



# ROOTS

*“People who make music together cannot be enemies. At least while the music lasts.”*

*—Paul Hindemith*

There it is—the same dimly-lit sign over the door as always. The red neon writing flickers just like it always did. It’s supposed to say “Jack’s Back Room,” but the top and bottom of the B have been trying to die for years, so it just says “Jack’s Hack Room” most of the time. A man in a long black coat stops in front of the door and stares in the front window. Past his own dark reflection, he sees small tables surrounding the stage, which is just big enough for an upright piano and a microphone. He picks up the black case next to him and walks in to the amber-lit room. Each small table has a lamp sitting in the center, and low-hanging ceiling lights light the bar.

“Danny! How are you?”

A short balding man has pushed his way through the tables toward the jacketed man. He grabs Danny’s hand and shakes it with both his own. “How’ve you been, my boy?”

“Hi, Mr. Tate,” Danny replies. “It’s just Dan, now, and I’ve been great, sir.” He sets down his case and surveys the small room. Dark figures sit at the small tables and line the bar. It’s mildly crowded tonight, so shadows permeate the room, making it impossible for Danny to see anything past the first few rows of people. The stage is still dark and empty, save for the piano and the microphone.

“So glad you could make it, with your busy schedule,” says Mr. Tate as he takes Danny’s coat. “I’m sure the old crowd of regulars will be excited to hear you again. What will you be p—”

“Where’s Kate?” Danny interrupts, looking over Mr. Tate’s shoulder. “She’s still playing here, right?”

Mr. Tate stops his questions and smiles knowingly at Danny. He points to a woman sitting alone at the far end of the bar. Danny picks up his case and makes his way toward her at the bar.

“Fancy running into *you* here,” he says when he reaches her stool. She pushes a strand of graying-blond hair out of her brown eyes before spinning around on her barstool. After glancing his way, she turns back to her drink.

“So, the trumpet wonder-boy finally shows up,” she says calmly, taking the last sip of her wine. “I never thought I’d see you back here after you sol- after you left for the studio,” she says.

“And forget my roots? I think not!” replies Danny. He takes a seat next to Kate and tries to wave

away the hovering bartender. “How long is your break?” he asks.

“A little longer, then it’s back to my post at the ivories” she says as she cracks her knuckles.

“Another wine, Kate?” the bartender asks Kate, already holding a glass for her.

“Thanks, Saul,” she says with a smile as she takes the glass of dark red liquid from him.

“Anything for you, Danny?” he asks.

“Just water’s fine, and it’s just ‘Dan’ now,” Danny replies. He tries to flatten out his hair to make himself look older. Saul takes Kate’s empty glass as he leaves to get Danny’s water.

Kate chuckles as she takes a sip. “You still don’t touch the stuff?” she teases.

“Nah, no need,” he says. He turns toward her and rests his elbow on the bar, just as he used to when he was starting here out years ago.

“More like ‘never again,’” Kate replies, taking another sip and glancing back at the dimly lit stage.

“I’ll never forget the nights when you had to run off in the middle of a set to puke.”

“And the nights when he missed the bathroom,” adds Saul as he brings the water.

“Oh, like neither of you ever had too much to drink,” Danny protests. He folds his arms on the bar and rests his head on them. Despite his protests, the memory is still vivid, and he almost feels the bile rise in his throat again. He coughs, and tries to recover his dignity. “Who drinks wine at a bar, anyway?” he asks Kate. She smiles and takes another sip.

“How long you been in town?” she asks, giving the bartender a small nod as Danny sips his water.

“I just got in tonight, back from recording some more tracks,” he says.

Kate holds her glass wine close to her lips for a moment. “I see,” she says at last. “How’s the recording business going for you?”


“It’s great,” he replies, though he doesn’t meet her eyes and glances at the bottles on the back wall.

“I’m trying some different things, was going for a mellower sound than what I used to do here. People are supposed to like it better.”

