more special than the last one or that much different from the next one. It's all a constant. A C-chord's a C-chord, a trill's a trill, a Broadway Barbra's a Broadway Barbra. In the big picture, not a damn thing's changing.

They tended to be older, the Barbras. Because The Baby Grand is where you end up, not where you start the climb, so they've not just stepped off the bus. They're all attractive to someone, he supposes. "Pretty" is what their fathers would have called them – popcorn eyes, button noses, pouty lips on a cutesy face. But "pretty" is only great when you're six, and soon enough you realize that "pretty" isn't "gorgeous" or "stunning". So they all found their mask – heavy on the eyeliner and fake lashes, a few layers of foundation and blush, usually the same shade of off-red lipstick. Not one of them trusts their innate beauty.

Why is that? At what point did the face looking back from the mirror take on an imperfect cast? What was said to them that made them feel that paint and colored dust was a viable alternative? None of which really matters to him, of course, so he never bothers to look anymore. What would be the purpose? And when it comes right down to it, he's sure they never see *his* face either. Even when they're looking right at it.

Their talent, though...what can you say? They may all have the ante for the game, but none are holding aces. Most can hit the notes, some can even hold them. Others – the smokers – have developed the tricks they need to get around the diminished power the cigarettes leave you. There are some that still show the promise they had – a timbre, a phrasing, an energy that set them apart. But it will never be enough. Not for them, not now. And the sad part is that they'll never come to grips with the fact that they're all forgettable – cookie cutter carbon copies. Just like him, really...a dime-a-dozen pianoman. There are no angels anymore, and even if there were, they never walk into this place. Well, almost never....

# # #

It was a hot, lazy afternoon. He was noodling on the piano, no one else in the bar except the bartender – a mantis of a man, all arms and legs, impossibly folded onto a stool, reading a Hemingway, the stub of a cigarette pinched between thumb and forefinger, the ash an inch long, ready to dust the page his eyes were locked to.

Across the room, he fingered the keys, allowing an internal muse to guide him anywhere but there. He looked up briefly, glimpsed something in the doorway – a silhouette, framed by the burn of sunlight. There was a momentary halo of dark hair, a slender form, a tall liquid shadow that flowed into the room.

His eyes went closed again as he re-connected to the keys, barely registering her presence. She moved to the bar, slid onto the corner stool, smiled at the bartender and in a whisper of a voice, ordered a vodka and soda with a splash of cran. Her age didn't read on her. The best one could say is that she looked old enough to have no illusions. Her body slumped in an unnatural way, as if gravity pulled harder on her than anything else -- like a snowman melting in heat -- a body language that said she was either extremely comfortable in her own skin or she'd surrendered to something she had no control over. Comfort and capitulation sometimes read the same. Her eyes said nothing at all, but neither did anything escape them, and there was an intensity in that state that captured and held when they fell on you.

But she didn't crack his consciousness. Not really. He was lost in that tune again -- the one that bled out of him that night years ago and had never left him -- the beautiful, haunting melody that found its way to his hands every day now, whether he wanted it to or not, like it was a living entity searching for something and using his hands to try to find it. But even as he ran through the piece over and over, eyes closed, head bowed, his mind dodged and bolted like a gazelle in the veldt chased by a cheetah, doing everything it could to block any conscious image of the tragedy that lives within that melody from rising above the visceral. He was drawn to it constantly, yet wanted to flee from it. It was the pain of her and the memory of her -- the wound and the salve at one and the same time -- so he forced himself to listen only to the progression of notes, following them like steps, hoping they'd lead him away, though he knew they would only bring him back.

Her back was still to him. She stirred her drink, then casually raised her eyes to the reflection of him at the piano in the mirror behind the bar. She watched him a moment, lost wherever he'd gone. She slowly looked down into her drink, stirred it again. She closed her eyes, dropped her head and let it begin to swing slowly with the meter of the tune. A soft hum rose from her throat, almost imperceptibly at first as it felt out the melody, then stronger and more assured as she intuited the emotion in it, sometimes following the melody line he kept repeating, sometimes throwing on a harmony to the 3<sup>rd</sup> or the 5<sup>th</sup>. Her voice was clear and sure, no dirt, perfectly sounded, delivered easily, without effort, without the need for control, so clean it was like her throat were simply as an oboe, a flute, a French horn, played by a master, incapable of delivering anything but pure tone and timbre.

