

THE GIFT

for Television
Inspired by real events

by
Jeff Resnick

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“LOSS”

The Narrator

He was born with the gift. From the time he was a small child, he reveled in the absolute joy of making music. It just came naturally. On his twelfth birthday, his father rewarded him with a tenor saxophone, so very appropriate for this youngster named Woody Reed. Dad also enrolled his young son in the local musician's union, and bought him a white tuxedo jacket, making his entry into the business of music official. A week later, he arranged the boy's first gig with a quartet of old wedding-band musicians who owed Dad a favor or two. When Woody arrived at that first wedding gig, making the decades-long foursome a quintet, the old-timers sulked like the joke was on them. One favor too many, they must have thought. After bemoaning the band's bad luck for a few moments, the trumpet player picked up his horn, rolled his eyes, and looked askance at Woody.

"Okay, kid," Trumpet Man said. "Let's hear what you can do."

Woody wasn't nervous. Not even a little. When you're twelve, nothing makes you nervous. He just lifted his saxophone from its burgundy velvet-lined case and stood at the ready.

"You know *Misty*?" Trumpet Man asked.

"No," Woody hesitated, "but I'll jump in on the second chorus after I hear you play the first."

"Got big ears, huh, kid?"

"Yeah," Woody replied sheepishly.

As I've already told you, Woody possessed the gift. He joined in on the second chorus, as promised, keeping one eye on Trumpet Man to catch his reaction. Within a few moments, eyebrows were raised on the other band members, as well, not to mention the guests slow-dancing to *Misty*. Woody didn't really understand yet that he possessed the gift. All he knew was that he loved playing music, that he had been blessed with the ability to entice a wonderful, warm tone from his sax, and that his quick mind instantaneously allowed him to mimic whatever he heard. Trumpet Man jumped back into the lead on the bridge, and Woody closed out the chorus. Then they switched, and were off to the races, as they say. As the song ended, the audience applauded enthusiastically, waiting for another danceable tune, and the old guys in the band favored Woody with a knowing look that seemed to say, '*You're okay, youngster.*' Never make an audience wait when they're applauding, and Trumpet Man called out the next tune.

"You know *Lush Life*?" he teased.

"No, but I'll jump in on the second chorus."

Without waiting for Woody to finish his answer, the tall, lean piano player closed his eyes and eased into the introspective introduction of *Lush Life*, Trumpet Man stifling a chuckle, which became the pattern for the evening. Woody sensed he was in his element. This was where he

belonged. Just before midnight, the bride and groom departed for the honeymoon suite, which was the band's cue to play *The Party's Over*. The quartet of oldsters could see the future in that very moment, knowing all too well that Woody felt like he was just warming up, and didn't want to stop playing, ever, for any reason. Even at this young age, he experienced the deepest of yearnings that music alone seemed able to satisfy. But, alas, he followed Trumpet Man's lead and closed out the final tune, and the party, with a flourish, wondering why he was finding it so painfully difficult to abandon the moment.

When they were all packed up, Trumpet Man gently wrapped his right arm around Woody's shoulder and looked him in the eye.

"Kid, I don't know where you learned to play like that, but you are one great little tenor player. I guess your folks named you right!"

"Thanks," Woody said with a nervous shuffle.

"Not only that, but you're a fast learner, with a great ear, too," Trumpet Man added. "That'll take you far in this business, if you don't screw up first. Listen, we got another wedding gig tomorrow night, kid. Wanna join us?" he asked with a slight tilt of his head, his right hand now patting Woody's shoulder several times in a genuine gesture of encouragement.

A bond had been formed, the kind of bond that transcends generations of performing musicians. Oh, I don't doubt that similar bonds exist between athletes in any team sport, but when is the last time you saw a 63-year-old pitcher playing professional baseball on the same field as a 12-year-old second-baseman? Woody sensed that tomorrow night would be another chance to share his gift. And tomorrow, he would be able to play the *first* chorus of every song he had played tonight. If you must know, many musicians possess such a gift. But it would be years before Woody Reed would comprehend that he had been given another Gift, more far-reaching and bizarre than the mere gift of music. And he would be one of a select group ever to have received this gift from the omniscient giver of Gifts. With such a history shaping his destiny, surely it wouldn't be long before Woody Reed would experience his first journey into The Zone.

What is The Zone, you ask? Undoubtedly, you've heard tell of the Olympic 100-meter sprinter who exercises not only his body, but trains his mind to visualize every split second of the gold medal race before the gun sounds. Still in the blocks, he imagines every muscle not yet taut, every breath of air not yet inhaled, every inch of ground not yet traversed. And when the starter pistol explodes, so too does the sprinter, his running shoes barely touching earth as he flies through the air for nine heart-stopping seconds, thus entering The Zone. Whether the result of years of relentless practice or the gift I've spoken of, more likely a combination of the two, The Zone exerts a particularly strong pull on performing musicians. I know this to be true, for indeed I have traveled to The Zone on countless occasions, each time amazed at what, and whom, I encounter there. Yes, I said *'traveled to,'* as opposed to *'entered'* or *'visited.'* You're very

perceptive to have noticed my choice of words. But this is not my story, after all. It's Woody's. So I think it would be best if I let Woody tell you about *his* first journey to The Zone, in his own words. What awaits you might be considered by some to be disturbing. So consider yourself warned. Much like the verbal disclaimer intoned on commercial breaks while you're watching movies on cable television, *the content of this program may not be appropriate for all viewers, and discretion is advised.*

Woody Looks Back

It's been said that all things happen for a reason. The problem is, we never seem to know that reason. Such was the case with me, Woody Reed. It's strange, but you're going along, just kind of coasting without giving life much thought, when all of a sudden something happens that sets off a chain reaction, and you're no longer in control of yourself or your surroundings. As it's happening, you get this weird feeling that there must be a reason for it, but that reason is just beyond your mental grasp. The more you try to reach out for it, the farther into the background it recedes, so you convince yourself you should be satisfied just to ride the wave, all the while not knowing how or when you even got into the water.

Looking back now, all these years later, I can't help but cherish the friendship that developed between Trumpet Man and me. From that first wedding gig, he took me under his wing, both to protect me and to nurture me, I'm sure. But there was something else, just beneath the surface, which took me some time to understand. The more we performed together, the more I noticed that his other band mates never socialized with him. They were happy enough to *perform* with him, and even to follow his musical lead. But when break time came, they went their way and he went his. *Theirs* always seemed to end up in front of the bar, savoring one too many drinks. *His* way always seemed to end up outside in the back alley, regardless of the weather, sipping a glass of ginger ale and smoking one too many unfiltered cigarettes. He never offered me one, though. On the contrary, he relentlessly lectured me on the ills of tobacco, making me promise never to take a drag, explaining that once you start it's almost impossible to stop. Come to think of it, he also warned me about the perils of alcohol. It seemed his mission in life was to protect me from any substance abuse whatsoever, because he himself had fallen out of favor far too many times. In this regard, as I got older I began to realize that it was I who protected him, from temptation, and from opportunity. After all, as long as he spent his spare time with me, he wouldn't get into trouble himself.

On the bandstand, Trumpet Man always smiled. That's what the people wanted to see, and he was willing to oblige. And yet I couldn't help but notice a deep sadness in his eyes. I'm sure no one else saw it. Then again, maybe others knew its cause but chose to ignore it, convinced there was nothing they could do to change it. As I grew older, we became not just band mates but the closest of friends, despite the 51-year disparity in our ages. We developed a comfortable habit of enjoying a cup of coffee at the nearest bistro after every gig. It was a relaxing and necessary means to unwind, to talk about the music we had just performed, and to make plans for the next gig, and the one after that. On one such occasion I learned the source of his sadness. We sat there, he and I, not saying too much of anything. I could tell from the look in his upward-turned watery eyes that I was about to become privy to a secret that could be shared

with none but the most trusted friend. As he contemplated the ceiling, the smoke wafting from his cigarette in lazy circles, he began to speak very softly, almost as if I weren't even there.

"I remember when I was your age, Woody," he lamented. "Like you, I had the whole world in my pocket, not a care in life. Mona and I had been married for less than a year. It was a great time. I was gigging just about every night then, making decent money in those days, waiting for my big break. One night, I was sitting in with The Count, wailing like crazy on tune after tune. Rumor had it that his lead trumpet player had run off with some chick that very afternoon. When he didn't show up for rehearsal, I got the call I had been dreaming about for far too long. The Count ambles over to me, hands me a wad of cash for the night's work, and tells me he's taking the band on a long road trip. He asks if I'd like to join him, filling the now-vacant lead trumpet seat. I couldn't believe my good fortune! I exploded into laughter and managed to squeeze out a positive nod of my head."

Trumpet Man stopped speaking, retreating further into himself. I decided not to say a word, afraid to interrupt the moment. He lowered his eyes and took a deep drag off his cigarette. Holding his breath to savor the nicotine kick, he looked back up at the smoke rings swirling towards the ceiling and continued his story.

"I went right home, woke Mona up, and told her the news. I was so excited, couldn't stop pacing back and forth across the bedroom floor."

He stopped again. This time, I knew he needed to be asked.

"What happened?" I ventured.

"She was cryin', Woody. Tears were rolling down Mona's cheeks, and her shoulders began to shake from trying to stifle her sobs. I asked her what was wrong. I told her this was my big break. *'We're gonna have a baby,'* she mumbled. I guess I was too thick-headed to understand the problem. *'Mona, that's the best news yet,'* I told her reassuringly. But she just kept on cryin'. Hadn't I just been offered a gig with The Count, my long awaited break into the big time music business? And weren't we about to fulfill our dream of having a child? I didn't get it, Woody. But Mona got it. She said to me ever so gently, *'and where do you suppose I'll be living, with a newborn baby, while you're out on the road?'* Hey, you can come with me, Mona. It'll be great! She paused to let my offer sink in before she answered again. *'You know the road is no place for a wife, let alone a baby. We talked about this. Don't you remember? You agreed there'd be no road gigs once we started a family. It just doesn't work. It can't work. You know that, don't you?'*"

"Did you go?" I asked.

"Naah. She was right, and I knew it. And Mona knew that I knew it couldn't work. I spent the night cradling her in my arms, promising I wouldn't leave her and the baby alone no matter how hard it might be to give up on my dream. The next night I finished up the gig and told The Count I couldn't join him on the road after all. The look on my face said it all, I guess. *'The wife?'*

he asked. I just nodded, and he knew the rest. He shook my hand and tried to comfort me by telling me he'd call me next time he was in town. But that was the last time I saw The Count."

I reached over and put my hand on Trumpet Man's shoulder, as he had done so many times with me. We sat without saying a word before he pushed himself out of his chair, silently indicating it was time to call it a night. As we walked to our cars, I was struck by the thought that his was but one story. Each of his band mates undoubtedly had his own story, each existing outside the realm of the other. I can't tell you why, but I suddenly thought about all the people on this earth, past and present. The infinite scope of our universe overwhelmed me. At that precise moment in time, I realized that countless generations of stories were indeed the threads that wrapped around our very souls, uniting mankind in ways we can never know. And that is what prompts me to tell you my own story, in the sincere hope that its telling will add to our collective understanding of who we are.

Woody in Turbulent Waters

I first encountered the turbulent waters while a much younger man, sitting in with a band I had never played with before that night. Now that I'm starting to tell you about my journey, I can't say for certain where I'll be when the story finishes, for I haven't arrived there yet. But you'll see what I mean, later, and you'll understand why I don't seem to know where I'm going at the moment, so bear with me, please. If I'm lucky, maybe I'll know where I'm going when I get there.

"Take it, Woody!"

Those words were music to my ears! But this gig hadn't started out so comfortably. All I have to do is close my eyes and I'm back in that moment, on stage in front of a sold-out house of 3,500 people wanting desperately to be entertained so they can put their worldly troubles aside for a few hours. As luck would have it, the band's tenor player woke up that morning with a bad case of strep throat. He couldn't even swallow, let alone blow on his sax. I got the call at three o'clock that afternoon, asking, no, begging me to sit in with the group for this show. Although I couldn't banish the recollection of Trumpet Man's story of sitting in with The Count so many years ago, I also knew that I couldn't turn down the opportunity presented to me.

I admit to being nervous when we took to the stage at 8 P.M., *sharp*. It's funny, but as a kid, I never got nervous about performing, or anything else, for that matter. Perhaps if I could have rehearsed with the band before stepping onto this stage, even for ten or fifteen minutes, I wouldn't have been trembling the way I was. But given the circumstances of my hiring, there was no time for rehearsal that afternoon, not even a dry run-through. I had the benefit of only the 30-minute sound check at six o'clock. If you've ever done a sound check, you know that it's not play time. No, this is the only chance the sound engineer gets to test the PA system, properly place the microphones and speakers, balance the sound both in-house and on-stage, and make sure the stage monitors are working without adding any dreaded feedback to the house mix. By 6:30, everyone else in the band was ready to chill out in the dressing room, secure in their comfort zone of camaraderie, either not realizing or not caring that I was on the verge of begging for a little rehearsal time to calm my pre-concert nerves. Don't get me wrong. I'd sat in with Jazz groups in the past, often on short notice. But this night would be something very different, my first experience playing Big Band Jazz. My first priority that night had been to focus on accurately sight-reading the arrangements so I wouldn't stick out like a sore thumb. The second priority had been trying to fit in with ten other instrumentalists who had been performing together for years, and seemed able to read each other's minds on stage. The horn section was unbelievably well rehearsed and tight. Their phrasing was so musical and right on the money, and they were careful to cue me with knowing nods whenever necessary. Once I had made it into the second set, I started to feel in synch with everything going on around me. I could tell the

band was waiting for me to bust loose. They'd heard me play before, to be fair, so they certainly knew I had the chops. Once fully settled into the groove of the show, I must admit that I hadn't had this much fun in a long time! This band was a cooking little machine. But there we were, well into the final set, when the band leader took the microphone in hand to address the enthusiastic crowd.

"You've been a great audience tonight, and we've had a blast playin' for you! We're gonna close out the show with a tune most of you have probably never heard, 'cause it was written way back before your *grandparents* were born! I guess I'm a sucker for old Jazz standards! But before we stretch this one out, put your hands together for our saxophonist for tonight's show, Woody Reed!"

Polite applause was scattered throughout the hall, understandable since I was only a stand-in who hadn't yet been offered the limelight.

"You may be wondering who this guy is. Well, Bobby, our regular sax man, came down sick this morning, and the only guy *he* would let us call to take his place at the last minute was Woody, which is really saying something because we all know Bobby is the best of the best."

I hadn't known Bobby had said that about me until I had just heard it with my own ears. If true, it was indeed a compliment of immense proportions. I knew Bobby. I'd heard him play, and he was indeed among the best around.

"Bobby told us to let Woody cut loose on this song, said he'd heard him play it before, told me to warn you to hold on to your seats. So, we're gonna feature the *wood-man*, here, on this old tune called...*Lush Life*."

I was in shock. Sure, I knew the song well. In fact, it's a song that held very special meaning for me. But the realization that I was about to be featured as the soloist fronting a band I'd never played with before that night got my knees knocking pretty badly. I had to remind myself that I was quite used to listening, then jumping in when ready. Even that process was different, now that I had matured musically. No longer did I need an entire chorus to hear what was happening. It was instantaneous. I could jump in *as* I was listening, sensing exactly where the song was going before it ever had a chance to get there.

The audience seemed to sense that something special was about to take place as the arrangement built in intensity from chorus to chorus. I felt it, too, like a bolt of lightning working up its electrical charge before exploding through the ozone when its energy could no longer be held at bay. I scanned my written part to see the words *Extended Tenor Solo* seeming to jump off the page. Okay, here we go. This was the moment Jazz musicians spend a lifetime preparing for, the chance to step up and strut your stuff. And then I heard those words offered from behind me.

"Take it, Woody!"

The first few bars flowed out of my tarnished old saxophone, as if without any conscious participation on my part. I was feeling loose as a goose, as they say, and soon my thoughts were streaming out in long, mellifluous phrases that I didn't even realize were within my mind until I had played them. By then, they were already a distant memory, now the foundation of what was yet to come. Behind me, though I couldn't *see* them, I could *feel* the rhythm section building with me as I achieved an emotional outpouring which I, and everyone around me, would likely remember for years to come. My heartbeat began to quicken, as did my breathing, and my fingers soon followed, flying through patterns that I had no advance knowledge of. My eyes were closed tightly, yet I could *see* the pulsating red glow of the spotlights through my eyelids, and I began to experience the very strange sensation of thinking about two things simultaneously: the music I was playing, and my own reaction to the music I was playing, as if I was having a conversation with myself, within myself, without getting in the way of the emotions emanating from my horn. Strange, but as I was talking to myself about this experience, I was still building, striving, reaching, pushing, wailing to all who would listen.

I had to remind myself to breathe, because unless I did, I'd surely have passed out. But the creative force within my mind had taken control, and wouldn't let the vessel of my physical body take in the life-giving fresh air. *Breathe, Woody, breathe!* But no breath was to be allowed, and my lungs seemed about to burst at their seams, if such seams exist. The band was right there with me, every step of the way, pushing me harder, higher, louder, frantically engulfing me within an ocean of pounding rhythm and a thunderous wave of pure adrenaline. The audience was up on its feet, jaws dropping in disbelief at what the people were seeing and hearing, urging me on to new heights. I couldn't see them, but I felt them, relishing the flood of notes cascading out of me faster than my mind could process in real time. And then...it happened.

Trying to put '*it*' into words will be difficult, perhaps futile, because what I experienced next defies language. I felt myself...*rising*. That's the only word I can think to describe it. But I had the distinct sensation of rising above the cacophony of the live performance. All the while, I continued to play, maintaining the internal conversation with myself from *above*, as I viewed my physical body down *below* on the stage. I still hadn't taken a breath, as I knew I should, as I knew I must. And I wondered, *have I passed out?* Rising yet higher, I looked down as I floated over the entire concert hall. The band was still cooking with incredible intensity behind me on the stage, laser lights flashing. The crowd was up, watching in eager anticipation of who knows what. And I was up, drifting way up above it all, watching myself play, watching myself turning red from lack of breath, watching myself trying so hard to get to where I now undoubtedly was, not realizing that I had already entered The Zone. All at once I got the shivers just thinking about this out-of-body experience. After so many years of struggling to get there, I had arrived at where I *thought* I had wanted to be. I continued to rise, higher and yet higher, until something scared

me to the core of my soul. Something...or someone...brushed against my arm. In a panic, I looked down to the stage below and saw there was no one close enough to me, no one in a position to touch me. I felt it again, this time with a whisper of cold breath in my ear as my arm was brushed a second time. Then, I heard the voice.

"Hey, kid..."

I knew that voice so well, and that's what scared me beyond salvation. It was the voice of Trumpet Man. I looked down again, and I could see and hear my physical self on stage spilling out my deepest emotions. But high above it all my spiritual self was jolted, reeling from the stabbing pain I had tried so desperately to suppress every time I thought about this moment in time that now seemed destined to escape my self-imposed confines. I was in full control of the music *below*, while totally out of control emotionally, *above*, which scared me far more than hearing his voice. In hindsight, I now know this was the very moment I first waded headlong into the waters of revelation, for Trumpet Man had indeed died in my very arms a year prior. I had been with him that night, playing yet another wedding gig. Afterwards, we were enjoying our traditional cup of coffee together at a local bistro, as had become our custom. Without warning, he abruptly closed his eyes in pain only a moment before his head fell to the table with a loud thud. I rushed over to his side, knocking my chair to the floor in the process, and cradled his head in my arms. He opened his eyes, looking up at me so helplessly as he murmured words I can never forget.

"Hey, kid...remember me . . ."

Those had been Trumpet Man's last words. He died looking into my eyes, never closing his own. I sensed the people as they formed a semi-circle around our table, hesitating in that obscene moment of fear before offering help. I heard their whispers, but I was oblivious to their presence. Everything was a blur of indistinguishable sights and sounds in my mind. If only he hadn't opened his eyes before departing, maybe my life would have been different, without this story to tell. But peering directly into the eyes of someone you love as death overtakes that person is a perverted intimacy that you never can forget or overcome. I knew the moment his soul departed his body, for in that instant his eyes became clouded and unfocused. But I could do nothing but stand there, frozen, convinced that if I merely maintained eye contact he would emerge from his nightmare. After what seemed to me to be mere scant seconds in the continuum of time, the sound of the siren cut through my defenses. Then I heard the shouts.

"Give us some room, move, move aside!"

The paramedics rushed to our table. Contrary to all the stories I'd ever heard, there was no death grip to deal with. No, someone all too gently lifted Trumpet Man's right hand from my shoulder, though I couldn't remember him placing it there. The paramedics spent the better part of ten minutes desperately trying to revive him from his eyes-open sleep, to no avail. I stood

there and watched, hearing nothing, seeing no one. I was hustled into the ambulance for the trip to the hospital, or perhaps the morgue, I knew not which. This was my first experience with death, you see, and I was in shock, I suppose, because I refused to believe that he had passed on, or through, or whatever the case may be.

For me, he never left. To this day, I still expect he'll sashay into my next gig, trumpet in hand, eager and ready to share his own gift with me. In my dreams, I endlessly relive those final moments. I can't say that I saw fear in his eyes in those last seconds. Rather, I sensed profound confusion, as if his mind was spinning out of control with his last-second plea, smothered by lack of oxygen: "*No, wait, I'm not ready yet!*"

Now, floating so high above that foreign stage, I was terrified, convinced that I was about to enter a dimension I was far too young to contemplate. So I did what I instinctively knew I had to do to save myself. I breathed. Long, deep, wrenching breaths. Instantaneously, I was back on stage, back in the moment, down on my knees, gasping for breath, soaking up the thunderous applause from the audience, sensing the shocked looks of disbelief on the faces of the musicians behind me as I turned my head to salvage my bearings. The standing ovation continued, the crowd now realizing they had witnessed something they would likely never see or hear again in this lifetime. I slowly got to my feet, exhausted beyond anything I'd ever felt before. It was all I could do to drag my battered body off-stage, where I collapsed onto the floor, barely managing to keep my horn from crushing damage. Thankfully, the curtains drew to a close, and the show was over. The other musicians came running off the stage towards me, fear in their eyes as they saw me sprawled on the floor, saxophone cradled protectively on my chest. The first to reach me was the piano player, he an ebony-skinned Jamaican named Ivory Keyes. It was all I could do to gather enough strength to ask him what had just happened.

"You be *wayyyy* out there, somewhere none of us ever *beeen*, to be sure."

Confused, I demanded, "Ivory, how long...?"

Ivory answered with a look of wide-eyed amazement.

"About 20 minutes, Woody-mon!"

With that, Ivory helped me to my feet, and half-carried me into the dressing room, where I collapsed into a heap, unable to find the strength to keep my weary eyes from closing. But something else was at work here, something I didn't understand.

Woody & The Deep Sleep

The next thing I remember was waking from a deep sleep, totally unaware of where I was, how I got there, and how long I'd been there. As I opened my eyes, I could see Ivory, looking intently at me from a chair nearby. I sat up slowly, realizing I was on a couch, with a pillow and blanket at my head and feet.

"Welcome back, Woody-mon."

"Ivory...where am I?" I asked in a hoarse whisper.

"You be in my pad, mon, sleepin' on my couch," he answered, with the hint of a smile slowly forming. He raised one eyebrow before uttering his next words.

"Today be Monday, Woody-mon."

I looked at him incredulously. My only recollection was being helped into the dressing room after the show. That was Saturday night, which meant I couldn't account for the last 36 hours of my life. It was only then that I realized I had experienced something beyond explanation, indeed beyond the realm of credibility. Looking back now over the years that have since passed, that night on stage had opened the floodgates that I had fought so hard to keep barricaded, lest I drown in the memory of Trumpet Man's final words to me. At the time of his death, I was too numb even to cry. No matter how hard I tried to force the tears, they wouldn't come. Mona had insisted I perform *Lush Life* at his funeral, just my solo tenor without accompaniment. There I had stood, saxophone in hand, in front of all those who loved him so dearly. Mona leaned close and whispered in my ear, confiding that Trumpet Man often told her that my rendition of that classic song was his favorite, and she was sure he would have wanted me to play it for him. As I raised the horn to my lips that day, the tears finally arrived, rolling down my face uncontrollably. To this day, I can't remember a single note I played. But everyone who was there told me it was the most soulful rendition of *Lush Life* they had ever heard.

So you see, my first journey to The Zone after Trumpet Man's death had convinced me that I didn't care to travel there again. To be perfectly frank, I couldn't deal with the prospect of returning, wondering what would have happened to me had I allowed myself to engage in conversation with Trumpet Man, so high above the stage that fateful night. Truly, I had loved this man. But the mere thought of communicating with a spirit, for that's all he could be, sent goose bumps running up my spine. Had I really been on the verge of another dimension? Had I actually felt the presence of Trumpet Man? Had I indeed heard his voice, felt his cold breath? I was scared. Very scared, fearing what could happen to me the next time I pulled my horn back out to play. I had always been told that I had The Gift, without really knowing what that meant. But now, I was terrified that something much more powerful was at work, and out of my control. So I have avoided thinking about it. In fact, I've avoided pursuing music with any sense of passion

whatsoever for fear of getting carried away. And I say that figuratively and literally, if you catch my drift. And today, at least, as I tell you the story of my first journey to The Zone, I can only wonder if my old, tarnished saxophone will ever see the outside of its burgundy, velvet lined case again.

“REVELATION”

The Narrator

Well, well! It seems quite some time ago that I told you Woody Reed would describe his first journey to The Zone, in his own words. Give this young man an inch and he takes a mile! Of course, he was always like that, even as a youngster practicing his saxophone hour upon hour. Tell him it's time to quit and you could see that momentary flicker of rebellion in his eyes. Remember that first wedding gig when Trumpet Man called out '*The Party's Over*' as the last song of the evening? Woody was only twelve at the time, not yet wise to the inner workings of his creative mind, not to mention all the creative energies surrounding him. You just knew he didn't want to stop, undoubtedly couldn't stop the creative flow in midstream at the drop of a hat. And why should he, when you get right down to it? Didn't you ever wonder why Jazz musicians have such a hard time coming down after a gig? It's all about reveling in the moment. No wonder it's so hard to let go of it. Life demands that we rebel against what we seem so unable to comprehend. Is it wrong to try so desperately to hang on to those rare moments of revelation? I'm not surprised that Woody would go on and on as he did, unable to turn the faucet *off* once opened. You see, I've been where he now is. I *know* of what I speak.

After Woody's traumatic first journey to The Zone, he escaped to the life of a musical vagabond, traveling the highways and byways, sitting in with Jazz groups wherever and whenever he could, with never a callback for a second show after it became apparent that his heart just wasn't in it, for reasons *they* surely could never understand. And he couldn't blame them. On one such foray down Main Street in small-town America, Woody drove past a large art-deco theater, the well-lit marquis flashing: '*A Tribute to American Music.*' As if drawn by a magnet, he parked nearby and walked back to the theater. But once again, this is not my story, after all. It's Woody's. So I think it would be best if I let Woody tell you about his second journey to The Zone, in his own words. Remember, what awaits you might be considered by some to be disturbing. So consider yourself warned. Much like the verbal disclaimer intoned on commercial breaks while you're watching movies on cable television, '*the content of this program may not be appropriate for all viewers, and discretion is advised.*'

Woody & The Performer

A live concert is an exciting experience for audiences and musicians alike. And that's how it was with me, Woody Reed. A crowd was lined up at the box office to purchase tickets for tonight's show, so if I hoped to get a seat, I'd better buy my ticket right now! Once inside, I picked a seat in the middle of the hall, craning my neck to see the large, art-deco chandelier some 30-feet overhead. The seats were upholstered in plush velvet, the ceiling rounded and high, and the stage large and impressive, graced by the giant maroon curtains one would expect in a theater of this period. People streamed into the hall amid that unmistakable pre-concert buzz that I knew so well. I couldn't help but notice that most of those around me were much older than I, in their fifties, sixties, and then some. At precisely 8:00 o'clock, the house lights dimmed, leaving the final few guests scurrying to their seats.

'Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to tonight's show: a tribute to American music.'

