***88 Keys***

***By Austen Fisher***

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***NOTES: Narrator was written for a man, but there is no reason that it can’t be played by anyone with any body if they can express themselves through the piano, act with sincerity and a sense of play, and have a continuous connection to the audience. Feel free to switch pronouns around and change the names of Emily and Chloe to Aaron and Caleb if it will make the performer feel more comfortable. The songs should not be played on the piano and sung all the way through, but instead show a snippet capturing the emotional depth of the song. The meaning, if you will.***

*[The set is a piano with a few props scattered around the room. The type of piano can vary depending on what the NARRATOR feels is required. The preshow music should be comprised of upbeat jazz, blues, funk, and pop music. Houselights are on and NARRATOR is meeting audience members as they come in, and making them feel at home. Maybe there’s a sing-along at some point? But then…)*

*(Preshow fades. Complete silence. NARRATOR at the piano. NARRATOR addresses the audience.)*

Narrator

Hello, everybody. Now, by a show of hands, who here knows how to play the piano?

*(Raised Hands)*

Okay, now who here currently plays an instrument?

*(Raised Hands)*

Great. Now who here is shit at music?

*(Raised Hands)*

Narrator

Perfect. Okay, you come up here.

*(NARRATOR picks out a person in the “shit at music” category and brings them to the piano bench)*

Narrator

Sit there. And now I’m going to give you a piano lesson.

I started playing piano when I was eight. My mom homeschooled me and, at eight, she gave me the choice between music lessons and more math worksheets. I chose music.

In my first lesson, I was told that there are eighty-eight keys on a piano, twelve defined notes, seven-and-a-half octaves, a ton of meters, around twelve progressions to play in any combination, and an almost infinite number of ways to combine all this into what we call: music.

Music is math. Mom tricked me.

But the only thing I want you to do is play a simple melody. This is a real song by Duke Ellington called “C-Jam Blues” it starts on middle C and goes like this. Watch my fingers.

*(NARRATOR plays the simple melody of “C-Jam Blues”)*

Narrator

Now you try.

*(The audience volunteer successfully [or unsuccessfully] plays the simple melody. Soon, the NARRATOR adds a baseline. If the audience volunteer messes up, NARRATOR can say things like “Wow, you’re really adding your own style to this” and “Free jazz on your first try.” NARRATOR then sends the audience volunteer back to their seat with a round of applause.)*

Narrator

The first thing I learned in my music lessons was that note: Middle C. I mastered that note pretty quickly. It was the other 87 keys that were the problem.

But from then on, middle C would be home. Something familiar and comforting to come back to.

And my mom was very encouraging. She would listen to me play as she made dinner and the smell of beef stew would come wafting to me at the piano.

I still hated the instrument. But at least it didn’t literally stink.

*(NARRATOR plays C)* Middle C. Home. Beef stew smell.

Learning to play music is hard.

*(to volunteer)* Right?

I would dread the walk up the steps to my teacher’s old, dusty piano. My teacher was Russian, and mean. I would beg my mom to let me stop taking lessons. But without fail, every Wednesday we would go to Mrs./Mr. Julie’s and I would suffer at the hands…

To make things even worse, her kids were my age too, and would always get home from school just as I was in the middle of my lesson. And every time I messed up a note, v*ery quietly* from the upstairs banister they would “boo” me.

Now, because I’m a sucker for punishment and you look bored, I’m going to have you all help me relive this harrowing experience.

I’m going to play me at eight years old and I want you all to be Mrs./Mr. Julie’s stupid kids. When I mess up, I want you to “boo” me.

How often do you get to “boo” an actor onstage?

Let’s practice on the count of three. One, two, three.

*(Audience Boos)*

Narrator

Perfect. That’ll help my self-esteem. Now let’s do it for real.

*(NARRATOR plays “Twinkle Twinkle” on the piano and messes up. Audience boos him. This repeats three times.)*

Narrator

At home, I played a game. Because that’s what kids do when they get bored.

If I was going to be forced to play this god-awful, upright monstrosity, dammit I needed something to entertain myself; to make me smile to myself.

So I started assigning meanings to the different keys. Like…

*(Narrator plays C again)* Middle C. Home. Beef stew smell.

My hatred of music continued for three more years.

More trudging up the steps to a lesson I didn’t want.

I realized that I could get away with not practicing. I would just have my teacher play the song I was supposed to practice, then I would just play back what I heard.

I got away with this for three years.

But three years later, I was sitting in my new room.

I had never had my own room before, and I finally had a space completely to myself. It was scary, and exciting, and I had to have my best friend Chris over.

