

## Snowbound

Eric struggled up the middle of Park Avenue against a torrent of wind and snow. The storm had hit the city just after midday, and now in the late afternoon New York had been shut down. Eric was trying to escape into a subway entrance somewhere ahead. But although he traveled this route six days a week from the Maison Louise Restaurant, where he was a busboy, he had no idea where he was. Wind-driven snow had obscured everything, creating a shifting world without landmarks. Eric, waist deep in snow, leaned forward into that buffeting wind; he raised his eyes, squinting into the teeth of the storm. All he saw was a swirling white mass framed by half-obscured brick buildings whose upper reaches disappeared from sight.

He heard a piercing whistle. He turned in the direction of the sound but in doing so lost his precarious equilibrium, and a sudden gust of wind toppled him backward into the path he had cleared.

He sank into a soft, sheltered place free from all tumult. He did not struggle any longer. He lay there, panting, eyes closed, finally giving in to the numbness of exhaustion and cold. Then came another whistle, like two musical notes, louder, closer. They pierced through Eric's dulled senses as if he were a tuning fork that had been struck. He opened his eyes to see the snow filling his grave, and he struggled again, upward.

A dark shape appeared above him, a hand reached down, and he felt himself rising, propelled by a great force. Once again on his feet, with an arm encircling his waist, he was half-dragged, half-carried, until the outline of a building emerged ahead. Then he was under a canopy, in a warm lobby, and finally guided over black and white tiles to an upholstered bench, upon which he sank.

He sat there with his head hanging down, a bedraggled, dripping orphan of the storm. After a few moments a man's voice spoke from above.

"I don't know where you thought you were headed on this glorious day, but your journey is now over."

Eric looked up. His gaze passed over snow-laden black shoes, wet blue trousers, and then to a jacket of heavy blue material buttoned all the way to a high collar; a whistle was hanging from a braided cord and there were epaulets on the broad shoulders. Eric realized that it was a doorman standing before him and that he was sitting in the lobby of one of those majestic old apartment buildings that line Park Avenue. At that moment the doorman removed his visored cap, shook off the melting snow, and set it down on the end of the bench; his short-cropped hair was gray. He had a bulky face and blue eyes, which looked down upon the boy with a friendly directness.

"Thank you," said Eric, and he spoke with solemnity. The doorman smiled and extended his hand — the same huge hand that had reached for him in the snow — and grasped Eric's.

"Think nothing of it, my friend. I was looking out the window — it was all a jumble of white — when this dark shape appeared. For only an instant. Quite a surprise, to see someone out in this blizzard. Which makes me curious" — and here the doorman sat beside the boy — "about how you happened to be on the streets this afternoon."

That a lie had gotten him into his predicament Eric would not admit; not even though the doorman, with his head tilted in ponderous attentiveness, made Eric think vaguely of a priest listening to confession. The lie, created by certain offhand remarks Eric had made to his fellow busboys, was that after he left the restaurant he went to visit a girl who had an apartment some blocks uptown. So on this day, when they had all tunneled their way out of the restaurant to find a storm raging, he had, as was usual with him, not gone with the others down the nearby subway entrance on Lexington Avenue. With a wave, he had struck off to his imaginary lover.

Instead of revealing any of this, Eric's account stayed on the surface of things, where nothing about his feelings could be disclosed. He first told about the Maison Louise's isolation — four steps down from street level and with the front window covered by heavy drapes — and how the owner, disgruntled at an empty restaurant, had set everyone to various tasks; Eric had used leather cleaner on the booths. They were innocent of what was happening outside, for when they had come to work at ten it had not been snowing that heavily and the weather forecast had not predicted a blizzard. So they worked on for hours, until finally one of the waiters peeked through the drapes and saw nothing but white. Eric told about their tunneling out of the restaurant and about his struggle with the storm, at first an exhilarating one, until exhaustion and the wind tunnel of Park Avenue had overcome him.

At the end of his story Eric and the doorman both turned to look out the windows. It was almost five o'clock and the snow had taken on the dark pallor of night. They could see it blowing hard, and it was now piled four feet against the door they had recently entered through. Neither spoke of what might have happened if the doorman had not caught the fleeting glimpse of a lone figure.

Eric did, however, remember something he had read once. Some place, in some culture, if a man saved another's life he was then responsible for that life. Eric glanced at the doorman, whose head was turned in profile at that moment. So this is what fate has given me as a benefactor, he thought: a doorman. Just then the doorman turned to Eric and looked directly into his eyes. Startled, and ashamed of what he had been thinking, Eric looked down at his wet shoes — ruined shoes, the toes beginning to curl upward.

"So, how do you feel about being a busboy?" the doorman asked abruptly.

Perhaps it was because he had so recently struggled from a snowy grave that each of the doorman's questions seemed to hold a significance. This one, too, demanded an answer that could reveal too much. Eric shifted warily on the bench, uncomfortable at having to hide another of the murky truths of his life. The truth was that he was not a busboy, not really. Into his mind for a moment came an image of his teacher, a memory of the slow smile enveloping that face when the last vibration of sound had faded, the one word offered to him in a hushed whisper: "Nice." It was a memory that told of what he really was. But he could no more reveal that than he could speak of the imaginary girl. Because the reality of his life was that he removed plates with the remains of meals from under the noses of people who never saw him. And that was all he did. He was merely a busboy, maybe someday a waiter; it would be presumptuous to claim that he was more than that. So, as he answered the doorman, not even his eyes gave any secrets away.