The curtains opened to reveal a 17-piece big-band, a throwback to earlier times, the rhythm section already into the introduction as the leader lifted his trumpet to his lips and began to play a melody I knew well: '*Misty*.' His playing rocked me gently, and I closed my eyes, thinking back to that first wedding gig with Trumpet Man all those years ago, when the first song he had called out was one and the same, '*Misty*.' Midway through the first chorus, my eyes flew open with a start as I realized that I was indeed listening to Trumpet Man's very rendition of this classic song; the same tone; the same phrasing; the same melodic bursts. It was uncanny.

Trumpet Man...I mean, The Performer on stage... abruptly ended his improvisation two bars before the third chorus, which I recognized as the tenor sax player's cue for his own lead-in to the next chorus. Instinctively, my hands jerked upward, as if expecting to lift my tarnished old sax to play my own lead-in. My heart stopped in mid-beat. There must be an explanation for this. In the midst of my confusion, the trumpet section belted out the next chorus, leaving the final one for the trumpet soloist to restate the melody. '*Misty*' closed out with precisely the same ending I remember from my own first playing of this song along side Trumpet Man that night. The audience began applauding, and The Performer smiled broadly, bowing to the crowd. I was frozen in place; frozen in time, more accurately. I couldn't even raise my arms to support my hands to applaud along with everyone else. I felt my mind drifting back in time, as the audience finally relented to The Performer.

"Welcome, ladies and gentlemen, to this evening's performance of A Tribute to American Music. Please put your hands together for a very gifted and talented young musician... Woody Reed!"

The audience laughed loudly at the absurd humor of a saxophonist with such an appropriate name...Woody Reed...but I couldn't hear a thing. At that moment, the entire concert

hall virtually closed in upon me. My heart began to beat uncontrollably, my whole body shaking, and my peripheral vision vanished. I felt unable to extricate myself from a nightmare growing more obscene by the moment. The Performer was looking right at me, as if a Star Trekkian tractor beam had been cast to connect us. He continued speaking to the audience, but I couldn't comprehend the words he was mouthing, his voice lost in an echo chamber, and I gave up even trying to comprehend his words. All the while, his eyes held mine, both of us firmly ensconced within the beam. His were kind eyes, thank goodness, and his expression spoke to me, comforting me, communicating to me and only me, that he knew who I was, why I was here, and that I shouldn't be afraid. Telepathically, it seemed, I heard his voice in my mind, made all the more confusing by the fact that the words I was hearing didn't match the movements of his lips on stage.

'It's OK, Woody. You're here for a reason. And you're among friends. Just close your eyes, sit back in your seat, and try not to be afraid. In a moment, I'm going to introduce the next number on the program. When I do, I want you to remember the last time you played this song. It's a song you know well, a song that has deep meaning for you. But when you hear the name of this song, don't be alarmed. Just remember: all things happen for a reason. In fact, you've been invited to this very town, on this very weekend, and to this very performance in this hall, tonight. You're not alone, Woody.'

Abruptly, we were back in real time. I opened my eyes, and The Performer's words now matched the movement of his lips. I felt weak, certain I would pass out, but I repeated his words of comfort to myself, preparing for what must be coming if he had taken the trouble to warn me of it in advance. I made up my mind at that moment that I would let nothing scare me to the point of losing control of my very thoughts and emotions.

"The next song we'd like to play for you this evening is a classic Jazz standard, perhaps one of the most beautiful songs ever written... '*Lush Life*.'"

It was all I could do to keep from leaping from my seat and screaming at the top of my voice, 'ENOUGH!' But I had been warned this was coming, hadn't I? So I followed the advice I had been given, remaining calmly seated, closing my eyes, taking a deep breath, and letting the music lead me to wherever it was I was being led by whomever was leading me there, and for whatever reason. I reminisced to the first time I had played this song with Trumpet Man, then the time I had played it alone and so soulfully at his funeral, and finally the last time I had played it with the Jazz big-band. The Performer was executing a brilliant rendition of '*Lush Life*' on stage, which allowed me to focus on the song, the music, and the mood. I no longer felt scared, but I must admit to a certain wariness in the back of my mind.

Looking around me, I saw women resting their heads on their husbands' shoulders, nostalgically transported to another time in their lives together. And I thought, this is what it's all

about, isn't it? What better purpose for music than as a gentle rekindling of emotions so long ago experienced and so deeply enjoyed. I turned towards the stage, and there he was, this wonderful performer, seemingly encased in the warm amber glow of the spotlights, his body swaying to the rhythm of the music as he continued his improvisation. I sensed him speaking to me as if in a dream.

'Prepare yourself, Woody, for what's about to happen will rattle your soul if you allow it to.'

I saw it with my own two eyes. Had he not warned me in advance, I surely would have run from the hall, screaming like a raving maniac. But then I felt his presence, like Trumpet Man's gentle hand on my shoulder, calming me, as a mother would her sick child. He was... *rising*...from his stage-bound physical body. Without even a hint of the panic I had felt upon my own rising years earlier, I turned my head to see if anyone around me was seeing what I was seeing. I couldn't be sure, but no facial expressions changed, no heads were raised from shoulders to follow the ascent, no cries of disbelief were gasped. Indeed, not even his own band members seemed to bear witness to his ascension. I looked up to see the spiritual glow now level with the top of the curtain. The Performer's body held fast to the stage as the notes flowed from his trumpet. Higher and higher the apparition rose, now floating over the top of the hall. It seemed to continue for hours, as hands were held, memories were recalled, and eyes misted over. In truth, all this occurred within the span of mere minutes, before his glow slowly and gracefully flowed back across the ceiling, back down the curtains, re-entering his body from which it had risen so elegantly as *'Lush Life'* ended.

To say you could hear a pin drop wouldn't come close to describing the absolute absence of sound, as if sucked from the hall by a giant vacuum. The audience, enraptured, seemed not to want to let go of the moment. But that moment passed, as it always does, and the ensuing applause was as loud and sustained as the moment had been quiet and brief. The Performer took a deep bow, lifting his head only slightly to look directly into my eyes. Even from this distance, I saw a tear roll down his cheek, whereupon he bowed his head again.

"Is that not one of the most beautiful songs ever written? With your permission, allow me to dedicate that performance to a very dear and special friend, a musician we all knew as... Trumpet Man."

I didn't move. I couldn't move. I had just witnessed the most emotionally draining performance I had ever seen, not to mention the spiritual experience which I recognized all too clearly as one I alone had shared, and I could only sit there soaking it all in. I remained in my seat as if glued, wondering what was yet to be revealed. The rest of the evening's performance was a blur, but when it ended and the audience had departed the hall, The Performer walked

down the steps from the stage and up the aisle towards me, a serene and knowing look on his face.

"I'm glad you stayed, Woody."

"Actually...I didn't have much choice...I couldn't move..." I answered with a half smile. His eyes were back on mine, not letting go. I knew what I had to ask, as did he, but I was terrified to let the words escape my mouth, for fear his answer would send me into a panic from which I'd never recover. Sensing my fear, he saved me from having to ask what I knew couldn't be possible.

"Trumpet Man is worried about you, Woody. He asked if I'd look after you, so to speak. I agreed. And here you are."

I had known this answer was coming, yet that didn't diminish its impact, like a cold slap in the face. My eyes were welling with tears, no place to go but down my cheeks, and I didn't fight it.

He gently placed his hand on my shoulder.

"It's all right, Woody...just let it out. Believe me, I know exactly how you feel. I went through the same revelation many years ago. For the moment, all that matters is that you're here, you've experienced the first step, and you're ready to proceed."

"Proceed where?"

"I think you already know the answer to that, don't you?" he asked gently, not wanting to upset me any further as I tried desperately to gather my wits.

"Will you...help me?" I nearly begged in a strained voice I didn't recognize as my own.

"Of course I will, Woody. I'll be with you, every step of the way. You've been blessed with The Gift. As I've been blessed. As Trumpet Man was blessed, and those before us."

"What do I do next?"

"It's time, Woody..." he confided.

"Time for what?"

"Time to climb back up on the horse," he answered.

"I hear 'ya...to be honest, though, I'm terrified of the thought of what might happen... again..."

"Do you *know* what happened to you that night, Woody? The night you've been trying so hard to forget?"

"I can't say that I know, as in knowing that we're now talking about it. But I'd heard stories since I was a kid about musicians entering a special place...The Zone, it was always called. No one I knew had ever done it, though. But we all still talked about it, wondering what it must be like to finally get good enough that you could go there. I can't be sure, of course...but, I *think* that's where I went. Only it wasn't what I thought it would be...not a nice place at all...and

it was all I could do to get out...with my life, I've since thought. And then, last night, you went there, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"I saw you rising, like I rose that night. But you warned me that you would, didn't you? And once I got over the shock of watching you float so high above the hall, I began to understand that maybe it's not the evil place I thought it had been. I looked around me, and I know that no one else saw you rising but me. And I'm sure there's a reason for that, just as I'm sure you'll tell me that reason. Why else have I been invited here...right?"

"You're here because you need to go back, to begin to understand the true nature of that place. Unless and until you do, you'll never be at peace with yourself. You did indeed travel to The Zone, Woody. But when your guardian tried to greet you, you panicked."

"So it *was* Trumpet Man I heard that night," I said with equal parts awe and disbelief.

"Yes, it was, but you left the scene, shall we say, before he could explain where he wanted to take you, what he wanted to show you, and whom he wanted you to meet."

"Meet?" I blurted out too loudly.

"Woody, I'd like to tell you understand the meaning of this place, but you must learn these things for yourself in due time. But I can tell you that it surely is a beautiful place, a place of immense learning and growing, and that you needn't be afraid of returning there."

"But why now, why here, in this place, at this moment?" I demanded to know.

"It's Trumpet Man's ultimate gift to you, Woody. But the more time that passes, the more difficult it will be for you to accept that gift and fulfill your destiny. That first entrance is the result of talents discovered, goals achieved, and dreams realized. But precious few return for a second visit. Most become the victims of their own perceived accomplishments, thereafter spending a lifetime of heartache trying to figure out how to re-enter, but to no avail. No, it's only a chosen few who are invited in, for they possess the *Real* Gift, Woody...which serves as their key to unlock and illuminate the unknown.

I could only stare at him as I attempted to make sense of what I had just been told.

"So, if I understand you," I said, "I've been chosen."

"Yes. Just as I was, and Trumpet Man, and others before us."

"What was it like for you, the first time?" I ask.

"Actually, it was much like your first time, Woody...terrifying. I was young, even younger than you were. I'd heard stories about The Zone just as you had, but I never dreamed I'd ever get there. Then it happened, just like that!"

He snapped his fingers once.

"Everything you experienced, I experienced...the rising, the internal conversation with myself about my music and my own reaction to my music; and the profound terror of being

touched, indeed spoken to by someone I had known and lost years earlier under circumstances not unlike yours with Trumpet Man. Like you, I panicked and forced myself back into the moment to escape something I couldn't comprehend or explain. But that's where the similarity in our experiences ends, Woody. Unlike you, I literally buried my horn in a closet, locked the door, and threw away the key. The mere thought of ever returning to that place was more than I cared to risk."

I could clearly see the pain on his face.

"But...how did you...I mean, I saw you go there with my own eyes. What made you finally decide to return?"

He turned his head back towards me, holding my gaze intently.

"I was lost, Woody. I had pushed music out of my life for 25-years. Think about that. I wasted a quarter century without once allowing myself to experience the only thing in life that made me feel whole. The emptiness just ate away at my insides, until one day I made up my mind I couldn't continue as half-a-person, and not even the better half, at that. I hate to make a joke under these circumstances, but my trumpet finally came out of the closet!"

I could only chuckle at that one, happy, though, that some semblance of normalcy... humor...had returned to his story.

"I can't begin to imagine what it must have been like for you, 25-years without doing what you love doing the most, what you were destined to do."

"Exactly," he agreed. "But better late than never, right? Once I made the decision to do it, actually achieving it wasn't as difficult as I thought it might be. Except for the nerves. That was the toughest part, because when you're older, you don't have the same confidence in yourself that you have when you're young. I practiced diligently, and performed regularly. But the first time I stepped back onto a concert stage, I was so scared, my knees were knocking to the point of buckling, my breathing shallow, and my mind desperately searching for rescue from the emotional turmoil surrounding me. But once I played the first note, Woody, the spell had been broken. Kind of like riding a bike, I guess, once you learn how you never quite forget. Indeed, I re-entered *The Zone*, this time not afraid of what I might find, but eager to unravel the mystery of what I knew I *would* find. And when my guardian greeted me that second time, I embraced his very soul, as Trumpet Man would wish you to do."

His eyes spoke volumes, beyond the meaning of mere words. Just as I had experienced his thoughts during his performance, once again I intuited his words.

'Yes, Woody, you have a choice to make, one that will impact the very essence of your life from this moment forward. This choice is yours alone. No one can help you decide. Not me, or even Trumpet Man.'

"I understand," I offered. *"So...lead me to the horse..."*

Woody Takes The Stage

By 7:30 the next evening, I was sitting back stage with The Performer as the rest of the band prepared to open the show. He patted me on the knee before speaking.

"The hardest part for you, Woody, will be the opening. Just leave it to me. I'll go out first and warm up the audience before I call you out, so be ready. Trust me, by the time I introduce you, they'll be in the palm of your hand."

Soon, I heard the same pre-recorded opening announcement that I'd heard while a member of the audience the previous night. I felt a sudden panic attack coming on, but he recognized it right away, clapped me on the shoulder, and said the four words I needed to hear at that point.

"Just have fun, Woody!"

'Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome to this evening's performance of A Tribute to American Music!'

He smiled, winked, and stepped through the curtains to the warm applause of the audience, as if leaping into a different dimension on the other side of the curtain. There I sat on my side of the curtain, feeling so totally alone and out of place. Last night, he had jumped right into the first selection, *'Misty.'* But tonight, he did something different, addressing his audience at the outset.

"Thank you, ladies and gentlemen, and welcome to this evening's show. You're all in for a special treat tonight, because a very talented young musician will be sitting in with us on tenor sax. And when you hear him play, you'll understand just how great he's destined to become. Please, give your warmest welcome to my young friend on tenor saxophone, Woody Reed!"

My heart dropped into my stomach, and I felt as if I would faint from the overwhelming nervousness I was attempting to conquer, when I suddenly remembered that he had been away for 25 long years before stepping back on stage. How must *he* have felt? Bolstered by the realization that if *he* could do it, so could I, I squeezed through the closed curtain to see him silhouetted in the bright spotlights at stage front, his right arm raised in my direction to welcome me to my spot on stage. The biggest, warmest smile on his face sure helped to calm my nerves.

A full house applauded my entrance, apparently convinced that if he *said* I was good, then I must *be* good! I took my first bow of the evening, the first of many, it would turn out. As my head was down, absorbing that first show of affection from the audience, I was so grateful that he had done exactly as he had promised by putting them in the palm of my hand before I had even played a note of music.

He took the microphone from its stand and glanced at me for the benefit of the audience.

You know *'Misty,'* Woody?"

At once, I was transported back to that first wedding gig with Trumpet Man, when he had asked me the same question. A huge smile broke out on my own face to the delight of the crowd as I answered.

"You start, I'll jump in!"

With that, the band kicked in, and the show was under way, me following his lead. Once through the first chorus, we traded eights for the second chorus, snapped our fingers to the brass section's third chorus, then played a few more as if questioning and answering each other before closing out with that same four-bar ending I knew so well. The audience immediately showed their approval, a few cheers mixed in for good measure. I was in seventh heaven, totally absorbed in making music with such a gifted performer in this beautiful theater. We spent the rest of the show belting out tune after tune: '*Satin Doll*'; '*Lullaby of Broadway*'; '*A Foggy Day*'; '*I Can't Get Started*'; '*Night And Day*'. The audience was right there with us the whole trip, thoroughly enjoying our nostalgic musical journey back through time. I was indeed working alongside a masterful musician and performer. He paced the show perfectly, bringing the audience up, then letting them down ever so gently before raising them up higher than the time before. I was feeling elated, not to mention warm, happy, satisfied, fulfilled...*at home*.

"Did I tell you this kid could play?"

They roared once again, offering me yet another opportunity to soak up their acceptance with a long, graceful bow.

"Well, you ain't heard nothin' yet! For our final selection of the evening, we'd like to play a song that has special meaning for Woody..."

As you know, he was introducing '*Lush Life*'. And as he did, I felt an overwhelming rush of emotion, and a desperate eagerness to play this song in my own way in this place on this night at this time. As the band began the song, he turned to me and whispered: "Take it, Woody!"

Those words were music to my ears. But what he did next almost threw me for a loop. He abruptly turned and ever so quietly left the stage, stepping back through the curtains through which we had both entered. Under any other circumstances, I might have been rocked by such a surprise, but not on this night. Everything felt so...*right*. And I realized that this was his gift to me. There could be no more generous gesture from one musician to another. This was, after all, his audience, his show. What greater compliment than to turn both over to me so unselfishly?

As he must have suspected would happen, I was immediately caught up in the moment, offering the audience my own soulful rendition of this song that I had played years earlier at Trumpet Man's funeral. Eyes closed, I was so intently focused on the moment that a tornado could have swirled across the stage and I wouldn't even have noticed a breeze. As I played, I could see Trumpet Man's eyes in my thoughts. I relived his spirit's departure, soon realizing that my mind was once again splitting itself into two halves, one concentrating on the music, the

other on its emotional impact. That realization brought with it the familiar sensation of seeing the red glow of the spotlights through my tightly closed eyelids, feeling the tears rolling down my cheeks. I knew what was coming, as The Performer must have known I would. But this time I didn't fight it. I didn't give in to the panic, for he had so expertly set me up for what was already beginning to happen to me. I even smiled to myself at the thought of him walking off the stage so purposefully, so stealthily, without the slightest clue of what was to come. But he knew. As I now did.

Once again, I experienced the sensation of rising from the confines of my physical body still tethered to the stage floor. I felt myself floating up the curtains to the ceiling, the hall so far below, over an audience completely unaware of what was taking place in a dimension obviously beyond the scope of their sensory recognition or spiritual comprehension. This time, though, I continued to breathe with purpose, looking down at myself as my body maintained the necessary physical posture of a saxophonist wailing both on and through his instrument. Then I felt it, that brushing up against my arm that I so vividly remembered. On this occasion, I welcomed it, calling out a thought from my inner mind.

'Trumpet Man, is that you?'

'Hey, kid,' I heard through a cold rush in my ear. *'You've come back!'*

Those simple words put me at ease with myself, and I made up my mind to remain in this place for as long as I could, or perhaps as long as I would be allowed. I felt a soaking warmth surround me, as if I were being embraced. Of course, *'embrace'* is only a word, a tool of language wholly insufficient to describe what I was experiencing. I realized then that I would never be able to relate this re-entrance to anyone, because there were no words in any language I knew of that approached an adequate description of something that wasn't even known to exist.

'I always loved the way you played 'Lush Life', Woody. Yes, I heard your performance at my funeral, and saw you, from above. Of course, above is the only word we can use, even though there is no such thing as direction, be it above, below, left, or right...it's all the same. The last thing I wanted to do on your first visit here was to scare you away, but of course that was unavoidable. But I knew you'd come back. And now you have.'

'Trumpet Man...', I asked in thought, *'how did you manage to find him, knowing he'd get me back to where I now am.'*

'As you're beginning to understand, Woody, all things happen for a reason. Let's just say I knew what it would take to convince you that your visit here was part of your life's journey. All that matters is that I convinced him to help you, just as he himself had been helped at another time.'

I suddenly had the strangest sensation about the implausible yet apparent existence of parallel dimensions. After all, far down below I could still see and hear myself performing *'Lush*

Life', despite the fact...for it must *be* a fact...that I was indeed engaged in this other-worldly conversation with someone who no longer was a part of my physical world below. I literally broke out laughing at the mere thought of my thought! Trumpet Man actually joined me in laughter, which was so absurd it made me laugh all the more.

'Wild ride, isn't it, Woody?'

'Wild doesn't even begin to describe it,' I replied.

All too soon, I'm afraid, Trumpet Man let me know that my journey was concluding.

'It's time for you to get back on stage, young man. Your audience awaits you!'

In an instant, I was drifting back across the hall ceiling, then down the curtains and back into my physical body on stage, just in time for the final notes of '*Lush Life*'. I opened my eyes, having returned to this moment in real time, and saw the audience as if in slow motion. To merely say you could hear a pin drop wouldn't even come close to describing the absolute absence of sound, as if sucked from the hall by a giant vacuum. The audience, enraptured, seemed not to want to let go of the moment. But the moment passed, as it always does, and the ensuing applause was as loud and sustained as the moment had been quiet and brief. I took a deep bow to acknowledge my appreciation for the audience's enthusiastic reaction. As I did, The Performer stepped back onto stage through the center of the curtains behind me, gently placed a hand on my shoulder, and grasped the microphone.

"Is that not one of the most beautiful songs ever written? And was this not the most beautiful performance of '*Lush Life*' you've ever heard?"

The audience responded with another round of applause, whereupon I took the microphone into my own hand.

"With your permission," I said, "allow us to dedicate that performance to a very dear and special friend, a musician we both knew as Trumpet Man."

The Performer raised arm from my shoulder as if to insert me into the spotlight for recognition.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please give one final indication of your appreciation to a great young musical artist, Woody Reed!"

I realized he was politely inviting me to leave the stage now, taking the show back into his own hands. I must confess to you, I experienced the briefest moment of rebellion, not wanting to surrender the limelight to him. But that moment was quickly transformed into the deepest sense of gratitude for his role in bringing me back to where I obviously belonged. As I took my final bow of the evening and turned to leave the stage, it was all I could do to make it through the curtains, reeling from sheer physical and emotional exhaustion. Of course, he had known this would happen. That's why he let me leave the stage...without having to be carried

off! I barely made it into the dressing room, where I collapsed in a heap on the couch. My body experienced that welcome spasm that warns of the deep sleep to come.

Woody's New & Important Direction

My next conscious thought was that of waking with no recollection of time or place. I felt a blanket over me, and saw a night light glowing dimly in the corner of what I eventually realized was the dressing room where I had collapsed into sleep who knows how long ago. I lay motionless as I tried to recapture my bearings. Once my senses began to return, I slowly sat up, disentangling from the blanket, and sat for a few minutes with my elbows resting on my knees, my head in my hands. The Performer knocked quietly before entering the dressing room. He looked down at me still sitting on the couch and smiled.

"You look like you've fought ten rounds in the ring, Woody."

"That's how I feel," I confided. "How long have I been asleep?"

"Oh, about 24 hours, Woody! I finished up the show last night, went home, showered, had a late dinner, did the dishes, watched a little TV, read six books, then came back here to make sure you were still among the living!"

I was beginning to understand this was how our relationship was being defined, much like my earlier tradition of sharing coffee and conversation at the bistro with Trumpet Man after every gig. After a few more minutes of idle chatter, he changed the subject.

"Did you have a nice visit, Woody?"

The question actually caught me off guard, as he knew it would, wondering if the word '*visit*' was meant for my visit this weekend to this little town, or for my return visit last evening to The Zone.

"As a matter of fact, I did," I replied, not attempting to clarify his meaning.

"I hoped as much, Woody. But now, I've fulfilled my promise to Trumpet Man, as you must fulfill your own. The time has come for you to leave, for your journey is about to take you in a new and important direction, as you'll soon discover."

With that, we shook hands before he again abruptly turned and walked not off the stage, but out of the dressing room. I would remember The Performer always, and I had no doubt that we were destined to journey together in the future. I took a quick shower, shaved, dressed, packed my bag, grabbed my sax in its burgundy velvet-lined case, and left through the back-stage exit, careful to close and lock the door behind me. I drove off with no particular direction in mind, but with a profound sense of purpose restored. It was only then that I dared wonder what he meant when he warned me that my journey was about to take me in a new and important direction. I had no doubt that this new direction would soon be revealed.

“PASSION”

The Narrator

Back again, are you? I'm well pleased, for Woody's life is about to take a surprising turn, and you deserve to bear witness. After being rescued by The Performer, Woody now knows that The Zone exerts a particularly strong pull on performing musicians. I know this to be true, for indeed I have traveled to The Zone on countless occasions, each time amazed at what (and whom) I encounter there. Yes, I said '*traveled to*' as opposed to '*entered*' or '*visited*.' You're very perceptive to have noticed my choice of words. But again, this is not my story, after all. It's Woody's. So I think it would be best if I let Woody tell you about his next journey to The Zone, in his own words. Remember, what awaits you might be considered by some to be disturbing. So consider yourself warned. Much like the verbal disclaimer intoned on commercial breaks while you're watching movies on cable television, *the content of this program may not be appropriate for all viewers, and discretion is advised.*

Woody Finds The Lodge

Beautiful day for me, Woody Reed, the sun shining brilliantly through the blue sky, the temperature in the mid-50's, as I take to the road with no particular destination in mind. I'm in no hurry, after all, looking forward to the drive as a time to rethink my life's new direction. With each passing mile, my experience with The Performer drifts further into my subconscious, giving way to an appreciation of the landscape through which I'm now passing. I must tell you, though, it was a mistake on my part not to pay attention to the weather forecast, for with every hour driven, I've noticed that the temperature has dropped several degrees, and the sky is looking ominous. It started with mere flurries an hour ago, but the closer I get to higher elevations the heavier the snow. By the time I finally see a road sign announcing I'm within 30 miles of lodging, I'm having trouble maintaining the mental focus to drive on this mountainous road through these blizzard conditions. Perhaps I've made the wrong decision by driving into the mountains without a plan, but I press on, these last 30 miles taking several hours of exhausting concentration. When I finally spot the large, log-cabin-style lodge, I'm totally spent, both physically and mentally. Now 10 o'clock on a stormy Tuesday evening, I have no trouble finding a parking spot, or a room for the night.

"Do you have a restaurant here in the lodge?" I ask the desk clerk once checked in.

"Oh, yes, sir. We're very proud of our excellent restaurant!" she brags.

"How late do they serve dinner?" I asked.

"Until midnight, sir. Would you like me to reserve a place for you?"

Although I was sure I would be the only diner on this dismal night, I agree, thank her, and head up to my second floor non-smoking room after the grueling day of driving. A long, hot shower invigorates me, preparing me for re-entry into wakefulness. I think it might have something to do with my long standing habit of showering before going out to perform, requiring my senses to be at full alert into the wee hours of the morning. Whatever the reason, this evening proves true to form, and the shower leaves me fully refreshed.

Back in the lobby, I approach the restaurant, surprised to see a line of people waiting to be seated, in spite of the blizzard raging outside. Or, is it because of the blizzard? The answer to that question reveals itself in the form of a large poster displayed on an easel just outside the restaurant entrance.

TONIGHT: GUITAR AND VOCAL SONG STYLINGS BY VIOLETTA

The poster features a head and shoulders color photo of a young, green-eyed beauty with short, wavy auburn hair. This, I assume, must be Violetta. As beautiful as is her face, her eyes hint at a

faraway preoccupation with something unseen to any but the most observant viewer. I know that may sound a bit silly, but I couldn't help but sense a deep emptiness in those lovely green eyes, almost as if her sitting for that photo was the farthest thing from her mind or interest. Her eyes seem to be looking towards me, not at me, prompting me to wonder at the cause of such a look. Regardless, I find myself looking forward to the prospect of hearing another musician perform, since I'm usually on the stage myself, unable to take advantage of the opportunity simply to listen to another musician from the audience's perspective. Add to that the anticipation of seeing such a beautiful young woman performing not fifteen feet away from my table, and I'm beginning to think about other things, as well.

I confess, I never really gave much credence to the instrumental abilities of female musicians. Call me a male chauvinist if you like! But in my experience, limited as it may be, women perhaps sang well, but I'd never heard one play with the same emotional intensity and physical control that I myself aspired to. I was about to be educated in the ways of the musical world, my uncalled-for and all-too-common sexist misconception soon to be crushed.

"Do you have a reservation, sir?" the hostess asked, actually startling me from my musing.

"Yes, I do...and it looks like I'll need one," I joked. "My name is Woody Reed."

She scanned her list for only a brief moment.

"Ah, yes, here you are! Right this way, please, Mr. Reed.

I followed her through the restaurant to a small table located on the far wall, quite close to the small carpeted stage, which was raised about two feet above floor level. Though the rear was dark by contrast, I could see a door I assumed must be the stage entrance from a dressing room behind. Since I neither saw nor heard Violetta, I guessed I must have arrived during the break between her first and second sets.

"May I get you something from the bar this evening?" the hostess asked, once again interrupting my thoughts.

"Uhhh, sure." I answered. "I think I'll have a glass of your house ginger ale."

