

Excerpt from *Trading Fours*

He takes asylum in the earthless, boundless flight of his inebriation. He does not especially view it as an escape from his burdens, as much as a marvelous journey unto itself, bringing with it memories of younger days, more vital days, days of no cares at all except to make a music sublime. And then there is the music. Oh, this journey is filled to the brim with music. The kind you bathe in, not clunk through. Without the journey, always masterminded by Jack Daniels or Glenlivet, there is only the clunking.

Nick spins out of Lot A of the Burbank Airport in his beat-up Porsche, under the merciful influence and feeling reckless, and he heads home, which is only five minutes away. God has exactly that amount of time to decide if he is going to involve Nick in a drunk-driving catastrophe, or let him make it safely to his front door, because Nick has decided in this instant that he is taking no responsibility for it himself. And he is going to challenge God to the highest speed his roadster will push it, for the entire twenty-something blocks to his bungalow in Toluca Lake.

Four minutes and thirty-two seconds later, he pulls into his driveway, stumbles in the front door of his bungalow and does the ritual. Flips on the light, checks his phone machine, fast-forwarding through the social messages and only bothering to jot down the ones that are work related, takes off his jacket, and loosens his tie even further from what had already been loosened earlier in the evening on the plane when the drinking began. He had walked out of his Scottsdale gig, grabbed a cab straight to

the airport, and hadn't even bothered to change out of his tuxedo.

He pours himself a drink, sinks into his recliner, and puts on his favorite cut from any recording to come down through the ages, Miles Davis's *Flamenco Sketches*.

He collapses onto his sofa and stares at a photograph on the wall facing him. It is of him and his two brothers, Cyril and Emil, in their first band together as young men. Mutton chops aside, and the fact that Nick is playing the bass in the photo, things have pretty much gone unchanged from that day of thirty-plus years ago. Emil is still a drummer, Cyril still a piano player, but Nick switched over to the piano, too, just a few years after that photo was taken. Older brother Cyril has always been bugged by that, because he was always the piano player in the family. Even their father had played a little trombone. And the point had been for them all to choose different instruments so that they could form a band together. But Nick fouled all that up when he suddenly announced to the guys one day that he'd had an epiphany and was now planning to take up the keys.

Cyril has always accused Nick of trying to one-up him.

"Everything I try to do in this life, it seems you're right there to jump on it, too. Snatch it from me, be better than me at it, steal my thunder, something. I don't know what it is with you, man."

But Nick could give a shit about Cyril's thunder. Cyril is a very respectable piano player, and generally tends to get good gigs. He plays casuals to pay the bills, as they all do, Nick included. He's always cutting a new CD, and getting some little distribution

deal somewhere, and selling a handful at gigs. Cyril used to be a personal favorite of the late Chuck Niles from KLON, and genuinely gets the respect and fellowship of his colleagues. He is friendly, he is outgoing, he does the showmanship thing on gigs, tends to jump up and down from his seat during solos and stand to demand an applause when it's over and it's time for the next guy's solo.

How on earth can Cyril possibly think that little brother Nick has any hope of stealing that kind of thunder? Nick is cranky and self-loathing on a good day. Hates gigging, especially casuals, and only just wants to bow his head toward the keys, close his eyes, not have to give a shit about his audience, and play.

He and Emil, the middle brother, get along well, probably because Nick has never threatened to touch the drums. But two piano players in the house? That has meant war for the Brandt brothers.

As he stares at the photo that has begun to fade and yellow from age, he breathes in the Miles and falls intoxicated by Bill Evans's piano, as he recalls a night some while ago at a bar, where he'd finished his last set of the night and was just sitting down for a drink. He got chatty with a lonely lady, who complimented his playing, bought him his drink, and was shortly thereafter getting Nick's life story, which included the woeful rift between he and Cyril, a rift that is by now as aged and yellowed as this photo. But it does still make for good bar sympathy. Especially from lonely ladies.

"Oh my God, you two are the Fabulous Baker Boys!" she chirped, and

continued chirping. “Remember that movie? Doesn’t that, isn’t that, I mean, when you saw that movie, did you just, like, die, and go, ‘*my God, that’s, like, my life up on that screen?*’ You saw that movie, right?”

It was at that instant that Nick knew he would not be taking this dip-shit with tits home with him. That goddamned movie had always bugged him. Two pianos! There’s never two pianos! In what fucking made-up world are there ever two pianos?

