

Standards

by Eddie Caplan

PART ONE

Gary Markles saw it happen again and again. People tried to find their own center, between anguish and peace, and weren't satisfied until they found that balance. If their life was too good or too bad, they were compelled by some inner urge to swing the other way. Some private pendulum kept trying to come to rest in the middle of the arc.

Gary saw it every night. He played an eight-hour gig at a piano bar, 6:00 p.m. to 2:00 a.m., Tuesday through Saturday nights. This was a decent lounge in a neighborhood restaurant. The drinkers were regulars and Gary knew them well. But they couldn't hide themselves from him. Oh, no. He knew them too well.

They came in feeling either totally great or totally lousy. But whatever side of center they were on, they all prayed that a few drinks would give them equilibrium. The lousy-feeling drinkers hoped for a numbing oblivion to pull them out of Hell, while the great-feeling drinkers hoped to pull themselves down from their Heaven before God *threw* them down, punishing them for their unworthiness.

Gary's music accompanied them, whatever they needed, whichever direction they were going. He could play upbeat or blues, jazz or Broadway, sentimental or raunchy, light touch or rough. In the end they all left the same — just slobs in a drunken mash stumbling out the door knowing in their gut that their respite was only

temporary. When they woke, the pendulum inside them would be swinging again, one way or the other.

Sometimes, at 2:00 when the bar closed, Gary would join the slobs and put down a few and lurch home, like them. He'd sway left and right down the sidewalk to his nearby apartment and fall onto the couch, the rough fabric raw on his face. Those nights, especially if he'd had more than a few, Gary would wake up in two or three hours and stare at his blank apartment and wonder where the hell he was, and why.

Other times, Gary couldn't stand to look at the customers or the bar one moment more. Then as soon as 2:00 o'clock hit, he'd grab his tips out of the oversized brandy snifter, and bolt outside, shoving the bills into his jacket pocket, jamming his fists in, not even noticing until he was far away. Gradually he'd become aware of his fingers gnarled in his pocket clutching the money and he'd feel so bad, like a whore. He had used his body — used these fingers — for someone else's pleasure, not his own, for this filthy pay.

That's when he'd walk for hours, getting as far as he could from the bar and apartment. He'd walk through the neighborhoods where the nice citizens lived, cozy in their beds, asleep with the kids and dog tucked in. Gary got what he needed for a while — that fix that came from being near something so clean and pure that his own life could be seen in balance for once. If he could have walked into space just then, looking down at Earth from the night stars, he wouldn't have found it any stranger than being near these houses.

Exhausted from walking, he'd return to his apartment, wrecked, and gratefully pass out asleep, not having to think about the slobs, or houses with kids and dogs tucked in.

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Gary woke up after noon. A cold shower shook off the leftover taint of the night before, and he was ready to start again. He grabbed a cafeteria breakfast at the music college near his apartment. He hadn't broken the habit since he had been a piano student there,

sixteen years ago. It was past lunch, but the lady in the hair net knew him pretty well and cooked him some scrambled eggs. The food was greasy, which was okay with him, and the college girls looked so fine. But so young. They stopped paying any attention to him years ago, but he figured there was no charge for looking. He preferred the more experienced waitresses from the bar anyway. Occasionally he'd be lucky enough to find a young, but experienced, college girl waitressing at the bar. That was pure heaven. But if she saw him at the cafeteria, she'd pretend to not know him. That was part of the price he paid for her experience, and he had come to expect it.

He finished the eggs and put the dirty dishes and tray on the conveyer belt into the kitchen. Then he got another cup of hot coffee to go, and walked out of the cafeteria toward the music library. He tasted the coffee, winced at its bitterness, and drank some more.

Gary's routine hadn't changed in years. He always spent his afternoons in the music library doing research for his job. He listened to the latest pop music and Broadway recordings to find songs to play. He didn't need the sheet music; his ear picked up anything he needed from the recordings.

An hour later Gary had a handful of notes scribbled on little slips of paper he'd taken from the reference desk.

He stretched and looked up, and saw a librarian he didn't recognize. Right away he liked looking at her. Not too old, he thought, not too young. Not a student. Just right. She was standing behind the music counter, working, and he walked over to her. Not too short or tall, either, he thought.

"Hi," he said, giving her one of his better smiles.

"May I help you?" she said, friendly enough. *All right*, Gary thought, *good enough to start*.

"I just noticed that I don't know you. I'm here all the time, but I haven't seen you before." He looked at her breasts, judging.

She looked at his face, judging.

He looked up. "Oh. Uh, my name is Gary."

"I know," she said.

"What...?"

“I have your card,” she said. She pointed at it with her pencil, in the box where the librarians kept the I.D.s as collateral in case somebody tried to steal the ancient headphones, greasy from the unwashed heads of hundreds of undergraduates.