She rolled her eyes and said, "Very well, sir. And will you be having dinner with us this evening?"

"Absolutely," I replied.

"Thomas will be your server, sir. He'll bring your ginger ale immediately, as well as your dinner menu."

"Thank you."

I settled into my chair and looked up to the stage area, noticing right away the absence of a piano in favor of an acoustic guitar upright in its felt-protected metal stand. At center stage was a simple wooden stool topped with a black cushioned seat, and one microphone on a boom stand,

adjusted to the height appropriate for the singer who would be seated on the stool. My ginger ale and menu arrived, and after perusing the available selection for only a moment, I ordered my favorite plate of Pasta Marinara with grilled vegetables. I reflected on how strange it was that as willing as I had always been to take musical risks, when it came to food, I always seemed to avoid any risk whatsoever!

At precisely 11 o'clock, the rear stage door opened. It was difficult to see who was stepping through the door, given the lack of any light at the rear of the stage. But the shadow-like figure was walking with the assistance of a cane, lamely dragging one leg with a physical effort that was impossible not to notice. Once in the still-dimmed lights at stage front, I could now see the beautiful face that graced the poster in the lobby. Violetta wore faded jeans and a black turtleneck blouse beneath a brown leather jacket. She wore no jewelry that I could see. No rings, no bracelet, no earrings, not even a necklace. In fact, I could detect no make-up, either, not even lipstick. She took some time situating herself on the stool, grimacing from the extra effort required to manually cajole her stiff left leg to a position that would allow her to sit in relative comfort. Throughout this process, I noticed that same faraway look I had detected in her photo. She avoided looking out into the restaurant, as if afraid of making eye contact with anyone.

Even more disconcerting, her lips were moving the whole time, like a coach whispering final instructions in her ear. Yes, Violetta was completely lost in her own thoughts, so totally oblivious to the audience sitting but a few feet away. I noticed that my heart was beating more quickly, due to an intense feeling of nervousness for her. Perhaps it was because I could relate to her situation, in that surreal moment a musician takes the stage only a heartbeat away from performing. Or, perhaps I was just an audience member like any other who felt a certain discomfort at seeing such debilitating nervousness in a performer about to bare her soul to strangers so quick to judge her abilities. Whatever the reason, I myself couldn't breathe, desperately wanting the moment to pass, and the music to begin.

As if sensing my thoughts, she set the cane on the floor and slowly lifted her guitar from its stand, spending only a moment tuning the instrument before beginning to play. The lights in the restaurant dimmed while the small spotlights hanging directly above her illuminated brightly, whereupon a sudden radiant smile seemed to miraculously transform an apparently nervous young woman into a professional in full control of the moment. It was impossible to know whether that was in fact how she really felt, or how she had trained herself to begin her performances.

A red spotlight made her auburn hair shimmer; a green one accentuated her radiant emerald eyes; and a yellow one added a soft, mellow glow to her wood guitar. I must admit, this was one beautiful young woman, and I'm afraid I was smitten. As if on cue, the other diners hushed themselves, awaiting her first note.

I closed my eyes, hoping beyond hope to eliminate any visual distraction from my desire to listen to the music now floating from the stage. From her first note, I was struck by what I was hearing. Her music spoke to me in a place other musicians rarely reached. I had to open my eyes to convince myself that it was indeed a she displaying such mastery, not a he. The rich sound, her talent, her very soul reached deep down inside and touched me in a way I'd never felt before. No, this was not just your typical hack guitar player strumming a few chords to back up her singing. She was, without question, a gifted, classically trained musician.

She opened the set with a medley of Brazilian bossa novas composed by Antonio Carlos Jobim, the first song being one of my favorites, '*Corcovado*'. Not only was her guitar work masterful, but her singing voice was both stunning and sultry in its clarity and depth. Best of all, she sang in tune, which is really saying something for singers these days! That trait alone impressed me. '*Corcovado*' segued smoothly into '*Desifinado*', '*How Insensitive*', '*Meditation*', and '*Wave*', before concluding with the ever-famous '*Girl From Ipanema*'. If I had earlier been smitten by Violetta's physical beauty, I now sat mesmerized by her immense talent. Her rare combination of appearance and ability prevented me from taking my eyes off her, quite sure I was falling in love at first sight. The audience applauded with appreciation, and I was afraid I was making quite a fool of myself by standing to offer my own ovation, soon to be followed by the rest of those in attendance. As I stood, she looked at me from her place on stage, and I could swear she winked at me. With that, my knees buckled, and it required all my effort to sit back down without falling head over heels in supplication onto the floor in front of her.

"Thank you for your kind attention," she said, addressing the audience ever so naturally, any hint of nervousness long gone. "And a special thanks to the young man over here who jumped so quickly from his seat to applaud me!" she joked, looking right at me. "I'm sure he must be a musician, by the perfect rhythmic tapping of his foot, and the equally accurate thumping of his fingers on his table. Am I right?"

Should I answer? I felt the eyes of the entire room upon me, certain the laughter I heard was at my expense. The words popped out of my mouth before I had a chance to think.

"Woody Reed, tenor saxophonist, at your service, m'lady!"

Ohhh, noooo, I didn't really say that, did I?

"Woody Reed?" she asked with one raised eyebrow before smiling. "What a wonderful name for a sax player! Is that your real name, or your stage name?"

"Uhh, yes," I answered with a smile of my own.

"Ahhh, you got me with that one, didn't you," she teased.

The audience was now laughing with me rather than at me. She introduced her next medley, then took us all on a magical and mysterious tour of Beatles songs: '*Yesterday*', '*If I Fell In Love With You*', '*Michelle*', '*Eleanor Rigby*', '*Golden Slumbers*', '*She's Leaving Home*', and

'The Long and Winding Road'. I felt like she was singing every song to me alone, before scolding myself that every man in the audience was probably wishing the same thing.

As the spotlights dimmed and the house lights were raised, indicating the set had ended, men and women alike erupted into warm and appreciative applause before once again returning to their watered down drinks and hushed conversations. But I didn't waste a moment. No, I was up at stage front in a flash, offering my sincere thanks for the pleasure of enjoying and appreciating her incredible talent, all the while feeling too much like an overage teenybopper groupie.

"I have never heard anyone sing and play so beautifully, so musically," I heard myself gush.

She hesitated for several long moments, either unsure how to respond or not wanting to appear too forward. I saw the faraway look that had disappeared during her performance return to her eyes. Once again, she was lost in the moment, painfully uncomfortable communicating in any way other than through her music.

"Thanks, Woody. I hope I didn't embarrass you, though," she demurred, all the while looking down at the floor, unable or unwilling to meet my eyes.

I could feel my cheeks blushing, but decided now was definitely not the time to be timid.

"I would like nothing better than for you to join me at my table," I said in a tone that sounded a little too plaintive to my own ears.

As soon as the words were out of my mouth, her body language indicated an inner desire to escape this human contact and seek solace elsewhere, anywhere. Not wanting to lose the moment to her painful uncertainty, I jumped right back in with another less demanding offer.

"We could talk about your music," I nearly begged with baited breath

It suddenly hit me that she probably received dozens of similar offers every evening. Why should mine appear any different? Like so many entertainers who are more comfortable in the anonymity up on a stage, removed from the face-to-face reality of normal conversation, I knew she was having great difficulty responding to my overture, which made my feelings all the more intense. As easy as it had been for her to joke with me from the protective safety of the stage, it was proving equally hard for her to respond to my straight-forward invitation to friendship down on the floor where I now stood.

I had amazed myself by even gathering the nerve to ask Violetta to join me. I'd never before been that bold. She finally answered in a manner that totally surprised me, her eyes still lowered to the floor, her voice so soft.

"I'm flattered...and, yes, I'd love to join you," she managed, still not lifting her eyes to meet mine.

That she had agreed was more than I could have hoped for. Perhaps she felt sorry for me, sensing my own feeling of being out of one's comfort zone. Like an idiot, I just stood there, staring at her, lost in her beauty. She finally lifted her hypnotic green eyes, and when she smiled at me I thought my heart would burst from my chest.

"Just give me a minute, and I'll join you at your table," she said in what seemed an attempt to release me from the uncomfortable moment.

"I'll be there!" I said, immediately feeling stupid for saying such a silly thing. Where else would I be, after all! As I sat back down, she negotiated her way back through the rear stage door. Within a minute or two, she was approaching from the front of the restaurant. I stood and offered my arm to assist her into her chair before moving it closer to the table, hanging her cane on the back of my chair. Now that she was actually sitting across from me, words failed me. All I could do was stare into those twinkling emerald green eyes, feeling so foolish, but unable to break her spell over me. After what seemed like an hour but could only have been a few seconds, she cocked her head to the left, and gave me a look that said, *'now what?'*

"I'm sorry," I stammered, the spell merely interrupted. "You're just...so...lovely...I don't quite know what to say, now that you're actually sitting here with me..."

She lowered her eyes once more.

"Woody, I'm afraid you're embarrassing me with your kind words! But I do thank you, nonetheless."

We spent the next 15 minutes talking about our lives and our music. To my utter amazement, she seemed genuinely interested in every word and nuance.

"Oh, my goodness," she gushed, looking at her watch. "I completely lost track of the time. I'm afraid I've got to get back on stage for my third set, Woody!"

As she stood, she took her cane from my hand, looked back at me, smiling that innocent little smile that women seem so good at.

"Do you have your sax with you, Woody?"

"Uhhh...sure...it's up in my room," I answered, unsure why she had asked.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" she teased, as if enjoying my confusion. "Tenor sax sounds real nice with acoustic guitar, don't you think?"

It took a moment for her question to register in my mind. But as soon as it did, my words fell over themselves.

"Yeh...it does...I mean, I'd love to...that is, if it's okay with you..." I stuttered.

"Great!" she chuckled. "Why don't you join me on stage for my last set?"

I stayed at my table long enough to finish dessert and listen to most of her third set before I returned to my room to grab my sax, all the while wondering, *'What are you setting yourself up for this time, Woody Reed?'*

Ten minutes before one o'clock, I re-entered the restaurant. The hostess recognized me.

"Oh, I see you're back, Mr. Reed. Time for another house ginger ale?"

"That would be great," I surprised her.

After only a momentary lapse, she regained her smile and walked me back to my table. By now, the room was less than half full, which is probably why the last set is the one reserved for sit-ins when you've never heard your invited artist perform before. I sat down, placing my sax case up on end between my feet. Several diners recognized me as the love-struck guy who had made such a fool of himself earlier in the evening and favored me with their understanding smiles. The rear stage door opened and Violetta once again limped to her position at stage front.

"Woody...you're back," she whispered to me as I clumsily got up from my chair and approached the stage.

"I told you I would be," I reminded her.

"Well, come on up, then," she coaxed with a slight tilt of her head.

I opened my old burgundy velvet-lined case, removed my sax, and tip-toed up to stage front to join her. Murmurs traveled around the room and I felt a sudden moment of panic. But Violetta sensed it and rescued me with a warm smile, which literally melted my heart.

"This should be fun," she whispered

"Fun is my middle name," I deadpanned.

"How about if we just run through some of the old standards, okay?" she asked.

"Old standard is my middle name," I replied in monotone.

"I thought you said fun was your middle name," she said, recognizing that my responses were the result of my nervousness.

"Oh, yeh...you lead, I'll follow," I offered as my last retort.

Playing alongside a vocalist is a challenge that many musicians don't seem to understand. My goal would be to augment without overpowering her talent, never getting in the way or drawing attention away from her own musicianship. That in mind, I stood to the side and slightly behind her, out of the spotlight. The house lights dimmed while the stage spotlights were raised, signaling the start of her last set. Violetta immediately turned to speak to the remaining audience members as if cued by the lights.

"Well, as you can see, my new friend, Woody Reed, has returned to join me on stage for a few numbers. Won't you please make him feel at home?"

Polite applause did wonders for my soul, but I must admit to being just a little bothered by her reference to 'a few numbers.' I understood all too well, this was her out clause if she didn't like what she heard. But such wouldn't be the case on this evening if I had anything to say about it. Or perhaps I should say if I had anything to play about it.

Without wasting another moment, or even bothering to see if I was ready, she launched us into the first song. As she sang the melody above her guitar accompaniment, I ever so gently wove my answering phrases around her lovely voice, always allowing her adequate space to express herself without worrying about what I was playing behind her. By the middle of the first chorus, I could see that she was appreciating the sensitivity of my musical answers to her vocal impressions, and her smile virtually lit up the stage. That was all I needed to see. After singing two verses, she turned her head slightly towards me and whispered, "Take it, Woody."

Those words were music to my ears, and I took us on a meandering little ride before surrendering the stage back to Violetta. She had been as meticulous in her accompaniment to me as I had been in mine to her, providing the necessary support and structure without demanding that I subjugate my thoughts to hers. There was no need to worry about how to end the song, for the best ending is the most natural one, which we employed without forethought. As Violetta held her last note, eyes closed, I whispered one final saxophone flourish around her voice. When finished, we both had no choice but to remain in place, eyes still closed, savoring the moment, tasting the richness of our first creative encounter. Only after several cherished seconds had passed did she open her eyes and look up at me, to find me looking at her with the same thoughts in my mind that she must have held in hers.

Forgive me, but playing music is not all that different from making love. And in a manner of speaking, Violetta and I had just made passionate but gentle love, and on our first date, no less, in front of 75 strangers. Sometimes love can be quite tender and understanding, as had just been the case. Other times it could be forceful, even rough, as it would be on the next tune. She began playing the introduction before the audience had ceased their applause for the previous song. Appropriate to the blizzard still raging outside, Harold Arlen's '*Stormy Weather*' provided a wonderful showcase for Violetta to display her raunchy, bluesy side, bending her guitar strings to her implacable will. This was quite the opposite of tender! On the contrary, our repartee smacked of a shouting match, probing each other's defenses to see who would win the argument. She did.

We followed next with Cole Porter's classic '*What Is This Thing Called Love*', Walter Gross's '*Tenderly*', and finally George Gershwin's '*Someone To Watch Over Me*'. If you must know, Violetta and I were getting to know each other intimately through our musical explorations. I can only wonder if the people in the audience had even the slightest idea that they were but voyeuristic witnesses to our lovemaking on stage. For Violetta left no doubt in my mind as to her needs and wants as so warmly hinted at by the title of that last song.

I comforted her, caressed her, indeed I stroked her soul without need of physical touch. I realized for the first time that the room was not only back at full capacity, but dozens more people were standing in the back, craning their necks for a view of our little platform. Apparently, word of our passionate musical lovemaking had spread through the lodge like wildfire!

The two of us, accompanied by our audience, had settled into a comfortable place, and '*a few numbers*' had by now stretched into the full set. The audience knew they were fortunate to bear witness to our creative exchanges, and Violetta turned to me as she prepared to announce the final selection, eager for me to share in the joy she was unafraid to display at our loving adventures.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I'd like to thank you for spending your time with us this evening. I must say, this has been a truly special night for me. Please show your appreciation to our guest artist for tonight's last set, a very special musician and tenor saxophonist, Woody Reed."

The audience stood and applauded enthusiastically. Although the clock's big hand now pointed to the 12, and the little hand to the 2, the people favored us with cries of '*more!*'

"Thank you again," she smiled, not waiting for them to quiet down. "With your kind permission, we'd like to perform one more beautiful old standard for you."

Violetta turned her eyes towards me, and from her lovely lips floated five simple words in the form of a question.

"You know '*Lush Life*', Woody?"

You can well imagine what was running through my mind.

"You start...I'll jump in along the way," I whispered while holding her green-eyed gaze intently, yet experiencing the strangest sensation that something was about to happen that I had no control over. Confused by what I was feeling, I questioned her with my eyes, but it was too late, for with only the slightest of nods, she had already closed her eyes and had eased into the melancholy introduction of '*Lush Life*', ever so gracefully mouthing words that were beautifully sculpted. Attempting to salvage my bearings from this turn of events, I decided not to play at all during her introduction, listening and watching as those in the audience were doing, all the while taking in the full impact of her talent. Once she entered the first verse, I tentatively began weaving my magic yet again, gently wrapping my melodic lines around her voice as if enveloping her body within my arms.

As we reached the second verse, she signaled me with her eyes to assume the lead role in our duet, which I did. As I had just done, Violetta stopped playing and quietly placed her guitar on her lap, allowing me total freedom to soar as high and as far as I could have wished for without concern for any rhythmic or harmonic constraints. Once I realized her plan for my cadenza, I obliged her by giving in to the moment, thrusting myself into a dazzling cascade of emotion. As naturally as one could imagine, she began mimicking my musical thoughts with her

voice, virtually note for note. No matter how I tried to amuse her, even trick her, she had a grip on my creative mind that refused to be broken. My mind laughed and laughed as my improvisation grew in scope beyond the confines of *'Lush Life'*. I continued to find humor in this most unusual musical situation, leading me to that now familiar sensation of splitting my thoughts between the music I was playing and my thoughts about the music, propelling me even further into my own improvisation. I knew what was coming. I thought I was totally prepared for my journey once again, unafraid of where it would lead me.

I felt the out-of-body ascent from the stage as my inner glow began its rise, the audience oblivious to what was taking place right in front of their eyes, yet unseen to them. But, something was different this time. I felt a tug on my heart, revealing a desperate and startled sense of fear at my departure. I knew this fear wasn't my own. No, I was feeling Violetta's attachment to my thoughts, understanding that we had become one and the same in our creative energies.

'Take me with you...' she pleaded in thought only. *'Please, Woody, don't leave me here alone...'*

As the musical improvisation continued to flow uninterrupted from my old sax, I reached out to her, my thoughts surely resembling a hand which she should but grab on to. While her own playing remained intertwined with mine on stage, I felt her mind desperately attempting to latch onto my very soul. She reached out her hand not just to grab mine, but as if to hold me in place while I began rising from the stage. I was completely off kilter as I strained to float above the audience, the two of us still physically engaged in our musical improvisation. But now it felt like two people unknown to me, and I just couldn't get a handle on the images I was seeing and hearing.

Violetta

'Woody, don't leave me here alone, please, come back to me...'

Trumpet Man

'Hey, kid...'

The Performer

'All things happen for a reason...'

Trumpet Man

'You've been chosen...'

Violetta

'Please, Woody, take me with you...'

All at once, I was struck with the overpowering realization that Violetta had been watching my ascent! How could that be? Just as I had been the only one to see The Performer's ascension, so, too, was Violetta the only one to see my own rising. The audience had not even the

slightest awareness of what was taking place in front of their unseeing eyes. Violetta not only could see the rising, but she was communicating with me in thought! Just as Trumpet Man had. Just as The Performer had. And then . . . it happened.

To attempt to describe 'it' would be futile, for no words could suffice to describe what was taking place. But I felt as if I were Icarus about to fall from the sky after flying too close to the sun, and it was all I could do to maintain my balance, both in space and in spirit. And then I knew in my soul...I was not falling from the sky, I was being forcefully dragged back across the ceiling; dragged down to the small stage to re-enter my physical body at the precise moment we attempted to conclude our performance of *'Lush Life'*. But when I arrived there, my physical body had collapsed, no longer playing its saxophone, and Violetta was sitting on her stool, dazed, arms raised in desperation, staring down at the heap of my body lying on the stage, saxophone cradled to my chest.

The next thing I remember was waking up, oh, so slowly, my head spinning. Without opening my eyes, I realized that I was covered with a heavy blanket, lying on a bed, Violetta lying next to me, her head resting on my chest.

"Violetta?" I stammered in confusion.

"Shhh...don't try to talk, Woody..."

"But...where am I, Violetta?"

"Shhh," she repeated, before whispering in my ear. "You're in my...home...Woody. I brought you here after...after you..."

The silence was deafening, all sound muffled like a concert hall sucked of its air by a giant vacuum.

"Violetta...how long have I been here?" I pleaded.

"Woody...you've been here for three days...but now...sleep...I'll take care of you...I won't let anything happen to you...again...ever..."

With that, I felt the spasm of deep sleep once again overtaking me, and I gave into it all too willingly.

“OBLIGATION”

The Narrator

Well, well, well. Back for more, I see! This is becoming a pleasant habit indeed. I'm sure you'll agree that Woody's last attempted journey to The Zone ended badly. But such is the way of things, is it not? Then again, he had been forewarned that his life was about to take a new and important direction, so we must assume that it's all part of that plan. Yes, as we have come to know, All Things Happen for a Reason. And I have no doubt that such reason will soon be revealed for all to understand, for The Zone exerts a particularly strong pull on performing musicians. I know this to be true, for indeed I have traveled to The Zone on countless occasions, each time amazed at what, and whom, I encounter there. Yes, I said 'traveled to' as opposed to 'entered' or 'visited.' You're very perceptive to have noticed my choice of words. But again, this is not my story, after all. It's Woody's. So I'll let him tell you about his next journey, in his own words. Remember, what awaits you might be considered by some to be disturbing. So consider yourself warned. Much like the verbal disclaimer intoned on commercial breaks while you're watching movies on cable television, *the content of this program may not be appropriate for all viewers, and discretion is advised.*

Woody Awakens

I awoke to a light-filled room. Violetta was no longer lying next to me, which caused me a moment of panic before I realized she was watching me intently from a nearby chair. As I gathered my senses, neither of us seemed able or willing to say a word, both remembering our first and last performance together who knows how many days ago. We just stared . . . without seeing, it seems . . . until I broke the spell by suggesting we return to the restaurant where we had enjoyed such passionate musical love-making on stage. We were seated by the same hostess who had greeted me on that blizzard evening, as if no time had passed since then, but I knew it had been the better part of a week since I had last seen this room. Now a bright morning, with sunlight streaming through the windows, the atmosphere was so different, so foreign, that I wondered if it had all been merely a dream. The hostess brought coffee and two cups. Violetta and I didn't dare look at each other across the table, knowing the direction our conversation must take, both afraid to utter the first word. My mind told me that I needed to confront her about what had happened on stage that night, but my heart convinced me she was just too fragile; two possible directions for what to say, but only one possible choice. So, I gave in to the moment and held her eyes with mine, knowing that I needed to be very gentle, for discretion is the better part of valor. I stared into her eyes, trying to find the right words.

"Woody, you have to stop looking at me like that," she blushed.

"I can't help it, Violetta. You're just too . . . beautiful," I offered in place of the words I had earlier planned when thinking about this moment of truth.

"You really don't have to say that, Woody."

"I know I don't," I said, "but it's true. Every time I look at you I feel like I'm about to melt into the floor."

She blushed mightily this time. It never had occurred to me that someone so lovely could be so insecure about her looks. This beholder saw something others didn't, or couldn't, but I had a difficult time imagining that anyone could find Violetta anything less than drop-dead gorgeous. I looked at her, only to see a tear rolling down her cheek.

"What's the matter?" I asked, fearing I must have said something to upset her.

"Nothing's the matter, Woody," she answered softly. "It's just that I feel the same way every time I look at you."

"So...this is what they mean by Tears of Joy, right?" I offered, taking her hand in mine across the table.

We both knew what my next question should be . . . what had happened that night at the conclusion of her last set, and why . . . but I swallowed hard and pressed on in a totally different direction, hoping my words would somehow lead us to the same destination. I took my time

before changing the subject, deciding not to ask the inevitable question that needed answering. There would be time for that when she was ready. I added cream to my coffee and stirred before proceeding to a most uncomfortable topic of conversation.

"Violetta, do you mind me asking what happened to your leg?"

She looked down for a moment, then raised her eyes once more to meet mine.

"No, I don't mind, Woody. I only remember waking up in the hospital. The doctors told me I had been in a coma for several days. I had a broken arm and collarbone, a collapsed lung, severe head injuries, and a completely shattered left leg. I guess I surprised them all when I opened my black and blue eyes those days later and asked for my parents."

Violetta looked as if she might cry at any moment, so I asked if she would prefer not to talk about it any more. She said she needed to talk about it, that indeed she had been keeping it all inside for so long that perhaps it was finally time for it to be let out, once and for all.

"What happened?" I asked.

"I don't remember a thing about that night. Probably a good thing, too. But my papa was driving, mama was in the passenger seat, and I was lying on the back seat, fast asleep. It turns out a drunk driver had crossed the yellow line, and we collided head on with his pick-up truck. When I finally awoke and asked for my parents, I was told they had been killed in the crash. Just like that. And you know the worst part?" she asked.

I nodded in encouragement, knowing she needed to unload this unbearable burden.

"My parents were both wearing seat belts," she went on. "I was sleeping on the back seat, and didn't have mine on. Talk about irony...they died strapped into their seats. And me? I was catapulted through the front windshield from the back seat, which surely saved my life."

She paused to gather her thoughts, as if remembering, or trying to forget, all that followed.

"In the confusion of the scene, no one even realized there had been a third person in our car. It was fifteen minutes before the fire was put out and the police searched the area by flashlight, finding me wrapped around the trunk of a tree some thirty yards away, my left leg dangling at an unnatural angle."

"Violetta...I'm so sorry..." I managed to mumble out loud, reaching across the table to take her hand once more. Her face took on a resolute look that said she wouldn't stop now, despite the tears that were about to flow. She took a deep breath and released it loudly before continuing her story. But to my surprise, she smiled after the exhalation, as if the hard part was finally over.

"My parents were both musicians, Woody, Mama a singer, Papa a guitarist. Ever since I can remember, they were constantly on the road, touring, with me in tow. Papa taught me guitar, and Mama taught me to sing. I was beginning to perform with them often, though I was only

sixteen. That night, we were on our way home from The Ellicott Room after playing a sold-out concert. Years earlier, Mama and Papa had hit it off with the owner, Lenny Dee, and they built a solid following at his club. It was a wonderful time, Woody. Then, it was all taken from us in a drunken moment. As it happened, my first performance at The Ellicott Room turned out to be my last. After the accident, Lenny visited me every week during my two-year rehab, encouraging me, talking with me about my future. I can't wait for you to meet him, Woody. I couldn't have healed without him. I felt so lost, with no clue about what direction my life should take. Lenny convinced me that music would be my salvation, my return ticket to the kind of life that had become so normal for me before the crash. You won't believe this, but he actually bought me a new guitar, the one I now play, kidding that I could pay him back some day when he needed a favor from me. He even set a daily practice regimen for me, all the while knowing it would be the most important motivation in my recuperation. Of course, now, these years later, I can laugh at Lenny's ulterior motives, which you'll understand all too well when you meet him! Once I finally left the hospital, he had already lined up several gigs for me to play. And today, here I am, a traveling musician again, almost like it was when Mama and Papa were still alive."

I had one more question I wanted to ask, but I was having trouble getting the words out. Sensing my dilemma, Violetta tilted her head and smiled in confusion.

"What?" she wondered aloud.

"Violetta...who are you talking to just before you start your performances?"

She looked startled and confused at the same time.

"What do you mean, Woody?"

"Oh, never mind, it's not important..."

"Wait a minute," she objected, "you can't just ask a question like that and then say 'never mind, it's not important!' What do you mean, 'who am I talking to?'"

I knew I couldn't leave my question hanging in mid-air without an explanation, so I nodded to her, letting her know I was about to continue my line of thought.

"Well...I'm not sure you're even aware of this, Violetta, but when you're on stage, in the moments before you begin performing, your lips are moving...as if you're talking with someone. I guess I'm just curious about that."

She frowned and seemed to turn her eyes inward as if questioning herself about this strange behavior I'd asked about.

"I never realized I was doing that..." she offered, "but now that you tell me...well...I suppose I understand what it is."

Not wishing to add to her discomfort any more than I already had, I decided to give her an easy out.

"Really, it's no big deal, Violetta. You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to," I said without much conviction, I'm afraid.

She sat completely still, staring into my eyes, perhaps deciding if I was worthy of her innermost secret.

"I . . . talk to . . . Mama . . ."

Words completely failed me, so I merely continued looking into her eyes, almost daring her to continue the thought, which she did.

"The thing is, I never realized my lips were moving when I talk to Mama! It's just that . . . ever since the accident . . . I know she and Papa are somewhere else . . . nearby . . . though I don't know where. And I believe they must be as desperate to communicate with me as I am with them. So, I guess I've developed this little ritual of talking to her before every show, as much to gather strength from her memory as to . . . communicate with her . . . Is that so crazy, Woody?"

I slowly leaned back in my chair, amazed by what I'd heard. But who was I to judge, especially considering everything I had experienced in the past week? After only a moment of speculation, I smiled and reassured her the best I could.