Her voice cut into his consciousness in the same way a shock of electricity lights a bulb. He was jarred from his disconnection. His eyes opened, swept the room, and fell on her...

# # #

The Barbra hits her final note, which she tries to hold, but lets slide flat. He trills the final chord into a crescendo, vamping it to cover her shortcoming. The audience is fooled by the vamp and suckered by the Barbra's histrionics -- the practiced, exaggerated bow followed by the cutesy curtsy, the wide, incisor-exposing smile that begs for more even as it tries to convince its bearer that she deserves the alcohol-fueled accolades the audience showers upon her.

But she, too, is oblivious to the kindness his cover vamp is. She breathes a "Thank you so much" into the mic, then turns and orders up another tune like she's punching keys on a Wurlitzer juke box, and then, as if that weren't insult enough, she compounds her clueless arrogance with a quick aside, demanding he pick it up, snapping her fingers at the top of a wrist flick.

"Come on, Ritchie. Pick it up a little, will you? Don't make me look bad here, okay?"

Like he has to do anything at all to achieve that. But his smile is instant, rote, and completely without sincerity. He sweeps mechanically into the next tune, driving it with a little more pace than it should have. A talented singer would be able to handle it – turn it around and make it work – but she won't. But hey...he's just following orders, right?

He glances to his right as he vamps the intro, catches the bartender's eye, throws his chin at him in a gesture each has come to understand. The bartender guy-nods acknowledgment, pours a double Maker's Mark, sets it in front of a waitress and points. The waitress swings around the periphery of the audience to the stage, slides the glass onto the small table behind him. He winks at her. She winks back. They wink at each other ten, twelve times a night these days.

If you asked him, he'd tell you that he never saw the booze coming. It just kind of snuck up on him, you know? It seemed like, one night he'd decided to have a Maker's to warm himself up because somebody'd turned the A/C down to North Pole, and the next thing he knew, he was getting cold every thirty to forty minutes every night, no matter where the thermostat was set. It wasn't like he got the shakes or anything. But his hands would stiffen up, especially where the breaks had been, and the warmth of the booze loosened them up. It was a professional necessity in that way, you see. That's what he told himself, anyway.

He'd also tell himself he could stop anytime he wanted to. But he never wanted to. And now it's no longer a consideration. Because as the years accumulated, the booze took on nuance, dimension. An importance beyond the medicinal. It still warms him, sure – soothes the pain in his hands. But that's not why he winks at the waitress these days. He winks at her because the booze spins the cocoon. It weaves the gossamer curtain that hangs between him and the rest of the room. It lets him disappear a little, to become invisible. It lets him hide.

But the question he can no longer answer is this: Is the booze where he's hiding, or the one thing that keeps him from disappearing altogether? And because he doesn't want to know the answer, he's stopped asking the question.

# # #

She turned on her stool, smiled into his look. He was instantly caught by those eyes – something in them resonated within him, touched something so strongly it stopped him playing.

"Don't stop." Her voice was quiet, without edge. "Please." She lifted her drink from the bar and moved to the piano. "It's beautiful. Is it yours?"

He nodded, and felt the heat of blush on his face.

"What's it called?"

"Never settled on anything," he said quietly. "It's more a memory of someone...kind of a way of trying not to let the sense of them fade, I suppose."

"She must have been very special."

Reading the answer from his face, she began to smile at him, then caught herself and stiffened, letting her eyes quickly pull her head around to glance at the door. The move was instinctive, wary. She watched the sun spill through the empty opening for a moment, then her shoulders relaxed imperceptibly, she dropped her head, smiled to herself, and turned back to him.