*(to audience member)* I’m going to have you play Chris, okay? And don’t worry there is no piano involved. You don’t even have to get up. Great.

Chris and I would always want to hang out, but we never actually knew what we wanted to do. So we were bored a lot.

*(to CHRIS)* Can I see your bored face? Perfect.

Chris was fiddling with my new radio alarm clock and a plethora of songs came pouring out of a poor-quality speaker.

*(to CHRIS)* What I want you to do is aggressively turn the dial every time you want the song to change. This is a low-budget theatrical experience. So the role of “Radio” will be played by me.

Change the dial to hear a new song… And be merciful.

*(CHRIS piano-tortures NARRATOR, who switches from song to song, perhaps Backstreet Boys, Beatles, and then finally…)*

Narrator

Eventually, Chris turned to a station I’d never heard before and stopped…

*(NARRATOR repeats the word stop until CHRIS stops torturing them)*

It was Jazz 88.5 FM.

I was laying on my bed facing my new bedroom ceiling, looking at the fake stars that I had put on my ceiling. They were taking in the light outside, ready to glow after the sun went down.

Chris had stopped incessantly changing the radio stations.

So all was quiet for a moment. Just me and my best friend looking at the stars during the day.

And this song came out of the poor-quality speakers.

*(NARRATOR plays “In a Sentimental Mood” by Duke Ellington)*

*In a sentimental mood*

*I can see the stars come through my room*

*While your loving attitude*

*Is like a flame that lights the gloom*

*On the wings of every kiss*

*Drifts a melody so strange and sweet*

*In this sentimental bliss you make my*

*Paradise complete.*

Narrator

I fell in love.

It was Duke Ellington’s *In a Sentimental Mood*.

It spoke to me in a way I’d never felt before. It understood something that I couldn’t yet explain myself.

There was something unspeakably sad and beautiful at the same time. Two forces competing against each other in harmony.

In my next lesson, I learned about sharps and flats.

I learned that a C# is the exact same thing as Db. And I immediately thought of *In a Sentimental Mood*. Two different keys. Same music.

I think music is funny that way. For example, in C# or Db you get both this…

*(NARRATOR plays “Nocturne in C# minor” by Chopin)*

Narrator

And this…

*(NARRATOR plays “Never Gonna Give You Up” By Rick Astley)*

*Never gonna give you up*

*Never gonna let you down*

*Never gonna run around and desert you*

Narrator

*(NARRATOR plays a Db)* C# or Db. There are at least two sides to everything. Something can fill you with great joy and great sorrow, all at the same time.

…

Turns out that my technique for not practicing paid off.

I was playing by-ear, which I found out is how most jazz musicians first learned to play too.

I wanted to play the music I heard on my alarm clock radio so I asked my teacher…

*(to audience member)* Can you come up and be my teacher?

I saw you raised your hand when I asked who played. Don’t worry you won’t have to play anything either. I’m the student here.

*(NARRATOR gets TEACHER to come up and sit with him at the piano)*

Narrator

I asked my teacher to help me get better so I could play jazz.

Music is a universal language. It gives people of all backgrounds, who speak different languages, a common vocabulary. Which was good in my case, because my teacher was a mean Russian woman who barely spoke English.

She would sit next to me on the piano bench and stare at my fingers. Then she would count as I played.

*(to teacher)* Just count me in, like this… *(in harsh Russian accent)* 1, 2, 3, 4.

Teacher

1, 2, 3, 4.

*(NARRATOR purposely messes up “Camptown Races”)*

Narrator

And every time I messed up…

*(NARRATOR hands TEACHER a ruler)*

Narrator

She’d hit my hands with a ruler.

*(NARRATOR awaits his punishment. If TEACHER hits hands, NARRATOR can play up the pain. If not, NARRATOR can compliment the volunteer for their gracious display of humanity. NARRATOR returns TEACHER to their seat.)*

Narrator

Needless to say, I found a new teacher.

I remember our first lesson, he took out a metronome and to my surprise, out of the metronome came my Russian piano teacher’s voice.

*(to old piano teacher)* On my cue, can you count for me one more time?

Piano Teacher

Yes

*(NARRATOR cues TEACHER)*

1, 2, 3, 4.

Narrator

I jumped off the piano bench.

Turns out my Russian piano teacher had made a line of Russian metronomes and my new teacher had bought one because it was on sale.

*(NARRATOR plays a D)* D. Music is a universal language; It’s visceral.

Especially when associated with fear of pain to your fingers. D always gives me a little tingle on my knuckles.