“Oh. So, do you have a name too? I don’t have your I.D.”

She laughed, “Yes, I have a name.”

Nice laugh, Gary thought. “Could I have it? Your name, I mean.”

“What would you do with it, if I gave it to you?”

“I’d use it.”

“How?”

“Let’s see. Suppose your name was... Cassandra. I’d say, Good afternoon, Cassandra. Isn’t it a lovely day, Cassandra? Have you come across any new music, Cassandra?”

“What kind of music?”

“Oh, just about any kind of popular music if it’s well known. Sometimes I’ll need an entire score for a Broadway show that’s on tour, here in town. The cast parties turn up at the bar a lot.”

“You’re a musician at a bar?”

“Yeah, I play at a piano bar. Want to come have a drink with me, Cassandra?”

“While you’re working? At your bar?”

“No, at a different time, at a different bar.”

“What’s wrong with *your* bar?”

“Nothing, I suppose. I just don’t want to see the slobs.”

“I see.”

“Now Cassandra, don’t jump to conclusions. I can be nice.”

“*Can* be? You’re not always nice?”

“Right.”

“Are you nice at your bar?”

“Nice enough. Sure.”

“Do you have to be at a bar to be nice?”

“Look. If you don’t want to go out with me, just say so.”

“I don’t want to go out with you. Yet. But why don’t you try being nice right here for a while? Then I’ll decide if I want you to be

nice somewhere else. Eventually I might even decide that I want you to be nice to *me*.”

“Fine. Have it your way.” He thought, Christ, what is it with this one? She must have a stick...

“I’ll help you,” she said, “I’ll be nice first.” A pause. “Let me get you some music that you might use.”

Gary watched her as she went into the stacks of recordings, pulling collections for him. She moved quickly and deliberately, knowing what she was looking for, and came back with several selections.

Gary listened to them and he was impressed. The songs were perfect, exactly the kind of music he needed. Her taste was excellent.

A couple of hours later Gary looked up and searched for her, but she wasn’t around. She must have left while he was absorbed in the music. Then he noticed the time was late and got ready to go. He took the recordings and headphones back to the music desk and retrieved his I.D. from a bored student.

“What happened to Cassandra,” Gary asked, “Will she be back?”

“Huh? Who?”

“Never mind,” Gary said.

...

“Bernadette?”

“No.”

“Damita?”

“No.”

“Jacqueline?”

“No.”

“Susan?”

“No.”

“Jacqueline Susann?”

“No!”

“Rumplestiltskin?”

“Will you stop? Here, Gary, take these.” She handed him newspaper clippings she had photocopied. They were stories about the songs she had been giving him: the songs’ background, where the composers were when they wrote them, stories that famous singers told about the songs...

“Hey, this is great,” Gary said. “I can use it at the bar. The customers love to hear this stuff.”

“That *is* the idea. Look at these. They aren’t as well known, but they’re gems and I like them particularly.”

“You’re terrific to me.”

“I know.”

“Wilhelmina?”

“No.”

“Gertrude?”

“Closer...”

“Hey, really?”

“No.”

• • •

Gary took it all back to the bar. He told the customers the stories Cassandra — he thought of her as ‘Cassandra’ — had given him. Gary combined the famous tunes with the lesser known, and built entire sets around themes. How this songwriter heard this other composer’s tune, and it inspired him to write this one, which inspired this singer to record it. “Funny story about that recording...”

Between sets, Manny, the bartender, said, “Pretty nice, Gary. This new *schtick* you’re doin’? The customers are slurpin’ it up.”

“Thanks. The waitresses are hanging around me more, too.”

“And the boss-man is *kvelling* over it.”

“Really? I can’t ever tell when he’s happy about anything.”

“Oy, didn’t you notice, he only screamed at me twice tonight?”

Gary laughed. “No, I hadn’t noticed.”

“Well, keep it up *boy-chik*. Looks good on you. Nice for a change.”

“What is *that* supposed to mean?”

Manny cocked his head, stuck his tongue into his cheek, and looked hard at Gary. “C’mon, *boy-chik*. You know.”

Yeah, I know, *he thought*. Gary didn’t kid himself. He was a good piano player, but not terrific. He sang OK, but same thing: not terrific. He’s on the downward slide toward forty and he may be at the height of his career, playing in a bar near his old school. Not great, not lousy. Somewhere in between.

“Yeah, I get it,” Gary said.

But this material that Cassandra fed him was a sweet tonic. The customers laughed a little louder, sang a little better, ordered the expensive drinks, and more of them. And they left bigger tips. For him and for Manny.