“Are there lyrics?”

He reached for an edge-worn spread of sheet music that sat folded on the piano top. He opened it and looked at it a moment, then pushed it across the piano to her, though he kept his fingers on its edge, like somehow maintaining the touch wasn't yet a commitment to share it. It was written in pencil, the lyrics meticulously scratched between the staves.

“May I?” she asked, and touched the corner of the sheet delicately.

He looked at her a moment, unsure that sharing the memory in the music wouldn't be betrayal of some kind, an adultery. But there was no seductiveness in her face, no agenda in her eyes, nothing to indicate that she wanted to take anything from him, own anything in him.

“Please?” she said, and allowed the faintest of smiles to appear at the corners of her mouth.

For some reason, he nodded. He hadn't expected to, maybe didn't even want to, but there was something about her – a need he recognized on some unconscious level – something. So he nodded, and lifted his fingers. She carefully turned the sheet to herself and picked it up.

He dropped his hands to the keyboard, and after a moment more, in which a decision seemed to be made, he began playing. He looked down at his fingers, watching them for the first time in a long time as they touched the keys and found the melody.

She hummed along for a few bars, then picked up with the lyrics, not tentative at all, but confident, sure, like she'd sung the song as many times as he'd played it. And her voice caressed the melody just as lovingly – seeming to share the pain and hope of it as deeply and knowingly as he, as though the memory of its genesis was as much hers as his.

He looked up, his eyes and ears coalescing into one sense, unable to turn from her.

# # #

He slams the final chord and crescendos it, vamping it as long as the Barbra can hold the note, which isn't long because she has no breath. She takes an exaggerated bow – as pushed as her singing. Then she picks up a large, nearly empty fishbowl from the center of the piano, a few crumpled bills resting in the curve of its base, and turns to address the audience.

He drops his eyes and bows his head, not in humility, but in embarrassment. If he could make himself deaf in these moments, he would. A dozen times a night, after each Barbra has finished her set, he must endure the begging on his behalf, a solicitation for donations as though he were a charity case, an indigent. It never rises above humiliation, more often descending into a crucifixion, in his view. And this one...this one's the worst. She's condescending, almost insulting, as she holds up the bowl and shakes it, and laughingly tells the audience that this is how he gets paid, and surely they can come up with a buck or two. She tries to be funny -- “He's a long way from Carnegie Hall, folks, and judging from what he's wearing, he could sure use your help” – but she's looking for a laugh for herself, not respect or concern for him.

He allows a wry smile to cut the corner of his face, but on the side away from the audience. Why legitimize this torture by seeming to appreciate it? Still, her barb isn't far from the truth, though that doesn't make it funny. Working for tips is never funny. On the contrary, it's serious business. It has elements of prostitution to it – you put yourself out there, you perform a service, you hope they tip you fairly. You even pay a pimp – the house always gets its end, doesn't it?

And like a prostitute, you learn what brings them around, what holds them, what builds the tip and what doesn't.

This he learned in his twenties, just out of college, a sheepskin and not much else in his hands, the energy of optimism feeding a Muse he was sure would never abandon him. Like a lot of musicians his age – the generation whose bellies had been fired by John, Paul, George, and Ringo – he saw the whole of New York as a fertile field. You could sow your seeds from any corner. You just picked one, opened up the tip case, and played. You didn't give a shit about the tips, of course, because Columbia, or Atlantic, or Reprise, or Warner Brothers – they were just going to walk by one day, and that would be it. Next stop: limos and Lears. You were so convinced it would happen tomorrow, or the next day for sure, that you didn't mind the fact that there wasn't enough in the tip case at the end of most days to buy a boiled-out Nathan's hot dog from the rusting cart down the street.

It didn't take too many days of that before reality began nibbling at the optimism and need dispossessed the Muse. Commitment to the thought that the music stands alone gave way to the stark truth that no it doesn't, that it's how you *give them* the music that matters. And to give them the music, you have to make them stop and watch. Not *listen* so much. But *watch*.