*(NARRATOR plays “Le Vie En Rose” in French and then English)*

*Quand il me prend dans ses bras*

*Il me parle tout bas*

*Je vois la vie en rose*

*Hold me close and hold me fast*

*The magic spell you cast*

*This is la vie en rose*

…

Narrator

On my thirteenth birthday, I had all my friends over for a party.

Everyone I was friends with was there. Chris was there, but so was my other best friend Noah.

Now, Noah was homeschooled like me. But Noah was… shall we say… less socially adept.

*(NARRATOR sits next to audience member who will be NOAH)*

Narrator

Hi Noah.

Noah

Hi.

Narrator

How are you doing today?

Noah

Good.

Narrator

What do think of the show so far?

*(Improvised conversation inevitably turns awkward)*

I just want to say you’re doing a brilliant job playing Noah. The awkwardness is spot on.

Now, Noah had a habit of hating people for no reason. Just like you hate me right now for making you Noah. And today, at my birthday party, Noah decided he did NOT like Chris.

They stared at each other across a room of my friends… They stared at each other across a room of my friends…

*(directs)* Stare at each other across a room of my friends.

*(CHRIS and NOAH look at each other)*

Narrator

And then… They immediately started a brawl.

-Don’t worry, I’m not going to make you do this next part.

Noah and Chris started rolling on the ground and punching each other. Soon all my friends had picked sides and were hitting each other, or trying to tear someone off of one of their friends. I watched the chaos, afraid to pick sides.

That night, after fielding angry parental phone calls, my mom sat down on the couch next to me and very gently told me that I was going to have to pick who to be friends with, Noah or Chris.

They were my two best friends. And I couldn’t pick.

I mean Chris had been my first friend in preschool and he was really funny. We loved to play Pokemon together, but not the games. We would pretend to be Pokemon complete with the voices and everything.

…And Noah had a trampoline.

I couldn’t choose.

So I lost both of them. And the rest of my friend group followed suit.

Now, this was tough for a homeschooler, because I didn’t get to see them around school to apologize, and I didn’t own a cellphone at that point. Because, well, it was the early 2000s.

Slowly all my friends drifted away into the abyss that is middle school.

I didn’t have a friend for four years after that.

And I think that during that time, during that isolation, was the first time I had… that feeling.

Sure, it had been there before. I recognized it in the song *In a Sentimental Mood*. But this time it was overwhelming, intrusive, disruptive. A constant, numb pain.

*(NARRATOR plays an Eb/D#)* Eb. Solitude. That indescribable feeling of loneliness.

Me, alone on a hot summers day and trying to ignore the neighbor kids playing with their friends.

*(NARRATOR plays “Solitude” by Duke Ellington)*

*In my solitude you haunt me*

*With reveries or days gone by*

*In my solitude you taunt me*

*With memories that never die*

*I sit in my chair*

*Filled with despair*

*Nobody could be so sad*

*With gloom everywhere*

*I sit and I stare*

*I know that I’ll soon go mad*

*In my solitude*

*I’m praying*

*Dear Lord above*

*Send back my love*

*…*

Narrator

I had a lot of time on my hands. So I practiced the piano with those hands.

I practiced scales, arpeggios, and (my favorite): Stride Piano.

Stride piano is also called two-fisted piano playing because you use both hands to create an almost orchestral sound, playing a ton of notes at once.

I filled my living room with sound and drowned out everything else. I was getting good.

*(NARRATOR plays a fast, stride“Don’t Mean a Thing” by Duke Ellington)*

Narrator

My new piano teacher pushed me.

Not with a ruler.

He taught me to improvise. To make up music. He explained to me that music is about reaching towards something greater than oneself. To reach beyond the pages of music and pull out something greater than ourselves.

I played a lot of blues at home. I was a teenager and it really helped me express my angst.

It gave me an outlet for the loneliness I was feeling.

I would improvise for hours, banging out my frustrations and sadness…

*(NARRATOR plays a short 12-bar blues and ends on an E)*

Narrator

E. Escape to something bigger than myself. E is drowning out my world and existing in another one.

…

Now, I’m going to skip to when I’m seventeen.

I know that’s quite a leap but when you’re homeschooled and don’t have any friends, there’s not a lot to talk about. Imagine a training montage of me practicing the piano.

I’m going to skip to walking into my first community college lecture hall.

*(NARRATOR moves through the audience excusing themselves. Eventually they sit next to someone.)*

Narrator

I moved passed the working mom, the sixty-year old going back to school, the obviously high guy in the back, and I sat next to the only other person who (at least from the back) looked my age.