But it’s just more of the same, Gary thought. *When 2:00 a.m. comes it’s still just us, the slobs and me.*

• • •

Gary said, “When will you go out with me?”

“Later. Sometime later,” she answered.

Gary wondered what *that* meant, but didn’t question her. After three months, he asked again, “What about now? It’s *later*.”

“Not yet,” she said. She looked wistful... like she was remembering something nostalgic, sad... painful?

He thought for a moment and said, “Is there another guy? Are you waiting for him to die? Or divorce? What?”

“No,” she said, “there is no one else.” He started to say, *So what’s the problem*, but she interrupted, “Look, I have this... premonition, a feeling you are missing... something... I don’t know what... but I can’t... Please, don’t ask me again until you’ve found it, whatever it is.”

Gary asked, “What *are* you talking about?”

“I don’t know. Suddenly I can’t find the words... I can’t tell you what it is. And you wouldn’t believe me if I *did* know and told

you. But *you* will know when it comes. You'll know. I promise.”
She dropped her head down, and stared at her hands on her lap.

“Fine then,” he said and glared at her for a few seconds, yet not wanting to turn away. Suddenly she looked up at his stare. Her eyes were shining. Loving him. He inhaled slowly. The heat of his anger dropped into his heart. “OK,” Gary said quietly.

She sat back and exhaled, her energy expended.

Gary looked at her a long time, then said, “Mary?”

She smiled sweetly but shook her head back and forth, *No*.

• • •

Gary took his consolation with the waitresses. But when they were finished, he needed to roll out of bed and walk the citizens' neighborhoods even more.

• • •

One evening at the bar, he was playing *Sentimental Journey*. When he got to the end Manny said, “Now, that's nice. What's that called?”

Gary looked at him strangely. “*Sentimental Journey*. Don't you know it?”

“Never heard of it.”

“Doris Day sang it,” Gary said, “Ever hear of *her*?”

Manny said, “Sure. Her, I've heard of. A nice *shikse*. But this *Sentimental* thing... no. Does it have words?”

Gary laughed, “Doris Day would have a hard time singing it without ‘em. Listen.” And Gary started to play and sing:

*Gonna take a Sentimental Journey
Gonna set my heart at ease
Gonna make a Sentimental Journey
To renew old memories*

When he finished, the customers around the piano put down their drinks and clapped. Manny and the waitresses did too.

“What was that song?” a lady on her third martini said.

Gary looked at her. Is she drunk? “*Sentimental Journey*,” Gary said. “Doris Day?”

“Hmm,” the lady said, gesturing her empty martini glass at Manny. “Didn’t Doris Day sing something else?”

“Yeah. *Que Sera Sera*,” Gary said.

“I don’t talk Spanish,” she said.

“That’s the name of the song,” Gary said.

“What is?” a waitress said.

“Hey, honey. Get me another one of these,” the lady said.

“Sure,” the waitress said. “Gary, what was that song again?”

“*Que Sera Sera*.”

“How’s that one go?” the waitress said.

Gary said, “You’ve got to be kidding. Didn’t you ever watch TV, or movies?”

“Yeah, so?”

“Doris Day sang it in Hitchcock’s *The Man Who Knew Too Much*. Then she used it for the theme song of her TV show.”

The lady leaned back and said, “I remember that. That was when she threw her hat in the air.”

The waitress said, “No, that was Mary Martin.”

“Mary Tyler Moore,” Gary said.

“Oh, yeah. Right,” the waitress said.

“So are you gonna play that *Sarah* song? Are you gonna get me my drink?” the lady said.

“OK,” the waitress said.

“OK,” Gary said. “Like this:”

Que Sera, Sera
Whatever will be, will be
The future’s not ours to see
Que Sera, Sera
What will be, will be

“Never heard of it. Nice though.”
Manny said, “Real catchy. You should record it.”
“I should *what?*” Gary said, incredulous.
“And that other song, the Sentimental one.”
“I... I’d have to get the rights...”
Manny said, “So *nu?*”
The lady said, “So?”
Gary said, “So.”

• • •

Early the next morning, Gary went to the library to look up the songs’ publishers. He wanted to write to them, to find out what the copyrights would cost to record the songs. *Hell*, he thought, *I might sell a few recordings at the bar, at least*. But he couldn’t find the songs listed anywhere. He looked up Doris Day and found the reference to her “Greatest Hits” recordings. But the recordings didn’t mention *Que Sera Sera* or *Sentimental Journey*.

That’s stupid, Gary thought, two of her best songs, and neither is in any of her Hits collections?

Gary went looking for Cassandra to help him, but she wasn’t there. When he asked about her, when she would be at work again, no one knew whom he was talking about. “There certainly is no Cassandra working here.”