“Well, I guess nobody actually likes being a busboy. But my uncle got me the job there, and I’ve got to make something of it. I mean, I want to work my way up to waiter. It’s an expensive restaurant, and a waiter can make over \$30,000 a year with tips.”

“Really? All that?” the doorman said, and his eyebrows went up, either mockingly or in respect Eric could not tell. Then the doorman seemed to shake off some further thought on the subject and instead said, “Well, right now there’s more pressing matters to take care of. Like getting you out of those wet clothes. And you’re going to have to call home.”

Taking off his sodden wool overcoat was like further revealing the truth of his existence. Underneath it Eric was wearing his red busboy’s uniform; in the fluorescence of the lobby it was shiny with food stains, stains that were inconspicuous in the more romantic lighting of the Maison Louise. A bow tie was clipped to the wide lapel of his jacket.

Laying the overcoat on the bench, Eric dutifully made his way to where the doorman pointed, to the phone on a desk in the front corner of the lobby. He was going to call his uncle in Brooklyn, but when he held the receiver to his ear he heard only the murmur of empty space. The lines were down. Eric had the exhilarating sensation of having entered a world cut off entirely from the old. For moments he listened to the vacant hum. When he finally put the receiver softly in its cradle and turned back to the lobby, he saw the doorman standing in front of an elevator, looking up at the dial above it that indicated the floor it was on. As Eric walked toward him the elevator door opened and a woman stepped out.

To Eric she appeared to be in her early fifties, dark hair streaked with gray, though thick. She was tall and slender in a plaid skirt and a blue blouse. As Eric approached she stopped talking to the doorman and turned to him. For just an instant it seemed that her eyes widened, such as when you see, to your surprise, someone you recognize. Then it passed and she smiled; a pleasant face, but with a look about those dark eyes of something soft, bruised, a bit moist. It wasn’t like any makeup Eric had seen before.

“I was looking out the window and I actually saw you, young man, floundering in the snow. And I watched you, John, rescue him. I tried to call you, but the phones aren’t working. So I got dressed and came down. Are you both all right?”

When the doorman had introduced Eric and had assured her — Mrs. Resweber was her name — that they were fine, she continued on in a headlong way. “Oh, but you’re not fine, not really. Eric, your clothing is soaked through. You can’t stay in those wet clothes. And you too, John. Look at those wet pants. You’ll both be sick tomorrow. As I was getting dressed to come down the obvious occurs to me. You, neither one of you, can get to your home tonight. Where will you stay? We’re literally snowbound. An emergency, so what can I do to help? I have a three bedroom apartment. Surely you’ll stay with me?”

The doorman was politely declining her invitation, saying that there were folding cots in the basement, when she shook her head. He paused and she repeated his words with a gentle reproach in her voice — “Folding cots? Basement?” He gazed back at her. When he spoke again it was in a softer tone.

“If you’re sure it’s not too much trouble? Of course we’d like to stay with you.”

So moments later Eric was in the elevator with Mrs. Resweber, the doorman to follow after he had finished putting things in order. She chatted in a vigorous effort to make Eric feel

at ease, but she wasn't succeeding. He was too aware of the odor of wet wool emanating from the overcoat he held over an arm. His soaked socks had sunk to the top of his curled clown's shoes, and his pants, too short for him, revealed his bare ankles. His wide-labeled busboy's jacket had never seemed to him more akin to the outfit worn by a performing monkey.

"You look to be just the size of my son, so there won't be any problem getting clothes to fit. You'll feel much better after a hot bath, Eric. Can you believe this storm? Who knows how long we'll be snowbound. I read a poem called that, when I was little. Anyway, it makes everything seem completely different. I took a nap this afternoon and then for the millionth time I looked out my bedroom window, and suddenly it was a new world down there. And then I saw a figure struggling along. It was you."

The elevator stopped at the eleventh floor and they emerged into a high-ceilinged corridor. It had beige wallpaper with a pattern of small yellow flowers. The heavy wooden doors of the apartments were widely spaced. What struck Eric most was how quiet it was. In his apartment house in Brooklyn the hall was a melange of cooking odors and noises — blaring music, crying babies, voices speaking and shouting in three languages. Here the carpet muffled their tread so that they moved soundlessly past doors that yielded no sound. When they came to her apartment Mrs. Resweber opened the unlocked door and Eric looked into an interior that seemed as still and frozen as a room in a seldom-visited part of a museum. There was a hallway with framed pastel drawings of birds and a table with a vase of flowers. Beyond the hall Eric could see into a section of the living room — a tan-colored chair, a table with a lamp, a wall of books. It was the stillness more than the richness that made Eric balk, to step back against her hand on his shoulder. He did not belong in there.