“Look, I don’t mean to piss on your favorite movie, but that flick was complete bullshit. There’s never two fuckin’ pianos. What’s the point o’ that?” he slobbered in her general direction, to which she responded with a blank look and a slightly dropped jaw. “You would never put two pianos on the same gig. I mean, unless it’s, like, a whole rhythm section, and then you might wanna augment the piano with a synthesizer, to do all the string shit and the fake, fuckin’ horn stabs and shit. But two grand pianos? Two acoustic, grand pianos? And nothin’ else? That’s ONLY in the concert world. You know, classical music and shit, where there actually is repertoire written for piano duos. Or maybe, like, back in the days o’ boogie-woogie, and cats like Fats Waller, when it was all about showboating dueling pianos. But you know, this shit about, like, playin’ Ramada Inns with two grand pianos, and doin’, like, fuckin’, *Melancholy Baby?* That was the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever fuckin’ seen on a screen.”

It might’ve been short on coherence, but it was ripe with gusto. When he realized that he’d ranted on in a language that was as unintelligible for its inebriation as for its content, he looked her way and caught the dumbfounded stare.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to touch a sore spot,” she finally got out, with just a touch of sarcasm. “Y’ever think about seein’ a shrink for that one, Joe? Cuz, it’s just a fuckin’ movie.”

And she promptly turned on her heels and sashayed down to the opposite end of the bar.

He remembers that night, of the many like it, clearly now, as he stares longer upon the three youthful Brandt brothers, and suddenly recalls that he had tried to spit back at her that his name was Nick, not Joe, but hadn’t managed it before she’d gotten herself out of earshot.

Tonight his head swims with thoughts of scenes that often end badly, and he ponders how, at the close of each, he always winds up alone.

The band he and his two brothers had formed they’d named Pie in the Sky. He stares longer at the three of them, playing some lounge outside of Wichita when he is barely nineteen. Emil, the drummer, is tall and lanky, but Nick and Cyril have always been short, squatty types. Dark features all three, though Emil has wisps of the dirty blond through his generally brunette, thinning hair.

Dear God in Heaven! Bill Evans’s piano playing is just about the tenderest thing Nick has ever heard. It is so sparse. See, that’s what guys don’t get. You don’t have to fill a song with a bunch of shit. Just let it talk to you. It may speak gently, or it may even argue with you a bit. But just leave it alone and let it speak. It isn’t supposed to be about showboating, flashing what kind of chops you have. In Bill Evans’s case on this

beautiful composition, his piano is like raindrops. Or flower petals falling. Or women weeping. Nick can't make up his mind which. But he begins to weep from the sheer radiance of it, until he finds himself stumbling up, heading for the bathroom, and kneeling on his knees, with his head hanging over the toilet, waiting for something to happen.

Flamenco Sketches is the last cut on the *Kind Of Blue* album, so when it's done, Nick is suddenly left alone in silence. And the silence is maddening. He wants to play his grand piano right now, but it's two-something in the morning, and he has neighbors with whom he shares a wall. Instead, he waits to pray. Just kneels, hands pressed together, as if in a holding pattern, wondering if vomiting is in his future, and waiting to be cleared for take-off.

When no retching comes, he slowly bows his head.

“Dear God, forgive my sins, which are bountiful and great. And let me find my way to your glory. I'm lost. So lost...”

But Nick Brandt hasn't lost his grace, as he self-deprecatingly claims every night before his toilet, or knelt at his bedside, begging God to redeem him. He just can't seem to realize that it's all in his hands, a set of hands that are easily as magical as Bill Evans's, a set of hands that have always been much more gifted than older brother Cyril's, which is where the real similarities between them and THAT movie lie, and which is the true source of Cyril's discomfort. And Nick hates having to receive the compliments that often come to him from cats who know both brothers, and are

constantly whispering their asides that he is the more talented of the two. He can never take those compliments as flatteries. He doesn't want to be better than Cyril. Or worse. Or anything that has to do with measuring them against each other. For Nick, it has never been about one-upmanship. That isn't what playing is supposed to be about.

He weeps and coughs and weeps and coughs so profusely this night, as are many like it, that he can barely get his prayer out. And he wonders if God is able to decipher the drunken mumblings of his coughing fit, enough to hear him and answer.

“Please, Heavenly Father, help me to find the grace that I seem to have lost. I wish only to do your will, Lord, which I know is the way to the kingdom of Heaven. Fuck! Oh, fuck me, goddamn it!”

And the retching suddenly begins, lurching him into a series of convulsions that cramp his ribs.

Where there had been flight, magnificent flight, earlier, there is now only the leaden weight of his self-abuse, and his pinings for God to take away his ache. Please, just take it away!

It is the last thing he remembers.