So you learn to build the tip and then work it. Like the street walker on the next corner, or the Three Card Monty dealer two blocks down, you learn to watch, and pick your marks, and draw them in.

Here, then, was the birth of the mask: the false smile, the pushed joviality, the quick patter thrown at them like wordzack to numb and interrupt their thoughts...to make them stop. You learn what brings them in, what keeps them watching. You permit no empty seconds, no pregnant pauses. You never leave a moment for their minds to shift back to who and where they are, or what they have to do, where they have to be. You keep them thinking about there and then, keep that connection alive. You become the eye candy, the continual sensory stimulus that holds them hypnotized just long enough that when they do finally break the spell, they feel obligated to drop something into the case before they move on.

If that were all it was – theater, in a sense – and that were all it remained, he might have been okay. But eventually, the insincerity of the persona slipped into the realm of the music – the laziness, the false notes, the embellishments that aren't needed but are flashy and make a big impression, tricks that masquerade as exceptional talent, the sleight-of-hand that fools the rubes. He learned them all. And used them. And before he knew it, the timbre of the mask had wrapped around the music like it wrapped around the face. It all – all of it, everything – became unreal, lost its substance, became the opiate.

And inevitably, the booze followed, like a soldier in lockstep, a lemming in blind leap – not so much because it numbs the pain of dreams lost, but because, quite simply and elegantly, it lubricates the sliding on of the mask.

But there was no mask that day...there was no need. There was no fear, no instinctive drive to hide, no cocoon required. There was just the music and the music had no agenda. There were no hidden hungers, no need for opiates.

She sang the song again, and again, as many times as he wanted to play it. Each time, he played it a little differently, but she was right there with him. And each time, it became more effortless for them both...a symbiotic dance that became basic, elemental, rooted in the DNA. It pushed and pulled them, brought them one to the other, until there was no sense of separation,

no awareness of time or place. They were not there at all, in fact, but inside the music itself, wrapped in the memory, fueled by the emotion, a single musical acknowledgement of love and loss, faith and hope, devotion and eternal commitment.

He had no idea how long they stood there, immersed, melded, willingly captured in what seemed a singular, timeless moment, despite having run through the song a dozen times. But when they did finally fall silent, neither took a breath. To have exhaled would have violated the sanctity of the arresting silence that surrounded them. He sat with his eyes closed, feeling it, recognizing something in it, something he hadn't been in the presence of for longer than he could remember. Or cared to.

He was unaware of her movement until he felt the warmth of her hands on his own. She had moved to the bench beside him, and taken his hands in hers. What surprised him was not her presence or touch, but that he didn't recoil from her in any way, that he let her turn him toward her without distrust, and rub the backs of his hands with her thumbs without awkwardness.

She spoke quietly, almost in a whisper.

"I believe you can see where the soul seeps out of someone, where it is they are able to make connection to something beyond themselves, where they can touch it." She looked up at him. "For you, it's when you let that melody rise from your fingers. Your soul is reaching out in that moment..."

His breath caught in his throat, he felt a pressure build in the corners of his eyes.

"I've wanted so badly to touch her again..." was all he could get out before the wave broke inside him. He dropped his head and let the sob release the tears.

"You do," she whispered. "I truly believe you do."

He looked up at her then, into those eyes, and he was suddenly unsure of anything.

"But maybe it's you," he said. "Maybe it's you that..." and he rolled her hands in his, taking hers now and holding them, "Maybe it's you that I..."

She withdrew her hands quickly and stood. "No..." she began, "I can't...", and turned, looking again to the door, confusion and fear on her face.

"I'm sorry," he blurted then, sliding to the end of the bench, the words pouring out, "I didn't mean...I mean, I wasn't..." his mind in free fall. What did he just do? What was he thinking? Oh, God...

She turned back to him. "It's not that I wouldn't..." she began. "I mean, don't get me wrong...this is wonderful..." A little smile, now, a little laugh. "It's amazing, actually...I haven't done...felt...this in a long time, and I need it, I think. Maybe as much as you seem to."