"No, it's not crazy, Violetta. I think it's a beautiful thing that you've just described. But . . . does she ever answer you?"

Looking up, she carefully pondered my question with a deep frown before responding.

"Not yet. But there's something there, Woody, something I can't really describe to you in words. I know that she's listening to me and watching over me. I can feel her presence. Do you know what it means when someone says 'it's on the tip of my tongue'? It feels like that. You can't quite reach it, but you know it's there, just on the other side of comprehension."

"I know exactly what you mean," I agreed, slowly nodding my head to let her know I was on the same page, waiting for her to resume her story.

"Since my rehab, I've been playing The Ellicott Room one weekend every month. I'm scheduled to perform there this weekend, Woody. But the thought of leaving you is more than I can bear. So . . . it would mean a lot to me if you would perform with me, Woody. . . ."

Her invitation was like a double-edged sword, but I agreed, knowing she needed my support, be it musical or emotional. And, frankly, I needed hers, as well.

"I guess I should warn you, Woody, Lenny may come across a little . . . strange . . . but he's really a loving and gentle person underneath his rough exterior."

"I can't wait to meet him," I said not at all convincingly.

"One more thing, Woody. Lenny is very protective of me, like I was his own little girl. After the accident, he told me he had promised papa that if anything ever happened, he would watch over me. And I must tell you he has been true to his promise. If ever I needed a godfather, Lenny is it! He has a heart of gold, especially when it comes to his precious little flower."

“Precious little flower?” I asked.

“That’s what he calls me, Woody. It means so much to him.”

"In that case, I'm sure we'll get along famously," I said more to convince myself it was true than believing it.

Woody and Lenny Dee

We arrived at The Ellicott Room around 4 o'clock that afternoon. We still had plenty of time to prepare for our 7:30 show, but Lenny was pacing like a caged lion when Violetta and I walked in. Brusque was actually a pretty accurate description of the inimitable Lenny Dee, but it didn't go far enough. As soon as he saw me, carrying her guitar case, plus my own burgundy velvet-lined sax case, not to mention the garment bag slung over my shoulder, he stopped dead in his tracks and threw his arms up into the air in exasperation.

"Violetta! Who's 'dis bum?" he yelled across the room in a strained voice.

Despite everything Violetta had told me about Lenny, he didn't look that formidable to me. Expecting to see a thick shouldered, no-neck mobster, Lenny was quite the opposite; a wiry little man, hunched over at the shoulders. His hair, or what was left of it, was obviously dyed pitch black, coiled around to cover the bald spots, which were no longer spots but geographic regions. The extravagance of the club was equally offset by his manner of dress. Lenny wore a beat up old green checked jacket, purple pants that were two inches too long and dragging on the floor, a canary yellow shirt, an oversized red bow tie with pink stripes, and red Keds sneakers with pink laces, obviously chosen to match the bow tie. If I had to hazard a guess, it would be that his socks were white, but I didn't care to ask him to raise his pant legs so I could test my hypothesis. His appearance was only half as strange as his manner of speaking. Everything was spit out in short, staccato bursts, much like a verbal machine gun, and that analogy caused me a moment of alarm, wondering how this strange little man could possibly own such a ritzy club.

"Lenny...this is Woody..." Violetta began to say in slow, measured tones.

Before she could finish her introduction, Lenny had hustled over to me, grabbed me by the elbow, and started pulling me to a table across the room where he still had half a glass of something waiting for him.

"You lissen to me, Mr. Woody two shoes," he spat as he looked up at me, waving a bent index finger in my general direction. "I deman' to know your intentions right now! Not tomorra, not nex' week, bud right now! You unnerstan' me?"

I wasn't sure whether to laugh or shake in fear, so I chose neither, instead quietly sitting down and gesturing for him to do the same before his blood boiled out the top of his head.

"Mr. Dee, I appreciate your concern. In fact, I'm thankful Violetta has you to watch over her. The simple answer is, we love each other. She loves me. I love her. I want you to know that I would never do anything to hurt her, and I would never let anyone else harm her, either."

He stared at me long and hard, wondering how to put me in my place and re-establish his machismo dominance. I didn't flinch. Finally, he let a smile escape the left corner of his crooked little mouth.

"Call me Lenny, okay, kid?"

"Okay, Lenny. I'm Woody Reed," I said as I reached across the table to shake his hand. I was startled at the touch of his gnarled, arthritic fingers, the grip not really a grip at all, but more an offering of a cold clammy fish.

"Lissen, I din' mean to call you a bum, y'know? But Violetta, she's my 'sponsibility. If I ever hear..."

All at once, Lenny stopped in mid-sentence, lowering his vocal volume and relinquishing his outward hostility to an inward gentility I realized he tried much too hard to hide.

"Geeze, I'm sorry, kid...look, I can tell by talkin' t'you, you'd never do nuttin' bad to her."

By this time, Violetta had limped over to join us at the table. She leaned over Lenny and planted a loving kiss on his forehead, causing him to turn a deep shade of crimson.

"Lenny, I have something else to tell you," she said haltingly as she sat down next to me. "I've asked Woody to sit in with me this weekend . . . if that's all right with you."

Whether due to his volatility or to convince Violetta he was still in charge, Lenny looked at her sternly and began waving the other bent index finger in her direction.

"Violetta, you know I luv you, like you were my own little girl. But I ain't gonna pay for anoder musician!"

Violetta smiled warmly in return, raising her hands in surrender, which seemed all too appropriate for the situation.

"Lenny, this won't cost you another penny. I'll pay Woody myself out of my standard fee."

Now duly acknowledged as the boss after all, Lenny looked at me, then back to her. Then back at me again, and back to her once more before relenting.

"What's he play?"

"Lenny, you've never heard anyone play tenor sax like Woody," she boasted on my behalf. "Trust me on this one. Mama and Papa would have loved to play music with Woody. He's that gifted, Lenny."

I was stunned, unable to move, feeling I'd been given the most sincere compliment I could ever imagine. Violetta redirected her gaze to me and wouldn't let go for what seemed like an hour. Lenny sat there fidgeting uncomfortably, his head turning from her to me, me to her, her to me, in what seemed to me to be torturous slow motion. Finally, Lenny broke the spell.

"Geeze, if you say he's good, Violetta, I guess he's okay by me."

Turning his head back to me for the umpteenth time, he wagged that finger once more.

"But no free drinks for da band!" he chided playfully.

Violetta and I both broke out laughing, which eventually caused the same reaction from Lenny Dee. The more he laughed, the harder we laughed, no doubt responding to the strangeness

of watching Lenny turn purple from lack of breath. Violetta and I then agreed that she would open the two-hour show herself for about the first half-hour before bringing me on stage to join her, which was fine with me, in turn making Lenny all the more confident in my innocent intentions.

As is the custom for most musicians I know, we ate a light dinner. The digestive process is just too complex and demanding to have to worry about while you're performing. At 7 o'clock, Violetta and I left Lenny's private table to head for the dressing room to change into the clothes we'd brought with us.

"Break a leg, kids," Lenny said as we rose to leave the table.

As soon as those words were out of his mouth, he gasped in disbelief that he could have been so insensitive. Violetta saved him from himself, turning to answer him with the warmest of smiles.

"I already did, Lenny, remember?"

Lenny blew her a kiss as we turned and left the table together, with me following closely behind her. Once in the dressing room, we both changed clothes without saying a word to each other, feeling the need to channel our creative thoughts individually in our own way. I took out my sax and repeated my pre-concert habit of running through some scales to warm up, while Violetta sat on the other side of the room humming distractedly to herself. The minutes passed quickly. There was a loud knock on the door, followed by a disembodied voice.

"Five minutes to show time, Violetta."

I stopped my exercises, thinking she might need some time alone to focus her inner energies on the performance that was only minutes away. I quietly walked over to her, kissed her on the cheek, and left the dressing room without need of saying a word, taking my place in the wings. Standing there, waiting, feeling the room breathe from its most secret and hidden corner in those few short minutes before the performance was about to begin, something started gnawing away at my insides. My thoughts carried me away to Trumpet Man's warning of a mission that I had apparently been assigned to complete. By whom, and for what reason, I had no clue.

My mind was reeling from everything I had experienced during the past week. No, not just the past week, but all the years leading up to the past week, as well. All that had happened, and all that was about to happen. I recalled something Violetta had asked me only this morning.

'Do you know what it means when someone says 'it's on the tip of my tongue'? It feels like that. You can't quite reach it, but you know it's there, just on the other side of comprehension.'

The more I grasped for an answer, the farther it receded into the background. So I put it out of my mind, hoping realization would come in the middle of the night while I slept.

7:30...show time...and no Violetta. 7:35...7:40...still no Violetta. I paced around in a tight circle where I waited, wondering where she could be. I couldn't catch my breath, wildly concocting plausible explanations for her absence. I was about to sprint to the dressing room to find out what could possibly be delaying her when she limped onto the stage at 7:45 to the welcoming applause of people who, I could tell, obviously already loved her. Frankly, given the inner turmoil I had put myself through for the past 20 minutes, I would have been much more comfortable joining her on stage from the outset, finding it more nerve wracking standing offstage, watching and wondering. But this was her show, after all, not mine.

I held my sax close, somehow thinking that my body warmth would encourage warm musical tones when my turn came, by osmosis, or something like that. The house lights dimmed enough to let everyone know the performance was about to begin, but still enough time for people who wanted to get one final drink at the cash bar at the back of the room without tripping over themselves or each other. Yet no chairs were left empty on this evening. No, Violetta was too strong a magnet, drawing all attention to herself on stage without even trying, and I'm sure without realizing she was even doing it. I gazed around the room, noticing the faces of the people raptly anticipating her musical magic. I guessed that most of them knew Violetta personally, and had heard her perform here before. Then it hit me like a ton of bricks! They must also remember her parents, and had watched her growing up, performing here for the first time as a teenager. The more I thought about it, the more I suspected they had even heard her last performance with her parents on this very stage, for The Ellicott Room was indeed where that concert had taken place, its stifling history hanging in the air around me. Yes, these people were totally aware of the tragedy she had already endured in her young life.

Violetta took the required time to seat herself at stage front before beginning her performance, once again mouthing words to herself that no one else could possibly hear or hope to understand. Her audience hushed as she placed the cane on the floor behind her stool, then made sure her guitar was perfectly in tune. At that moment, the house lights were lowered to candle light, the stage lights were raised to full brightness, and Violetta began her performance without a word of introduction. It could have been my imagination, but by about the second or third song, I sensed that she was...oh, I don't know...distracted. Not to the point where anyone in the audience would ever notice, but I couldn't help but wonder why she seemed only on the edge of focus, as if something more important was on her mind. It showed itself in little ways, like her eyes darting in the surprised moment of a forgotten lyric, or her fingers refusing to move in complete synch with her musical thoughts. She seemed to be fighting with herself to maintain her composure, her marvelous musicianship barely managing to win out in the end at the expense of her stamina.

Violetta's dilemma couldn't help but add a frightening sense of fragility to my own already frayed nerves. There could be nothing worse than to have to stand alone in the dark, so near yet so far, wanting nothing more than to rescue her from whatever was closing in on her so oppressively. Through it all, she kept glancing over to where I was now standing, though I'm sure she couldn't see me, given the contrast of the bright spotlights on stage to the suffocating darkness offstage. For what it was worth, I concentrated on her music as strongly as I could, hoping my own thoughts would somehow help her conquer whatever unseen demons were torturing her soul and undoubtedly testing her resolve.

Those thirty minutes seemed like thirty hours, and by the time Violetta turned her head towards me one last time to make sure I hadn't run away, I felt emotionally drained, physically spent, but surely only a fraction of what she must have been feeling. Perhaps that explains why at that moment in time, something inside of me seemed to kick in, demanding my creative inner self to be at its strongest for Violetta's sake. This would be my time in the spotlight, not to steal it from her, but to rescue her from it. Where she was weak, I would be strong. Where she had doubts, I would be confident. Where she stumbled, I would fly. Where she was fearful, I would be bold. I stepped forward far enough to the edge of the stage that she alone could see me, willing her to take power from my unspent reserves. When she saw me, even at this distance, I could see her eyes welling up with tears, and her expression seemed to say *'thank God you didn't run away, Woody...I need you.'*

It was as if you could see the dark clouds of uncertainty evaporating from her place beneath the bright lights. She exhaled loudly, and her demeanor took on the same resolute look that I remembered from our conversation about the trauma of losing her parents in that irrevocable drunken instant. Now, as then, she smiled, once again as if indicating that the hard part was over, and it was time to regain control of her emotions. With that, she took the microphone in hand and began to speak to her audience, not merely as a musical artist addressing paying customers, but as a person confiding her inner-most feelings and insecurities to her closest friends.

"I can't tell you how wonderful it is to come back to The Ellicott Room again," she began, "to be around all of my dearest friends. I'm sure you know I love you as much as you love me, maybe more!"

The audience responded with knowing smiles and gentle applause, letting her know they felt the same way. And as Violetta now spoke, they remained totally silent, with not a word of distracting conversation to be heard.

"I must be honest with you...the past few days have been very strange...and at the same time, very beautiful. If I seem a bit off the mark this evening, it's because I have learned things

about life that I never could have imagined. You see, I now know, we are not alone in this world.”

The only sound to be heard was the soft electric buzz of the spot lights, now accentuated by breaths being held in anticipation, and the absence of any physical motion, even the tuxedoed waiters frozen in place at the back of the room by her words. She lowered her gaze to the floor for only a brief instant, then graced us all with a most lovely smile as she began to lightly strum her guitar with sustained chords as she again spoke. I'll bet no one but me recognized her strummed backdrop as the chords for the song '*My One and Only Love*'.

"Before I get completely maudlin," she continued, "I have a very special surprise planned for you tonight. Most of you knew my parents from their time performing here on this very stage where I'm now sitting. And you know that I miss them terribly, as you do. Some of you also know me well enough to understand that after they left us, I put an emotional wall up around myself, not allowing anyone else in to share my troubles...or my joys. Until now, that is," she said in a whisper, again turning her head to look at me offstage, many in the audience craning to follow her gaze but unable to locate the object of her attention in the darkness offstage.

"It is my sincere pleasure to introduce you to a wonderful musician," she said, "a loving and caring man who has captured my heart in a way I never thought would be possible. I ask you, now, to please welcome Mr. Woody Reed as he joins me on stage in front of this roomful of my dearest friends.”

All eyes were fixed on me and only me as I dragged my trembling body across what seemed a six-mile long stage to join Violetta, but I could see and hear only her. When I finally reached stage front, the hall remained deathly quiet, the reverberation of my footsteps on the wooden floor the uncanny center of attention. I had no doubt that I was about to make a complete fool of myself. Hey, what else is new, right? I didn't care one bit. I got down on one knee beside her, held her left hand in both of mine, leaned forward and kissed her hand ever so gently. After what seemed much too long a moment, I stood back up to see she was staring at me, her moist emerald eyes lustrous in the spotlight. We both turned to face our audience, together, ready to begin our first professional performance as a duo, startled to see women and men alike reaching for handkerchiefs to wipe away their own tears as they surely remembered Violetta's other first performance on this stage. All at once, the palpable barrier that had until this moment stifled any sound or movement suddenly fell away, for the hall erupted into thunderous applause, having nothing to do with music since we hadn't as yet played a note together! I took Violetta's hand once more as we graciously accepted their show of unconditional love. Glancing over at Violetta at my side, I was relieved to see that this was all just what she needed to reinvigorate her soul. She immediately started playing the introduction to our first song together without bothering to tell me what it was.

All it took were the first three words she sang for me to know she had selected a Cole Porter classic, *'I Love You'*, as if to repeat the same words I had mouthed to her from offstage only a few minutes ago. I must say, this young woman certainly knew how to tug the heartstrings.

For the next hour, we journeyed from composer to composer, and decade to decade. Now fully revitalized, Violetta stared at me for a brief moment after every song. I must admit, this caused me some concern, since I had no idea what might motivate her to do that. She seemed to be gauging my reactions, wondering to herself if what she had in mind for us was indeed about to happen, perhaps unsure if she dare venture there without me. As the time approached 9:45, we hadn't as yet performed *'Lush Life'*, and I could see that she was not only saving it for last, but also purposely withholding it from me as a lover holds back the ultimate moment of ecstasy as long as possible. Alas, the time had arrived and she would wait no longer, easing into the introduction without announcement. As she sang, she was staring directly at me, and I held her eyes with mine while I wove my musical answers around her voice ever so softly, oblivious to the presence of anyone else in the room except the two of us. We knew where this musical foreplay was destined to lead us. All our thoughts were focused on this moment, and for us, any sense of time and place ceased to exist. I could once again see the pulsating red glow of the spotlights through my tightly closed eyelids as I felt ready to begin my much anticipated ascent, all the while maintaining my physical performance on stage. And then, the strangest thing happened, cutting to the core of my soul. I heard Trumpet Man's voice whisper from above, as if in a dream.

'Hey, kid...'

Soon to be followed by the voice of The Performer...

'All things happen for a reason...'

'Your life is about to take a new and important direction...'

'You've been chosen, Woody...'

'You have a mission to fulfill...'

'You've been blessed, Woody, as was Trumpet Man, as I was, and those before us...'

Instinctively, I suddenly knew what I must do. I don't know how I knew, I just knew. . . I opened my eyes . . . breaking the spell . . . holding myself back . . . returning to the on-stage reality of my musical flourishes around Violetta's voice, before stopping in mid-phrase to whisper in her direction, "Take it, Violetta . . ."

Those words were music to her ears, as they had been to mine. She closed her eyes, knowing what was about to happen, focusing her intense creative energy in a singular direction, allowing the music to carry her to where she knew she was destined to travel. All at once, I saw her. Rising, her aura a warm glow ascending ever so slowly above the stage. Still playing my

sax, I looked out to the audience as she continued rising, to see all eyes fixed on our stage presence, unaware of the ascending aura that no one else could possibly see or experience, locked out of our other-worldly dimension as they were. All except one other pair of eyes, that is! How wonderful, how amazing, how uplifting it was to see Lenny Dee's eyes following Violetta's ascent, his arthritic fingers steepled to his mouth as if in prayer, knowing in his heart exactly where she was headed, thankful that he had lived to see the fulfillment of his promise to Violetta's papa.

In that very moment, I truly understood The Gift I had been given, and I foresaw the beautiful secret mission that I had been chosen to fulfill. Violetta held fast to me, not letting me escape from her mind, which, of course, I had no intention of doing anyway. For the briefest instant, I sensed her hesitation, as if fearful of what awaited her, but this passed in the flicker of an eyelid. Though my body was still tethered to the stage, Violetta's emotions were my emotions, our spirits one and the same, inseparable, as my mind heard two other voices from above ... whispering...in unison...

'Violetta'...

...followed so tenderly by my love's answer...

'Mama...Papa...'

The Narrator

Well, well, well. All too soon, Violetta and Woody had descended to The Ellicott Room's stage, rejoining that moment in your time at the conclusion of Lush Life. As they prepared to leave for their necessary recuperative and restorative sleep, Lenny Dee pulled Woody aside, this time gently. He stuffed something into Woody's pocket, and, with a tear in his eye, he waved a bent index finger in Woody's direction as he issued a grave warning.

"Don' you ever tell my Violetta I dun dis, or you gonna be in big trouble, you unnerstan' me?"

Woody stood there, flabbergasted, unsure how to respond, whereupon Lenny abruptly turned and hurried away, nearly tripping over his too-long pant legs, before losing control of his emotions entirely. Woody reached into his pocket to find two crisp hundred-dollar bills wrapped around a hand-written note, signed by Lenny.

'Violetta was right.

I ain't never heard no one play so good as you.

Take care of my precious little flower'

“FRIENDSHIP”

The Narrator

Welcome back once more, as I now pick up the thread of this remarkable story. I must warn you, however, that all is not as it seems. Indeed, it never is. For strange things are about to happen... but I get ahead of myself by attempting to simplify things so early in the telling! Suffice it to say you will experience some disorientation as this tale unfolds, much the same as Woody experiences. In time, the contradictions you encounter will be explained to you. But you have no choice other than to find the answers to the mysteries presented along with Woody, for his journey is also one of confusion and revelation. You will come to realize the answers as he does. After all, Woody is living the story in real time with no means of narrating to you what he himself can not yet know. So be patient. The truth will ultimately be revealed to you.

The Zone exerts a particularly strong pull on performing musicians. I know this to be true, for indeed I have traveled to The Zone on countless occasions, each time amazed at what and whom I encounter there. Yes, I said 'traveled to' as opposed to 'entered' or 'visited.' You're very perceptive to have noticed my choice of words. But I'll let Woody tell you in his own words what he is experiencing as he is living it. His story is indeed a fascinating one. Your presence here is testament to that, is it not? What awaits you might be considered by some to be disturbing. So consider yourself warned. Much like the verbal disclaimer intoned on commercial breaks while you're watching movies on cable television, *the content of this program may not be appropriate for all viewers, and discretion is advised.*

Woody & Violetta

I awoke early Saturday morning, not at all rested after only six hours of sleep, my dreams of Violetta's journey taking firm hold of my mind. Violetta, on the other hand, was a novice to The Zone, and she was still overwhelmed by the recuperative and restorative sleep. She was wise not to tarry long in that place last night, knowing that we were scheduled to perform at the Ellicott Room once again this evening, that being but fourteen short hours from now. I opened my eyes to get my bearings, remembering placing a sleeping Violetta on the bed next to me. My left arm was still draped around her shoulder, her back to me. I lay there unmoving for several minutes, savoring the sweet smell of her auburn hair on my face, and the slow pace of her breathing. I had no doubt that Violetta would want to talk at length about her journey last night. I also had no doubt that she would hold off on broaching the subject of being reunited there at long last with her parents for as long as she could, not wanting to break the magical spell she surely felt surrounding her. I gently untangled myself, careful not to wake her, and quietly padded off to the kitchen of the small apartment Lenny provided for her weekend gigs at the Ellicott Room. I brewed a fresh pot of cinnamon hazelnut coffee, my favorite, as I spent several hours just sitting, looking at the snow through the kitchen window, while Violetta slept the morning away. By the third pot off coffee, the cinnamon aroma must have accomplished what I didn't have the heart to do, for Violetta joined me at the small kitchen table, wearing my green flannel robe to keep her warm. She smiled at me, unable to hide the wonderment she must have felt deep down in her soul.

"Good morning, Woody," she whispered with a twinkle of emerald green eyes.

"It certainly is," I answered softly.

She ambled over without need of invitation and sat next to me, nuzzling her head on my shoulder warmly. We sat there in complete silence for several minutes, feeling no need to do anything but snuggle and smell the coffee.

"Thank you, Woody," she eventually whispered in my ear.

"For what?" I asked innocently, pulling my head back so I could see her eyes.

"For last night," she continued. "I knew what was about to happen. And I knew that you knew why I had saved '*Lush Life*' for our last song of the evening. But communicating with my parents was the most wonderful and beautiful thing that has ever happened to me. Aside from meeting you, that is," she half-joked lightly.

"It was quite a ride, wasn't it?" I chuckled.

"It certainly was, Woody."

Another long silence overtook the moment, until I interrupted it eagerly.

"Are you hungry, Violetta?"

"I could eat a horse, Woody!"

"I thought so," I said, knowing exactly how she felt after an exhausting journey to The Zone. "What do you say we have a final cup of coffee here, then go out for a late lunch before heading over to the club?"

"Sounds good to me," she offered, getting up to pour us each that last cup.

After only a few forced gulps, Violetta shuffled off to the bathroom to shower, leaving me to enjoy the flavored coffee that she obviously didn't care for. I, on the other hand, reveled in each swallow. Within minutes, I felt her presence behind me without even hearing her re-enter the room, turning around quickly to see her standing there, wrapped in a towel. I felt my face heat up and turn beet red, and gave Violetta a resigned look of embarrassment, shrugging my shoulders for want of anything else to do, whereupon she silently retreated to the bedroom. Soon enough she was back in the kitchen, squeaky clean, fully dressed and ready to go. I took that as my cue to follow her lead and showered as quickly as she had, toweling off with little regard for the droplets of water left untouched when I threw my jeans and sweatshirt on. While I was in the bathroom, Violetta cleaned up the kitchen, leaving it immaculate in a way that I never could have...or, would have...though I knew I should have.

We threw our heavy coats on, locked the door, and walked down the front stairs, bracing ourselves for the cold winter wind that would surely sting our faces as we hopped in my car before I thought to utter a word.

"Where we goin'?" I asked, more to break the uncomfortable silence than wanting to know our destination.

"I know this little place downtown called the Toad Lagoon," she told me as I started the car. "They have the best oat pancakes you've ever tasted, Woody! They make 'em with a special butter milk batter and load 'em up with nuts and raisins with a shake of confectioner's sugar on top. Add a little butter and a lot of maple syrup, and you'll feel full for a week," she promised.

Arriving at the Toad Lagoon at about 3 o'clock was a good thing. Had we showed up during lunch or dinner, we would have had to wait at least an hour for a table. But our timing was perfect, for we had our choice of empty booths. We threw our coats over the metal coat rack next to the door and sat down without need of looking at the menu, for she had already decided what we would order.

"Hi, Violetta," the waiter said with a smile and a wink as he approached our table. "I haven't seen you in a while...been on the road again?"

"Hey, Brian," she answered in return, once again blushing mightily, though she certainly had no reason to. "Yeah, as a matter of fact, I have; just got back last night."

Not wanting me to feel left out, Violetta took my hand in hers and made the required introductions.

"Brian, I'd like you to meet Woody. Woody, meet Brian."

We exchanged polite smiles before Brian left with our double order of oat pancakes, heavy on the maple syrup, light on the butter.

"Brian?" I asked coyly, one eyebrow raised as if expecting a tell-all true confession.

"Puleeze," she blushed. "Brian and I have been friends ever since I started coming here for breakfast after my shows at the Ellicott Room," she said as innocently as possible. "Honest, Woody," she pleaded in a final attempt to put my tease to rest.

With that, Violetta and I spent the next hour devouring our oat pancakes and enjoying the kind of coffee that puts hair on your chest. Every now and then, I caught a glimpse of Brian out of the corner of my eye, watching our every move, smiling at Violetta whenever he thought I wouldn't notice his attention. Or, maybe he wanted me to notice! I can't be sure if Violetta noticed. But knowing women as I now do, I wouldn't be surprised if she had logged every glance in her mental notebook. The longer we sat and talked after our oat pancakes and coffee, the more uncomfortable I became. The hour was growing late, and I knew there could be nothing worse than arriving late for any gig, let alone this one, not having adequate time to mentally prepare for the kind of performance we both wanted to deliver. All at once, Violetta took my hand in hers from across the table, drawing the conversation on for far too long.

"Woody...do you think...I mean, would you mind if I saved '*Lush Life*' to close out our show again tonight?"

I knew this moment would come sooner or later. Sensing her angst, I stared directly into her eyes as I answered as patiently as possible, careful not to add to the stress she was putting upon herself.

"Violetta, I don't mind at all. I know what a wonderful experience it was for you. I just don't want you to be disappointed if it doesn't happen again, so easily, and so soon after last night," I cautioned, attempting to prevent her from setting herself up for the kind of failure that could surely devastate her soul.

Her eyes lowered from my stare as she spoke. I realized that she was actually stalling, not wanting, or perhaps afraid, to leave. This began to cause me more than a little nervousness, for we were already cutting it pretty tight before our 7:30 show time. Torn between my own task-oriented inner clock and my efforts not to cause her any more discomfort, I relented to the conversation at hand, hoping we could still make it to the Ellicott Room with time to spare.

"I know, Woody. You're right," she continued. "It's all I can do not to pray that I journey there tonight. I just want so desperately to communicate with my parents again. All these years, I knew they were looking for me but just didn't how to contact me. Since meeting you, and performing with you, it's like a dream come true, Woody," Violetta confided softly.

"Truly, a dream," I agreed, realizing that I had to grab the bull by the horns and get us out of here at once, lest we miss our show entirely. With that thought uppermost in my mind, I gently removed my hand from her grasp, slid out of the booth and stood, indicating it was time to leave. As if on cue, Brian approached, handed me the check, and turned to Violetta with his parting words.

"I hope I see you again soon, Violetta," he smiled mischievously.

"Oh, you'll see both of us real soon, Brian," she answered without hesitation, realizing she needed to nip this little game in the bud.

"Nice meeting you, Woody," Brian said without much conviction, but at least politely.