“I *know* that,” Gary said, exasperated.

He wandered outside, to think. Soon he found himself in the cafeteria. The hair net lady made him some eggs, and Gary chewed them, not tasting them. “Christ, I’m going nuts,” he said aloud. The co-eds giggled at him. He jumped up and ran back to the library. He searched again, more carefully.

But it wasn’t just Doris Day’s songs. It was all of the great songs: *When Sunny Gets Blue*, *Misty*, *Satin Doll*... all the standards were missing. Every song that he had ever played in the bar was missing. Nothing on the shelves, and nothing in the catalog. The

librarians were equally clueless. Nobody had ever heard of them. The songs simply didn't exist.

Moon River, Autumn Leaves, Birdland, Twist and Shout, Johnny B. Goode, On Broadway, Yesterday, Take the 'A' Train, Just the Way You Look Tonight, Danny Boy. They had all vanished. *American Pie, Bridge Over Troubled Water, Peace Train, Impossible Dream, Edelweiss, Old Man River, Proud Mary, Fire and Rain, Send In the Clowns, Luck Be A Lady Tonight, Anticipation, As Time Goes By, Tennessee Waltz, Close to You.* "Christ," he whispered, "The list is endless." *Put on a Happy Face, You Are My Sunshine, Stardust, Both Sides Now, The Man I Love, The Lady is a Tramp, When I'm Sixty-Four, Over There, Some Enchanted Evening, You've Got A Friend, 1999, Silent Night.*

He was the only one who knew the truly great songs. The other composers and songwriters were still there, in the library's catalogs, but only their near-great tunes were listed. Their best were not. He thought, *this is too good to be true...*

PART TWO

Gary moved the heavy drapery aside and squinted at the afternoon sunlight. The view of Central Park from his penthouse was clear, another fine day. He wanted no part of it and let the drapes fall. He turned back to the living room and took a long drag on his cigarette, then sipped a bourbon to wash down the smoke. He swirled the ice in his glass and watched as Zoë slunk out of their bedroom, tying the belt of her elegant silk robe. The lavender flamingos hand-stitched on the back of the robe peeked their heads across her left shoulder, eyeing him.

She said, "Breakfast?"

Gary nodded once, a short jerk of his head.

"I'll inform Steve that we're ready now," and she turned toward the kitchen. "Eggs benedict?"

Another nod.

"I don't understand the bloody fascination," Zoë sighed as she slipped through the kitchen door.

"It's not the benedict so much," Gary muttered to himself, "Just as long as they're not scrambled." Zoë returned and Gary crushed the butt of his cigarette into a spotless ivory ashtray. Steve kept it clean, and Gary enjoyed defiling it. "Light me another." Zoë lit the cigarette and brought it to him. She put her hand on his crotch and purred.

"Stop it." He moved away and poured a fresh drink. "Want one?" he asked.

"No, you know it hurts my voice. You remember I'm opening at Feinstein's next weekend, don't you, Gary?"

"Sure. You'll want me stage-side, of course?"

"Of course," she said, "You're going to be there, aren't you?"

He thought for a moment, and sipped his drink. "It helps your career, doesn't it, when I'm seen there?"

"I want you there because I love you," Zoë said.

"It serves your need."

"I must admit, your songs *are* divine. Without them, I don't believe anyone would bother to come to hear me sing."

"They wouldn't."

"You are a wicked bastard," Zoë growled, "But I love you anyway."

"You love my songs."

The kitchen door swung open and Steve strode in to set the table. He crisply laid the plates, silver, china coffee cups, and crystal. He poured two glasses orange juice from a carafe and disappeared into the kitchen.

Zoë said, "Joe called again. The execs at Megga want to know if you'll have the songs ready for the recording sessions in July."

“They’ll be done. I’ve already pick— written — them, in my head. I just need to copy them out.”

“Oh? What will the lead song be?”

“*Unforgettable.*” And thought, *It’s my goddam theme song.*

Aloud he said, “Here, listen.” Gary sat at his white baby grand piano. He balanced his drink on the music shelf and dangled his cigarette in the side of his mouth as he played and sang:

*Unforgettable, that’s what you are
Unforgettable, though near or far
Like a song of love that clings to me
How the thought of you does things...*

Steve abruptly reappeared with breakfast and placed it on the table with a flourish. Gary stopped mid-phrase and picked up his drink. He sat at the table and began wolfing down the eggs benedict. Steve glanced at Zoë and retreated into the kitchen. She walked to the table, took a piece of buttered toast, and stood nibbling it. Gary surveyed her, up and down, and said between bites, “Are you going to the gym today?”

“Yes. Why?”

“You could lose a couple of pounds before the opening.”

“The dresses have already been fitted. I look fine.”