He looked up at her. "Yes..." was all that came out, so soaked in need he might as well have said "Yes, I need you. Yes, I want this. Yes, save me."

Her smile disappeared. "But I can't. Please understand. It's just that there's...there's a..."

"Don't," he said, raising a hand to stop her. "You don't have to. I don't need to know."

He looked away from her then, dropping his eyes to his hands folded now in his lap. The silence was so loud, so heavy, and he felt it so intensely, that it stopped him breathing. It wasn't until his body forced a desperate breath that he came back to himself. After a moment, he shifted back to the center of the bench, and looked up at her.

"I just want to hear it again," he said, a weak but honest smile adding the "please". Then he raised his hands to the keys.

# # #

The cosmo splashes across the keyboard and into his lap, soaking his crotch and half of his shirt. He'd seen it coming, like one of those slow motion film sequences, but there was nothing he could do but absorb the assault.

The woman is drunk, of course. She and her husband had staggered in a while ago, full of flash and show – he with a constant spread of big bills on the bar, she with gaudy jewelry everywhere and a Gucci handbag on her arm that the husband made sure stayed above the bar and visible. Their flamboyance was obviously fueled by alcohol, but he could see the calculation behind it. It wasn't enough that they were having a good time – they wanted everybody else to think they were having the *best* time, that they could more than afford it, and that if you wanted to play in their league, you came to their corner of the bar and paid homage. Building the tip, he thinks – that's all it is. But here the tip isn't a quarter or two, it's an ego stroke, and what worries him is that ego and alcohol at this time of night is not a good mix.

At some point the husband decides that the corner of the bar isn't enough for him, that he wants the entire bar to acknowledge their specialness, and that he's going to use the stage and his wife to do it. He revs it up with a disparaging remark about the Barbra just finishing up a tune, then he lets it rip.

"Hey, pianoman!" he bellows. "How 'bout lettin' a *real* singer up there, huh? The little lady here has the pipes of an angel, don'cha honey? Did some background singin' a few years back for that black singer...whats'hername? R...E...S...P...E...C...T? Whats'hername?" And off someone in the crowd, "Yeah, yeah... 'Retha Franklin!"

She tries to pull him back with a weak-hearted "Oh, Bill, they don't want to hear me...", but he's already moving. He parts the crowd around them with one hand and with the other in the small of her back, he pushes his wife toward the stage. "Sing us a tune, honey," he says, like he's held out a Milkbone and told her to roll over and play dead.

She staggers to the stage, weaving through the tables in her too-tight skirt, drink in hand, Gucci swinging from an elbow, the crowd egging her on with Bill's continued instigation. But as she attempts to mount the foot-high stage, she catches a Manolo Blahnik heel on the fraying carpet, thus facilitating the cosmo's mad dash across the keyboard and into his crotch.

But he doesn't miss a beat, mask in place, patter automatic. He makes it seem like it's all part of the show – a clown-like dance as he shakes out his wet trousers, a gentlemanly bow and a hand to help the wife find stability near the piano, a call to the bartender for a refill of her glass. A quick wipe of the keys with his sweat towel, and a vamp of intro music, and it's like it never happened. Except to the husband, who's already turned his back to the stage, berating his wife's clumsiness to the minions surrounding him, despite it being him that put her up there in the first place. The bastard. He's making her misfortune the currency he buys attention with.



He takes pity on the wife – it's obvious she's flying without a net. He quietly asks her what she'd like to sing.

"How 'bout 'Shummertime'?" she slurs, and tries to strike a chanteuse pose with her back against the piano, though it's obvious she's simply trying to remain vertical.

He nods and quickly hits the intro chords, trying to get this over with as quickly as possible for both of them, but from the first two bars he can tell she's too drunk, and within eight, she's already making a fool of herself, dropping words, horribly off-key, listing dangerously right into the curve of the grand piano, until she finally stops, simply unable to continue.