*(NARRATOR sits next to audience member who will be EMILY)*

Narrator

*(to EMILY)* Hi, is this spot taken?

Emily

No.

Narrator

When this person turned around, something in my gut fell to the floor.

This was the most beautiful human being I had ever seen.

I’d never been so happy to hear the word “no” in my life.

Her name was Emily, she was my age, and was interested in something called theater.

She convinced me to try out for the community college’s play, a little known play called *Romeo and Juliet*. Have you heard of it?

Emily was a dead ringer for Juliet. She was by far the best actor. So naturally I wanted to play Romeo.

Because she roped me into this theater mess, I got her to “coach” me with my monologue. I would listen to her Juliet monologue and she would listen to my Romeo monologue.

*(NARRATOR hands a side to EMILY. On it is the “Gallup a pace” line. NARRATOR has her read the line, and then acts Romeo… poorly.)*

*But soft,*

*What light through yonder window breaks?*

*It is the east and Juliet is the sun.*

I did the audition and the next day the cast list was put up.

Emily got Juliet, obviously, and I got… Potpan. A servant who can’t read. Emily laughed so hard I thought she was going to bust a gut.

But even though I wasn’t Romeo in the play, I’d got the girl! Emily and I were now dating! A round of applause for Emily for agreeing to date me!

*(Audience applauds)*

*…*

Narrator

I hadn’t had a friend for three years, and all of a sudden I had the best friend.

We connected on so many levels. Our sense of humor, our love for entertaining people.

But perhaps the most important, we both talked about that melancholy that was all too present in our lives. We both couldn’t quite pinpoint what it was, but we new it was there. And that it scared us.

I was also terrified to tell my family I had a girlfriend.

My family teases me mercilessly. I mean my dad’s nickname for me since the sixth grade has been “Idiotboy.” He says it with love, but still!

For my dad, it’s usually accompanied immediately by a smack from my mom.

Now, its a real transition to go from homeschooling with no friends, to a community college where they do heroin in the bathrooms.

*(slyly waving)…* And I had a girlfriend.

The secrecy made my relationship even more exciting. Plus, I learned some things that my parents had failed to teach me.

I would still practice piano when I was home, but the mood of my playing changed.

*(NARRATOR plays “Ain’t Misbehavin” by Fats Waller coyly looking towards EMILY)*

*No one to talk with*

*All by myself*

*No one to walk with*

*But I’m happy on the shelf*

*Ain’t misbehavin’*

*Saving my love for you*

*For you*

*Only for you*

Narrator

Whew! I was doing great.

Emily introduced me to doing plays and I loved doing them. Especially with her.

Theater was like music, but I didn’t have to practice by myself!

We did plays, musicals, and even started one of those annoying high school improv groups.

But eventually Emily and I wanted to go to different schools. We had different dreams.

We talked about doing distance, but eventually decided that it wouldn’t work. She went to Atlanta, and I stayed in Minnesota. There was a tearful goodbye.

*(NARRATOR over-dramatically waves to EMILY)*

Narrator

Goodbye.

Emily

Goodbye.

*(NARRATOR starts to leave and then comes back)*

Narrator

Okay, bye for real.

Emily

Bye.

*(NARRATOR leaves a little more for real and then comes back)*

Narrator

Last time, I promise. *(soft and real)* Goodbye.

Emily

Goodbye.

Narrator

See ya!

Emily

Bye!

Narrator

That was too casual. Goodbye…

Emily

Bye!

*(NARRATOR waves delicately)*

Narrator

And then there was a passionate goodbye kiss that we are NOT going to do in this play.

*…*

I then went to a huge university. And it was much different than community college.

Almost everyone was my age and nobody did heroin in the bathrooms! At least while I was in there.

I stayed in the dorms my first year with a HUGE rugby player who communicated to me with a series of grunts.

*(to audience member)* Can you grunt for me?

*(Audience member grunts)*

Narrator

Perfect. You sound just like them.

I was so nervous about making friends. But it turns out not having friends for four years makes you a pretty good friend. I was loyal, trusting, gullible…

Seriously. So many people have told me that gullible is not a word in the dictionary. I can tell you that it is, in fact, a word.

My lack of social skills was funny to my new friends.

And they put up with my piano playing. Some of them even played with me.

*(NARRATOR plays an F on the piano)* F. Jazz legend Miles Davis refused to call jazz “jazz.” Instead he called it “social music.”

Did you know that no note on a piano exists in isolation? If you listen hard enough, each note has overtones of another. No matter what, no note is ever alone.