Mrs. Resweber moved past him and opened a door just beyond the entrance. She gestured into a small, tiled washroom. "Eric, you leave all your clothes in here, just drop them on the floor, while I get a bath started. I'll put a robe on the doorknob. Come on now, you can't stand all night in the hall in those wet clothes." She reached for him, took him by the hand, and pulled him gently inside.

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An hour later Eric looked down upon the clothes that were arranged on the bed. The bed which, he thought, he would be sleeping in that night. At home he slept on a narrow cot, a thin mattress on metal springs. This bed was luxuriously wide.

He removed the robe and stood naked in the bedroom. Though Mrs. Resweber called it her son's room, there were no signs of boyhood. The one framed photograph atop the chest of drawers showed a serious-faced young man. Obviously they had moved to this apartment when her son was grown, and he only came for occasional visits; that would account for why his clothes would be kept here. The room was warm and quiet — only the sigh of heat from the floor registers. Outside the snow still fell in the night, gently now, not blown by the wind. Earlier, while he had waited for Mrs. Resweber to prepare his bath, Eric had looked through the drapes and, in the evening darkness, had sensed rather than seen the ponderous mass of snow covering the streets far below. Across the Avenue the windows in the buildings glowed softly, each a safe haven.

The memory of his lying in the snow had already taken on a dreamlike aura, unreal. For not only had a change occurred in his circumstances, but ever since he had entered the apartment Eric had been expected to act in a way unlike how he normally behaved. When his parents had died eight years ago he had moved in with his uncle's family, and he had tried hard not to be an added burden. So it was unlike him to leave the pile of wet clothes for Mrs. Resweber to dispose of. They looked like a dark clot of poverty lying on the white tiled washroom floor. And moments later he had felt foolish standing in the hall, wearing only a robe — he had never in his life worn a robe — with his bare legs and feet exposed, waiting for this strange woman to come and lead him to his bath. After he had apologized for the third time she had turned to him and said, "You're no bother, Eric, believe me, and I don't want to hear 'I'm sorry' from you anymore. How many times in a life does something happen like this, where you can help? I'd much rather you just enjoy what I can do. Understand?"

He had begun to understand during the bath. The tub was long enough for him to fully stretch his legs. The porcelain and brass glowed in the brightly-lit room. He allowed himself the luxury of lying in the hot water for a long time, eyes half-closed. When he dried himself even the towel was a treat — bigger, thicker and softer than any he had ever felt. Then, donning the robe again, he stealthily opened the door and looked into the bedroom, where clothes had been laid out for him on the bed.

He slipped on the underwear, then a pair of blue pleated trousers. As she had predicted, they fit perfectly. The shirt felt strange to his hands, and he read the label, which had a man's name in script and the words "Sandwashed Silk." It was green — a rich green, he decided. The shoes were brown slip-ons, and even they were the right size. When he finished dressing he looked at himself in the mirror over the chest of drawers and saw someone vaguely familiar gazing back.

He made his way down a short hall and into the living room. He heard voices and smelled food. Open glass-paneled sliding doors connected the living room to the dining room. Seated at the big dining table, a drink in front of him, was the doorman. He was remarkably changed too. Gone was his uniform, replaced by a tweed sports jacket over a knit shirt. He looked up as Eric approached and smiled.

"So here he is! And much improved since I last saw him."

Mrs. Resweber appeared at the door of the kitchen. She wore an apron and carried a big wooden spoon; with her other hand she brushed a loose strand of hair back from her forehead. She smiled as she looked Eric over from head to toe.

"Everything does fit perfectly. I knew it would," she murmured. She continued to gaze at him.

"Can I help you with something?" Eric finally asked.

"I already tried that," the doorman said, pulling out a chair next to his. "I've been informed that Leslie has whipped together many a meal unaided. Here, sit down."

Eric was surprised to hear Mrs. Resweber referred to by her first name, but knew it was at her request. He also found her apron and spoon a bit unexpected, despite the doorman's words. It seemed they had all assumed different roles for this evening.

"What would you like to drink? Iced tea?" Mrs. Resweber asked.

Eric saw that the doorman was drinking what looked, to his expert busboy's eye, to be a scotch on the rocks.

"Tea would be fine."

The doorman seemed younger out of his uniform — or maybe it was that his face looked less formidable when not framed by the high-collared doorman's jacket. The blue eyes were still friendly, amused, direct.

"I have a locker and a shower in the basement," he explained. "When I emerge from this place I don't make my way home dressed as a doorman. Anyway, some evenings I stay in town, have dinner, see a Knicks game."

"I admire that," said Mrs. Resweber, who had arrived with Eric's drink. "I haven't gone out in the evening in years. Here I live in New York and don't take advantage of it."

She spoke for a few moments of things she had once enjoyed doing, the doorman listening attentively, nodding.

When she had gone back to the kitchen the doorman leaned toward Eric and lowered his voice. "Look, I should tell you some things so that you won't maybe stumble onto an uncomfortable topic. Mrs. Resweber's had a hard time of it. Her husband died about four years ago. And it was rough, one of those cancers that take forever. Then her son, he was grown so I only saw him when he visited, he was killed in an accident of some sort. Something happened on a work site. Anyway, since then she hardly ever leaves the apartment. I've been worried about her. It's as if she's only going through the motions of life. So it's good to see her involved tonight. I know she likes having you here."