Kate laughs, but Danny notices that her eyes aren’t smiling anymore. “So ‘mellow’ is how you justify it,” she says. “If the job is so great, why are you moonlighting at a jazz club?” she asks with a sparkle in her eyes.

Danny picks up his water again, and his eyes are still focused on the wall behind the bar. “Well, nostalgia, you know? I got my start here, my heart’s here...”

Saul muffles a cough at the other end of the bar.



“You left pretty quickly, as soon as you could in fact, less than a week after that industry guy was scouting around in here. Why the sudden nostalgia?” asks Kate, setting down her glass. She has narrowed her eyes into a slight glare, and she folds her arms across her chest.

Danny leans in toward her. “You can’t blame me for moving on to bigger and better things, Kate. I couldn’t have stayed in a second-rate club for my whole career,” he explains, but he can’t look her in the eyes, and gazes over her shoulder.

Kate continues to glare at him without flinching. “You’re right, I can’t blame you for wanting more exposure for your playing,” Kate concedes, her gaze retaining its intensity. “I don’t blame you for that. What I blame you for is selling out to smooth jazz.”

Danny slams his glass onto the bar. “Not another purist! What is so wrong with playing a certain way if it pays the bills? Kate, for the first time in my life I didn’t need an office-bitch day-job. I could actually afford to take a girl out without skipping lunches all week. I could have the life I always wanted!”

Kate leans on the bar and rubs her temples. “Kid, no amount of money will ever buy your integrity back.” She looks at him again with drooping eyes and a sadness visible in her face. “I thought you learned that, if nothing else, in your time here,” she says finally.

Danny stares at the back wall for a moment, unsure of how to react. Kate was like a mentor to him, and she had seemed supportive when he said he was leaving all those years ago; did smooth jazz really change her mind that much? Even if he didn’t like it as much as hard bop or anything he’d played in Jack’s Back Room, it was still a job, after all.

“You didn’t answer my question,” Kate prompts, prodding him in the arm. “Why are you here?”

“I hate to interrupt,” says a voice behind them. Mr. Tate is smiling between them and puts his hands on their shoulders. “But I *am* paying you two to play, after all.”

Kate still hasn’t taken her eyes off Danny. “Yes, Danny, what do you want to play?”

For the first time tonight, Danny shifts uncomfortably and looks at his feet. “I was kinda thinking some stuff off my album?” he suggests. The producers from the studio kept bugging him about publicity, after all.

“That stuff’ll get you shot here,” says Kate. “Blues. Pick a key.”

“Uh, B-flat.”

“Pick a tune.”

“‘Billie’s Bounce’ ok?”

Kate finally smiles again. “Back to basics, huh?” Danny opens his mouth to protest, but Kate cuts him off. “I’m just teasin’ you, kid. Get your horn out.”

The beauty of a jazz standard combined with skilled musicians is that two people can jam together without much rehearsal (or in this case, no rehearsal in years). Everyone knows the chord changes, basic melody, and how to modulate around that line within the chords. Kate’s been playing the blues for her whole life, and even Danny, who’s been locked in a studio playing pre-prescribed smooth jazz, remembers how to improvise over a blues pattern. His hands shake as he unpacks his trumpet, and Kate plays some chords while she waits. He’s still warmed up from practicing earlier in the day, but he still blows a few notes and typical blues patterns before he steps up to the small stage. The room quiets as the stage lights go up. Danny nods to Kate, and they begin. She gives him a short lead-in, and Danny starts with a bouncy, playful tune on his horn. In opposition to his testosterone-driven solos from years ago, Danny’s playing has a more relaxed feel to the audience. It’s as though the horn is playing itself, and he’s just providing the air. His fingers dance up and down on his valves, and his face gets red on some of his more intense licks. Danny closes his eyes as he gets into the music, and he begins to move with the melody. He’s putting his heart into his playing, more-so on this one song than all the songs on his entire album combined.