“Not to me. I want you thinner. Did you call back — what’s his name? Doc McVeigh?”

“God damn you! My breasts are big *enough!*”

“Look,” Gary said, pushing the empty plate away, “We’ve had fun, Zoë, but I’m bored and there are plenty of other singers who want my songs. Megga has been talking to me about Jenna Aurillo...”

Zoë laughed. “That teenage tart? Do you really think she’ll do for your songs what I have?”

“These songs are impregnable. Or should be. But look how you butchered *I Feel Pretty*. It was embarrassing. You’re too damn old. Jenna is better for this younger stuff.”

“I’m only twenty-five.”

Gary stood up, and refreshed his drink. From the bar he said, "And you're slowing down in bed."

"Ah, and you believe Jenna will be more exuberant?"

"I know it already."

"What!? You've slept with her!"

"Zoë. Come on. What did you think I'd be doing while you rehearsed for Feinstein's? Waiting at home? Patiently writing love songs for you, pending your return? Really."

Zoë turned pale. She stood holding the half-eaten toast, staring at Gary. Then she straightened, walked over to Gary, smeared the buttered toast on his cheek, and dropped it into his drink.

"Steve!" she yelled. Instantly, Steve banged open the kitchen door. "We're leaving," she said, "Go pack."

Gary said, "Well, well. And I thought you were gay, Steve."

• • •

"OK, Jenna. That was terrific. Really sweet." In the sound booth Gary turned to Suzie, the recording engineer. "Did you get that clean enough?"

Suzie turned off the intercom to the studio and said to Gary alone, "Clean enough for *her*."

Gary said, "Watch it. She'll ruin you if she wants." He flipped on the intercom and said to Jenna, "We're good in here. That take is the one for the disk. Let's pack it up for today."

Gary lifted his dark glasses and rubbed his eyes. His head was pounding. He and Jenna had been drinking past three o'clock the night before. Then she kept him up until five, in bed, the cocaine holding him awake and hot until even she passed out.

But as awful as he felt now, he was dreading tomorrow more. Tomorrow, Gary wanted to record the Gershwin medley he had 'written'. That is, Gershwin songs that Gershwin apparently forgot to write himself. Gary had prepared the medley for these Megga sessions, intending Zoë to record them.

But Zoë was gone and Jenna was too young to deliver the sultriness and nostalgia he wanted. Gary had been trying to get her to understand the sophistication, but it went past her. He even had her listen to Ella's recordings of Gershwin's other songs, the ones that Gershwin had remembered to write, but Jenna couldn't get the panache.

Suzie was finished labeling and sorting the day's recordings. "Do you want anything else from me today?" she asked. "Or tonight?"

Just then, Jenna came into the booth. She saw the glance that passed between Gary and Suzie and Gary's twisted grin. She knew *that* look.

"No," Gary said, "That's all. See you tomorrow."

"Nice session, Jenna," Suzie said, and waving as she left, "Tomorrow..."

The door slowly fell closed and Jenna pointedly wiggled her bottom onto Suzie's recording panel.

"Jenna, forget about her," Gary said, "She's no threat." He saw her relax a bit and stretch her hands behind her head. She curved her back and pushed out her perfect breasts, and Gary noted she made sure her tank top lifted up enough to expose her delightful belly button — fitted with the navel ring that he had bought for her — and the top of her red satin panties. Gary closed his eyes, pretending to rub them again.

"Listen. I've been thinking about the last verse on *Our Love...* when you sing, *Rockies may crumble, Gibraltar may tumble*, you should sing it with a decrescendo. You know, wistful, sort of like the Rockies and Gibraltar were really falling down."

Jenna tipped her head to the left, then right, then back. "Sure Gary, whatever you say. Do you want to go to Maxie's party tonight? Their starting about 10:30, when the *Cockroach* concert lets out. The band is going to show up."

Gary looked at her. "I need you fresh for tomorrow's session."

"I'll be here."

"Fresh, I said."

“Well, I’m going to the party anyway. Jesus, I hate New York. Nobody knows how to party here. When can we go back to L.A.? I miss the beach.”

“Jenna, we can’t go back until we’re out of the studio. We can’t get out of the studio until you sing my songs the way I want. And you aren’t going to sing my songs the way I want until you can come to the studio without your head full of air and coke.”

“Fuck you,” Jenna said. She stood and put her hands on her hips. “I was doing fine before I hooked up with you.”

“Your career was crashing. You had one hit and the rest was crap. I saved your measly career with my songs. Without them, you’d be singing to pimply boys at a high school gym in Topeka. Or singing backup to *Cockroach*. Same thing.”