At that moment Mrs. Resweber called out from the kitchen. "Food's almost ready. You guys can set the table. Place mats and silverware are in the top drawers." She meant the china server with ornate glass doors. "We'll need dinner and salad plates."

"Hey, you should be good at this," the doorman said to Eric as they got up, slapping the boy on the shoulder.

"And music," she called, in a ringing tone. "We need music. Record player to your right in the living room."

Music. Maybe it was the way she called for it that struck Eric so intimately, but suddenly the matter of music came alive in him. It wasn't the first time in the past two hours he had thought of it. Wasn't the whistle he heard as he lay in the snow like two notes of music? And in the lobby, when he had avoided mentioning that he was more than a busboy. But then his feelings had been encumbered by murky deceits, wet wool and regrets. Now, in this other world he had stumbled into, Mrs. Resweber's crystalline call for music seemed to him deeply meaningful. Maybe, rescued, he was somehow to be given music, too — if only to listen. But if he could just listen again with enthusiasm it would be no small gift. For the truth was that, when he had struggled up from his snowy grave those light years ago, one of the precious things he had wanted in his life was music.

Eric and the doorman completed setting the plates and cutlery around the center bowl of flowers. The doorman stepped back, surveying the table. "I'd say we've done an A-1 job." He then picked up his empty drink. "About that music. Why don't you do the honors." And he inclined his head toward the living room.

Next to the glass-paneled sliding doors was a shelf holding an old turntable and receiver, and under that a long row of ragged-edged albums extending along the wall. Eric knelt down and noticed that there was a thick layer of dust on the albums. Which meant that this music Mrs. Resweber had called for had been long untouched by her. Eric reached down and his fingers broke the dust as he tipped an album to reveal its cover.

What he found there were treasures. With growing excitement he pulled out album after album of jazz, the old jazz that worked with the classic ballads of Cole Porter, the Gershwins, Irving Berlin, Jerome Kern. Smiling out at him from the worn covers were pianists like Erroll Garner, George Shearing, Art Tatum, Oscar Peterson. He had been right to find Mrs. Resweber's words meaningful, for all this before him was *his* musical life. That this place he had come to should have such treasures for him in such abundance seemed just another of the evening's strange turns.

Eric knew that, to most people, the strange thing was that someone his age would be intimately familiar with the standards. It was because of his peculiar musical education that he had come to know them so well. Eric again thought vividly of his teacher — the second time today. "We're on the gold standard in this room," that man had often said.

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"This room" was the chorus room at Eric's high school. It was empty during the lunch hour, and one day, in the first week of his senior year, Eric went in there — where he didn't belong — to again sit at a piano. He already knew how to play. He was born with that ability, although it was not until he was nine years old that it was discovered. It was then that his father made friends with a new neighbor who taught music theory at City College. This man lived a few houses down — it was in a hilly residential section of Yonkers — and Eric went along when his father occasionally walked over in the evenings. What fascinated Eric was the man's big, shiny black piano and the movement of his hands on the keyboard when he played — something that Eric would shyly ask him to do whenever there was a lull in the men's conversation. It seemed to Eric that when he heard a melody and watched as it was played, he could remember exactly what keys were struck in what sequence to produce those sounds. One evening when the men left the room he went to the piano and proceeded to duplicate the song that he had just heard. The two men reappeared at the door, shoulder to shoulder, eyes wide and mouths open.

That was the beginning of his musical life. He took lessons three days a week from a lady with a French accent. She stressed a classical foundation. At age eleven he began to work his way through the complexities of the Goldberg Variations. Though he still ran around with friends, music, infinitely fascinating, had relegated every other interest to a minor role. Evenings he walked to his father's friend's house — the door was always open for him — and played whatever sheet music was on the stand. Many of those evenings his father and mother came to listen. Afterwards, in the summer darkness, the three of them strolled slowly back to their home, talking in low voices.

Then came the car accident that ended everything. There was not even anyone left to comfort him. The families gathered to discuss what to do with him; they let him know that his parents had been so irresponsible as to leave him penniless. His uncle grudgingly agreed

to take him in, despite the burden. Eric was thirteen, and everything changed. As for music, there were no more lessons; in fact, he never even mentioned that he could play. He seemed to have lost interest in it, as if music too had been silenced in the accident.

He went into a kind of dormancy. The past, and the feelings that thinking of it produced in him, came to exist only in dreams. So the years went by. At school he was one of those students that no one particularly notices. On some days he spoke less than a dozen words. His grades were C's or D's; he sat in classrooms uninvolved, often sleepy. Ever since he was fifteen he worked at a pizza joint from six o'clock to ten. When he got home from this job, he watched the little black and white TV by his cot; he was something of a TV addict, watching in a dark room, the volume turned low. Saturdays he worked all day, but Sundays he was off. He slept late, then restlessness drove him out of the apartment. Some days he walked miles until he reached the Brooklyn Bridge. He crossed to the middle of the span; he leaned against the railing, looking down into the water. He paced its length until the lights of Manhattan began to blink on; then he turned back for the long trip home. Thus he lived for three years, full of untouched feelings.