F always reminds me of my friends crammed into a dorm room with an odd assortment of instruments, trying to play anything besides *Wonderwall*. We did some pretty odd covers.

*(NARRATOR plays “All About That Bass” by Meghan Trainer and “Stand by me” by Same Cooke mashup)*

*When the night has come*

*And the land is dark*

*And the moon is the only light we’ll see*

*No I won’t be afraid, no I won’t be afraid*

*Just as long as you stand, stand by me*

*Because I’m all about that bass bout that bass no treble*

*I’m all about that bass about that bass no treble*

*All about that bass bout that bass no treble*

*All about that bass bout that bass no treble*

…

Narrator

That first year, during the holiday break, Emily came home and we… Well…

*(NARRATOR plays “Let’s Get It On” by Marvin Gaye)*

*I’ve been really tryin baby*

*Tryin to hold back this feeling for so long*

*And if you feel like I feel baby*

*Then c’mon, oh, c’mon*

*Let’s get it on…*

Narrator

During our time together, I discovered that she had been struggling with depression. Even while we were dating earlier.

She had a suicide attempt a week before I sat down next to her in the classroom. I hadn’t known when we were dating. But I also hadn’t asked.

This bothered me because she was the only one who also understood that pang that I’d been feeling for a long time. And she’d acted on it.

It turned out that there was a medical term for what I was feeling. It wasn’t unexplainable anymore.

But the words “clinical depression” sound so scientific, like the florescent lights in a doctors office.

The definition scared me.

After the break, we went our separate ways.

Again, we knew that distance wouldn’t work. We just enjoyed each other’s company for the month.

One of the reasons I loved Emily was that she shared my philosophy of “with the sharps come the flats.” Truly the Juliet to my Potpan.

So I ignored it. That pang. I pretended that Emily’s problem was completely different from mine and I went on with my life.

I played more music.

*(NARRATOR plays Simple Song by Big Bad Voodoo Daddy)*

*I sing those simple songs about simple things*

*It’s what makes my baby swing*

*She’s got eyes like an angel and smiles like a devil*

*Man, you know she’s the real thing*

*So when my baby’s not around*

*The whole world hears my poor heart pound*

*Cause man you know she’s the one for me*

…

Narrator

I didn’t hear from Emily for three-and-a-half months.

I think that she sensed that I was freaked out by her depression.

When I finally did hear from her I picked up the phone afraid that she had made another attempt.

But it wasn’t another attempt.

She was pregnant.

And she was scared.

And so was I.

Over the next month we considered our options. She was all the way in Atlanta, so I spent a lot of time on the phone trying to support whatever choice she made.

On the phone I tried to be calm and collected. Off the phone, not so much.

She decided that she was too young to have the baby. And I agreed. I supported her decision one-hundred percent. She made an appointment at a clinic and I was upset that I couldn’t be there with her, to help her make the toughest decision of her life.

But she didn’t have to make the decision. Her body did it for her.

I was playing the piano. Trying to down out everything when I got a phone call…

*(NARRATOR plays “Georgia On My Mind” by Ray Charles. Then answers the phone.)*

*Georgia, Georgia*

*The whole day through*

*Just an old sweet song*

*Keeps Georgia on my mind*

*Georgia, Georgia*

*No peace I find*

*Just an old sweet song*

*Keeps Georgia on my mind*

Narrator

She was in the shower. She was screaming and a lot of blood was flowing down the drain. I stayed on the phone with her until she fainted.

I called 911 and gave them her address and an EMT named Peter stayed on the phone with me while I sat helplessly on my piano bench and cried.

Later that night Peter explained to me that Emily had had a miscarriage.

I couldn’t imagine what Emily was feeling.

Miscarriage made the thing that was inside of Emily sound real. Realer than it was. It wasn’t a baby, not yet.

But the word “miscarriage” made it sound… I don’t know.

I still believe that we weren’t ready to be parents and that the abortion was the right decision. But it hit me for the first time that the “thing” was a potential life that Emily and I created.

Something beautiful beyond description. And it was gone now.

*(Narrator plays F#/Gb)* F#. Screaming. The unspeakable pain that comes with loss you don’t understand.

*(NARRATOR plays “Golden Slumbers” by The Beatles)*

*Once there was a way*

*To get back homeward*

*Once there was a way*

*To get back home*

*Sleep, pretty darling*

*Do not cry*

*And I will sing a lullaby*

*Golden slumbers*

*Fill your eyes*

*Smiles await when you rise*

*Sleep pretty darling*

*Do not cry*

*And I will sing a lullaby*

*…*

Narrator

After the miscarriage, the melancholy became worse. I retreated into myself more often.