The piranhas in the audience don't miss any of it, and their titter and laughter cuts into the husband's holding court at the corner of the bar. He turns to see his wife step from the stage, using the mic stand for a balance pole, then turn awkwardly back to grab the Gucci she'd set on the stage lip. She begins to weave toward the front door, tears glistening on her cheeks.

He and everyone else in the bar watch the husband step from the bar and loudly ask his wife where she's going, and when she doesn't answer, he raises his voice, almost a command for her to come back and sing, but she ignores him. As he watches his wife bounce off the door jamb and out onto the sidewalk, he suddenly becomes aware that he's standing in the center of the room, all eyes on him, but not in the way he wants. His carefully constructed ego charge has collapsed around him.

Embarrassed, yet still refusing to accept responsibility, the husband begins hurling accusations and epithets at *him*, of all people – where did he learn to play, what did he think he was doing, who did he think he was – an unending stream that flowed forth as he strode to the door himself, finally turning and yelling that he'll never be back to this shithole again, before bouncing off the doorjamb himself and out onto the street.

After a very pregnant and embarrassing moment, he pulls the mic to his mouth, lets the mask smile and says, "Well, that went well...anyone else care to sing us something?" He then launches into an uptempo tune that usually makes everyone happy, but it doesn't work. His obvious insincerity and over-the-top attempt only brings the embarrassment to himself, the heat of which he feels rising on his face.

# # #

"I just want to hear it again," he said.

She turned to him, back to the room, and tucked into the curve of the piano, facing him, effectively making it even more intimate between them.

"Play it, then," she said softly.

He considered his hands on the keyboard a moment, then began to play.

"Softer," she said. "Reach out and caress me with it."

He let his hands rest motionless on the keys then, and allowed a silence to settle around them like a moment of reverence before a prayer. He closed his eyes, and pulled a breath deep into his lungs. And suddenly the sense of that night so many years ago was on him – the coolness of the air as he walked numbly from the Emergency Room, the intensity of the emptiness where his heart used to be, the overwhelming realization that a split second of inattention had viciously

and irretrievably ripped everything that mattered from him. Yet right there, in that moment, at the sound of her voice, the soft supplication of a woman whose name he didn't know but whose soul had found him in the dark somehow, he felt the longing of that night shatter and dissipate like the pieces of a puzzle blown from a table, and in its place, a warmth, a kind of peace, a resolution, remained.

He began again, this time letting his fingers float above the keys, barely touching them as he played. The haunting melody became ethereal, cymbaline. His face softened as the mask let go and slid away and the purity of the emotion he'd sculpted into each note washed over him like it had the night he wrote them, trying desperately in those initial moments of pain, horror, and disbelief to hold the image of a face now long gone, the sound of a now-silenced voice, in the only way he knew.

She began to sing, her voice barely a breath – so soft and warm, so assuredly the whisper of a lover. She infused the melody with a life he hadn't imagined, and each note began to evoke a sigh from him, as if a lover's fingertips were being drawn across his brow and around the edge of his ear with a touch only lovers recognize. And then he was suddenly aware that the face he'd wanted for so long to see again was forming in his consciousness, drawn by the melodic line so perfectly rendered by the voice of the angel now standing in front of him. He felt the rock around his heart crack open. He felt the release of the pain trapped inside. He felt the wet track of the tear tracing down his cheek. He whispered her name aloud for the first time in years.

# # #

He pulls his zipper up, hits the flush handle on the urinal with a closed fist but immediately regrets it as the pain shoots through his hand. Bones never really heal he thinks, as he moves to the sink and runs warm water over the backs of his hands, letting them soak in the heat. He looks into the eyes staring back at him in the mirror, something he tries to avoid because he doesn't like the thoughts that crawl into his mind when he does. It always surprises him how they look so hollow, why they have a cast of...what?...of hopelessness, of despair, of, shit...nothing...to them. And he always thinks, maybe it's because there's nothing he wants to see with them. Not really. And that worries him. And makes him want to wink at the waitress. Which he wants to do very badly right now.