It wasn't until he was sixteen that he bought a stereo radio with a cassette player. He also bought two tapes that day, one of Erroll Garner doing classic show tunes and the other of Glenn Gould playing Bach. Both represented parts of his past; the type of music that Garner played was on the music stand in the house he had walked to in Yonkers, and the Bach he had played for his teacher. But he had moved far enough away from those memories so that the music triggered no painful feelings. He listened at night with a vague pleasure, intently, contemplatively; he felt something long asleep stir in him. So it was a kind of further reawakening when he sat down at the piano in the chorus room; it was the first time in three years that he had felt the familiar black and white keys under his hands. The piano was old and beat up, but it sounded good.

Each day he stuck around his locker. When the hall emptied he'd slip in the room and close the door. When he thought the teachers had cleared out, he played. Then one day he looked up to see one of the school's janitors standing at the door, a broom in his hand, looking at him. Eric hadn't heard the door open, didn't know how long he had been watched. But there the janitor was, a tall, thin old black man with a long, deeply creased face — Eric had noticed him in the halls a few times. Since he had been expecting all along to get run off eventually, Eric began to get up without a word. But the janitor shook his head. "No, go on," he said. He came in, closing the door behind him, and sat on one of the metal folding chairs, his long legs splayed out and his arms folded expectantly on his chest. He looked at Eric appraisingly, a slight smile on his lips. "Go on, play," he said softly, a coaxing tone entering his voice, and he motioned with his head toward Eric and the piano. So Eric did play; he had found sheet music for "Up a Lazy River" in the book of choral favorites, and he had been trying to jazz it up, like he had heard Erroll Garner do on the tape he had. But he felt intimidated by his audience, so he played it straight. When he finished the janitor sat there, looking at Eric. Finally, like making a pronouncement, he said that Eric didn't play all that bad. He nodded. "No, not bad at all. Only trouble is, you left something out of that song." He got up and motioned for Eric to let him take his place at the piano. When the janitor sat down



and raised his hands over the keys, Eric saw that his fingers were twisted out of shape and the knuckles and joints swollen. But despite some stumbling on the keys because of that, it was clear to Eric, after only a few chords, that this man was a piano player; there was an authority, confidence. His timing, Eric knew, was special. He played through “Up a Lazy River” with an easy flair, despite the stumbling, and when he was finished he said for Eric to sit next to him, that he’d teach him something about playing a piano. “You didn’t put no bounce in it, son. And this song is playful, it’s got to bounce. You want to know how to do that?”

That was the beginning. Without either one saying anything they began to meet every lunch hour. It soon was no secret. “This is my free time too. Nobody’s business if we spend it here.” So finally Eric had a teacher at that school who meant something to him, and for the first time he felt purposeful, even ambitious. The ambition was that he could play the piano professionally. It was like a door opening before him, presenting him with the possibility for the kind of life he’d like to live.

It turned out that his instruction would be of limited scope, because on the third day the janitor came in with a stack of well-worn sheet music. The music was all one type, the only kind, it turned out, that the janitor was interested in; the gold standard, he called it. Eric was already familiar with these songs — every jazz pianist had done his rendition of “But Not for Me” and “Imagination” and “I Can’t Get Started.” Eric was to be taught the classics of American popular music, which was fine with him.

But though Eric began with the best of intentions, there was something about that music, it turned out, that made him uneasy. The feeling was there from the beginning, and it had to do partly with how the janitor would get caught up in those songs. The second day they met the janitor returned to the subject of making music bounce and sparkle. He said that he’d play Eric a song that was like skipping stones on a pond, it had to be done, in his words, “so quick and frolicsome.” He told Eric to particularly watch what his left hand did. He started playing “I’ll Take Romance.” And as he played Eric saw the janitor’s eyes close and then he began to murmur hoarsely about a heart young and eager to fly, about rushing to love in the hush of the evening. Although Eric tried to concentrate on the mechanics of how it was being played, he couldn’t rid himself of the distracting thought that this was a song meant only for people young and beautiful. But here was this old black janitor, gray-haired, with beat up metal folding chairs around him and his broom leaning against the wall. Singing softly about romance; lost in it, his eyes closed.

Though Eric stayed distracted and even uneasy, he quickly regained his mechanical skills. He could watch what the janitor did and replicate it, and both were impressed. For the first few weeks, that is. Because as Eric became more assured in his technique, the praise he had been getting began to fade. It seemed to Eric that the janitor got more dissatisfied with him the better he played. Finally Eric first heard the janitor’s complaint, one which would be repeated over and over in the next weeks, becoming almost a refrain: “You’re just playing notes. You got no feeling the way you’re doing it.”

So the two had quickly found the issue over which they differed. It came to be a barrier. In response to the janitor’s disapproval, Eric kept cynical thoughts to himself. But he demonstrated with showy playing that he could “just play notes” far better than the janitor,

with his warped fingers, could. The janitor sat stony-faced. This stalemate ended one day when the janitor got up abruptly, his metal chair scraping across the sound of the piano, and left the room, muttering, “Just a wet behind the ears kid.” The next day he came into the chorus room only to gather up the sheet music and hand the stack to Eric. “Here, you take this home and read over them lyrics til you understand what the songs are saying. Maybe it’ll take ten years from now.” He stopped at the door and added, “But no use trying to play that music til you know what it’s about.”