"You too, Brian," I responded as Violetta got up from the booth, cane in hand.

I didn't dare look back as we walked out the door, certain I would see Brian watching us through the large front windows of the restaurant. I threw my arm around Violetta's shoulder to keep her warm in the cold air. She leaned into me easily, and we shuffled our way to the car. Heavy, wet snowflakes were beginning to descend, visible in the streetlights, showering the sidewalk with the warm glow of a winter evening. I sighed loudly, smiling at the same time.

"Just friends, huh?" I joked as I flung my arm around her waist.

"Yup. Just friends," she repeated.

I opened the car door for her and she smiled. I winked down at her, closed her door, and walked around to the driver's side. To my surprise, the door was locked when I reached to open it. I knew I hadn't locked it. I peeked through the closed window to see Violetta smiling teasingly before she finally leaned over and unlocked the door she had just locked while I was walking around the car.

"Ohhh, Violetta," I swooned mockingly. "I can see this is gonna be a fun evening."

We both enjoyed a good chuckle as I started the car and pulled away from the curb. We didn't speak at all on the way back to her apartment, where we needed to gather our clothes and instruments before driving to the club. Once on the way again, we remained silent still, not from disinterest, but from the pull we both were beginning to feel in our hearts. It was time to put our performance face on, much like an athlete puts on his game face.

By the time we finally arrived at The Ellicott Room, it was after 7 o'clock. Lenny Dee was pacing like a caged animal, waiting to pounce on us as we entered the lobby. Barely managing to control his hot temper, he jerked his thumb towards the dressing room without saying a word. Knowing we had cut it much too close for our 7:30 show time, we hurried to the dressing room to change into the clothes that were in the garment bag slung over my shoulder. Between our clothes, her guitar case, and my old burgundy velvet-lined sax case, I was pretty winded as she opened the dressing room door. But I couldn't shake the strange feeling in my gut. This was all too rushed. With everything that had happened to us, so quickly, not to mention

Violetta's anticipation of journeying to The Zone once again, the world just felt a little out of sync. Glancing at Violetta, I could sense the nervousness in her face. I was about to leave the dressing room to give her some needed space and time alone before our performance when there was a knock on the door. Before I could even reach for the doorknob, Lenny Dee came barreling in, only adding to the strangeness of the evening.

"Lissen, youse two, I was tinkin' it might be better for da two of youse to do da whole show togedd'er tonight. No need to keep 'em waitin' for da kid to come on stage later, Violetta. Everyone sure loved you bot' last night, y'know?"

Disturbed from her pre-concert routine, Violetta was obviously shaken by Lenny's intrusive entrance so close to show time. She just nodded blankly before returning her attention to the image in the mirror in front of her. I knew this evening was going downhill fast. After Lenny left the dressing room, I walked over to Violetta, kissed her on the forehead, and did my best to calm her down.

"You'll be fine, Violetta," I assured her without believing it myself.

"Woody...if anything happens tonight, you won't...I mean...please don't leave me alone," she pleaded.

"Not a chance, Violetta," I answered. "And nothing is going to happen. Just concentrate on doing a great show. Everything else will follow in its own way."

I realized that my own words didn't sound all that convincing even to myself, and I suspect Violetta took little comfort from them. There was another knock on the door.

"Five minutes, Violetta," announced the stage manager without entering the dressing room.

She looked at me, unable to hide the panic she must have been feeling about what was about to take place...or not.

"Show time," echoed the disembodied voice from the hallway outside the dressing room, followed by a single, loud and intrusive knock; more distraction from what we needed to be focusing on.

I bent forward and lifted my sax from its velvet-lined case, suspecting I would soon be in the position of physically needing all the warmth it could offer. Violetta was still staring into the mirror, oblivious to anything going on around her.

"Violetta," I whispered so as not to startle her. "You look absolutely beautiful tonight, even more than usual," I fibbed, hoping to lift her spirits but failing miserably.

She turned towards me and gave me a look that seemed to ask, 'did you just say something?' I opened the dressing room door, waving my right arm across the threshold in a gesture that was meant to indicate it was time to leave the confines of this room. It took several moments for her to realize where she was and what I was doing, standing there like a marble

statue with one arm in front of me in the open doorway and the other holding my saxophone. After a flicker of recognition, she stood, grabbed her cane, and limped past me, out the door, into the hallway.

"Uhhh...Violetta...did you forget something?" I asked in as close to a joking tone of voice as I could muster, immediately recognizing that any attempt at humor was misplaced under these circumstances.

She just looked at me as if in a daze, with not a clue of what I had just asked her. So, I planted my foot against the door to prop it open and reached back to grab her guitar from its stand, somehow managing not to drop my saxophone in the process. She wordlessly took the guitar from me before abruptly turning away and setting off towards the stage in stiff, robot-like movements. I followed close behind, not knowing if I should say anything more. With each step, my dread merely increased in intensity, my thoughts warning me that this evening was not going well.

The closer we got to the back stage area, the more we could hear the intensity of voices coming from those already seated in the audience, awaiting the show they had all surely heard about from those in attendance last night. It's funny, but you can get a real feel for your audience before you even set foot on stage. Last night's pre-concert buzz was subdued and affectionate. This evening's sounds were almost raucous, ripe with expectation, challenging us to deliver on the unspoken promise of an excellent show. I could hear the Master of Ceremonies already concluding his introduction of us at stage-front before we had even made it to the stage entrance.

"Ladies and gentlemen, without further adieu, please welcome the Ellicott Room's own beloved artist of the guitar and voice...Violetta...accompanied this evening by brilliant tenor saxophonist Woody Reed!"

I actually laughed out loud at his choice of words. I was not yet ready to consider myself brilliant by any stretch of the imagination. In that final moment before our feet would transport us onto the stage without even thinking about the required steps, I placed my arm around Violetta's shoulder in a final gesture of physical support and emotional encouragement. I was startled by the instant realization that she was shaking, her skin actually cold to my touch.

"I'm right beside you, Violetta," I whispered in her ear without removing my arm from her shoulder. She stepped forward without looking at me, as if steeling her resolve. And then . . . it happened. Her left leg, so badly mangled years ago in the car accident that had claimed her parents' lives, caught on the threshold at the rear of the stage. My world seemed to grind down into a vision of agonizing slow motion. I saw her start to fall forward, trying desperately to cradle her guitar. I heard the audience gasp in horror, such an abrupt shift from their loud applause only a moment ago in time. Before I was aware of a conscious thought to do anything, I lunged forward, roughly inserting my hand under her right arm to prevent her fall. While she had

been rescued, her guitar was not so lucky, eluding her last-second protective grab and slipping to the floor with a loud klunk, causing yet another gasp from the guests. I quickly bent over and picked it up, inspecting it for any damage before I handed it back to Violetta. To my surprise, her guitar survived its fall with not even a scratch in sight. However, Violetta's psyche was another story. She just stood there, staring through her guitar, unsure what to do next. I placed my arm around her waist from behind, steadying her, and guided her to the seat awaiting her at stage front. I was totally conscious of the murmurs coming from the audience. People were standing, craning their necks to get a better look at what was going on in front of their incredulous eyes.

The lighting technician must have been equally confused and unsure of protocol, for he dimmed the stage lights in his confusion and brought the house lights back up to full. Once I had Violetta seated, I got down on one knee, blocking view of her from the audience as much as possible, and looked directly into her eyes.

"Violetta...I'm here for you," I whispered as reassuringly as possible. "I will be your strength. Lean on me, for I'll never let you down."

A tentative smile, intended for me only but seen by many others as well, cracked through the tears she couldn't seem to hold back. Seeing that, the audience began a slow rhythmic applause which built in intensity when the lighting tech realized this must be his unseen cue to dim the house lights and raise the stage lights back to full brilliance. This show would go on after all. As I stood back up and turned to face the audience, I was struck as if by a slap in the face that Violetta hadn't executed her usual habit of silently mouthing words of comfort to herself, unheard by all except her intended parental recipients in another world. This, after all, had become her tradition before performing, and her failure to remain true to procedure, no matter how strange it might seem to anyone else, was not a good omen.

I knew that Violetta would need at least a few moments to gather her wits and focus her energies. My sax securely attached to its neck strap and hanging safely in front of me, I took the microphone in hand, placing my left hand in my pocket in a typical gesture of casual confidence. To my surprise, I felt a wad of paper crinkling from my touch, realizing I had neglected to remove Lenny Dee's note and hundred dollar bills after last night's show. I think I even smiled at the absurdity of the moment.

"Ladies and gentlemen," I began. "Thank you so much for coming to hear Violetta and me perform this evening. I hope you've had as much fun as we have, for we thoroughly enjoyed playing for you. So, thank you again, and please drive home safely."

I turned back to Violetta, tugging on her arm in a comic gesture of attempting to drag her off stage against her will. Despite my lame attempt at stalling with a bit of vaudevillian humor, the audience responded with dead silence. They didn't get it. I stood totally still, the emperor

without his clothes, heartbeat pounding in my ears, my lips responding with an uncomfortable self-protective attempt at a smile.

Violetta apparently had decided to rescue me this time, for she began strumming her guitar lightly behind me. My first thought was to get down on my hands and knees and thank her for saving me from the abject embarrassment I had brought upon myself. My second thought was the realization that she was leading us into '*Lush Life*' as the first song of the evening. I felt an overwhelming dread, spiraling down into a bottomless vortex, totally out of control, out of sync, and at the mercy of forces beyond my comprehension.

When Violetta began singing the introspective introduction to '*Lush Life*', her voice quivered nervously, searching in vain for the meaning in the words she was mouthing from habit, not emotion. It was wrong. Everything about tonight was wrong. Playing this song now was wrong, for it was Violetta's undisguised attempt at escape from the moment, casting away any hope of an emotional performance in search of a journey that was not to be offered for the wrong reason. I closed my eyes, knowing that any rescue this night would have to come from me. Violetta was just not up to it.

In the middle of her tortured introduction, I jumped in assertively with an 'I'll take it from here' attitude, letting her know she need not sing again until ready. She settled into a thankful if not pleasant accompaniment behind me, realizing that on this evening I would be the one bearing the burden of performance. Little by little, I found a comfortable musical groove despite the shaky start of the evening. As the notes began cascading from my old sax without need of conscious thought or planning, the only emotion in my mind was the remembrance of playing this very song at Trumpet Man's funeral so many years ago. In my dreams, I endlessly relive those final moments. I can't say that I saw fear in his eyes in those last seconds. Rather, I sensed profound confusion, as if his mind was spinning out of control with his last-second plea, smothered by lack of oxygen: '*No, wait, I'm not ready yet!*'

At the time of his death, I was too numb even to cry. No matter how hard I tried to force the tears, they wouldn't come. Mona had insisted I perform '*Lush Life*' at his funeral, just my solo tenor without accompaniment. There I had stood, saxophone in hand, in front of all those who had loved him so dearly. Mona leaned close and whispered in my ear, confiding that Trumpet Man often told her that my rendition of that classic song was his favorite, and she was sure he would have wanted me to play it for him. As I raised the horn to my lips that day, the tears finally arrived, rolling down my face uncontrollably. To this day, I can't remember a single note I played. But everyone who was there told me it was the most soulful rendition of '*Lush Life*' they had ever heard. For me, he had never left. To this day, I still expect he'll sashay into my next gig, trumpet in hand, eager and ready to share his own gift with me.

Back in the moment, the more I reminisced, the more I let myself go, losing track of where I was and with whom. Seeing the pulsating red glow of the spotlights behind my tightly closed eyelids, I visualized Trumpet Man's casket in front of Mona's tear-soaked face in the first row. My soulful rendition of this song took absolute command of my senses as the tears rolled down my cheeks yet again. My mind wandered to thoughts about The Performer. Just as I had experienced his thoughts during his performance, once again I intuited his words.

'Yes, Woody, you have a choice to make, one that will impact the very essence of your life from this moment forward. This choice is yours alone. No one can help you decide. Not me, or even Trumpet Man.'

Suddenly, I realized that I was once again experiencing the now familiar sensation of simultaneously thinking about the music I was playing, and my own emotional reaction to it. Lost in the moment, I felt myself . . . rising . . . from the confines of my physical body on stage, a feeling that was becoming so comforting and welcoming. I knew I was on my way to The Zone yet again. But exactly as had happened only a short week ago, I felt a violent tug on my mind, hearing Violetta's heartbreaking plea from below.

'Don't leave me alone, Woody...please...take me with you.'

As before, I held out my thoughts as if a rope for her to grab onto, despite suspecting in my soul that Violetta would not be traveling with me this night. At that precise moment of realization, I heard the familiar voice of Trumpet Man with a whisper of cold air in my ear.

'Hey, kid...remember me...'

For reasons I'll never understand, I reacted to his words in a panic, as I had done on that first journey so long ago. Why should that be? After all, I had become a regular traveler to The Zone, where I had communicated with Trumpet Man. As I contemplated this surreal response, there was a sudden flash of brilliant white light. I looked down to the stage below to see Violetta following my ascent with her terror-stricken eyes, one hand actually raised in a desperate physical gesture of trying to grab onto me.

Violetta

'Woody...don't leave me here alone alone...'

The Performer

'You've been chosen...'

Lenny Dee

'Take care of my precious little flower...'

The Performer

'You must save yourself, Woody...'

Trumpet Man

'You get there with the right people, at the right time, in the right place, or not at all...'

The Performer

'Time to get back up on the horse...'

Lenny Dee

'If I ever hear...'

'I ain't never heard no one play like you, kid...'

Woody Reed

'Breathe, Woody, Breathe...'

And I felt myself, floating above the concert hall, observing the audience not at all confused by my ascent, since that rising was beyond the scope of their worldly senses. And still I saw Violetta's hand being lifted and held in the air in mid-song. The last thing I remember seeing was Lenny Dee's gaze following my ascension from far below. The fear was obvious in his terrified expression as he saw me catapulted into deep space from a pinpoint location on earth, as if sling-shot through a wormhole into another dimension.

At first, I could see everything receding into the distance, looking smaller and smaller by the moment below me. But all at once, without knowing when it happened, I found myself suspended in pitch black, with not a flicker of life-giving light to save my soul. Opening my eyes in hope of regaining some semblance of balance, I experienced the horrific realization that I couldn't hear anything, so totally alone, without direction, without Violetta, without The Performer, without Trumpet Man, and without my music to guide me.

'Oh, Violetta, I can see this is gonna be a fun evening.'

“LEADERSHIP”

The Narrator

Well, well, well! As I so carefully warned you earlier in the telling, all is not as it seems. Indeed, it never is. For strange things have in fact happened yet again. Suffice it to say you have experienced some disorientation with the unfolding of this tale, much the same as Woody has. But your patience is a virtue, for the truth about Woody's future is about to be revealed to you! Ahhhh, but such revelation will not be easy...his tale will unfold from the prospective of Trumpet Man, The Performer, Violetta, Lenny Dee, Brian, and Woody himself, not to mention someone else you have yet to meet. Each will explain what has happened to Woody from his or her own vantage point. As you might expect, this telling will cause you much discomfort, since you must hear each person's story before you can understand the whole story. And, in this case, the whole is definitely greater than the sum of its parts. So, prepare yourself, for what awaits you might be considered by some to be disturbing. And, as always, consider yourself warned. Much like the verbal disclaimer intoned on commercial breaks while you're watching movies on cable television, *the content of this program may not be appropriate for all viewers, and discretion is advised.*

Violetta in the past

The last thing I clearly remember was the sight of Woody rising from the confines of his physical body on stage. His beautiful aura floated up gently towards the ceiling of the Ellicott Room, drifting as if without concern for worldly matters. Despite my forced attempt at performing *'Lush Life'* to escape my worldly bonds, Woody had somehow managed to focus his energy totally on the music, whereupon he began his much-deserved ascent.

But as I sat there, watching him escape the pain I was feeling at that moment, I couldn't help myself. Selfishly, I reached out to him, first with my eyes, then with my hand, hoping against all hope that he could pull me up with him. I knew this was wrong. And I knew it couldn't happen that way, for I had done everything possible on this evening to guarantee that I would be bound to this stage as if with a ball and chain. But I reached out for him anyway, and I saw his eyes desperately meeting my gaze, trying against all odds to help me. That's when I was overwhelmed by a brilliant flash of white light, convinced an explosion had rocked our world. At that moment, I saw Woody catapulted outward at remarkable speed, disappearing from my view in that flash of an instant, and I feared he was lost to me... forever.

I sat there, so totally desperate on that stage, unable to do anything. Woody was gone. And I was alone once more. I have no memory of anything else. I'm told that I would be dead if not for Lenny. I lay here now, in this bed, stunned at the ability of this arthritic little man to lift me in his arms and carry me to safety, giving his own life to save mine. This strange little man, my guardian, whom many viewed as a buffoon, was nothing less than a hero, saving my life for a second time. Through my tears, I prayed that he would be reunited with my parents, for the three of them shared a love and trust that transcends all else.

When I awoke yesterday in this bed, arms and hands heavily bandaged, I wondered, selfishly, if I would ever play the guitar again. Imagine, my life being saved by Lenny sacrificing his, and me thinking only about myself. I felt shame on top of pain and fear. Having already endured a long rehabilitation in my otherwise short life, my first thought was to give up the battle before it even began. But then I envisioned Woody's eyes holding mine, willing me to never give up hope of recovery and finding each other once again. And how unfair it would have been to Lenny for me to give up so easily. He never did. If nothing else, I owed him my best effort at life.

How strange that I would have walled myself off for such a long time, only to fall in love with Woody at first sight. I'll always remember performing *'Lush Life'* with him for the first time. When he eased in with that beautiful and soulful tenor sax of his, so gently and compassionately weaving his musical answers around my musical questions, I was overcome with a feeling of warmth I had never experienced before. If you must know, it felt like we were making love right there on that little stage in front of everyone who cared to watch! And when I

gave the stage over to him during the second chorus, how he soared above us all like a majestic eagle riding the air currents! At that moment, I knew we were destined to be together forever. Or, so I thought. I lie here now, wondering where he is, what has happened to him, for no one can recall seeing him escape the fire that claimed Lenny and his treasured Ellicott Room that evening. The most I can do now is think of Woody, and try my best to communicate with him, at least in thought.

'Woody...come back to me...please...'

Lenny Dee in the past

Friday night, Violetta and Woody were great! When I saw Violetta float up into da light, I just knew where she was headed. I stood, watchin' 'er rise above the stage, wishin' I could go wid 'er. Years ago, when Violetta's papa asked me to watch over her if anyt'ing ever happened, I was in shock. Nobody nev'r asked me to do somp'in so 'mportant before. I gave my word. And I was gonna keep it, no matter what. When all hell broke loose Sat'rday night, da place was burnin' down 'round us, and Violetta, she's just sittin' on da stage, lookin' up, reachin' for Woody. I saw 'im floatin' up, reachin' back for 'er, but it was too late for 'im to help. So I knew I had to be da one to save my little girl from harm. I ran up to da stage as fast as my legs would carry me. I picked 'er up in my arms, an' carried 'er out t'rough the smoke and flames. I never stopped, I never quit. I made a solemn promise, an' I would'n go back on my word, just like I never broke my promise to my other sweet little flower.

By da time I got us outside, my chest was feelin' real tight. Dose fireman had to pry Violetta outa my arms. I finally let go, I guess, 'cuz I was layin' dere, watchin' 'em put Violetta on a stretcher and load 'er onto dat amb'lance. I knew I was a gonner by den. The last t'ing I r'member is seein' my Violetta's face, and the face of my other flower right next to her, so close I could almost touch 'em both. I just prayed dose last few minutes, hopin' I would see both der parents again, wherever dey were...'cuz I was on my way dere, too. I closed my eyes. An' ya know what? It did'n hurt, not even a little. No, it felt real warm and peaceful. So...I let go...

Woody in the future

Without a conscious thought of time passing, I found myself back on stage, back in the moment, down on my knees gasping for breath, soaking up the thunderous applause from the audience. I slowly got to my feet, and dragged my body off-stage, where I collapsed onto the floor, barely managing to keep my sax from crushing damage. Thankfully, the curtains drew to a close, and the show was over. The other musicians came running off the stage towards me, fear in their eyes

as they saw me sprawled on the floor, saxophone cradled protectively on my chest. The first to reach me was the bass player, he a bald-headed giant named Armstrong Fingers.

"Mannnn, Woody, you were wayyyy out there this time!"

With that, Armstrong carried me into the dressing room. As I relented without choice to the deep sleep, something didn't feel right. Indeed, something felt very wrong, just beyond the grasp of my mind as it prepared for shutdown moments from now. If only I could focus.

The next thing I remember was waking from a dream, totally unaware of where I was, how I got there, and how long I'd been there. I opened my eyes and felt myself staring into Armstrong's eyes, recognizing a face I had known for at least 25 years, yet unable to call to my mind anything about this man who was obviously both friend and colleague.

"Welcome back, Woody."

"Armstrong... where am I?" I asked in a hoarse whisper.

"Where do you think? Like always, you're in my pad, sleepin' on my couch!" He raised one eyebrow before uttering his next words. "You were gone on a long trip this time, Woody. I've never heard you play like you did last night. Straight out of a dream, it was."

"Or a nightmare," I mused. Here I was, a fifty-six year-old man, yet again strung out from my travels to otherworldly places, waking on a couch in someone else's apartment, trying to focus on what had just happened to me. I couldn't shake the feeling that nothing fit in this picture, including me. I was a man in the wrong place at the wrong time, unable to touch the reality of the moment.

Armstrong had thoughtfully tossed my dirty clothes into a laundry bag, placing it near the door. "Woody, I gotta tell ya, in the 25 years we've been playing together in this band, I've never heard you play like you did last night. It was truly inspirational, my man!"

"If only I could remember it," I answered. "But I have no memory of playing even a note. It's kind of a Catch-22, you know? You work so hard to achieve the moment, you take off, and then...poof...you're off to somewhere else in the flicker of an eyelid."

Armstrong broke the uncomfortable silence.

"Woody...you don't seem like yourself today."

"I don't know, Armstrong. Something just feels...you know...wrong. Maybe out of place. I can't really explain it, but I feel like I'm somewhere I'm not supposed to be."

"You are somewhere you're not supposed to be...you're in my apartment after a gig again, instead of being in your own pad with someone far better lookin' than me!"

I looked at him intensely, grateful for his years of friendship before answering.

"Yeah, you're right, big man. Time for me to vanish."

With that, I got up to leave. Armstrong reached out one of his big paws to initiate the parting handshake that had become so comfortable for us over the years. Taking his hand, I was

reminded how appropriate the name Armstrong Fingers was for this gentle giant of a man. I was lucky to have him as a friend. I left with my sax case in one hand and laundry bag in the other, walking outside to a cold and dismal afternoon, snow covering the ground from last night's downfall. A strange thought of snow warmly glowing in the streetlights brought on an unexpected feeling of déjà vu that I couldn't quite put my finger on. The more I reached for it, the farther it receded from my grasp. I started the car, pulled away from the curb, and there it was again. Nothing I could grab onto, just a feeling that I had already experienced this moment.

I got back to my apartment and walked in, chastising myself for leaving the kitchen such a mess. And there it was again. This time, it was the rather insane notion that my kitchen had been spotless before I left. I couldn't fathom an explanation for my thoughts. I decided to go out to eat, not eager to spend time alone in the apartment. I pulled up to the Toad Lagoon, one of my favorite places. The waiter greeted me with a smile.

"Hey Woody," I haven't seen you in a while. You been on the road again?"

"Oh, Hi Brian," I answered. "Yeah, as a matter of fact..."

That's as far as I got before the feeling overtook me again. Brian's smile quickly faded, replaced by a look of concern as I sat there frozen in mid-sentence.

"Woody...are you all right?" he asked as if fearing the answer. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

I stared at him long and hard before mustering the will to answer.

"Brian...why do I have the feeling that you already asked me that very question?"

He actually took a step back, convinced something dreadful was about to happen.

"Woody...I haven't seen you for months."

"Are you sure?" I asked stupidly.

"Of course I'm sure, Woody."

"It's just...well...I can't shake the feeling that someone asked that same question last night."

"Woody, you weren't in here last night."

By now fully ashamed and embarrassed, I threw my arms up in the air in surrender.

"Aww, man, I'm sorry, Brian. I'm okay. Really, I am. It's just been a strange day. I think what I need about now is a heaping stack of oat pancakes, heavy on the maple syrup, light on the butter, please."

There it was again... I decided not to alarm Brian any more than I already had, so I kept this thought to myself. He left to deliver my order to the kitchen, looking back over his shoulder suspiciously to see if I was about to do anything crazy, I guess. But it *was* crazy. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't grab onto what was bothering me. Nothing fit. Nothing felt right or... normal, for want of a better word.

Later, back at my apartment, I plunked myself down on the couch in front of the TV. I nodded off to sleep within twenty minutes, my head lolling back onto the pillow propped behind me. I recall being in that moment in time when you know you're dreaming, because your very awareness of the dreaming process means you're about to wake up. In my dream, I saw myself from above, walking down Park Avenue with my arm around the shoulder of a woman whose face I couldn't see. It was snowing, the heavy flakes glowing in the warmth of the streetlights. She was laughing. She put her arm around my waist from behind as we walked and then...and then, I woke up, still on the couch, the sun invading my privacy from outside.

I drove over to Armstrong's pad around 10:30. It took a half dozen or more loud knocks to wake him at this ungodly hour for most musicians. I was about to turn around and leave when he opened the door, his eyes squinting from the light outside.

"Woody...what are you doin' here?"

"Armstrong...I need to talk."

"Man...what time is it, anyway?"

"It's late...around 10:45," I smiled.

"A.M. or P.M.," he snarled.

I knew he would lighten up and invite me in, which he did, turning without need of formally asking me to enter his sanctuary. He stumbled into the kitchen, one hand stroking the dark stubble showing around his as-yet unshaved head. He plopped down in his chair, and slapped his face a few times in a show of waking himself up before speaking.

"Okay...I'm awake, like it or not. What's up?"

I paused to gather my thoughts.

"What happened last night, Armstrong?"

"What do you mean, 'what happened last night'?"

"I mean, tell me about the gig. What happened when I...left? What song were we playing?"

He scratched his head while looking up at the ceiling to refresh his recollection of the previous evening.

"Well, Bennie called out '*Lush Life*'. Strange thing is, you didn't even wait for him to finish the intro, Woody. You just jumped right in over top of his singing...kind of surprised us all. You know how you normally take your time to build through your solo?"

"Yeah..."

"Well, last night was different. It was like you were on a mission or something. Man, you just took off into the stratosphere, right off the bat. Notes were flyin' out of your sax faster than I've ever heard before, Woody. After about ten minutes or so, I knew you'd gone off to wherever it is you go, because we all stopped playin' and you just kept on wailin' as if we weren't even

there any more. The audience was goin' crazy, stompin' their feet, screamin' louder with every note you played, like they couldn't get enough of it. When the time seemed right, we all just kicked back in, figurin' you were about ready to collapse. Sure enough, you were soon down on your knees, gaspin' for breath."

"Then what happened, Armstrong?"

"Then you hauled your sorry little butt off stage and collapsed. The show was over, the curtains closed, and I carried you into the dressing room, where you zoned out like a dead man. And now, here you are...again."

"Okay, okay...but...did anything...strange...happen last night, Armstrong?"

He looked at me long and hard.

"Strange? Woody, every time we play, you get stranger and stranger! And you ask me if anything was strange? Gimme me a break, man! You're the strangest dude I know!"

"I know, I know, but I never left the stage, did I?"

Armstrong thought for a long moment before answering.

"Let's put it this way. Your body never left the stage. Where your mind went, only you know! End of story."

I got up to leave, patting him on the shoulder.

"Thanks, Armstrong. You're a good friend...no matter what anyone else says," I joked on my way out the door.

"I must be! Who else would put up with your strangeness?"

I spent the rest of the day trying to figure out the significance of anything and everything Armstrong had said. There was a thread there, I knew, but I couldn't grasp it. As always, the more you reach, the further it recedes. Monday night was a carbon copy of Sunday night. I plopped down in front of the TV again, fell asleep, and grabbed onto that moment of consciousness just before you're about to wake up from the dream you're immersed in. This time, I was on stage performing. I could only see myself in the dream as I started to rise out of body during *'Lush Life'*, as so often happens these days when I play that song. But something was wrong. There was a flash of brilliant white light, and in my dream I could feel a strong pull on my thoughts, sensing the panic in the two emerald green eyes I gazed down into from above. I suspect those eyes belonged to the same girl I saw myself walking with in my dream last night. I couldn't see her face clearly, but I saw those eyes, as she seemed to reach out for me, the distance between us quickly growing, until I couldn't see her at all anymore. And then...I woke up.