As they reach the ending, Kate tells him another key and another standard, and he nods his head while holding his last note. She gives him a small interlude to catch his breath and empty his spit as she modulates into the new key, and Danny comes in just at the right place. The audience stares at the man on stage baring his soul through the brass. Finally, after one more transition and one more song, Kate brings the music to a close.

No one moves as the strings and the brass echo and fade. Finally, one of the regulars stands up and starts applauding slow and steady, almost like a heartbeat, then everyone gradually joins him. Danny takes an elaborate bow, holding his trumpet slightly in front of him as though he is bowing to the instrument. He bows again, giving the audience a wide smile and extending a hand toward Kate, who nods to the crowd. The audience quiets, and Danny looks over to Kate. She smiles at him, and she gives the audience a quick.

“You’re on fire, kid. What do you want to play next?” she asks. Danny names off another song and another key, and they start again.

“I knew you still had it in you, Danny Boy,” says Kate as she ruffles his messy hair back at the bar



after their set is done for the night.

“The way you whipped me into shape, you think I could forget?” he says, his hands still shaking a little. “I gotta admit, it’s been a while since I really played some good blues. I missed it.”

Saul brings another wine for Kate and offers Danny a beer, which he accepts. “I’m glad we haven’t completely lost you to the mass-production studio machine,” says Kate.

Danny takes a big gulp of his beer before replying. “You wanna know the truth, Kate?” he says, hunched over his glass a little. “They went out on a limb for smooth trumpet, and it didn’t work. The album basically flopped.” He takes another drink from his beer.

Kate’s eye’s bulge. “Really?” she asks. Danny nods. She puts a hand on her protégé’s shoulder.

“I didn’t know it was gonna be smooth jazz when I signed on,” he admits. “By the time I knew, it was woo late to get out. When the album started tanking, I suggested going back to jazz roots for the next one, or bop, blues, something that didn’t make me a sellout, but they wouldn’t go for it, said there wouldn’t *be* a second album,” he explains. “So here I am. Years later and all I’ve got to show for it is a shinier trumpet and one measly album that makes me feel like a musical whore.” He takes another gulp of beer, slumps onto the bar and leans on his arm.

Kate takes another sip of wine. “Well, I have a little bit more faith in the public’s taste now, but I’m still sorry you had to learn the hard way,” she says, but Danny doesn’t detect any sting in her voice this time. “I’m not saying ‘I told you so,’ but I did warn you, Danny Boy. Quick fame usually means quick fall,”

“I know, I remember” he groans, and he slowly sits up again. “I’m sorry, I know you taught me better than that. I let ego get the best of me, and now I just feel like an idiot.”