Of course Eric already knew what the songs were about. By just half paying attention you would know that they were musical poems about love and loss, joy and despair. All feelings Eric had been avoiding for years. And now he was being asked — required — to put these feelings into his playing. But not being told exactly how to do that. Only told to read over the lyrics. For the next three days Eric played alone in the chorus room — none of the janitor’s cherished songs. But if that man had wanted to shake him up, he had succeeded. Eric had all along been silently rebuking his criticism, telling himself that if he was expected to get misty-eyed over the songs, then they’d just have to lack feeling. But now he began to look at the situation differently. If he did admit that the janitor might be right, that “just playing notes,” no matter how well, affected how the music sounded, then he’d have to somehow get around that problem. Eric wanted his playing to lack nothing.

So he did read over the lyrics at night — carefully and thoughtfully. He was doing something, he realized as he lay in bed with the sheet music before him, that he had never remotely done before. Entering the world of the lyrics was like entering a hothouse of tropical plants. He couldn’t stay in long. But, yes, when he was done he could say that he had a better feeling for what the songs were about. Not that they got him choked up. Not even that he knew what difference it would make in his playing. Then he thought about how the janitor would murmur the lyrics to the songs. Eric wasn’t about to do that, but he decided to memorize the words so that he’d think of what the song was saying as he played it. Maybe that would make a difference. It wouldn’t hurt giving it a try.

When he started playing again he concentrated on hearing the words. And he immediately sensed that it did make a difference. What he found changing the most was his timing — spaces appeared in his playing that coincided with a pause in the thoughts. Realizing the change, and remembering how he had been first impressed by the timing of the janitor’s playing, he pursued this new tactic. He found himself more intent than he had ever been at a piano, more involved. He also found himself more tentative. But, when he would falter, the janitor — who had without comment rejoined him when he heard his songs being played again — would only say, “That’s okay. Go back a ways. You had it.” The janitor’s complaining days were over; the rift had been healed, and the two, so different, became almost conspiratorial.

Some days they would just talk. The janitor told him about New York in the 50s and 60s, when he had played a lot of clubs and lounges. Maybe never any of the top ones, but he had kept busy. Did a good bit of studio work too. One day he brought in an 8 by 10 photo of himself from back then, all done up with shadows behind him. Sitting at a piano, wearing a tux, leaning forward with his chin resting on his hand, showing a diamond pinky ring. He was

startlingly young, sleek looking, the deep creases in his face smoothed by time. He was smiling, casual. He looked good. And the photo was signed — Charles Ellis. Under his name were the words “In the Mood.”

“These couples,” he said. “Why were they in this club together? For the most part because they were in love or maybe wanting to be in love. So I was there to supply the mood to get the job done, you might say.”

Eric came to understand that every song created its own mood. As he progressed — as the months went by — he found himself getting lost in the atmosphere of certain songs. He’d feel then like the room they were in would fade away. He truly loved to play when this happened. And he began to see the words — like “shimmering” in “Autumn in New York” made him see lights reflected off wet streets. And in “Isn’t It Romantic?” he tried to get the sense of nighttime shadows moving in the trees, their gentle rocking cadence. He tried to put all this into his playing.

When he was away from the piano he moved about his life, mechanically doing things. But in the insular world of his mind music dominated his thoughts. Although, strangely, he also began to think sometimes of his parents, those two he had successfully avoided thinking about for years. It didn’t hurt as much as he had expected. And, again strangely, he thought of them not so much as parents but as a couple. This was oddly reassuring to him. He vaguely knew it was all tied up with the music, the alchemy that it involved for him. And it was truly a kind of alchemy, for he began to feel sometimes that he was able to create a dream world in which the feelings of a song were crystallized for a while. It was then, near the end of their time together, that he’d finish playing and, after a hushed silence, he would hear that one word, offered in a slow whisper: “Nice . . .”

But the chorus room, he was to discover when it was no longer there for him, had only been a stage in his life. During that time he had unknowingly given up the hard, protective cocoon in which he had lain dormant. Once school was over he emerged into the world painfully aware of all he did not have. And music was one of those things. There was simply no piano for him to play. He did try to seek one out after school, before he gave up. Although he would later heap blame on himself for every lack in his life, he could never say that he hadn’t tried. He had stood many days in front of a Village recording studio, getting up the courage to approach the musicians who frequented it, but they hardly slowed down for his faltering words. He had made a proposal to the owner of a Chinese restaurant near where he lived to let him play nightly in his lounge — it had a abandoned piano picking up dust in a corner. But it was as if the world conspired to thwart his every attempt to be part of it, as if he had some mark upon his forehead which allowed others to see his need, from which they would turn away. The efforts he made came to be memories that burned with the shame of rejection, echoing like the restaurant owner’s derisive cry of “Chopsticks!”

