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INTERMISSION

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books

Owen Martell



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THE PETRUSHKA CHORD

[HARRY]

IMPROMPTU

It was late in the evening, after dinner and Debby, before Harry got a chance to open the paper. Nearly two whole days had passed since the accident, which he read about now full of grim excitement. A prickly heat raced through him. The report was short – more news in brief than news itself – but the sadness of the circumstances, and the notion that the circles of loss might yet extend beyond the immediate upstate vicinity, had ensured its newsworthiness. It even mentioned his brother – and the heat came to finger-like points beneath his skin. Mr LaFaro, it said, was to be seen recently performing with the Bill Evans Trio at the Village Vanguard club in Greenwich Village.

Harry had seen the deceased, met him, almost spoken to him. They went down for the afternoon set on Sunday, Pat and Debby and him. Bill introduced them after they'd finished. Scotty, I'd like you to meet my brother Harry. Hi Harry. Hi Scotty, he'd wanted to say back, you were great,

before contenting himself with nodding and grasping the young man's hand.

Scotty handled his bass with implausible, almost arrogant ease. The arrogant part of it wasn't directed at the instrument itself though, nor even at the listening audience. It was more a comfortable disregard for all that he might have played, that which fell away definitively as soon as he'd placed firm-sliding fingers where he'd always meant them to be. If Harry wasn't able to hear him improvising, on a June afternoon, it was because improvising wasn't the word. He was doing something else, something that wasn't even audible in Bill's playing.

And now he was dead. Harry thought of the fingers he'd seen and felt, thwanging and plucking, roughly affectionate on the neck of his bass like a farmer's handling livestock. When he took them in his own hand, they seemed quite unshakeable. He thought of them on the steering wheel then, in the instants before the crash, their grip loosening in increments of equal fatality as his concentration, the way he'd seemed to assert his being by always being *on*, lapsed at last. He wondered if he had family, a wife, children, and thought of Debby, asleep in the next room, the way her fingers used to retain the shape – the absence – of his index finger, long after she'd fallen asleep and he'd got up, as if to leave the room, but unable still to take his eyes off her. And he thought of Bill, meek and reedy. He felt afraid for him, suddenly.

Harry folded the paper and put it down next to him, on the empty place on the sofa. Pat was in the kitchen washing the dishes from dinner and he seemed to hear a spongy layer of soap cushioning the impact as she placed them on the draining board.

He got to his feet and went over to the little telephone table in the corner of the room. He lifted the receiver and dialled Bill's number. He took the base of the telephone in his hand and stood facing the window. There was a fleeting reflection of their father in the glass. Putting the receiver to his ear, he felt a twitching in his own fingers. He let the phone on the other side ring for a good half a minute or so, wondering how long it might have been before he found out had he not seen the paper. There was no answer.

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He put the phone down and went into the kitchen, stood next to his wife and picked up a tea towel and a plate from the draining board. He played over in his mind the twenty seconds of his encounter with Scott. You remember that bassist we saw, playing with Bill? He died. He was in a car accident. Harry put the plate back, unwiped. That was probably twenty seconds right there. Pat looked up at him.

He tried Bill's phone again and, getting no answer, went to get his shoes from the hallway. In two minutes flat, he was down on the street.

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Nearly ten o'clock but still light. Coming off the steps that led down to the pavement, he caught the falling sun full and shut his eyes briefly. He opened them again onto the pavement itself and set about walking, an insistence in his shoulders, as if the effort he put in now would be totted up later for possible gains. When he got to the end of the block he changed into a higher gear and crossed the street, in time with the gathering chorus of engines waiting for the lights to change. He headed downtown, towards the subway station, and the first hints of a night breeze, blowing up off the Hudson, came upon him. Exhaust fumes too, flecked with copper. The breeze caught a lock of his hair, those loose strands that decided every morning which side of his parting they'd register their allegiance to. They were flicking back and forth, in agitation, and he tried repeatedly to smooth them down, even licking his palm.

He walked again through the meeting with Scott, thinking of Bill's part in it this time, so as to be better prepared for what was awaiting him.

He'd wanted to introduce them, Harry thought. It wasn't done for form's sake or out of some obligation, familial or other. There had been plenty of other gigs when he'd barely got a word out of his brother afterwards, let alone mumbled introductions. So it was either that Bill liked Scott's playing particularly and envisaged a lasting partnership, or that he liked him personally. Either way, he'd thought it worth introducing them. More likely was that it was both – an opposite identity of their playing together; traits and ticks, habits and modes that found each other on the bandstand, where it didn't particularly matter if one was vigorous and athletic, for example, the other anything but now, so long as they came, by whatever means, to the murmured accord. And now one of them was dead.