Each night thereafter, I dreamed about the same girl. One night, it was in a booth at the Toad Lagoon. Another night it was in the car, and she was unlocking my car door from the inside, teasing me about something. Each time, I woke up before I could see her face or figure out who she was and how she fit into my life. As soon as I woke up, her image receded further

and further into my subconscious, to the point where I found myself looking forward to going to sleep in front of the TV, knowing I'd feel her presence again.

I was scheduled to perform with the band tomorrow night, so after breakfast I took my gig clothes out of Armstrong's laundry bag and headed out to the cleaners.

"Hey, Mr. Reed!" boomed Oscar from behind the counter.

"Hey, Oscar. How ya' been?"

"Oh, I can't complain. Nobody will listen anyway!"

"Ain't it the truth!" I chuckled.

As we were talking, he checked the pants I'd dumped on the counter to make sure I hadn't left anything in the pockets before throwing them into the hamper. But this time, unlike the hundreds of other times I'd gone through this same ritual with Oscar, he pulled a wad of money out of my to-be-cleaned pants.

"Whoa, Mr. Reed," he admonished loudly. "You've been coming here for years, and this is the first time I ever found anything in your pockets. It's a good thing I checked!"

He took pride in handing over the money that was stuffed into the pocket. I was stunned. Not wanting to make a scene or admit my lack of knowledge about where that money could have come from, I just smiled gratefully and thanked Oscar for being so honest. I didn't look at the wad of money until I got into my car, making sure no one was watching me as I sat there peeling off two hundred-dollar bills wrapped around a hand-written note.

'Violetta was right. I ain't never heard no one play like you before...see ya tomorrow night, kid...Lenny.'

I read the note again and again before it dawned on me that Violetta must be the girl in my dreams. No matter how hard I tried to visualize her face, all I could conjure up were two green eyes following my ascent from the stage. Is it possible I could have performed with this person and not even remembered? And if so, when? And who was Lenny?

I went to sleep Thursday night in front of the TV again, searching for an answer. In the moment before I knew I would wake from this dream, I saw myself with Violetta again. But this time, I seemed to be looking at myself in a mirror, as if I was someone else observing the scene playing out in front of my eyes. I was startled out of my reverie by the realization that in my dream I was...well...younger...much younger than I am now, with not a trace of gray hair, and curls much longer than the style of today. It felt like me looking back over my life through a set of binoculars, with the big lenses placed up against my eyes instead of the small ones, looking back through time with an oddly distorted vision.

But this night, I didn't wake up. I remained asleep in front of the TV, oblivious to the world, offering me no further hints at what and whom I had seen in my dream. By the time I

awoke, I was already exhausted from my unwelcome nightly ritual of searching for answers that didn't seem ready to reveal themselves.

Violetta in the past

I lay in that hospital bed for weeks, searching for Woody in my dreams. It was getting harder and harder to call up his face in my mind's eye. I just knew that I had to find him. And I sensed that he would be doing the same for me, if he were still alive. I refused to believe that he had died in the fire. But if not, something drastic must have happened to keep him from visiting me. Of that I had no doubt.

I was finally released from the hospital, suddenly aware that I was once again totally alone in this world, with neither friend nor home to go back to. Even my most precious possession, my guitar, had perished in the fire.

Brian in the past

As soon as she walked in the door, I knew something was terribly wrong. She took a seat, alone, looking like a lost soul. And that's when I noticed the bandages on her hands. I approached her quickly, and she spoke to me with a shaky voice.

"Hi, Brian..."

"Hi, Violetta. I haven't seen you . . . since you came in here with Woody," I said gently, hoping to draw her out of her funk.

No sooner had I uttered those words than her face became even darker, as if she were about to cry.

"So...you haven't seen Woody since then?"

"Well...now that you mention it...no, I haven't," I answered slowly. "Is something wrong, Violetta? Has something happened?"

"I don't know, Brian...but I need to find him. He seems to have dropped off the face of the earth."

"Listen, Violetta, how about if you wait 'til I'm off at the end of the night, and we can talk then, for as long as you'd like. In fact, I wouldn't mind the company if you'd care to share some coffee and conversation. What do you say?"

"I'd like that, Brian. And...thank you."

"In the meantime, I'll bet you could use a good dinner. And I'll bet I know exactly what you'd like!"

She tilted her head, wondering what I meant. Within minutes, I had returned to her table with a plateful of oat pancakes, heavy on the maple syrup, light on the butter. And that's when her tears finally broke loose. I put my arm around her shoulder, like a brother comforting his younger sister.

"Later...we'll talk," I said, reluctantly returning to my other tables.

Woody in the future

By the end of the first set Friday night, the band was cooking pretty well...all except me, that is. I just couldn't get into it. My thoughts kept drifting off to my dreams, searching for a connection to my recurrent visions of two green eyes belonging, I believe, to a girl named Violetta. During the break after the first set, Armstrong approached me in the dressing room with a dour look on his face.

"Come on, Woody...what's goin' on out there tonight?"

"I don't know, Armstrong...I just can't find my focus, I guess."

"Well listen, Woody. You're not doin' us much good out there, you know? So if you can't get it together for the next set, do us all a favor and sit this one out. We can't cover for you all night...and we shouldn't have to."

"You're right, you shouldn't...and you won't have to. I'll be fine..."

"Listen, Bennie is gonna start the next set out with 'Lush Life', okay? Just do your thing. Let loose. We'll be right behind you the whole way, Woody!"

We took the stage after intermission to half-hearted applause from the audience, certainly anticipating a better closing set than the opener. Bennie introduced the much-awaited feature song of the evening, that old Jazz classic, 'Lush Life'. I knew I was in deep trouble right away, because the voice I heard wasn't Bennie's, and the words coming from his mouth didn't match the movement of his lips.

'Ladies and gentlemen, without further adieu, please welcome the Ellicott Room's own beloved artist of the guitar and voice...Violetta...accompanied this evening by brilliant tenor saxophonist Woody Reed!'

The band kicked in strong, as if on a mission. I looked around me to see my band mates playing. But I heard nothing. The other horn players kept shifting their gazes to me, wondering when I would join them. But I couldn't move. I was frozen in place.

Suddenly, the floodgates burst open with non-stop images and sounds. I saw Trumpet Man at our first wedding gig. I saw The Performer journeying to The Zone in front of my very eyes. I saw an earlier time in my life, performing with Violetta, loving her and being loved in return by her. I saw Lenny Dee with his arthritic hands steeped in front of his face as his eyes

followed her ascent to The Zone that night in the Ellicott Room. And I saw Violetta, eating dinner with me at the Toad Lagoon, and I stood there, motionless, drowning in the torrent of emotions still beyond my comprehension.

Lost in my thoughts, I was supposed to step up to the microphone for my unaccompanied tenor sax solo. Herbie actually pushed me from behind as I continued to stand frozen, unable to respond to any stimulus. I finally managed to shuffle up to the microphone out of habit more than in response to his not-so-gentle prodding. There I stood, naked in front of the audience, unable to force my hands to raise the sax to my mouth.

"Take it, Woody!" Armstrong yelled all too loudly from behind.

Normally, those three words were music to my ears, giving me escape into a world I was free to create in real time. Tonight, however, those same words felt like a death sentence. The hall was silent. I looked out into a sea of expectant eyes willing me to do something...anything. Lost in a morass of conflicting thoughts and emotions, I held my sax off to the side and whispered into the microphone.

"Violetta...Violetta...please..."

You could have heard a pin drop, save for the echo of my voice across the auditorium. I dropped to my knees, sax held aloft in my left hand, and looked up to the rafters above the stage, screaming at the top of my lungs.

"Violetta...please...don't leave me alone..."

The tears were by now streaming down my face and I lowered my gaze to the floor. The concert hall remained deathly silent, as if all the air had been sucked out leaving only a soundless vacuum. Everyone was waiting for something to happen. Ever so slowly, I stood, turned, and walked off the stage, leaving my band mates to fend for themselves. It was only then that I could hear the boo's chasing the silence. I never looked back to the stage. I escaped through the rear stage door into the parking lot, where I got into my car and drove off into the cold night, feeling like my world had just come to a wicked and unpredictable end.

“UNRAVELING”

The Narrator

Well, well, well . . . as I so carefully warned you earlier in the telling, all is not as it seems. Indeed, it never is. For strange things have happened yet again. Woody has fallen deeper and deeper into the morass that seems to engulf him, with no rescue in sight. He has lost all that has meaning for him...Violetta, Trumpet Man, The Performer, Lenny Dee, Armstrong. . . and, most important, his music to guide him. But I beseech you, do not give up hope. For the unraveling of this tale will lead you to a place you never could have anticipated or expected. Think about what you have heard, and all that I have said. Woody desperately seeks his salvation. Here. Now. What awaits you might be considered by some to be disturbing, so consider yourself warned. Much like the verbal disclaimer intoned on commercial breaks while you're watching movies on cable television, *the content of this program may not be appropriate for all viewers, and discretion is advised.*

Woody in the future

A soft knock on my door startled me. It was 5:30 in the morning. I opened the door to find my bandmates of the past 25 years standing together, their eyes averting mine as I motioned them in. I had abandoned them during our last performance together, leaving them to fend for themselves on stage to the boo's of the crowd. They filed in soundlessly, seating themselves on the couch and floor. Armstrong was the first to speak.

"Woody...are you...all right?" he ventured, unsure of his words.

"No...I don't think I am, Armstrong. Before anyone says anything, I need to apologize to all of you for what happened last night. I left you guys hangin' out there all by yourselves, I know that. Frankly, I wouldn't blame you if you never spoke to me again."

They continued to bore holes in my floor with their downcast eyes before Armstrong broke the uncomfortable silence.

"Woody, we sure don't know what's going on with you, but if we can help you in any way, we will. 25 years of friendship doesn't disappear in one night. We just wanted you to know that."

I started speaking, slowly, trying to think of the right words.

"I...don't...belong...here...Armstrong..."

"What do you mean, '*you don't belong here*,' Woody?"

"Armstrong, I need to get this out! Please, don't say a word. Just listen."

"Okay, Woody. We're all ears."

"Last Saturday night, I believe I quite literally...crash landed...onto your stage at the conclusion of '*Lush Life*'. You see...I hadn't started the evening playing that song...with you..."

"Woody...what are you talkin' about?..."

"Hear me out...please! I know how strange all this sounds, but I began that performance in another time, on another stage, with another musician. I remember rising from my stage-bound body as I began my journey to The Zone, only to feel someone desperately attempting to pull me back. But it was too late. Suddenly, there was a flash of brilliant white light. The last thing I remember was feeling like I'd been shot out of a cannon, watching her eyes disappear below me as I rose faster than ever before. I floated, alone, lost above the world...until, all at once, I found myself returning to the conclusion of *'Lush Life'*...25 years later...with you."

"That other musician...was...Violetta, wasn't it..." Armstrong pondered aloud.

"Yes," I nodded. "Violetta."

Over the next few hours, I told them everything I now remembered about my earlier life, starting with Trumpet Man and leading all the way up to the moment in time where I now found myself. I can't say if they comprehended what they were hearing. But at least they allowed me the dignity to try to find my way.

"Woody...none of us ever pretended to know where you...traveled to...all those nights during our gigs. We've all heard about The Zone, knowing full well that much of what anyone says isn't from first-hand knowledge, but from legend. I think we're all willing to accept anything and everything you say to us, but there's something I just can't seem to wrap my mind around."

"I don't blame you, Armstrong. All I can do is try to answer your questions."

"OK, Woody, well, let's assume that you indeed crash landed on our stage, as you put it. And let's say we're open to the concept that you began that performance in another time, in another place, with another musician at your side. Now, assuming that we haven't all lost our minds yet, one unanswerable question seems to remain."

I knew what was coming, but I told Armstrong to ask the question.

"Woody, *who* has been performing with us for the past 25 years, if not you?"

There it was, the ultimate question, for which I had no certain answer, only conjecture.

"Believe me, Armstrong, I've spent hours trying to answer that question in my own mind! The best I can come up with is a theory. I've told you about my journeys to The Zone, concluding with last Saturday night. In my travels, I've experienced a never-ending series of parallel universes inhabited by all of us at different times and in different settings. I can't explain it any more accurately than that, because mere words don't do justice to the apparent realities that exist beyond the scope of our own physical senses. I believe with all my heart and soul that the Woody Reed you came to know over the past 25 years was indeed me...but not *this* me," I whispered, pointing at myself as if at another person in the room.

"My theory," I continued, "is that *your* Woody Reed began his performance of *'Lush Life'* last Saturday night, much as I did 25 years before, and started his own ascent to The Zone, also

just as I did. I believe that the flash of white light I saw that night was, for want of a better description, some kind of a cosmic shift. I was catapulted 25 years forward, if such direction actually exists...and I don't think it does, if you must know...but I ended up crash landing on your stage, in this time, instead of on the stage where, when, and with whom I began.”

"Woody, if what you say is true...and I don't doubt it for a moment if you say it's so...that means that...”

"Yes," I interrupted. "That means that there's another Woody Reed out there in another time, searching for these same answers in his equally unfamiliar reality, just like I am here.”

"Woody, I gotta tell you, this is all a bit much to grasp, especially this early in the morning," he said in a feeble attempt at levity to break the ice. "But if your theory is true, then all of us exist, everywhere, in all times, in all places, but without knowledge of our other selves. Is that about the gist of it?”

"Yeah...I'd say you hit the nail right on the head," I joked.

We all actually shared a few chuckles at the absurdity of trying to think outside the box, realizing there is no box in the first place.

"Woody...you've got to find her!" Armstrong abruptly shouted out.

"Yes...I do, Armstrong."

"You've got to trace your steps, Woody! You're living in the wrong time, stuck in the wrong place. You've gotta return to all the places the two of you were together, all the people you met. It's the only way...”

"I know," I whispered. "But...”

"No buts, Woody! Don't worry about us. We'll survive. You, on the other hand, might not survive this, Woody.”

I got up and Armstrong nearly smothered me in a bear hug, the other guys standing around us and patting me on the back encouragingly. Slowly, we untangled ourselves.

"Woody, if your theory is correct, the *right* you...will be rejoining us as soon as *this* you gets back to where you belong.”

"That's an interesting way of saying it, Armstrong, but yeah, I believe that's exactly what *will* happen...if I'm right," I said, conviction finally returning to my voice.

“Woody,” Armstrong almost pleaded, “you’ve got to get back on stage with us! It’s the only way for you to reach your destination. You must find your way back to Violetta.”

My bandmates solemnly departed in silence, leaving me sitting there, on my couch, where I fell asleep within seconds from emotional exhaustion.

Violetta in the present

I lay in that hospital bed for weeks, searching for Woody in my dreams. It was getting harder and harder to call up his face in my mind's eye. I just knew I had to find him. And I sensed that he would be doing the same for me, if he were still alive. I refused to believe that he had died in the fire. But if not, something drastic must have happened to him to keep him from visiting me. Of that I had no doubt.

I was finally released from the hospital, suddenly aware that I was once again totally alone in this world, with neither friend nor home to go back to. Even my most precious possession, my guitar, had perished in the fire. On the spur of the moment, I hailed a taxi in front of the hospital and gave the driver Woody's address. Within minutes, as we pulled up to the apartment I remembered as if from a dream, I jumped out of the cab before it had even come to a complete stop, barely remembering to pay the driver. It took only a moment to gather my thoughts before hurrying up the stairs to Woody's apartment. I knocked...and knocked...and knocked, louder each time. A sense of dread overtook me with each unanswered knock. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw someone approaching me on the stairway from the floor above.

"Excuse me...can I help you?" he asked gently.

"I'm looking for Woody...Woody Reed," I answered with the sound of desperation obvious in my shaking voice.

He looked at me for what seemed like minutes before asking, "Are you a friend of Woody's?"

I wanted to scream at the stupidity of his question, but I calmed myself before answering, simply, "Yes."

Again, he paused too long before finally answering me.

"We haven't seen Woody since...the fire," he hesitated.

"At the Ellicott Club?" I burst out.

"You were there?"

"Yes, I was there. Woody and I performed together that night and I need to find him."

I saw him looking down at my hands, still red from the burns I had spent the past many weeks trying to heal.

"I wish I could help you," he said with genuine compassion, "but no one has seen or heard from Woody since that night. For all anybody knows, he could have..."

He stopped short, not wanting or unable to finish his sentence. Undaunted, I asked him if he would jot down a short note and give it to Woody when he returned home, refusing to admit that he might never do so.

'Woody...call me...Violetta.'

"Violetta?" he asked as he glanced at what I had written before folding the note into his shirt pocket.

"Yes... Violetta."

"I will tell him, Violetta. I promise."

He slowly turned and walked back up the stairs to his own apartment.

Woody in the future

I pulled into the lot of the lodge, the first place I could remember performing with Violetta. I parked my car, grabbed my suitcase and sax case, and walked into the lobby to register. As I was handed my key, I asked the clerk if they had a restaurant.

"Oh, yes, Mr. Reed," she replied eagerly. "We're very proud of our four-star restaurant."

"How late do they serve dinner?" I asked, realizing I was repeating a conversation I had already had some 25 years ago.

"Until midnight. Would you like me to reserve a table for you?"

"Yes, please," I answered as I turned to find the stairs. I couldn't help but feel like this was going well, indeed a word-for-word recitation of the conversation I'd had with a different hostess in this very lodge 25 years ago on my first visit.

I walked up to my room, immediately struck by the realization this was the very same room I had stayed in 25 years ago, the first night Violetta and I had shared not only a performance, but a bed. After a hot shower to revive me, I came back down to the lobby and walked towards the restaurant. The entire way, I searched for an easel with color poster at the entrance to the restaurant, remembering the first time I had seen Violetta's picture announcing her performance, held over from the weekend due to the blizzard that had shut the whole town down. While I saw no such poster, the restaurant looked pretty much the way I remembered it. The hostess greeted me as soon as I got to her welcoming podium.

"Good evening, sir. One for dinner this evening?" she asked politely.

"Yes. I have a reservation...the name is Reed," I repeated as if from a 25 year-old script.

"Ah, yes, Mr. Reed, here you are," she answered after locating my name on the reservation list. "Actually, it doesn't look you'll need a reservation tonight," she added, her previously unspoken words breaking the magic of the moment for me.

As she walked me to my table, I asked her who tonight's entertainment would be.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Mr. Reed," she answered, looking back over her shoulder, "but we don't have entertainment in the restaurant."

"Ohh...last time I was here, they had a wonderful singer performing," I attempted to clarify before reaching my table.

"That must have been quite a long time ago, Mr. Reed," she said as I sat down. "I'm afraid they stopped booking music in here at least twenty years ago."

"Ohhh...I'm sorry to hear that..." I answered, trying to hide my disappointment.

"May I get you a drink first, Mr. Reed?"

"Uhh...sure...I'll have a house ginger ale, please," I said, perhaps hoping that sticking to an old script would somehow change the present unwelcome flow of the conversation.

"Certainly," she laughed. "Thomas will be your server, Mr. Reed. He'll be with you shortly with your ginger ale and menu."

My heart stopped. The coincidence was just too much to handle. Within a few minutes, Thomas, my waiter, approached the table with a ginger ale. I wracked my brain, trying desperately to recognize him from our first meeting 25 years ago. The age seemed right...he looked to be about 50-ish.

"Good evening, sir," he announced as he placed my drink in front of me. "May I tell you our specials of the evening?"

"Actually," I quickly answered, "I'd like to order a plate of pasta marinara with grilled vegetables."

I could have sworn that sparked a flicker of recognition in his eyes, but I couldn't be sure, so I pressed on as he wrote my order on his pad.

"How long have you been a waiter here, Thomas?"

He smiled a weary smile as he answered.

"About 30 years, sir. Why do you ask?"

"Oh, I don't know," I said without breaking eye contact. "I remember eating here a very long time ago, when they still had entertainment. I could be wrong, but I think you might have been my waiter!"

Thomas looked at me closely and carefully before snapping his fingers in recognition.

"You're that sax player, right?"

My heart was beating a mile a minute by now.

"Man, what a memory you have!" I gushed.

"That's funny," he explained, "but as soon as you ordered pasta marinara with grilled vegetables, I knew I had met you before! A man *is* what he *eats*, right?"

I decided to go for broke.

"Thomas, let me ask you. Do you remember the beautiful young singer I performed with here?"

His demeanor told the story I didn't want to hear.

"Oh, what a shame that was," he said with downcast eyes. "Violetta was such a sweet person, as you surely know," he continued sadly. "The last we heard, she was burned pretty badly in a fire at some club the week after she left here. They took a wrecking ball to the place soon after."

"Do you know what happened to her, Thomas?"

He made a point of looking inward, searching for an answer.

"You know... we never saw or heard from her again after that. I wish I could help you more, but I just don't know what ever became of her."

"Thanks, Thomas. By the way, it's good to see you again," I concluded sincerely, allowing him to turn from my table to place my order. Thinking about it, I realized that meeting Thomas could serve either to prove or debunk my theory, depending on how I looked at it. Initially, I was thrilled that he remembered me from my first performance with Violetta. Upon further thought, though, his very recollection seemed to prove my working theory wrong, in that it could be taken for proof that *this* Woody Reed...*me*...indeed was present in this place, in *this* time, as well as *another* time, some 25 years ago. On the other hand, it could just as easily have proved my theory correct! His recollection of hearing about the demise of the Ellicott Club and Violetta's disappearance could be taken for proof that somehow the different times and places intersected. If that was the case, it tended to lend even more credence to my belief in some sort of cosmic shift that threw our parallel universes out of kilter. Regardless of which way I looked at the problem, I wasn't about to give up and go home.

Violetta in the present

Brian would prove to be a loyal friend to me in the months to come. But that night, I waited until he finished up his shift, then followed him to his little bungalow just a few blocks from the restaurant. Awaiting us at the front door was a lovely young woman who looked exactly like Brian but with long hair, which, quite frankly, startled me! He quickly introduced me to his twin sister, Bryanna, who proceeded to throw her arms around me, comforting me as she would a sick child.

"Please, come in, Violetta. Brian has told me all about your dilemma."

The three of us stayed up all night, talking, getting to know each other. Brian fell asleep on the floor, obviously exhausted from his late shift at the restaurant, whereupon Bryanna took over.

"Tell me how you and Woody met, Violetta. Maybe it'll help us come up with an answer to his mysterious disappearance."

I spent several hours explaining how I met and performed with Woody, that we had fallen in love at first sight. Eventually, I got around to explaining what had happened that fateful night at the Ellicott Club.

"That was *you*?" Bryanna gasped. "You know, I read about that in the paper, and lots of people were talking about it. For all we know, Woody could have... ohhh...I'm sorry, Violetta, I didn't mean to say that."

"Don't be sorry, Bryanna. Just talking to you about all this is helping me more than you'll ever know. Some way, some day, I *will* find Woody. Until I do, I'll never give up hope that he's alive, and well, looking for me, too."

"You're staying here, Violetta. No ifs, ands, or buts! And you'll stay here as long as it takes us to find him!"

To my own surprise, I didn't argue the point. In truth, I needed a friend right then more than at any other time in my life. Bryanna led me into the spare bedroom, pulled back the covers on the neatly made bed, and actually tucked me in before turning off the light and shuffling off to her own room to catch up on much needed sleep. A lifelong friendship was born, to be nourished continually and unselfishly throughout the coming years.

Thomas in the future

After my shift, I drove home, eager for a good night's sleep. No sooner did I open my garage door and drive my car in than something began to tug at the edges of my thoughts. I couldn't quite put my finger on it, but I knew that it would come to me if I stopped thinking about it. So I brewed a pot of tea, turned on the all-night Jazz show I listened to on public radio every night, and plopped down in my easy chair in the living room with my newspaper, fulfilling my daily ritual of catching up on the world news. I purposely avoided thinking about whatever was trying to pry its way into my conscious thoughts, confident that by ignoring it I would in fact allow it to come forward in full bloom.

As usually happens, about fifteen minutes into reading the paper my eyelids started feeling heavy, closing as an invitation to sleep. On the radio in the background, I could faintly hear an old arrangement of tenor saxophonist Coleman Hawkins and singer Sarah Vaughn performing '*Body and Soul*,' Sarah providing the luscious *body* to Coleman's emotive *soul*. All at once, my eyes flew open, and my mind returned to full awareness. What was bothering me under all those layers of my consciousness was the visit earlier in the evening from another saxophonist, Woody Reed. Out of the blue after 25 years, he had come into the restaurant, as if no more than a week or two had passed since I last saw him. He asked about Violetta, the singer he had performed with for the first time at the lodge all those years ago. I told him that I hadn't heard another word about Violetta after reading in the paper that she had been badly burned in the fire that had destroyed the club, the name of which escaped me at the moment. He looked like his world was about to fall apart when I told him that. But sitting here now, I suddenly

remembered that Violetta had come into the restaurant maybe three or four months after that gig at the club, asking about Woody! In fact, I remember she came in with a friend whose twin brother was a waiter, which is surely how I came to remember the visit. Truth be told, I was somewhat taken with Violetta's friend, but neither the time nor place seemed appropriate to initiate the kind of relationship I might have wanted back then.

I spent the next half-hour feeling totally guilty that I hadn't remembered this visit when Woody had asked me earlier in the evening. I finally convinced myself I shouldn't beat myself up too badly. It was, after all, 25 years ago, so I could be forgiven a momentary lapse of memory. I wracked my brain, trying to remember if Woody had told me where he was headed this night. The more I thought about it, the more I was sure that he never did tell me. I suspected this new information might help his search, if not his frame of mind. But for the life of me, I had no idea how to contact him. If only I had thought to ask for his address or phone number...

Violetta in the present

After my all-night conversation with Bryanna, I slept late the next morning, emotional exhaustion draining my energy as surely as physical fatigue must have claimed hers. I woke up around noon to the sound of a light rain tinkling against the bedroom window, despite the coldness of winter that had until now trapped us in its icy grip. I lay there in bed for another ten minutes, mesmerized by the sounds of the house. Finally getting out of bed before dozing off again, I shuffled into the kitchen to find a note that Bryanna had left on the table.

Violetta,

Brian is off to work, I'm at the library doing a little research. Help yourself to whatever you need. Here's a spare house key, in case you go out. I'll be home by about 11:00 tonight. See you then...we'll talk some more. In fact, I have an idea!

Later...

Bry

I found the coffeepot right away and brewed some Cinnamon Hazelnut, which was in its bag in the refrigerator door, properly labeled. This was Woody's favorite coffee, and that recollection stabbed at my heartstrings like a dagger. After downing a cup, I made myself some scrambled eggs and wheat toast, content to wile away the day absorbed in mundane tasks. Frankly, I welcomed the break from my troubled and obsessive thoughts about finding Woody. I knew it would do me good to spend a mindless day in this warm, quiet house, without so much as a thought about the weather or anything else. So that's exactly what I did. After a long hot bath, I spent the rest of the day dressed only in the bathrobe Bryanna had left hanging near the tub for me, reading yesterday's paper, and snacking on the leftovers. I

looked forward to her coming home later in the evening and sharing her idea with me. Although I had just met her, I felt that I'd found a true friend, indeed a life-long friend, someone who would never think to say or do anything to hurt me. Around ten o'clock that evening, I decided to prepare a dinner of pasta marinara for the three of us, figuring Brian would be exhausted from his day waiting tables. Although no one ever would have called me a good cook, I managed to do an adequate job of playing chef, and by eleven I had the table set awaiting their return. Sure enough, like clockwork, I heard the key in the lock minutes later. They both strolled in looking none the worse for wear.

"What's this?" Bryanna asked, gesturing to the table, obviously surprised at what she was seeing and smelling there.

"Pasta Marinara," I answered proudly.

"I can see that, Bry, but you really didn't have to go to all the trouble!"

"Oh, it was no trouble, Bry. Besides, it's the least I could do. I don't know many people who would offer their house to a stranger like you've done. Consider this my small way of saying thanks for being a friend."