One problem was that his type of music was played only in enclaves in Manhattan, places of a forbiddingly exclusive nature. On the Mondays he didn’t have to work he sometimes went to the Algonquin or the Carlyle Hotels in the afternoon and wandered into their lobbies to peer through closed doors at the hushed, dim rooms. Other places, such as the Rainbow Room, were even less attainable, up in the stars.

He went to the Manhattan School of Music and to Julliard to get applications for admission. But when he looked them over and saw how complicated a process it was — pages of information to be filled out, letters of recommendation and transcripts to be sent, auditions to be passed — he felt intimidated and discouraged. They seemed to want a higher level of validation than he had; all he could tell them about was a janitor's whispered word. This came to seem, as the months of disappointments accumulated, of total insignificance. And, for the final blow, the tuition was astronomical, totally beyond the world he existed in. Scholarships were available, but the amount of validation for them was even greater. Twice he went to Julliard and asked to see someone in the “piano department,” but he was easily put off by the lady in the office — the mark on his forehead again. Ultimately the applications wound up in a drawer, the first few lines of one filled out in pen with his name, address.

And what was the reality of his life in the next two years? It was made up of the remains of food left on plates. He often worked both the lunch and dinner shifts at the Maison Louise; being a busboy, nothing more, occupied most of his time. He did his job well and seemed on the surface to be fine, just as he had when he walked through his years of high school in that cocoon. But he wasn't fine, and now there was no cocoon.

Thus it was that, one fall day, he came back to the school to visit the only person who really knew him. Not that he and the janitor had ever talked about their feelings; still, there had been a level at which they had shared an intimacy. In a way Eric felt that to return was to violate some unspoken fact of their lives; when he and the janitor had shaken hands after their last session, on his last day of school, there had been a finality to it. The goodbyes had really been goodbyes, and the gift that the janitor had handed to him, in its manila envelope, had been his last gift to Eric. Why there had been this finality Eric only sensed vaguely; so, in need of something, he came for a visit.

He arrived later than he had wanted to, after lunch. He first looked about the corridor where the chorus room was — he heard a woman's voice inside, giving some kind of instructions — and then went out onto the walkway that connected the two wings; there was a large yard with benches on one side where the students ate their lunches. It was empty now except for the lone figure of the janitor; he was dragging a black plastic bag behind him and was stooping down to pick up the trash that was left. The yard was a mess, strewn with the remains of half-eaten lunches, Styrofoam containers from the cafeteria, crumpled brown bags, cans of soft drinks. While he stood there unnoticed, Eric thought that this was where the janitor had gone each day after they had played, and he understood at that moment why he should not have come. As he turned to escape back into the hall the janitor suddenly looked up and saw him. There was a pause of reluctance in the way the janitor looked at him — Eric could feel it — but then he smiled. “Well, now . . . Eric . . .” He let the bag fall and came slowly over, wiping his hands — those long, warped fingers — on his pants leg.

They sat at a bench and talked, both uncomfortable. No, Eric said, he did not play anymore. Yes, he was working — as a busboy.

“Listen, son, you got to go after what you want in this life. I'd help you if I could, but I just don't have no connections anymore. But you're real good, *real* good, and don't forget that. You got something to give.”

“Do you play anymore?” asked Eric, feeling a dismal need to pursue the worst.

“No, I don’t play. But my day is over. That chorus room, I just go in there now to sweep and mop it. That’s just the way it is. Don’t feel no reason to fool with that piano anymore. . . . Now maybe if some boy wonder comes along again. Now then I might have to show him a thing or two. Might do that . . .” His voice trailed off and they sat looking out at the yard.

“I’m twenty now,” said Eric, after a few minutes of silence.

The janitor looked at Eric’s profile, as if that statement meant something. Then he looked down at the ground. They again sat without speaking.

Finally the janitor got up. “Got to get back to work, Eric. I hope you can see some way to play. It’s necessary, you know. Goodbye, son.” And he abruptly turned and walked off. Both knew that Eric would not come back.

When the first cold weather set in Eric began to return to Julliard. It had nothing to do with applying for admission. By this time he had given up on music. He had even put his collection of tapes away; the sounds had come to seem joyless, trite. His placid exterior was still there — he still spoke reasonably when spoken to — but beneath that exterior the calcifying effects of bitter jealousy had begun. Going to Julliard came to be a torture he could not seem to spare himself. When he suggested to his fellow busboys that there was a girl uptown he went to, it was not, in a way, a total lie, for among the brightly-dressed, laughing young musicians that came and went around him there was a certain girl who was often alone, with an aura of solemnity about her. She carried a flute case and had a way of walking that suggested freedom. Her he loved. Of course he never spoke to her, never spoke to anyone. He just watched those who possessed all he wanted. He told himself that he could talk to her if he were a student there; in that way love and music were linked in his mind, and both were unobtainable. He was painfully aware that, besides the external factors that had boxed him into his present life, he was too lacking in social skills and aggressiveness to get those things he needed. For his shortcomings he could not forgive himself. So he would skulk about the entrance to Julliard, hating what he was, what he wasn’t. He would pull his overcoat about him. It was the only cocoon he had now, that and his impassivity — for he let no one see how he felt. He hid behind these makeshift protections, even though they did not spare him anything.