And then I made a mistake.

I stopped talking to Emily.

I thought that if I stopped talking to her, I could escape and forget.

I knew what she was going through was a hundred times worse than what I was feeling, but I selfishly decided that I needed to take care of myself.

But I couldn’t escape. The guilt consumed me.

I played the piano desperately now, reaching for that something greater to help me. A cry for help.

I’m not a religions person, but music is a sort of prayer for me. I’m weird that way.

*(NARRATOR plays “Sinners Prayer” by B.B. King)*

*Well if I’ve been bad, baby, I declare I’ll change my ways*

*I don’t want bad luck and trouble to follow me all my days*

*Please have mercy, Lord have mercy on me*

*Well if I’ve done somebody wrong, Lord have mercy if you please*

…

It was during one of my prayer sessions, a year later, in a practice room that I met Chloe.

*(to audience member)* I’m going to have you play Chloe, okay?

Now, I’m going to tell the story of how we met and you’re just going to do what I say. Good?

Good.

She knocked on the heavy doors that separated my black and white banging from the rest of the world and, like an astronaut entering the space station, she stepped in.

This surprised me, because nobody had ever interrupted me while I was in a practice room and I fell off my bench.

She told me that she was a part of the university jazz ensemble. She thought I was good and told me that their ensemble needed a piano player.

After discussing when and where the auditions took place, she waved and exited my space station.

*(Narrator has Chloe go back to their seat)*

So I sat there and thought about it.

Now, I used music as an escape and joining a group of people who sounded good sounded scary. But the next day, I auditioned for the ensemble director.

And to my surprise, I got in.

I remember the first time I walked into the practice room. I was late, and when I opened the sound proof doors Chloe was singing…

*(NARRATOR plays “The Very Thought of You” by Nat King Cole)*

*The very thought of you, and I forget to do*

*The little ordinary things that everyone ought to do*

*I’m living in a kind of daydream, I’m happy as a king*

*And foolish though it may seem to me, you’re everything*

Narrator

And I fell head over heels in love.

I fell in love in a way where I understood old jazz lyrics. I fell in love in a way where I felt hope for the first time since I was twelve. I fell… down coming into the practice room.

That was a great first impression.

After rehearsal, the ensemble director suggested that I practice with Chloe and I said “Yes, sir.”

Chloe and I decided to meet later that week. We went into a practice room didn’t come out until the building closed.

Accompanying Chloe was like sex. No, better than sex. I played my feelings for her between each note she sang.

She understood. And you need to understand that I’d never had this unspoken language with anyone else before. Nobody else had really listened, really heard me.

For the first time, someone understood.

*(NARRATOR plays a G on the piano.)* G. Telling Chloe “I love you” in every song we played together.

*(NARRATOR plays a bit of “Your Song” by Elton John)*

*It’s a little bit funny*

*This feeling inside*

*I’m not one of those who can*

*Easily hide*

Every note was a love letter we passed back and forth, like kids do in the middle schools I never went to.

*(NARRATOR plays a bit of “Crazy Little Thing Called Love” by Queen)*

*This thing*

*Called love*

*It cries*

*In a cradle all night*

*It swings*

*If jives*

*It shakes all over like a jelly fish*

*I kinda like it*

*Crazy little thing called love*

There are so many love songs. I couldn’t play enough of them.

*(NARRATOR plays a bit of “When A Man Loves a Woman” by Percy Sledge)*

*When a man loves a woman*

*Can’t keep his mind on nothing else*

*He’d trade the world*

*For the good thing he’s found*

I would continue to “talk" to her during rehearsals. Never speaking. And she noticed. She smiled at me when I played something she thought was particularly sweet.

*(NARRATOR plays a bit of “Can’t Help Falling in Love With You” by Elvis Presley)*

*Wise men say*

*Only fools rush in*

*But I can’t help*

*Falling in love with you*

One night, She asked me if I wanted to play outside of rehearsal. When we met up she asked me if I had anything in particular I wanted to play. This was my chance! I wracked my brain for what I wanted to tell her.

No lyric was enough, no song was enough. Only one came remotely close. So I played…

*(NARRATOR plays “Come Rain or Come Shine” by Ray Charles)*

*I'm gonna love you, like no one loves you*

*Come rain or come shine*

*High as a mountain, deep as a river*

*Come rain or come shine*

*I guess when you met me*

*It was just one of those things*

*But don't ever bet me*

*'Cause I'm gonna be true if you let me*

*You gonna love me, like no one love me*

*Come rain or come shine*

*Happy together, unhappy together*

*Wouldn't it be fine*

*Days may be cloudy or sunny*

*We're in or we are out of the money, yeah*

*But I'm with you always*

*I'm with you rain or shine*

Narrator

I had barely got done with the song before she tapped me on the shoulder and kissed me.