"I must admit, I'm pretty hungry," she said, turning away to prevent me from seeing her blush. She put her raincoat onto its hanger and hung it in the closet near the front door. She took a couple of candles down from the cupboard, lit them, and placed them on the table. We enjoyed a comfortable dinner, talking about the day. When it was apparent that our conversation was running out of steam, Bry got up from her chair and began to clear the dishes from the table, all the while looking at me to gauge if she thought I was ready to proceed to more serious matters. I helped her, she rinsing and me loading the dishwasher while Brian retreated to the couch. When we finished, we ambled into the living room to relax. She sat down on an overstuffed pillow on the dark wooden floor, her back against the wall. I sat cross-legged across the small room, elbows resting on my knees, already beginning to wonder about the idea she had earlier hinted at.

"I have an idea, V," she said abruptly.

I didn't answer, instead waiting for her to continue.

"If you're ever going to find out what happened to Woody, we have to look for him on the assumption he can't look for you," she said with conviction.

"I thought that's what I was doing when I searched Brian out," I answered with nowhere near the same level of assurance.

"Okay, okay, finding him was a good start, V. But we've got to go back and trace your steps, visit all the places you were together. Sooner or later, we're bound to find something. Listen...tomorrow's my day off. I think we should get an early start and visit the Ellicott Club."

"But the place burned down, Bry. I don't see how..." I stammered, feeling my eyes starting to sting from holding back the tears.

"...I know, I know, but it can't hurt. You never know what we might find there. And if that doesn't turn up anything, we'll take another step back in time. It's the only way, V. The worst that can happen is we'll waste a day looking. What do you say?"

Of course, she was right. I agreed to her plan, despite my fear at what we might actually find in the process. But I had no better idea.

We retreated to our separate rooms, intent on being well rested for our morning stakeout at the Ellicott Club, or what was left of it.

Thomas in the future

Having recalled Violetta asking about Woody 25 years ago, I had to do something or I would never sleep tonight! I logged onto the Internet and did a search for Woody Reed, saxophonist. Sure enough, I found a number of links listing his discography, groups he had performed with, and accolades from various reviewers. To my disappointment, there was no listing showing address or phone number. I was about to give up and log off, but my eye barely caught a link to a bulletin board message that had been sent out into cyber-land by Woody only a few days ago.

'Violetta, if you see this message, please contact me...

Woody'

I clicked on Reply and typed my message.

'Woody,

After you left the restaurant this evening, I suddenly remembered that Violetta had indeed visited the lodge once about 25 years ago, looking for you! I'm afraid it just slipped my mind after all that time. In fact, she came in with a friend. I think her name was Bryanna. I hope this helps you. All the best to you, my friend...

Thomas'

I clicked Send Message, secure in the knowledge that perhaps I'd done my small part in helping Woody solve his mystery. With that, I collapsed into bed and slept the night away, unfettered by any lingering negative thoughts.

Bryanna in the present

Exhausted as I was after a long day, I slept like a log, waking up before my alarm clock had a chance to violate the next morning's solitude. I took a quick shower and dressed in record time, thinking I would fix breakfast for the two of us. To my surprise, Violetta was already in the kitchen putting the finishing touches on homemade pancakes. I chuckled out loud, thinking I

could easily get used to having someone cook my meals for me. Dinner last night, and now breakfast...this was just too much to ask for!

It was still dark outside, and a steady snow was falling. With pancakes stuck to our ribs and coffee adding the required caffeine kick, we threw our coats and boots on, eager to get on the road to begin our search for any clues to Woody's whereabouts. By 7:30, we were on our way to the downtown corner where the Ellicott Club had once stood. As we drove up, I can't say we were surprised to see an empty lot. After all, the building had burned to the ground. But the total completeness of the cleanup did catch us a bit off guard. It looked like nothing had ever stood there before. Grass and shrubs had been planted, managing now to stick up through the steadily accumulating snow. We just sat there in the car, hesitant to look at each other, listening to the defroster motor breaking the discomfort of our dead silence. As if on cue, we both opened our car doors at the same time, getting out to walk the site, wondering if some magical intuition would fall upon us.

It was so quiet outside you could actually hear the heavy, wet snow blanketing the ground in a self-protective barrier to our prying eyes. No sooner did we walk across the site than our footprints were already covered over by fresh snow. It was easy to imagine that no one had ever been here before, to say nothing of a building having stood here. Don't ask me why, but I actually thought about all the times I'd visited Niagara Falls, wondering what it must have looked like to the first Indian ever to approach the hypnotic waters of the raging Niagara River as it sought the solace of the rocks so far below. I never wondered why some people jumped, unable to step away from the edge. It was that strong a pull on the human psyche.

I can't say that Violetta looked disappointed. In truth, I'm sure she expected to find nothing of value here. I think I was more dejected than she was, perhaps because I had every expectation of finding something...anything...that would lead us to Woody. More to break the silence than anything else, I spoke first.

"Well, Violetta...what now?" I asked.

"Are you in the mood for a little drive," she finally answered after several long moments of pondering the situation.

"Absolutely," I agreed. "Where to?"

"The lodge where Woody and I met and performed for the first time together."

"Let's do it," I urged.

In this weather, the drive would be a long and arduous one, especially once we reached the mountains of northern Pennsylvania. So we drove back to my place and packed a small suitcase for each of us, just in case we would need to stay over the night, which I suspected we would. In good weather, we would have made it before noon. But today would be different, I

knew, and we both seemed to steel ourselves for the drive that awaited us. I figured we'd be lucky to make it there by dinnertime. But that didn't stop us.

“SISTERHOOD”

Violetta in the present

Bryanna took the first driving shift. The bad news was that the snow continued to fall heavily. The good news was that there was not a hint of wind, so the wet snow didn't blow or drift, making the driving not at all tiresome, despite having to proceed well below any posted speed limits. I suspect we had both learned long ago from living in this climate that when it came to traveling in wintertime, the tortoise invariably arrived at his destination well before the hare.

As I thought would be the case, the weather took a dramatic turn for the worse as soon as we approached the higher terrain of The Southern Tier. The farther we drove up into the hills, the more difficult it became. What began as *inches* quickly became *feet* of snow, and the earlier calm was replaced by gusty winds buffeting the car on all sides. We pressed on, knowing that conditions would probably change once we crested the hills and began our descent into the Pennsylvania valley. Despite the 55-mph speed limit, we never drove faster than 30, preferring to maintain a steady and safe pace. We both shook our heads in disbelief at the number of SUV drivers who recklessly passed us, skidding and fishtailing in the unplowed left lane. Sure enough, we passed most of them mere minutes later, digging their vehicles out of roadside ditches. Didn't these people comprehend the value of patience?

By noon, we were heading into the valley. The sun was attempting to peek through the thick dark clouds. What had been heavy snowfall only minutes ago in the highlands was a light dusting in the valleys. But we didn't kid ourselves. We both knew we would have to drive through yet another section of mountainous terrain where the weather would certainly take a turn for the worse again. We stopped for gas, refilled the windshield-washer with fluid, and decided to have lunch at a roadside diner. Despite the neon '*Truckers Welcome*' sign in the front window, there were no trucks parked in the lot, and only a few cars. The diner was an Art Deco prototype from the nineteen-fifties, so common in this part of the country.

We walked in where another sign awaited us: '*Please Seat Yourself.*' So, we did, preferring a vinyl-clad booth to rotating stools at the counter. Once unburdened of our coats, we sat down and looked over the menu. A heavy-set waitress who looked to be about fifty quickly approached our table, as if sensing that we had made a decision on what to order.

"What can I get you, sweetie," she asked Bryanna.

"Ohhh...I think I'd like the open-faced turkey sandwich with mashed potatoes and gravy," Bryanna mused somewhat comically, probably afraid of my reaction to her ordering such a large meal so early in the day.

"Make it two," I added quickly, smiling across the table in answer to Bry's surprised expression.

"Hey, we're on an adventure, right?" I offered in explanation, not that one was required or expected.

"That we are, V," she quipped. "That we are!"

Forty-five minutes later, we were both ready for a nap! The turkey sandwiches were simply wonderful, the mashed potatoes fresh and creamy, and the gravy thick and tasty. I'm sure we looked like we were ready to slump over the table in search of relief from our meals, which must have been the waitress's cue to hurry back over.

"Can I get you anything else, sweetie?" she asked, this time looking directly at me, not at Bry.

"How about a couple of pillows and blankets?" I joked, which brought out a chuckle from the three of us.

"What's for dessert?" Bry interrupted

I looked at her from across the table in disbelief.

"You must be kidding!" I laughed out loud.

Without wasting a moment, the waitress rattled off a long list of desserts all made fresh on the premises. Bry caught my attention with a hilarious wide-eyed look that seemed to say *'let's go for it.'* So we did.

"I'll have apple pie a la mode," I gushed, almost ashamed of myself.

"I'd like cherry cobbler a la mode," Bry ventured.

"And two strong coffees," I added.

The waitress smiled broadly and headed to the pie case to begin preparations.

"Are we nuts or what?" I asked Bry in mock anger.

"Nuts? Oh, V, we forgot to ask for nuts..."

The waitress must have heard us, for moments later our pies arrived, each with a dollop of real whipped cream topped with a sprinkle of nuts.

"This," marveled Bry, "is heaven."

"You only live once," I chuckled.

As we sat there, enjoying each other's company as if life-long friends, I had the strangest sensation that I really knew absolutely nothing about her. Here she was, trying to help me put my life back in order, and I hadn't even bothered to ask her about her own life. Was that selfishness? Or, was it being so wrapped up in my own problems that I never even thought anyone else could have problems? Or, was there really a difference between the two?

"Bry," I began. "You know, it just occurred to me that I don't know a thing about you, other than you're the best friend I ever had, and you're one of the kindest people I've ever met!"

I could see her blush mightily at my words, before being overcome with emotion in a way that surprised me.

"Don't get me going, V," she answered, "but I'm really nobody special. I just like helping people. And there you were, someone who needed my help."

"But that's exactly what I mean, Bry. People who help other people have usually been helped by someone else, and they feel like they need to pay back the kindness by helping others."

She looked inward for a moment before answering, and when she spoke her words were slow and deliberate.

"I guess that's true in my case, too, Violetta. I believe that by helping you, I'm helping myself at the same time. I hope that doesn't sound too selfish."

"Selfish? Don't be ridiculous!" I admonished her.

She paused for a few moments before deciding it was okay to tell me more, which surely must have been an indication that she trusted me as much as I trusted her, despite the reality that we had known each other for such a short time.

"You see, my life really isn't all that different from yours," Bry continued. "And maybe that's why I was drawn to help you. Like you, I lost my parents, too. Yours died in a car accident. Mine died in a plane crash. Like you, I was young, maybe sixteen years old. And suddenly, I found myself alone in this world, with no parents. At least I had Brian, though."

"Oh, Bry...I'm so sorry," I said across the table. "You don't have to tell me any more if you don't want to. I know exactly how you feel, believe me, I do."

At that moment, she took a deep breath and smiled at me.

"Violetta, I've never spoken to anyone else about this. But talking to you, I feel like it's okay to let it out and get it off my chest. For some reason, it doesn't hurt right now, knowing that we share so much in our lives without ever knowing it before now. Like you, I had a guardian angel in my life, too."

"Who, Bry?"

"Well," she mused, "I never really knew him. But the house Brian and I now live in? That was my parents' house. After they died, we just...well...kept living there, even as sixteen year-old kids. We kept going to school, and just took care of ourselves. Nobody asked, and we never told anyone about living there alone. Then, maybe a month later, we received a registered letter from a lawyer, telling us that the mortgage on the house had been paid off in full, and we were the recipients of a trust fund which had been set up in our names. Sure enough, about two weeks later the checks started coming, one every month, with enough money for us to live on...and a little left over."

"Bry...this is so much like my own story, it's uncanny. Didn't you ever want to know who this person was?" I pressed with genuine interest.

"Actually, Violetta, I did want to know. In fact, I can admit to a certain morbid fascination about knowing. So, I visited the lawyer's office one day and proceeded to walk in and demand some answers. Imagine, a sixteen year-old kid making demands on an estate lawyer."

She paused again, as if trying to remember every detail before telling me more.

"Come on, Bryanna," I demanded. "What happened?"

"Luckily, this lawyer was a kind man, Violetta. He just smiled at me, invited me to sit with him in his office, and asked his secretary to brew a pot of tea for us. Can you imagine? And there I sat, for two hours, drinking tea with this kindly old gentleman, as he told me all he could about my guardian."

"What do you mean, *'all he could'*, Bry?"

"Well, that's where it all got very interesting. It seems that my parents' life insurance policy was enough to pay off the mortgage on the house. But when I asked him where the monthly checks were coming from, he said he couldn't tell me any more than he already had."

"What does that mean, Bry? After all, it's your life you're talking about, right?"

Bry looked right at me with the strangest look in her eyes.

"Violetta...that's exactly what I said to the lawyer! Finally, he must have taken pity on me, because he offered to provide one piece of information if I promised never to act on it."

"Bry, this is all getting very strange!" I gushed. "What did he tell you?"

"You ready for this, Violetta?"

"Ready? If you don't spill the beans right now I'm gonna toss this coffee at you!"

She was thoroughly enjoying this, I could tell. And it made me feel better inside that she trusted me enough to share her secret.

"It seems that my mother had a brother. Growing up, she never really talked about him, other than to tell me that he was an undesirable character. Now, she wouldn't go into any detail, but the less she spoke of him the more I wanted to know. Then, out of the blue one day...I think I was about fifteen...she sat me down for one of those mother-daughter talks! I thought she was gonna tell me about the birds and the bees...of which I was already convinced I was an expert... but instead she started to tell me that if anything ever happened to her and Dad, her brother...our uncle... would take care of Brian and me. But she made me promise that I would never, ever, look for him, or attempt to communicate with him in any way."

"But...why?"

"I don't know, Violetta," she pondered. "But I think there was something there that embarrassed her...that she was somehow ashamed of her own brother. No matter how hard I pressed her for answers, her lips were sealed. And that was that."

"That's it? That can't be the end of this story, Bryanna!"

She smiled at me mischievously, purposely drawing out her tale of intrigue. If I thought my own life was different than the norm, I had a rude awakening in Bryanna's life story!

"Yes, there's more, Violetta! About a month later, I was in the car with my father, running an errand for Mom. As casually as possible, I just asked Dad about Mom's brother..."

This story was getting hot! I couldn't control my excitement.

"What did he say, Bryanna?"

She laughed some more, almost unable to get the words out before finally calming down enough to speak. I didn't know if she was excited about what happened, or about my reaction to it, but I just kept looking at her with a look of expectation, virtually begging her with me eyes to tell me more.

"Get this, Violetta, my Dad very nonchalantly said, '*Oh, you mean your uncle Leo?*'"

"You're kidding! Just like that?"

"Yup...just like that," she answered with a snap of her fingers. "Obviously, Dad had no idea that Mom and I had had a mother-daughter conversation the previous month. Or, if he did know, he never said anything about it. So I answered, '*yeah, Uncle Leo, Dad.*'"

"Aaaaannnnnd?"

"And Dad started laughing in a way I'd never heard him laugh before, right from his gut! Then he looked over at me and said '*If you ever tell your Mom I told you this, I'll be knee-deep in kaka, Bry! Can you keep our secret?*' I told him I could, and would, so he chuckled again before answering '*Your Uncle Leo is a gangster, Bryanna.*'"

"A gangster!" I howled. "Oh, my gosh, I can't believe this, Bry! Did you ever find out any more about him?"

"Not a thing," she answered with a look of disappointment. "Other than my Dad telling me that Uncle Leo's full name was Leonardo. My Mom's maiden name was Divencenzo, so that meant that I had a gangster uncle named Leonardo Divencenzo. Kind of *sounds* like a gangster's name, doesn't it?"

"I'll say it does...straight out of a TV script. And you never met him?"

"Nope, that was it. Oh, a couple of times I thought about how exciting it would be to try to find him, but I was a kid. I didn't know where to start. I didn't know if he lived in the same city...or country, for that matter!"

"So all this time, Bryanna, you just kept getting checks from a trust fund your Uncle Leo had obviously set up for you, and you never wanted to find out more?"

"Oh, I wanted to, Violetta. But the lawyer told me I was never allowed to know where the money came from. And then, about three or four months ago, the checks stopped coming, just like they had started years earlier."

"You're kidding!" I said in disbelief. "Did you call the lawyer and ask him why?"

"As a matter of fact, I did."

"What did he say, Bry?"

"He invited me over for tea the next day. As we sat there, drinking and talking, he told me how sorry he was to have to be the one to inform me that my uncle had died. '*You mean my Uncle Leo?*' I asked the lawyer. Violetta, he sat up straight with the strangest look in his eyes, wondering how I had known my uncle's name. And then he explained very politely that he was prohibited from telling me any more about my Uncle Leo, other than the fact that his will was tied up in court and wouldn't be unsealed for several years. He promised to keep me informed of the progress, but warned me '*not to inquire into this matter again.*' "

At that, Bryanna threw up her hands in a gesture of surrender. Looking at her now reminded me of the time I told Woody my own strange story of woe. I remembered that it felt like a giant boulder being lifted from my shoulders. I'm sure that's how Bryanna felt at this moment. I felt the same sense of relief for her that I had felt for myself. But there was something else I was feeling. As we prepared to leave the diner, I couldn't shake the sensation that there was a very important piece missing from this puzzle. The more I tried to put my finger on it, the more it drifted from my conscious thoughts.

Duly fortified by the strong coffee, we were soon back on the road, feeling none the worse for wear. We decided I would drive the next leg, since I was more familiar with this route, one that I had traveled many times before in between gigs. The weather fulfilled its promise of worse to come as we traveled the winding roads into the mountainous terrain. Before we had even a moment to question our decision to continue, we found ourselves smack dab in the middle of what could only be described as a major blizzard. The snow was piling up relentlessly. The wind gusted viciously, making it virtually impossible to see more than a foot in front of the car. We slowed to a crawl. Under normal conditions, I always tried to avoid driving behind a truck on the mountain roads. I dreaded the thought of not being able to see through the truck. I wanted to know what was ahead of it at all times, thinking this knowledge would somehow make me a better driver. But I absolutely hated the constant slowdown required when the truck lost its momentum as it struggled to climb each and every hill. That drove me crazy! But in this weather, I was actually comforted to be behind a semi, its tail lights a veritable beacon of hope in the storm. Never mind that the trucker might be as blind as we were! One naturally assumed a professional over-the-road driver was much more accustomed to arriving safely at his destination, despite the weather. Did you ever notice that it's easier to see clearly what's going on behind you when you're driving in a storm? As difficult as it was to see in front of us, we could easily see that a caravan of perhaps a dozen cars had formed behind us, each relying on the one in front of it to lead the way, and all counting on the assumed skills of the trucker.

We turned on the radio to ease the tension of driving. But the terrain dictated that no station signal could be maintained for more than a few minutes, and the constant drift of the signal and static proved more irritating than the silence. Before long, I glanced over at Bryanna in the front seat next to me. Her eyes closed, shoulders slumping, and head leaning against the passenger window, she was sound asleep. In that moment, I suddenly realized how strange life is. I felt like I had known Bry my whole life. In truth, we had just met. As different as we may have been in our upbringing, our outlook on worldly matters, or anything else, none of that could change the fact that we had established an immediate connection. Certainly, there was no doubt that the connection was Woody. More important, Bryanna and I genuinely liked each other. I found myself wondering if we would remain friends for life or whether she would join that list of acquaintances who are a meaningful part of your life today, but gone and forgotten tomorrow.

As I continued to drive while she slept so peacefully, I couldn't shake that strange feeling that I was overlooking something. Ever since Bryanna had told me about her Uncle Leo, something had started to flicker under the surface of my conscious thoughts. As so often happens when you try so hard to figure out what's bothering you, the more you press, the less able you are to come up with a satisfactory answer. So I did what I always did when confronted in this way. I just put it out of my mind, secure in the knowledge that as soon as I stopped thinking about it, the answer would naturally present itself. Such thoughts must have occupied my mind for more time than I could have imagined, because suddenly it was nearly 5 o'clock, which meant that I had completely lost track of the last two hours. The truck slowed to 5 mph, mindful of icy patches, and his caravan followed suit. Of course, I assumed the driver was a *he*, but it wouldn't have surprised me if *he* were a *she*! I put on my right blinker to indicate I would be leaving the road. The truck's rear lights blinked rapidly, as if to say I got you this far, now be careful the rest of the way. I was stunned how thankful this little gesture made me feel, reminding me once again that we're not all that different from each other. The rest of the caravan moved forward behind the truck so as not to leave a broken link in the chain. I actually waved as they passed.

I found my way to the lodge parking lot, thankful that it was already in the process of being plowed out, despite the continuing snowfall. Perhaps sensing the change in driving conditions, Bryanna awoke to the realization that we had safely arrived at our destination.

"We're there?" she asked groggily.

"And in one piece," I joked, relieved to be free of the pressures of driving through the blizzard.

"How long have I been sleeping, Violetta?"

"Oh, I don't know...a couple of hours, maybe," I answered.

"I'm sorry, Violetta...I just couldn't keep my eyes open for another second," she apologized.

"Don't be silly, Bry! After all, you're the one who got home late last night, remember?"

She smiled in recognition of my appreciation for her efforts, not to mention her companionship. I parked her car right in the front lot, which had already been cleared, leaving only a short walk to the entrance. We were traveling light, each with only a small overnight bag, so we were in the lobby registering for a room within a minute. The desk clerk was one I didn't recognize from previous visits here. She looked up from her computer as Bryanna ventured to a coffee bar to fill two plastic cups.

"Good evening," she offered politely. "May I help you?"

"Yes, please," I answered. "I'd like a non-smoking room for the night."

"Certainly!" she said.

Within minutes, coffee cups in hand, Bry and I walked up to the second floor, which was reserved for non-smoking guests. As I opened the door, I was irritated by the fact that I had forgotten to ask for a room with two double beds in favor of this room with a king size bed. But I was immediately struck by the coincidence that this was the very same room Woody had brought me to that night after our first journey to The Zone together. I stood there, in the open doorway, gazing around the room as if afraid to enter.

"What's the matter, Violetta?" Bryanna asked. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

"Bryanna, by some strange coincidence, this is the very same room that Woody and I shared after our first performance together."

Her jaw dropped as she continued watching me look around the room. All at once, she took control of the situation, grabbing my bag from my hand and literally pushing me forward into the room so she could close the door behind us.

"There are no coincidences in this life, Violetta," she said with conviction, which startled me out of my dizziness. "Everything happens for a reason, even if we can never know the reason. This is a sign, Violetta! And a good sign, at that! I can feel it in my bones. We're on the right track. Somewhere, someone is leading you to Woody."

I could think of nothing more appropriate for the moment than to throw my arms around Bryanna, which is exactly what I did. Standing there, I realized that she was patting my back, like a mother would to comfort her fearful child.

"You go ahead and shower, Violetta," Bryanna insisted. "I'll unpack our stuff and wait 'til you're done."

"You sure, Bry? I don't mind waiting..."

"...no argument, young lady!" she interrupted.

I smiled and headed into the bathroom. Far be it from me to disobey an order so forcefully given!

Woody in the future

I logged onto my computer, and the moment the message came up on the screen, I felt my heart in my throat, beating uncontrollably. There, before my eyes, was a message from Thomas, the waiter at the lodge restaurant, telling me that he had remembered Violetta coming back to look for me some 25 years ago. I choked back the tears, realizing that my search suddenly had new meaning, for Violetta had indeed been looking for me, even as I now searched for her a quarter of a century later. I clicked on 'Reply' and sent off a quick response to thank Thomas for his email:

'Thomas: I can't thank you enough for your message. Believe it or not, I think I may soon find Violetta, for I'm hot on the trail and hope to be reunited with her within the next days. I look forward to seeing you again one day...25 years ago! I'll explain it all then, Thomas. So keep the pasta marinara warm.

Your friend, Woody Reed'

Bryanna in the present

Violetta and I relaxed in our room for a couple of hours, unwinding after a long hard day behind the wheel. At around 7:30 we walked down to the lobby and strolled into the restaurant to grab a light dinner before retiring for the night. Violetta was surprised that she didn't recognize anyone, including the hostess, despite the fact that she had performed here so often, most recently only several months ago. Regardless, we were seated at a table-for-two quite near the stage, although there was no performer scheduled this evening. Once again, Violetta's expression when we sat down set the tone for the conversation to follow.

"Bry, I know you're going to think I'm making this up, but this is the same table Woody sat at that first night when he came here and heard me perform!" she whispered despite the lack of anyone sitting near us.

I just looked around to get a feel for the room, trying to visualize the scene Violetta was describing to me in hushed tones. It was almost as if I had been here that night, it was that real in my own mind's eye.

"Like I said, Violetta, there are no coincidences in life. Everything happens for a reason, even if we may never know that reason. But it's another sign that we're on the right track, of that I have no doubt," I comforted her.

Moments later, the hostess walked back over to our table.

"I'm sorry, ladies, I'm afraid I forgot to ask if either of you would care for a drink before you order dinner," she explained with an embarrassed look on her face.

Violetta answered for the two of us.

"We'll both have your house ginger ale, please."

The hostess smiled at the humor and said, "Two house ginger ales, coming right up! Thomas will be your server this evening, and he'll return shortly with your drinks and menus."

Violetta's jaw hit the floor.

"What is it, Violetta?"

"Bry," she answered catching her breath. "Thomas was here that night! He waited on Woody, and Thomas and I often spoke to each other on the many evenings I performed here. If anybody remembers Woody, it'll be Thomas!"

No sooner did Violetta finish her sentence than Thomas approached our table. Interestingly enough, he looked at me first, and I could have sworn he was about to flirt with me! But all at once he looked over to Violetta, and suddenly there were two jaws on the floor! This was all getting more interesting by the minute, as they say.

"Violetta..." he stuttered.

"Thomas, I...I..." she stammered.

After a full 30-seconds of looking at each other in astonishment, I decided we'd be here all night unless someone said something, and it sure didn't look like either of them was capable of uttering a word.

"Thomas, my name is Bryanna. I'm Violetta's best friend. Let's cut right to the chase. Have you seen Woody Reed?" I blurted out.

The question, put so bluntly, obviously had the intended effect. Thomas looked like he might fall over, so he rescued himself by pulling up an empty chair and sitting at our table. His face had turned white as ash, and his hands were shaking from the shock of the moment.

"Violetta," he began deliberately, looking straight into her eyes, "I'm afraid I haven't seen Woody since the last time you two performed here,...what, three, maybe four months ago? The last I heard, you had a serious accident at some club, and you were severely injured. We didn't know what to think. What happened, anyway? And more important, are you okay?"

Violetta had a hard time hiding the look of disappointment. She tried to answer Thomas, but the words just couldn't escape her mouth, whereupon I again came to the rescue without need of invitation.

"Actually, Violetta is doing remarkably well, as you can see for yourself, Thomas," I clipped. "But she *must* find Woody. That's why we're here. Any help you can offer will be greatly appreciated."

Thomas turned his head to look right at me, and I saw great tenderness in those beautiful, sad eyes of his.

"What did you say your name was?" he asked.

"Bryanna," I answered.

"Bryanna. That's a lovely name...for a lovely woman. Let me guess...you're a detective, right?"

"How did you know that?" I wondered aloud.

"Oh, I don't know, it's just something about your manner of speaking. You know, no nonsense, get right to the point," he joked with a warm smile.

"So it's that obvious, huh?"

"I'm afraid so, Bryanna. But to answer your question, I only met Woody that one time, the night he came in here for dinner and heard Violetta perform. Let's just say it was pretty apparent to all watching that he was immediately taken with her talent...not to mention her beauty. The next thing we all knew, he was sitting in with her for the final set of the evening, and they sure brought this old room to life. I'll never forget it...greatest show I ever heard. But that was the last time I saw Woody, and indeed the last time I saw Violetta, too. I truly wish I could be more helpful, but I'm afraid the story ends as simply as it began."

Violetta reached out and took Thomas's hand in hers.

"Thanks, Thomas. To answer your question, I'm doing much better now. Let's just say I've been laid up for the past few months recuperating. But finding Woody is now the focus of my life. So, if...you know..."

Thomas looked back to Violetta and assured her.

"Of course, Violetta...if I see him, I'll tell him you were here looking for him. But...if you don't mind me asking, where does Bryanna fit into this puzzle?"

"Oh, let's just say she and I are old friends," Violetta answered.

"Man, I better become a musician! Two beautiful ladies looking for me? I should be so lucky!" Thomas laughed.