And then, at the moment when his loneliness had been most complete, a hand had reached down in the snow for him.

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As he knelt on the floor at Mrs. Resweber’s, he felt closer than he had felt in a year to that dreamy world of the chorus room. Music was again full of possibility, able to transform everything. Eric looked at cover after cover, excited at the discovery of so much piano, and he selected three albums with anticipation, a Peterson and a Shearing sandwiched around a precious old soundtrack recording of music from the Astaire-Rogers’ films. He smiled as the first clear, assertive chords of “But Not For Me” were played.

When he returned to the dining room Mrs. Resweber said, as if thanking him, “Oh, I love Oscar Peterson.” Eric felt akin to her, a fellow aficionado.

“He’s something else. How he just glides.”

“Well,” said the doorman, looking from one to the other. “It’s good to hear such enthusiasm in the voices of humans.”

Perhaps it was the music, but during dinner they were mostly quiet. Murmurs of wonder from the men at the excellence of the food. But the music dominated, fresh and delightful again, setting a mood far from the everyday world to one in which romance was the only issue.

When they had finished eating and had gone into the living room, Eric took a stack of records by vocalists and sat in a chair by the only lamp that was on in the room; he started looking over the names of piano accompanists on the backs of the albums. The worn covers gave off the odor of disuse. Eric thought of what the doorman had told him about Mrs. Resweber, and the reason for the dust on the albums seemed obvious. She and her husband must have had this music in the background when they were young. So it stirred painful memories for her. But tonight she had called out for the music again. And she loved Oscar Peterson and he had seen her smile as Astaire and Rogers carried on their playful dance of love.

Eric looked up; the other two in the room, seated on the sofa, were in semi-darkness. They spoke to each other occasionally, in voices too low for Eric to make out their words. These shadowy figures evoked for him a memory of some other place long ago, a place calm and accepting. The music played softly.

As he gazed at them a voice suddenly spoke to him. “What are you searching for?”

Eric stirred from his reverie. For a moment he did not understand what the voice was asking; it seemed a question that had to do with his own life — that it was referring to the music and to his effort to be what he really was. An effort that he had abandoned. Though why, he asked himself wonderingly, would someone abandon such a quest as that? Then he thought that the voice was actually referring to the albums he had been searching through; it was only another of the doorman’s questions that seemed to be asking more than it really was.

“A name,” he answered. “I’m looking for a name. Charles Ellis. He’s a pianist, did studio work years ago. I’d like to hear what he sounded like then. I thought he might be an accompanist on one of these albums.”

“You and this music, Eric . . . How do you happen to know this pianist?” asked Mrs. Resweber.

Eric thought of the gift he had been given — the photograph, in a manila envelope, handed to him on his last day in the chorus room. It was how Charles Ellis had wanted to be remembered. It now occurred to Eric that someone looking exactly like that person might have once played for Mrs. Resweber and the man she had loved. She might have seen and heard him then, in some faraway New York, maybe on a snowy night. Everything seemed to have the possibility of being intricately connected. And Eric thought that if he were connected too — if he were to play a role in all this — he must reach out to the others now.

“He was my teacher,” he said. “You see, I can play the piano. That’s what I am. A piano player.”

So that night, at their urging, Eric told his story about the chorus room and the janitor who turned out to be a pianist. He told what the bedraggled busboy in the lobby had avoided revealing to the doorman. But Eric felt now that the busboy's existence was the unreal one. What was real was what Charles Ellis had taught him, what he had said about Eric having something to give. It was what mattered now, sitting here with these two.

When he ended his story they sat silently in the darkened room. Finally the doorman stirred.

“Do you play anymore?”

“I haven't touched a piano in years.”

“Would you like to play tonight. For us?”

Eric looked at him. The doorman turned to Mrs. Resweber. “You know about that nightclub they're going to open in this building? No? Well, it's on the street side, where the restaurant used to be. You said that you don't go out, like you should. Why not tonight? Wouldn't you like to hear a little night music on a snowbound night like this?”

Her answer, one Eric could barely perceive, was a nod.

The doorman turned back to Eric. “It has everything, a piano, bass, drums. In fact, I let them in the other day to work on the acoustics and lighting. It's all ready. And I control it all, all the lights and switches. What say we go down there now? We can open it tonight, just the three of us. I have the keys.”

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So there was a little night music. The young man on the stage, a muted light on him, was seated at a piano that seemed to glow with vitality. Around him the room was dim, all burnished copper, smoky mirrors, polished dark wood. He turned through the sheet music, illuminated by its own tiny spotlight. He began playing tentatively, beginning and returning to the beginning of a song, going further each time, then moving to another song. Slowly he realized that the piano was the medium that he still controlled and that, at last, it lay under his hands again. He looked at the couple in the room and then he leaned over the keys intently and began to play a song for them.

He played it slowly, with a stately insistence, the notes rising and falling, returning to the question. It evoked a moonlit night, breezes playing in the trees, shadows moving.

Outside the snow that had captured them in that room lay silent and undisturbed. No more had fallen for hours. The wind was gone — all was calm. The sky above was so clear that the stars had again taken their customary places in the heavens.