…

Narrator

Chloe and I started officially dating.

The other people in jazz ensemble were like “FINALLY!” Apparently they had noticed our love letters.

We played beautiful music together and life was good.

Every time my depression reared its ugly head, I’d play while Chloe sang and the rest of the world would fall away.

I finally found that something greater that I was reaching for. That thing that is indescribably beautiful, profound, and silly. I was in love.

Chloe pushed me to be a better musician and a better person. Not only did she understand my depression, she knew how to take it away for a little while.

It reminded me of only other person in my life who had understood that feeling.

Emily.

*(NARRATOR plays “Angel Eyes” by Frank Sinatra)*

*Try to think that love’s not around*

*Still it’s uncomfortably near*

*My poor heart ain’t gaining any ground*

*Because my angel eyes ain’t here*

Narrator

I told Chloe about Emily. And Chloe gave me the courage to text her after two years. I sent her a message that said that I was sorry and that I wanted to be in her life again.

She didn’t respond for a few days and then eventually sent a text that said:

“Call me.”

She was mad. Obviously.

I didn’t have an excuse for my actions, all I could say was that I was sorry.

But she knew me well enough (and she loved me enough) that she gradually let me back into her life.

…

Meanwhile, Chloe and I graduated together, me with a theater degree, her with a degree in vocal performance. We talked about getting married. Flirted with the idea, and decided what we were doing already was WAY better than marriage.

Chloe started singing in jazz clubs in the city, while I got jobs playing piano for theaters, improvising the music in the show. I became good at instantly underscoring.

Can I demonstrate what this is? I’ll need a volunteer with shoe laces.

*(NARRATOR gets an audience member with shoe laces. Straps will work for this as well.)*

Narrator

Now I need you to walk onstage, untie and retie your shoe laces, then you can do anything you want and return to your seat. Can you do that for me?

Shoe Person

Yes.

Narrator

Perfect.

*(NARRATOR improvises music in a Charlie Chaplin/Silent Movie style to all the actions SHOE PERSON does)*

Chloe and I moved in together, which is a hard thing to do for the first time. Especially for me. I couldn’t hide the times when I was too depressed to move, or sometimes I played songs so melancholy they made Chloe cry.

That’s the dangerous part of speaking the same language. Chloe could hear what I was feeling, and it made her feel that way too.

*(NARRATOR plays “Round Midnight” by Thelonious Monk. Narrator ends on Ab/G#))*

*It begins to tell ‘round midnight*

*Round midnight*

*I do pretty well till after sundown*

*Suppertime I’m feeling sad*

*But it really gets bad round midnight*

Narrator

Ab or G#. Sharing every part of myself with a person for the first time ever. Watching true tears of empathy in Chloe’s eyes.

I hated to see her cry. But I loved that she understood. And I loved her.

I saw Chloe’s first professional live show. She was wonderful. The drummer was artful. The bassist really swung.

The piano player. He was good. Like, really good. And good-looking. And they had a real chemistry together. I was jealous.

Now, I’m gonna need a representative from the audience to play this very handsome piano player… Let’s see…

*(NARRATOR picks out an audience member)*

Narrator

Good enough. Now can I have you stand up, please? Good. Hello. What’s your name?

Handsome

*NAME*

Narrator

Ugh. Of course his name was *NAME.* And do you have any hobbies?

Handsome

*HOBBIES.*

Narrator

You’re just like him. With your stupid *[blank]* hobby. Have a seat.

I ignored my jealousy. I knew Chloe loved and respected me but she knew I was jealous and it was hurting our relationship. We would fight. The more we would fight, the more depressed I would get.

I remember one time she got so frustrated at my outlook on the world that she sat on me and beat my chest yelling “Why can’t you just be happy?”

Then one day I went to see Chloe at a club with her band. And I saw it. Or rather, I heard it.

They were playing in a way that we never had.

He was better than me. At the piano, and for her. It was all in the music. The way she moved with his chords, the subtleties in his fills…

I…

You’ve never felt so low than when you’ve felt high for the first time you can remember.

*(NARRATOR plays an A on the piano)* A. That night in the club, and realizing that the person I loved more than anything else in the whole world would be better off with someone else. That she didn’t sing with me like that. That she didn’t love me like that.