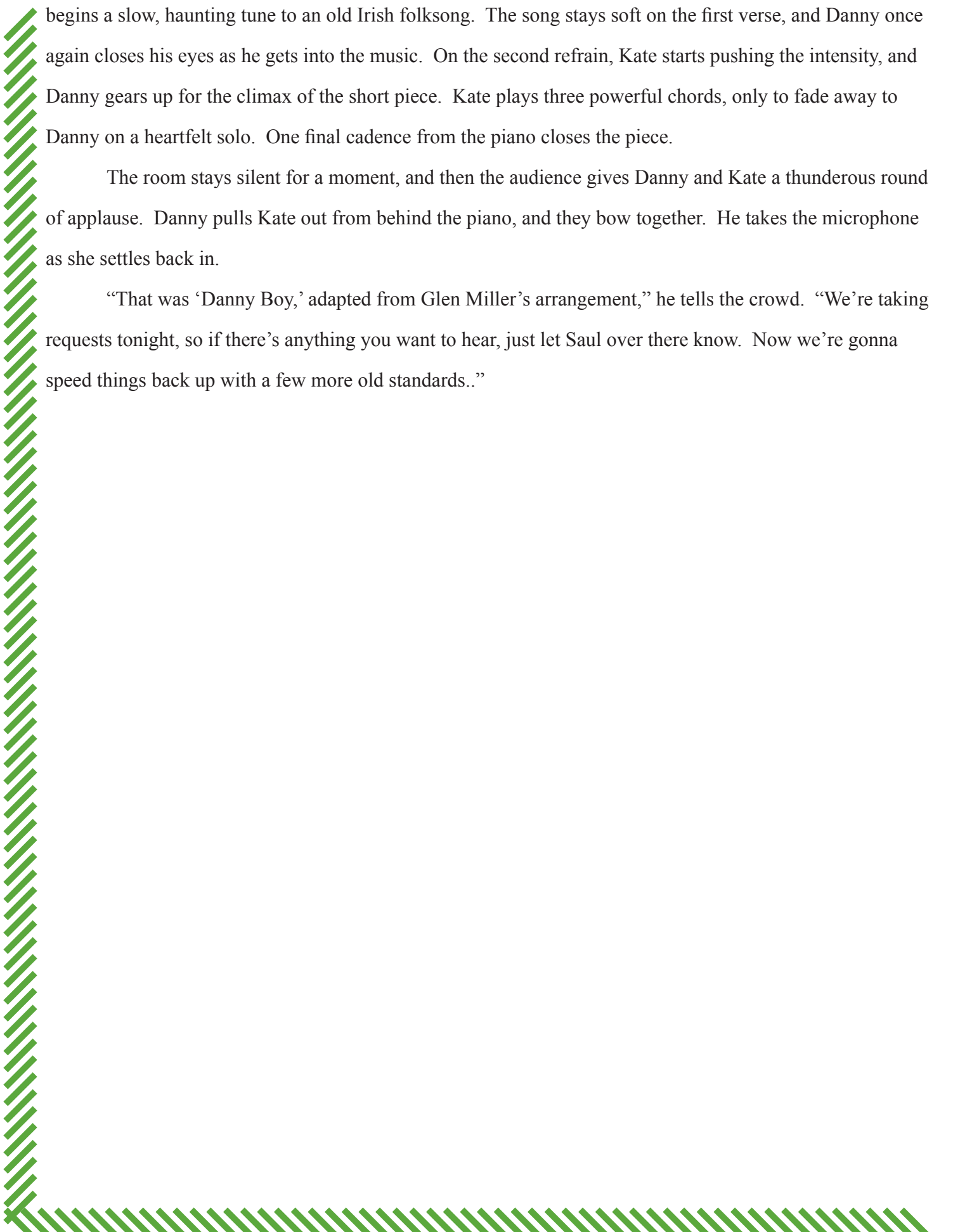
Kate chuckles at him. “You’re a trumpet player, hon,” she says. She reaches over and ruffles his hair. “I’ve never met a good trumpet who *didn’t* have an ego. Just don’t let it get the best of you again.”

Danny forces a small smile and finishes his beer. “Anyway, I should probably go soon-”

“Where do you think you’re going?” Kate demands. She grabs him by the back of his shirt and drags him back onto the bar stool. “You just got home.”

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A week later, the crowd in Jack’s Back Room is larger than usual. Rumor has it that their resident Prodigal Son has finally returned. Inside, the amber-lit room seems darker due to all the extra shadows. Only the stage retains its brightness. A young man stands on the stage, a horn in his hands and a smile on his face. A woman sits at the piano, playing him a slow, lazy introduction. He puts the horn to his face and



begins a slow, haunting tune to an old Irish folksong. The song stays soft on the first verse, and Danny once again closes his eyes as he gets into the music. On the second refrain, Kate starts pushing the intensity, and Danny gears up for the climax of the short piece. Kate plays three powerful chords, only to fade away to Danny on a heartfelt solo. One final cadence from the piano closes the piece.

The room stays silent for a moment, and then the audience gives Danny and Kate a thunderous round of applause. Danny pulls Kate out from behind the piano, and they bow together. He takes the microphone as she settles back in.

“That was ‘Danny Boy,’ adapted from Glen Miller’s arrangement,” he tells the crowd. “We’re taking requests tonight, so if there’s anything you want to hear, just let Saul over there know. Now we’re gonna speed things back up with a few more old standards..”