Jenna dropped her stance and strutted over to Gary. “All right. Fine.” She put her hands gently on his shoulders and sat on his lap, her legs wrapped around his waist. “You know I’ll give you whatever you want. Your songs are cool, and I *do* like hanging with you. Even in New York.”

“OK,” Gary said, “But look, go to the party without me. Be back at my place in time to get a decent night’s sleep. We start tomorrow at nine.”

“Eleven.”

“Nine.”

“Ten.”

“*Nine*.”

“God damn you! Ten!”

“Nine-thirty.”

“Shit, Gary, shit. OK, nine-thirty.”

Gary smirked.

Jenna jumped up and jabbed her finger in his face, “But I’m going to be late, you prick!”

• • •

That evening in his penthouse, Gary searched for a clean glass, gave up, and used the glass he had left on the bar that morning. He stood on the balcony and drank four or five bourbons over ice, until the ice ran out. Then he drank two or three more, warm without ice.

Fucking Steve, he thought, *there hasn't been enough ice or clean anything since he took off with Zoë.*

He looked around for a cigarette, but couldn't find any. He ransacked the bar, the kitchen, and the bedroom. Nothing. *Fucking Steve.*

Gary left the apartment to buy some cigarettes. It was a hot July night in the city, but he wore his *Yankees* jacket. He liked to have a place to put his hands. Gary slipped on his sunglasses so he would be less recognizable to his fans and wouldn't be hassled.

He walked to the newsstand on the corner. The place was crammed with cameras, toasters, doughnuts, coffee, hot-dogs on a rolling grill inside a see-through box, fax machines, cereal, toking pipes, roach clips, rolling paper, and a lottery ticket machine.

"Cigarettes," he said, "*Camels*... unfiltered." The kid behind the counter looked about thirteen. Maybe he was. Gary stared at the boy for a moment too long, and the kid moved his hand to his waist. A gun's butt stuck out of his belt. "Better make it a carton," Gary said, "and a lighter."

Outside, Gary messily ripped open the carton and pulled out a pack. He struggled with the plastic wrapping but finally got it off. He walked up and down the sidewalk and finally found a trash can, then threw out the plastic and bits of cardboard carton. *I'm not a total slob yet*, Gary thought. He lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply. Too deep, and started coughing and hacking from the smoke. He caught his breath and wished he had some bourbon. And ice.

He looked around, deciding what to do. He looked at his watch, but it wasn't there. *Shit. Left it at home.* He finished his cigarette and tossed it into the gutter. Then without thinking, he hailed a taxi. Instantly, a cab on the other side of the six-lane street, going in the opposite direction, screeched a U-turn and stopped inches away from

Gary's knees. Gary got in, leaned back in the seat, and closed his eyes.

"Mister! Hey, Mister! Where, Mister?" *What?* Gary looked up. It was the cab driver, asking a normal question. "Where, Mister?"

Shit, I don't care! "Go anywhere for now," Gary said, "Go down Broadway, not too fast."

"OK, Mister!" The driver took off with a jerk. Gary reached into the cigarette carton and pulled out the opened pack, and took out a cigarette. "Mister, don't smoke!" the driver said, pantomiming.

Right, Gary thought, Fucking New York, of all places, won't let you smoke in a cab. He put the pack into his jacket pocket and laid the carton across his lap. They passed the theaters around 42nd Street and Gary looked at the marquees. Half a dozen shows had "his" songs in them. He was paid a bundle to doctor ailing musical scores, inserting just the right hit into just the right scene to save the show.

What would *Annie* be without his *Tomorrow*? Or, *The Producers* without his *Springtime for Hitler*? Or, *Cats* without his *Memories*?

Memories. Christ, how did this all begin, he thought. *One day I'm playing piano in a bar and the next thing I know, I'm screwing starlets using somebody else's songs as collateral.* "Go to Maxie's," Gary called out to the cab driver.

"Maxim's, Mister? Madison Avenue!"

"Maxie's! Maxie's!"

"Maxim's, Mister. OK!"

Oh, hell! I can't go to Maxim's in a Yankee jacket. Who's singing there tonight? Is Betty Buckley doing another stint? I love the way she caresses my songs. MY songs?! Shit!

Gary yelled, "Stop! Just take me to the East Village... 5th Avenue and West 11th."

"5th and 11th, Mister? East Greenwich Village, Mister? Mister?"

"Yes! East Greenwich Village! 5th and 11th. West 11th!"

"Mister? 5th Avenue West 11th East Greenwich Village?"

"Yes! Yes! Yes! Yes!"

“Mister, OK, Mister.” The cab lurched suddenly when the driver turned a corner and headed in the opposite direction. Gary was knocked nearly off of his seat. The cigarette carton fell to the floor and his glasses slipped off. Gary hurriedly tried to get his glasses back on. Too late. The driver looked at him in the rear view mirror.