And after that, every time that I saw Chloe, I felt this…

*(NARRATOR plays “Here Comes The Sun” by The Beatles)*

*Here comes the sun (doo doo doo doo)*

*Here comes the sun, and I say*

*It’s all right*

Narrator

But I also felt this…

*(NARRATOR plays “Feelin Sad” by Ray Charles)*

*I'll tell the story just once again*

*The way I love you, darling it's a sin*

*You mended my heart, you broke once, baby*

*And now you broken my heart again*

*Hey Lord! I'm feeling sad, I'm feeling sad*

Narrator

I didn’t know what to do. My depression was back, fueled by anxiety and a terrible certainty that Chloe didn’t love me the way I loved her.

Finally, I confronted her about my feelings… She started crying… Always a bad sign…

And then she told me that she was in love with [*blank].* That they had been seeing each other for a couple weeks while I was out of the apartment practicing.

I was crushed.

I didn’t blame *[blank]*. Well, not too much anyway. Chloe just didn’t love me.

I was destroyed. So I went to the only place that felt safe. The piano.

C. Home.

But my home had changed. Chloe was my new home and that was gone.

When I touched a key… It felt… empty. No voice.

So I tried another.

And another.

D? Nothing.

Solitude. Eb?

I panicked. I spiraled. I went to the darkest place I’d ever gone. F#? The one thing that had always worked was broken and so was I. That week I slept at the piano. C? But I couldn’t sleep. C? My brain was keeping me awake, torturing me with thoughts I couldn’t get rid of. G? I tried going for a walk. A. A. A. A. I was on a bridge. Looking down at the water. Looking for any reason to- G. It was all hitting me at once. Db? The ripping apart, the solitude, the fear, the loss, the disappointment. Ab? I couldn’t do it anymore. C? I took a step.

And I heard the strangest sound.

*(NARRATOR plays “In a Sentimental Mood” by Duke Ellington)*

*In A Sentimental Mood*

*I'm within a world so heavenly*

*For I never dreamt*

*That you'd be loving sentimental me*

Narrator

It was my ringtone for Emily.

I did the hardest thing I’d ever done. I picked up the phone and I told her what was happening.

Emily literally talked me off the ledge. She said that she loved me. That I was important to her. And that my brain was sick.

Just the sound of her voice was enough.

She told me to get help. Not only that night, but in general.

And I did.

I sat up all night with a friend, and I saw a therapy group the next week. I told them everything.

They told me that I should use my skills to do a show. You know, so I could talk about it and work through these things. I said that was a stupid idea. No one would want to watch me for forty-five minutes.

*(NARRATOR plays a Bb/A#)* Bb/A#. My phone miraculously playing *In a Sentimental Mood*. A saving grace.

…

I’ve had the blues. I think that’s the feeling that writers like Hemmingway, Chekov, and Shakespeare wrote about. And the feelings that old jazz songs convey with simple words.

*(NARRATOR plays “Mood Indigo” by Duke Ellington)*

*You ain't never been blue; no, no, no,*

*You ain't never been blue,*

*Till you've had that mood indigo.*

*That feelin' goes stealin' down to my shoes*

*While I just sit here and sigh, "Go 'long blues”.*

Narrator

Blues music also has a different definition for melancholy.

Melancholy in blues is a feeling of deep sorrow, but also the acknowledgement that it will pass.

Everything will pass. A lot of artists have tried to express this feeling.

*(NARRATOR plays “Obi-de-Obe-da” by The Beatles)*

*Obladi oblada life goes on brahhh*

*Lala how the life goes on*

*Obladi Oblada life goes on brahhh*

*Lala how the life goes on*

Narrator

Which brings me to…

*(NARRATOR plays a B on the piano)* B. Taking everything one day at a time.

B is my reminder to breathe.

Sometimes you just don’t know how to go on. But that’s ok. You don’t need to have an answer. Nobody really does, do they?

That’s the beauty of it all, isn’t it?

…

In my eyes, B always moves to something else. You can go up and down, you can have dissonance and resolution, you can make beautiful music.

And I don’t have an answer. All I can do is reach for that something greater; and fail over and over again. And know that I’m not alone. Just like a note on a piano, I don’t exist in isolation. I mean, just look around.

Music plays in every moment, and it begins and ends in that moment. It’s communal; it’s exclusively unique; it will never happen this way with this exact feeling ever again. It’s alive.

And so am I. Thanks Emily.

And I guess that brings us back to C.

*(to the original piano student)* Hi. Will you help me one last time? I can’t end this show by myself. Can you play middle C and take us home?

*(The piano student plays middle C)*

***END OF PLAY***