As he pulls a towel from the stack and dries his hands, the bathroom door opens and a small man enters. He's about forty, maybe a little older. A tourist, for sure, in a flowered shirt, khaki shorts, flip-flops, the smell of gin on his breath. He tucks himself into the urinal and looks over, recognition crossing his face.

"Love what you're doin', pal," he says. "You and them ladies. You're quite a performer."

The mask smiles at the man, the head nods appreciatively. The mind is still thinking about winking at the waitress.

"Anything you want to hear?" the mask says automatically, reaching for the door and hoping the move doesn't look too desperate.

"Well, now you mention it," the man says, "me and the wife would love to hear 'New York, New York'. You do that one?"

The mask smiles at the man again. "I do 'em all," he says, and he's out the door before "Every last fucking one of them" can find utterance.

# # #

Their focus on the music was total, their communion a complete immersion. They stood with eyes closed, aware of nothing but the passion embodied in the melodic line they followed together, he playing, she singing, hearts and minds woven together, given over to something outside of themselves yet connected directly to their very cores. So neither of them heard him come in. Neither felt the heat of the anger barreling down on them.

The first he knew of the man's presence was the sound of the crack of the bones in his hands punctuating the cacophony of the keys as his fingers were mashed into them, crushed under the slammed lid of the keyboard. It was a shock so unexpected and bewildering that the reality of what had happened didn't even register in his conscious mind, the synapses unable to make conceptual sense of the messages they were carrying.

All he remembers of that moment was that the soft caress of her voice shattered in that same instant, choked-off as the man dragged her from the stage, his hand at the back of her neck, holding collar and hair, driving her before him out the door and into the street, spewing poisonous jealousy in a rage of drunken foulness, ripping her from his presence and forever corroding his memory of a moment that had had so much promise, leaving him broken and helpless, his hands misshapen and already swelling, looking into the burn of the sun framed by the door, his hoarse and broken wail echoing off the mirror behind the bar into the now-empty room.

Later, he asked the police about her while a doctor wrapped his hands in plaster at the hospital, asked if they had found her, asked if she was unhurt, asked if he could see her. But they told him there had been no sign of her, no witnesses that had seen where the man had dragged her, no one that saw a vehicle or got a license plate. Nothing.

He never heard anything else about it. There was nothing in the paper, no follow-up by the police. He himself asked a few casual questions to shopkeepers along the block, but that yielded nothing. No one had seen anything. She had simply vanished, hauled into oblivion by a raging bull that had not only crushed his hands, but had trampled the only pure moment of joy he'd had in he couldn't remember how long.

Other than the pain that lingered in his hands forever now, it was like it never happened.

# # #

Another Broadway Barbara steps to the stage, flashes her laser-whitened teeth in a too-big smile, and gives a half-bow, half curtsy to the crowd, initiating another long night of trills and vamps, winks and masks. He sits behind the piano, hunching down in an unconscious attempt to be even less visible. He looks only at the keyboard, afraid that glancing up at her would signal his readiness, his willingness to once again don the mask.

The ache in his hands is centered across the line of the breaks, still tender, even after eight months. He rubs them, hoping without expectation to ease the pain the booze no longer seems to reach. As he does this, he lets his eyes wander the room: same regulars at the bar, same tourists looking for the opiates he offers, same bartender, same waitress, same faded red drapes, same piano with the sticky keys. His eyes come to a rest on the open door to the street, the sunlight having long since surrendered to the cool, bluish moonlight now pouring in. He finds it impossible to look away then, images and memories suddenly flooding through his

consciousness, touching places he thought he'd buried again. His face begins to relax, his shoulders lose their tightness.

He barely hears the Barbra's calls for a tune, her voice distant, like an echo on the other side of some divide he's managed in this moment to cross.

With his eyes still on the door, he brings his hands to the keys and begins to play the song she'd sung that afternoon, playing it now as he played it then – softly, as a caress, with no bravado, no false smile, no false joviality, no mask...just him, the naked him, letting his soul walk the keyboard.

He closes his eyes and tries to see a face.