“Hey, Mister! You Gary Markles, Mister? I saw on TV! Thirty-five Grammys! Twelve Tony Awards! Fifteen Oscars! One hundred five People’s Choices! Lifetime MTV award! That you, Mister Gary Markles?”

Terrific. A fan. “No. You’ve made a mistake.”

The driver said, “Hey, make me a star! Listen to your song...” He sang as Gary sunk lower into the seat, trying to avoid the driver’s eyes in the rear view mirror:

*Volare, oh oh!
Cantare, oh oh oh oh!
Nel blu, dipinto di blu!
Felice di stare lassu!*

Gary waited for the driver to slow down a little so he could open the door and roll out of the cab without killing himself.

*E volavo, volavo felice piu in alto del sole ed ancora piu su!
Mente il mondo pian piano spariva lontano laggiu!*

The driver closed his eyes with the pleasure of his singing. He was coming up to the big finish. Cars were swerving to avoid Gary’s cab as it hurtled through a red light, and Gary reached for the handle of the taxi door again. He was becoming less concerned about killing himself the more the singing went on.

*Nel blu, dipinto di blu.
Felice di stare lassu!*

It was over. The driver opened his eyes and yelled, “Oh, shit!”

Gary screamed, “What?!!”

The driver said, “Missed goddam turn.” Gary fell back into the seat, his heart pounding. “So what do you think?” the driver asked. “Pretty good, huh?”

“Amazing,” Gary answered truthfully. “I’ve never felt such excitement listening to *Volare* before.”

The driver beamed. “So, you’ll help me?”

“Oh, absolutely. I have your name here from your license. I’ll call you. Really.”

“Fantastico! Here.”

“What?”

“Here. We’re here. 5th and 11th. \$21.55,” the driver said, turned around, grinning.

“Oh,” Gary said, “Here’s \$30... keep the change. Please.”

• • •

The taxi sped off as Gary jumped out of the way. He was in front of Maxie’s condo. Gary had his sunglasses on, but the building’s doorman recognized him anyway. “Evening, Mr. Markles!”

“Evenin’. I’m going up to the party. In full swing?”

“You’ll be the first, sir.” Gary looked at his watch. *Shit. Left it at home.* “What time is it?”

“Nearly 10:00, sir.”

“Can I go up?”

“Yes sir. Whatever you want.”

I can do whatever I want, Gary thought. I wonder what I want?

PART THREE

“From WHYY in Philadelphia, I’m Terry Gross with ‘Fresh Air.’ On today’s ‘Fresh Air’ we talk with Gary Markles: songwriter, music producer, star-maker, and for the past two years, *singer*.”

“Gary, you’re undeniably the most famous songwriter in the world. Tell us a little about your creative process. I’m sure other songwriters would like to know what *you* do that makes you one of the most prolific and, I might add, most eclectic songwriters ever.”

Gary said, “Well, I can’t tell you that I feel much personal ownership of these songs. I can honestly say that it feels like they were created somewhere else, but I’m the first to hear them. Then, I just write them down, record them, whatever.”

“That’s an interesting sentiment, but I think you’re being too modest,” Terry said. “If it were effortless, couldn’t these songs have been written by anyone?”

“Yes, I wonder,” Gary said, “I have often asked myself these past seven years... why me?”

Terry asked, “Seven years ago you were a piano player in a bar. Correct?”

“Right.”

“Had you ever written songs before you started seven years ago?”

“No, I never did,” said Gary, “Of course, I studied harmony and so forth while I was in music school. But I never tried to write any songs of my own.”

Terry asked, “So why did you start seven years ago? This is the question, I think, I was leading to before. What sparked your creative process?”

“Well,” Gary said, then stopped. He cleared his throat, paused, then continued, “Seven years ago I was playing songs in the bar. I was playing other people’s songs — of course, since I hadn’t written any of my own yet. Then I started playing *Sentimental Journey* and doo-doot-doo-ing along with the melody and, to me, it was as if I had

played it a million times before. The bartender said, hey that's a nice tune... what's it called? I told him. He asked me to sing the words, so I did. Just like that I sang, *Gonna Take a Sentimental Journey*... and he flipped over it. The customers did too. That was the first moment I knew a song that nobody else did. It was strange. I could have sworn that it was a song I'd known for years and played many times before. I actually thought at first that they were all too drunk, or they had been on some other planet, or something, and had never heard of the song. But then I realized the song was familiar only to me."

"Wow."

Gary said, "All of my songs that you know are like that. I'm just remembering them, but yet, they are new *to you* somehow."