You wouldn't have put them together, that was for sure. Scott was happy to assume all the authority of his youth. Bill, thirty-two in August but only a few years older, looked like the junior partner. You'd have said, coming at them blind, that they were too different. Scott was astounding – he actually sounded as good as he looked. Bill, on the other hand, well, you heard him feeling his way. Or you felt him listening. You saw, in any case, the way it troubled him – in the sense of movement inside, rather than affliction necessarily – the way he bent double over the piano, head almost touching the keys, fingers like willow stalks dragging along in the swell.

Then you spoke to him after the gig and he wanted to fade into the decor. As if the places he played weren't already dimly lit or unfussy enough. He didn't want to talk about the set or listen to you tell him that you'd enjoyed it. There wasn't even any of the passive arrogance, the way you couldn't help but look as if you were abashed *and* feigning abashment when you came off stage and people said nice things.

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In the subway, looking into the tunnel as he waited for the first light of his approaching train, he thought of the Holland Tunnel, opened the year of his birth, and the way everything on the other side belonged to Jersey and to childhood. The first time he saw Manhattan from the turnpike. A long, guileful crocodile, idling in the Hudson, the towers of midtown its beady eyes. Bus rides.

He took Pat and Debby out there shortly after they'd set up in New York. It was late summer and the houses where they'd lived, Bill and him and Harry Sr and Mary, seemed impossibly green and growing when they compared them, the three of them together, encouraging Debby to list the places *she* could remember living, to the cramping necessity of their new place in the city. There was a ceramic swan outside the house on Hunter Avenue and

a new car too. The house itself had been given new windows.

They stayed into early evening and the sun disappeared behind the trees just as it always had. The change in the light announced, or so it had always seemed to Harry, the arrival of the trains, even to the point of enabling you to hear them at last; the distant wailing, a call not only of their vast American continent but of oceans too, whale song, marbled and blue.

Bill was everywhere that afternoon – on trees they'd climbed, in upstairs windows and in the air itself, where the footballs seemed to fly still, from the bottom end of the garden, where there was no fence to separate their patch from the street, all the way up to the little ridge outside the kitchen window, back when he played quarterback, when he had cheeks, and arms and legs that didn't look like they'd snap in two at the first remotely bruising contact.

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Harry was met by hot gusting wind when he came up the stairs at 86th Street. With every step as he walked down Broadway, he felt his shirt sopping cold against the small of his back. The heat seemed to hit him in waves, yielding the day's accumulation slowly, like a poisoner dosing his

victims. Ground heat, seepage from the paving stones and buildings, from telephone kiosks and rubbish bins piled high and wide on street corners. Emanating also from the entire subway network beneath his feet, geothermal portent of a swelter deeper still. Everywhere was heat, he thought; the whole city. Every body.

He slowed his pace but, unwilling to let his guard down entirely, tried at the same time to prick up his senses, as though expecting to run into his brother not just around any corner but around all of them. He wanted to prepare himself for meeting Bill but felt himself bothered by the notion of there being any need to; the fact that his turning up unannounced would be registered by both of them in precisely those terms. He'd allowed himself to imagine that living in the same place as his brother – for the first time since they'd left New Jersey – would be governed by their previous knowledge of each other. The old rules had lapsed, however. Those of their parents lingered, albeit severely weakened by the fifteen-year hiatus – but they'd never been absolute anyway. Bill and he hadn't ever dropped in except on each other's bedrooms and had to ask now whether the other took sugar in his coffee.

When he tried to think of the right thing to say when he saw him, Harry found himself imagining instead ways in which he might speak of Bill to strangers who'd come asking. He'd insist, he thought, in the first place, on the inalienability of the past, how he was there, in everything,

to try and mask the fact that there were other people who, in the day-to-day sense at least, knew him better now. But he'd be taken in, he thought, like plenty of others besides, by Bill's growing celebrity. A handful of albums already and polls in *Billboard* and *DownBeat* that had him coming to the top of his game. People might coax him into accepting a part in that too. They'd associate the two of them, increasingly, by their common name. I don't suppose you're related to *Bill* Evans, laughing. He's my brother, he'd say, and agree as he did so to the terms they were offering. Then they'd respond either enthusiastically, at which point, he knew, he'd want to give them back untouched the quickly taken glory, or else with indifference, to all of it *en somme* – the dollar gigs in Catskill Mountain resorts, meals at the kitchen table, the whole New Jersey scrapbook – as if their connection to Bill went beyond his. He's *my* brother, he'd want to say then, before thinking finally that it would be all he wanted, in fact, for Bill to be just as unknown as he'd ever been, untethered with genius, the old couplings holding firm. That way he'd be able to say, He's just my brother – and get away with telling them nothing.

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Arriving at last at West 83rd, Harry turned towards the park. It was sufficiently dark for men in doorways to