Then Gary felt something nostalgic, sad... painful? He thought of Zoë, Jenna, and the others, and how he and they fed off the songs, other people's genius. And he thought of Cassandra for the first time in seven years.

Cassandra. My nameless angel. Oh God, how you've pulled my life off-center!

Then he knew he had no right to be here, being interviewed like this, a pretender, stranger, foreigner... He felt sick, the worse kind of slob, receiving no reprieve from this adulation and no mercy for his crimes.

Terry saw his pained look and graciously said, "Let's take a break. When we return, I'd like to talk about your upcoming solo album, your fourth I think, *The Sound of Music / The Sound of Silence*..."

• • •

Gary sat at his piano holding a pencil in his teeth. He was playing a series of chords, trying them out in different ways. When he found a combination that sounded adequate to him, he stopped and wrote what he had played on the blank sheet of music manuscript

paper he had in front of him. He thought, not good enough yet, but getting better. A little.

The first song he wrote himself — really himself — was *Cassandra*. The recording sold some, but it was largely seen as a novelty item, the great Gary Markles' one and only flop. The next few songs did slightly better, but the critics smelled a burnout. They snickered at his 3-D life: drinking, drugs, and declining career.

Variety's gossip page read, "Perhaps Napoleon needs a Josephine after all. He's had the run from Aurillo to Zoë. Maybe Gary will go back to the A's now that, we hear, Jenna is splitsville with the lead singer of *Cockroach*. Perhaps she will rejoin Gary in his Elba, overlooking Central Park."

Gary didn't care. He made millions of dollars from the music he'd already plagiarized, and the royalty checks kept coming to him even if he never sold another note. But he couldn't take the money anymore. Instead, he started scholarships for songwriters at any music school he could find, funded by donating the copyrights of the songs he'd stolen. Let the royalty checks go directly to the schools, he thought, and leave me out of it.

When his money was used up or given away, Gary sold his penthouse and started playing piano in the New York lounges. He was still famous and made a nice living playing standards. But he no longer said he had written the songs. Anyway, nobody believed him when he said who the actual composers were, not even those composers themselves.

• • •

A couple of years later, probably because of his largess with the royalties, he figured, Gary received an offer to teach jazz piano and songwriting at his old college. He accepted, on the condition that he could also teach a course on the history of popular music. Gary wanted to try to set the record straight.

When he arrived back in town, a couple of months before the fall semester began, he went to his old piano bar and asked for a job.

They were thrilled to have *the* Gary Markles on their calendar, and opened a twice-a-week slot for him.

Manny was glad to have him back and they talked about their old times. The first set he played, Gary began with *Sentimental Journey*, of course. Manny smiled at him, and said, “Ah *boy-chik*, that’s always been my favorite. Ever since I heard Doris Day sing it with Les Brown’s orchestra. Les Brown wrote it, yes?”

Gary smiled, “Sort of. Bud Green wrote most of it, but Les Brown and Ben Homer worked on it too. It took *three* brilliant guys to write that *one* brilliant song. Don’t you forget it.”

The customers liked his playing, but didn’t care that he was *the* Gary Markles. It wasn’t important to them, and eventually they couldn’t even think of who Gary Markles was. Just the piano player at the bar, right?

Gary didn’t drink with the slobs any longer; he didn’t drink at all. He went home to a small, but nice, place he owned in the citizens’ neighborhood. And, he thought, I’ll cook my own damn eggs.

• • •

Gary avoided the music library for as long as he could. But eventually he had to prepare his curriculum for the fall. He walked across campus and pulled open the heavy library doors. Inside, he waited for the painfully slow elevator to take him up, and when the doors opened on the music floor he nearly let them close again to take him down, without getting out. At the last moment, he shoved his arm into the path of the closing doors and got himself through.

He walked to the listening area and looked around.

She wasn’t there.

Gary pulled out his I.D., handed it to the kid behind the desk, and received a pair of headphones. *Christ*, he thought, *I had these same headphones ten years ago...*

And then he saw her, sitting near the window, turned away from him. She was wearing headphones, listening to music. He watched the back of her hair for a long time. She didn’t move, not

nodding in time to the music, not tipping her head back to look at the ceiling. She just listened, intently.

One step at a time, he walked up behind her. Over her shoulder, he saw that she was holding liner notes, reading the lyrics. His lyrics. His music. *Cassandra*.

The music must have finished. Cassandra pulled the headphones down off her ears, resting them around her neck, then let her hands drop to her lap. She turned her head to look out the window, and he could see her face reflected in the glass. She was looking through the glass at a point far distant, outside. Then she saw his outline in the reflection, refocused her eyes, and recognized his face.

He came up directly behind her and put his hands softly on her shoulders, the back of her head against him. After a moment, she laid her head softly against his arm.

--- End ---

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