"Thanks, Thomas," Violetta answered in a whisper. "You'll be a great catch for some lucky lady soon, I'm sure."

Thomas got up, replaced the chair at the empty table from which he had taken it, favored me with another almost-flirtatious look, and turned back for one final comment.

"Let me guess," he said with one raised eyebrow. "Two plates of pasta marinara with grilled vegetables, right?"

"The man is a born waiter," I joked to Violetta, thinking that if time allowed, Thomas and I might actually enjoy each other's company. I filed that away for later thought and action.

Thomas in the future

Before going into work the next afternoon, I logged on to retrieve my email messages. There was only one, and it was from Woody Reed:

‘Thomas: I can't thank you enough for your message. Believe it or not, I think I may soon find Violetta, for I'm hot on the trail and hope to be reunited with her within the next days. I look forward to seeing you again one day...25 years ago! I'll explain it all then, Thomas. So keep the pasta marinara warm.

*Your friend,
Woody Reed’*

I had never received such a strange message before! I look forward to seeing you again? 25 years ago? What was that supposed to mean? Or, was it simply a typo? I scratched my head, logged off the computer, and ventured out to another day of waiting tables. Life was just too strange these days for me to comprehend, I'm afraid.

Violetta in the present

Bryanna and I got an early wake-up call the next morning, leaving by 7:00 a.m. We didn't even eat breakfast, preferring a head start on the day's destination. The early morning weather was beautiful, with a gorgeous sunrise penetrating a cloudless sky as we pulled out of the lodge parking lot. The streets had been plowed during the night, and people were out and about on their way to work. We figured to get in a few hours of uninterrupted driving before stopping for breakfast somewhere near the Pennsylvania-Maryland border.

We had plenty to talk about, that's for sure! I don't know why I should have been surprised, but Bryanna seemed quite taken with Thomas. Although the more I thought about it, the more I realized they probably would make a perfect couple, should they ever pursue the opportunity to get to know each other under more normal circumstances. Then again, abnormal circumstances often seemed to generate the best excuses for lasting relationships, providing a reason for communicating about important life issues rather than the usual mundane activities. After all, you sure couldn't pretend that the relationship I had with Woody had been mundane, short though it had been under the abnormal circumstances that I was still trying to figure out.

Bry and I were convinced that running into Thomas last night was a sign that we were on the right track to locating Woody, giving us hope of finding more clues later this day. It was my intention to visit the theatre, where Woody had performed with the person he so fondly referred to only as The Performer in the days before meeting me at the lodge on his way back home. Although I had never before visited the area, I had no doubt that we would have no trouble finding the theater. If we were lucky, we would even find The Performer still on the playbill. If not, we would have to search him out, which might be a bit more difficult without knowing his real name! Nothing abnormal about that expectation, right? Regardless, our moods remained upbeat as we drove, focusing only on the positive outcome we hoped to experience.

By mid-morning, hunger got the better of us, so we stopped at a pancake house in Amish country, parking Bryanna's car next to several black-canopied, four-wheeled buggies still attached to their horses. We relaxed over muffins and coffee after devouring the main course of pancakes and scrambled eggs. Duly fortified, we were back on the road after a welcome respite from driving. Since I had driven all morning, Bry drove for the next few hours. After another trade-off of driving duties, we found ourselves approaching a sleepy little town in mid-afternoon. The sky was brilliant blue, the sun bright, with not a hint of a cloud in sight. Much to our delight, the mid-sixties temperature forced us to peel off our heavy winter coats in favor of the sweaters we wore underneath. Indeed, it was warm enough to open the car windows halfway. We could easily have been fooled into believing it was a late-Spring day. We followed the signs to the theater and found a parking spot on one of the side streets. It was just as Woody had described it to me, an impressive and old-looking brick façade right on the square. I felt like I had been here before, if only in my imagination based on Woody's tale. We quickly walked up to the marquis that displayed a schedule of the month's movies and musical events, and there, staring us in the face, was a picture of The Performer!

A Tribute to American Music with the 21st Century Orchestra

read the marquee poster. We read further, and soon appreciated the comedic impact with the sub-headline,

**performing 20th Century standards by Errol Garner, Hoagy Carmichael,
Duke Ellington, Cole Porter, George Gershwin, Billie Holiday, and more!**

A small crowd was lined up at the box office to purchase their tickets for tonight's show, so I figured if we hoped to get a seat, we'd better buy our tickets now! Tickets in pocket, Bryanna and I were back at the front door by 7:45, along with a couple hundred other people. Through two sets of double doors, we entered the actual theater. I carefully picked out two seats right in the middle of the hall, hoping for the best acoustics, and craned my neck to see a large chandelier overhead. The seats were upholstered in plush velvet, the floor carpeted, the ceiling rounded and high, and the stage large and impressive, graced by the oversized burgundy colored curtains one would expect in a theater of this period. People continued to stream into the hall amid that unmistakable pre-concert buzz which I knew so well. Listening to conversations around us, we could detect accents from various parts of the country, as well as some from other countries. We couldn't help but notice that most of those around us were much older than either of us, in their fifties, sixties, and then some. It became clear that many of the people were here upon the

recommendation of friends who had heard and enjoyed the show during peak season, between April and October. At precisely 8:00 p.m., the house lights dimmed, leaving the final few guests scurrying into their seats.

'Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to a tribute to American Music with the 21st Century Orchestra.'

All hands clapped enthusiastically as the evening's casually dressed performer stepped from between the tall curtains at stage center. I could only smile at remembering Woody mention The Performer's long dark curls, generously laced with gray. The Performer smiled warmly, bowed gracefully, and approached the microphone.

"Thank you for coming this evening," he announced. "It has been my pleasure performing for you...I had a wonderful time...thanks again!"

With that, he turned and began walking back towards the curtain, microphone still in hand. The audience, apparently warned by their friends to expect such vaudevillian, off-the-wall humor, reacted, as expected, uproariously.

"Oh...did I forget something?" he queried as he innocently turned towards the audience once again. Laughter and guffaws filled the hall. It was obvious this man was comfortable on stage. He had the crowd in his hands before he even played a note of music! That was a technique I wasn't used to, and I made a mental note to remember it, if and when I ever returned to the stage. The thought startled me into the realization that I hadn't even replaced my guitar, which had been lost in the fire at the Ellicott Club. What was I waiting for?

Before the people had a chance to quiet down, The Performer picked up his trumpet, whereupon the rich sounds of a 17-piece big-band filled the hall. My hair stood on end as I recognized the arrangement of *'Misty'* as the very same one that Woody and I had performed together. The many strange coincidences leading up to this day put my mind on notice to be wary. But his melodic playing rocked me gently, and I closed my eyes, thinking back to that first set with Woody months ago at the lodge. My eyes flew open with a start, as I realized midway through the first chorus that I was indeed listening to Woody's very rendition of this classic song. The same phrasing, indeed the same melodic bursts. It was uncanny.

The Performer abruptly ended his improvisation exactly two bars before the third chorus, which I recognized as the tenor sax player's cue to take the baton, so to speak, with his own lead-in to the next chorus.

"Take it, Woody!" The Performer demanded, directing his gaze to the middle of the stage where no one stood.

My heart stopped in mid-beat. There must be an explanation for all this. In the midst of my confusion, the orchestra's tenor saxophonist executed the two-bar lead-in, and was off on his own improvisational journey. My jaw hit the floor and I felt myself all but paralyzed by the

sudden realization that the sax solo I was hearing was the very solo Woody had performed that night with me, note for note! The Performer and his sax soloist proceeded to trade eights, which is musical parlance for alternating eight bars each of improvisation over the rhythm section's harmonic foundation. The trumpet section belted out the next chorus, leaving the final one for the trumpet soloist to restate the melody. *'Misty'* closed out with precisely the same ending I remember from my own first playing of this song along side Woody.

The audience began clapping appreciatively, and The Performer smiled broadly, then bowed to the continuing applause from the house. I was once again frozen in place, frozen in time, more accurately. I couldn't even raise my arms to support my hands to applaud along with everyone else. I felt myself drifting, as the audience finally relented to The Performer's re-grasping of the microphone.

"Hello," he announced.

"Hello!" the audience bellowed in unison.

"Welcome to tonight's performance of A Tribute to American Music. Tell me, how do you like this band?" he asked, sweeping his left arm to indicate the musicians behind him.

The audience applauded once more, eager to show their approval at what they were hearing. The Performer talked for several minutes about Errol Garner, who had composed *'Misty'* so many years ago, giving a mini-history lesson with a voice that was as musical sounding as the music itself.

"I'd like to introduce you to the orchestra's first soloist of the evening, whom you just heard playing tenor sax on *'Misty.'*"

With a glimmer in his eyes, hinting at the humor about to be revealed, The Performer continued.

"Please put your hands together for a very gifted and talented young musician...on tenor sax, Woody Reed!"

The audience laughed loudly at the absurd humor of a saxophonist with such an appropriate name...Woody Reed...but I couldn't hear a thing. At that moment, the entire concert hall virtually closed in upon me. My heart began to beat much too quickly, my whole body was shaking, and my peripheral vision vanished. I felt in the middle of a dark tunnel, unable to extricate myself from a nightmare growing more obscene by the moment. The Performer was looking right at me, as if a Star Trekkian tractor beam had been cast to connect us. He continued speaking to the audience, but I couldn't comprehend the words he was mouthing. It sounded like his voice was lost in an echo chamber, and I gave up even trying to hear his words. All the while, his eyes held mine, by now both of us firmly ensconced within the beam. They were kind eyes, thank goodness, and his expression spoke to me, comforting me, communicating to me, and only me, that he knew who I was, why I was here, and that I shouldn't be afraid. Telepathically, it

seemed, I heard his voice in my mind, made all the more confusing by the fact that the words I was hearing didn't match the movements of his lips on stage.

'It's okay, Violetta. You're here for a reason. And you're among friends. Just close your eyes, sit back in your seat, and try not to be afraid. In a moment, I'm going to introduce the next number on the program. When I do, I want you to remember the last time you played this song. It's a song you know well, a song that has deep meaning for you, as it has for Woody. But when you hear the name of this song, don't be alarmed. Just remember: all things happen for a reason. In fact, you've been invited to this very town, on this very weekend, and to this very performance in this hall, tonight. You're not alone, Violetta.'

Suddenly, we were back in real time. I opened my eyes, and The Performer's words now matched the movement of his lips, any trace of echo gone. I felt weak, certain I would pass out, but I repeated his words of comfort to myself, calming my nerves, preparing for what must be coming if he had taken the trouble to warn me of it in advance. I made up my mind at that moment that I would let nothing scare me to the point of losing control of my very thoughts and emotions.

"Thank you so much," he addressed the audience once more. "The next song I'd like to play for you has a bit of history to it. Perhaps one of the most beautiful songs ever written: *'Lush Life.'*

While many in the hall showed their anticipation of hearing *'Lush Life'* with an audible *'ahhhh,'* it was all I could do to keep from leaping from my seat and screaming at the top of my voice, *'ENOUGH!'* But I had been warned this was coming, hadn't I? So I followed the advice I had been given, remaining calmly seated, closing my eyes, taking a deep breath, and letting the music lead me to wherever it was I was being led by whomever was leading me there, and for whatever reason. I reminisced to the first time I had played this song with Woody at the lodge, then the last time we had played it at the Ellicott Club that fateful night. The Performer was executing a brilliant rendition of *'Lush Life'* on stage, which allowed me to focus on the song, the music, and the mood. I no longer felt scared, but I must admit to a certain wariness in the back of my mind, the feeling enhanced by the beautiful and familiar sound of a tenor sax that I knew so well!

I opened my eyes, looking around me to see women resting their heads on their husbands' shoulders, nostalgically transported to another time in their lives together. And I thought, this is what it's all about, isn't it? What better purpose for music than as a gentle rekindling of emotions so long ago experienced and so deeply enjoyed? The entire experience was exactly as Woody had described it. I suddenly felt very close to him in our common understanding. Now with a smile on my face, I turned my head again towards the stage, and there he was, this wonderful

performer, seemingly encased in the warm amber glow of the spotlights, his body moving to the rhythm of the arrangement as he continued his improvisation.

'Prepare yourself, Violetta, for what's about to happen will rattle your soul if you allow it to.'

I sensed him speaking to me as if in a dream. My smile quickly faded, and without further admonition, I saw it with my own two eyes. Had he not warned me in advance, I surely would have run from the hall, screaming like a raving maniac. But then I felt his presence, like Woody's gentle hand on my shoulder, calming me, as a mother would her sick child.

The Performer was...*rising*...from his stage-bound physical body. Without even a hint of the panic I had felt upon my own inability to rise from the confines of this world during my last performance, I turned my head to see if anyone around me was seeing what I was seeing. I couldn't be sure, but no facial expressions changed, no heads were removed from shoulders to follow the ascent, no cries of disbelief were heard. Indeed, Bryanna was still sitting next to me, eyes glued to the performance on stage. I looked forward again to see the spiritual glow now level with the top of the curtain valence. The Performer's body held fast to the stage as the music filled the large hall. Higher and higher the apparition rose, now floating above the stage, no less than 35 feet above the seats. And as I watched and listened, I felt Woody's soulful playing of *'Lush Life'* capturing my very soul. It seemed to continue for hours, as hands were held, memories were recalled, friendships were remembered, and eyes misted over. In truth, all this occurred within the span of mere minutes, before the glow slowly and gracefully flowed back across the ceiling, back down the curtains, re-entering the body from which it had risen so elegantly, and *'Lush Life'* ended so gently.

To say you could hear a pin drop wouldn't even come close to describing the absolute absence of sound, as if sucked from the hall by a giant vacuum. The audience, enraptured, seemed not to want to let go of the moment. But the moment passed, as it always does, and the ensuing applause was as loud and sustained as the moment had been quiet and short. The Performer took a deep bow to acknowledge his appreciation for the audience's reaction, lifting his head in mid-bow to look directly into my eyes. Even from this distance, I saw a tear roll down his cheek, whereupon he bowed his head again.

"Is that not one of the most beautiful songs ever written?" The Performer asked once the audience had quieted down.

"Mmmmm..." was the only response to be heard from the mesmerized crowd.

"With your permission," he added in the most sincere tone, "allow me to dedicate that performance to a very dear and special friend, a musician we all knew as...Trumpet Man."

Woody had told me all about Trumpet Man, his mentor, now deceased for many years. Despite the inner panic I felt, I knew that I had indeed been drawn here for a reason, and I prayed that I would soon be reunited with Woody.

“Destiny”

Bryanna in the present

No sooner did we find our seats in the middle of the hall than Violetta began pointing everything out to me, from the balcony behind us and above us, to the chandelier hanging from the high ceiling. I, too, found myself caught up in the excitement of the moment, taking in all the sights and sounds like a child seeing and hearing her first concert performance. Violetta and I both laughed along with the rest of the audience at the off-the-wall humor employed by The Performer. But as the show progressed, I began to notice that Violetta was growing more and more uncomfortable and nervous. I was afraid for her, and I felt the urge to reach over and take her hand in mine to assure her that she wasn't alone. But I also didn't want to interrupt the moment, for I was now convinced that we were both here for a reason, although she more than I, and I felt sure that somehow Woody was central to that reason.

I first realized something was wrong when The Performer began his rendition of '*Misty*,' indeed the first number in the show. At first, Violetta's eyes were closed as she gently rocked to the rhythm of the music. Then all at once, right in the middle of his solo, she suddenly opened her eyes wide, and I noticed that her hands were actually shaking in her lap. I didn't dare interrupt her thoughts with a question, and I certainly didn't want to disturb those around us who were enjoying the music. But I actually became scared when he later introduced '*Lush Life*,' the very song that had been so special for Violetta and Woody. The more The Performer talked to the audience, the more frightened Violetta seemed to become, and the expression on her face could only be described as abject terror. As he began to play his arrangement of this song, I could see Violetta fighting to regain control, to no avail. At one point, she actually turned her head from left to right, and right to left, several times, as if unable to believe that what she was experiencing wasn't being felt by any others in the crowd, including me.

When the tenor sax soloist began his improvisation, the tears began rolling down Violetta's face uncontrollably. She tilted her head up towards the ceiling, and if I didn't know any better I would have sworn she was following something moving above the stage, unseen to all except her. I wanted so badly to comfort her, but I didn't dare break the spell, and indeed that's what it must have been, for it was certainly beyond the comprehension of my physical senses. I watched her steel her self against all odds, actually clenching her fists tightly to draw upon some inner strength. So I did the only thing I could do. I remained next to her, offering her at least the physical support of knowing I was nearby in case she needed me. Finally, at the conclusion of the sax solo, she actually smiled as if in recognition of some deep meaning that I couldn't know or understand. This was, after all, something she had to go through by herself. I began to feel that she was through the hardest part of the ordeal, and she slumped back in her seat in total exhaustion, her fists unclenching in the process. It was only then that I reached down and took

her hand, holding it tightly in my own in the hope that my strength would pass through my hands and into hers.

The Performer maintained mastery of his audience for another hour on a musical journey through the 20th Century classic standards of Jazz. When it was all over, he looked upward, raising his arms as if in supplication. The audience erupted into thunderous applause now, favoring him with a well-deserved standing ovation and cries of '*Bravo!*' After savoring the moment, he lowered his arms, and left the stage the way he had entered. The crowd continued to applaud as the house lights came back up to full, at which point many satisfied guests began their walk up the aisles, talking excitedly about what they had all just shared. A few dozen others walked down the aisle to stage front, awaiting The Performer's re-entrance to answer their questions. Neither Violetta nor I moved. We couldn't move. We had just witnessed the most emotionally draining performance either of us had ever seen, not to mention the spiritual experience which I recognized all too clearly as one Violetta alone had shared with him. I could only sit there soaking it all in. The Performer spent the next half-hour talking with people, answering their questions, laughing, kidding, and even signing an occasional autograph when asked. Through it all, we remained in our seats as if glued, thinking about our journey, wondering what was yet to be revealed.

Once everyone had departed the hall, he walked down the steps from the stage and up the aisle towards us, a serene and knowing look on his face.

"I'm glad you stayed, Violetta," he said, now appearing physically tired from the evening's work.

"Actually...I didn't have much choice...I couldn't move..." she answered with half a smile.

Then, he turned his head and looked right into my eyes. I had the insane feeling he could see deep into my soul, and I experienced a lightheaded sensation.

"I'm glad you're here, too, Bryanna," he said so softly that I almost didn't hear him.

"But...how did you...I mean...how..." I stammered uncontrollably.

"You've been in Woody's thoughts," he whispered.

This time, Violetta grabbed *my* hand, certain I was about to pass out from the shock of the moment.

"Well, I know you both have a ton of questions...but I have only one. Are you hungry?" he asked.

"We're starving," we whispered in unison.

"Just give me a few minutes to pack up my gear, and I'll buy you a sandwich, okay?"

"Only if you let us help you," Violetta offered.

"Deal!" he said, snapping his fingers once.

We three packed his gear into his little Toyota SUV. Violetta and I got in my car and followed him to a restaurant across town. He insisted they had the best grilled-cheese sandwich around. This must have been one of those sleepy little towns where they rolled up the sidewalks at 6:00 o'clock! Here it was, only about 10:00 p.m., and we arrived at the restaurant to claim our choice of empty tables. He virtually collapsed into his chair, now fully giving in to the strain of the evening. A waitress immediately came over and asked if we would like anything to drink before looking over the menu. He looked at her with a straight face.

"I'll have the house ginger ale, please," he said without hinting at a smile.

The waitress smiled, looking to me, then Violetta, and we both just nodded for the same as she spun on her heels to retrieve our drinks, undoubtedly well used to this one-liner.

"Woody needs our help," he whispered despite the lack of any other people in the dining room. He held Violetta's gaze, not moving an inch. The waitress arrived back at our table with three ginger ales, and asked if we had yet decided on what to order. I hadn't even thought to look at the menu.

"We'll each have a grilled-cheese sandwich," he said, adding, "if that's okay with you, ladies?"

"Sure...that's fine..." we playfully agreed.

"Three peas in a pod," the waitress kidded. "I'll have your orders out shortly."

His eyes were now on mine, not letting go. I knew what I had to ask, as did he, but I was terrified to let the words escape my mouth, for fear his answer would send Violetta and me into a panic from which we'd never recover. Sensing our fear, he phrased the question for us, saving either of us from having to voice what we knew couldn't be possible.

"You're wondering why you're here, right?" he asked, not once wavering from eye contact.

We could do no more than nod our heads dumbly in agreement. Words just would not come. He went on.

"Woody is lost to us," he said.

Violetta must have known this answer was coming, yet that didn't diminish its impact, like a cold slap in her face. Her eyes were welling with tears, as were mine, with no place to go but down our cheeks, and we didn't fight it. He continued speaking in the most gentle and mesmerizing tone.

"Woody is so totally alone, trapped in a time and place not of his own choosing, without even his music to guide him. But he's searching for you even now, as we sit here talking about him. You've been chosen...to bring him back, Violetta. And you're the only one who can accomplish that, for you and he share the deepest love and understanding possible. Your journey

will be long and difficult. But it must be undertaken, for any further delay puts Woody more at risk of never returning to his rightful place with you.”

He gently placed a hand on each of ours across the table.

"It's all right...just let it out. Believe me, I know exactly how you feel. I went through the same salvation many years ago. For the moment, all that matters is that you're here, you've experienced the first step, and you're ready to proceed.”

"Proceed?" Violetta struggled to ask. "Proceed where?"

"I think you already know the answer to that, don't you?" he asked knowingly, not wanting to upset her any further, if that was even possible.

"Will you...help me?" she nearly begged in a strained voice I didn't recognize as hers.

"Of course I will, Violetta. I'll be with you, every step of the way. You see, you've been blessed with The Gift. As I've been blessed. As Trumpet Man was blessed, as Woody was blessed, and all those before us.”

"What do I do next?" she asked fearfully.

"The next thing you do is eat your grilled-cheese sandwich!" he smiled, eager to break the feeling of doom we were certainly both experiencing.

At that moment, the waitress brought our sandwich plates, laden with chips and a pickle.

"Anything else I can get you?" she wondered.

"I guess we're all set for now, thanks," he answered on our behalf.

The waitress turned and headed back from where she had come. We ate our sandwiches in silence, knowing that words were irrelevant at this point. When we finished, he ordered a cappuccino for each of us. We just sat, talked about music, about life, and about the reason for us being here.

"It's time, Violetta..." he confided.

"Time for what?" she asked, confused.

"Time to climb back up on the horse," he said.

"I'm not sure I know what you mean..."

"Did you bring your guitar along with you today, Violetta?" he asked good-naturedly.

I saw Violetta's face turn red with heat.

"I...well...no, I didn't," she answered with emotion in her voice. "You see...I...haven't touched a guitar since...since the fire destroyed mine months ago...do you know about that, too?"

"Yes, I know. But that doesn't matter. You see," he explained, "I'd like nothing better than for you to sit in with me at tomorrow's performance.”

"Sit in? With you?" Violetta asked in shocked disbelief.

"Yes, with me," he smiled.

"But you know there's no substitute for playing on stage...something I haven't done since the Ellicott Club," she admitted somewhat hesitantly. "And my hands...I just don't know if...if I can..."

He looked directly at her.

"Violetta, it's time to climb back up on the horse. And there's no time like the present, right?"

"I guess so," she mumbled. "To be honest, though, I'm terrified of the thought of what might happen...again..."

"You should be!" he said in a joking tone, which totally caught her off guard.

As I sat there, feeling like the odd-girl out, The Performer kept asking her questions.

"Do you know what happened to you that night, Violetta? You know, the night you've been trying so hard to forget?"

"I can't say that I know, as in knowing that we're sitting here right now, talking about it," she replied, thinking about every word before she verbalized it. "But I do know that Woody and I journeyed to a special place...The Zone, he called it. The second time I traveled there, an inner door was revealed to me. I passed through that door, where I was miraculously reunited with...with my parents."

I sat there like a fly on the wall, absolutely stunned by what I was hearing. I hadn't a clue what they were talking about, but I began to suspect what had so terrified Violetta during tonight's performance. It was all I could do not to ask questions of my own, but I knew that my role in this play was as yet unexplained. To be honest, I almost dreaded the explanation yet to come for me!

"And the last time?" he prodded firmly.

"The last time...was...all...wrong," she mouthed while looking off into the distance, shaking her head, searching for deliverance from the pain of that night.

"What was wrong about it, Violetta?" he continued quietly but relentlessly.

"It...was...forced," she whispered, the words virtually stumbling out of her mouth. "I was selfish, I know that. Woody used to tell me, *'you get there at the right time in the right place with right people for the right reason or you don't get there at all.'* I broke the cardinal rule. Everything about that night was wrong, but I pushed on for all the wrong reasons. Yet Woody somehow managed to overcome my inability and weakness. He just took over, realizing that I was in no frame of mind to travel with him that night. I was terrified, for he began his ascent without me. And I reached up and out to him, desperately trying to pull him back, which only served to push him away. All I could see were his eyes, fading into the distance above. And then, suddenly, he disappeared in a brilliant flash of blinding white light. My next recollection was waking up in the hospital, my hands and face wrapped in bandages, my memory of that evening

blank. Whatever trouble Woody is in, I know it's my fault. And I know I must find him, for if I don't I'll never forgive myself. And I'll never be whole again..."

"And you, Bryanna?" he asked, turning his head away from Violetta to stare through me like a dagger.

"Oh, I'm just little old me!" I exclaimed, drawing Violetta out of her trance into a sudden fit of laughter at the honesty of my response. I suspected he knew I would do that, and actually set me up to accomplish that predetermined task of bringing Violetta back to reality. I was beginning to feel like a puppet on a string. At first, I didn't care for the feeling. But once I gave into it, I found it quite enjoyable, like not having a care in the world. So I went with the flow. Indeed, the warmth of his smile was like sitting in front of a hot fire on a cold evening, and it felt wonderful.

"You may consider yourself less than you really are, Bryanna," he went on, "but you play a very important role in the outcome of this journey."

"I do?" I asked stupidly.

"Yes, you do," he answered. "Consider yourself the missing link, or, more accurately, the missing piece of a puzzle. Without you, the rest of the pieces don't fit, indeed, can't fit. With you, though, the final picture presents itself in its totality. Without you, Violetta could never have come this far. And without you again, her journey will end here, as will Woody's. So you see, a tremendous burden has been placed upon you. To put it another way, you've been chosen for this task by powers you can never comprehend. But you have been chosen, like it or not. I see in you a strength of character you never knew you had, and a compassion that makes you the only choice for helping Violetta and Woody."

I sat there, looking from him to Violetta and back to him, wondering how I had ever been cast in this drama being played out before my very eyes. And yet, despite the gravity of his words, I wasn't afraid. I knew I was the link to reuniting Woody and Violetta, though I had no idea why or how, and I was determined not to let either of them down. And at that moment, I knew that this man sitting before me already knew the outcome yet to unfold.

"I'm ready," I said calmly.

"I know you are, Bryanna," he answered. "And you, Violetta?"

"Yes...I'm ready, too," Violetta said with conviction in her soft voice. "But...I don't even have a guitar to play..."

"You leave that little detail to me, young lady!" he joked. "You just be at the rear stage door tomorrow, ready to do your thing."

"Okay...and...thank you," Violetta managed.

At that, the three of us stood to leave, marching out of the restaurant with our arms around each other's shoulder, with The Performer between Violetta and me. I guess we must have

looked like the Three Musketeers, but so what! We were the only people in the place, other than the waitresses and the cashier. And they sure didn't seem to mind.

Violetta in the present

Bryanna and I found a little bungalow-style motel nearby. She waited in the car while I went into the office to ask for a room for the night. I rang the old style bell on the counter, and it took several minutes for the clerk to emerge from behind a curtain at the rear of the office. He looked like ten miles of bad road, and I suddenly realized I had probably awakened him from a deep sleep on a cot bed in the back room. Within thirty seconds, I had the key to a bungalow at the back of the property. Exhausted from the long drive, not to mention the events of the day, we both fell asleep as soon as our heads hit our pillows. My last conscious thought before falling into that deep sleep was about tomorrow's show; what would happen; whether I was ready to perform; and, if I would ever see Woody again.

My dreams began to take a very strange twist. I was thinking to myself how strange this twist was as I was experiencing the dream, like being two people looking at something at the same time but not being able to tell each other about it. Lenny Dee flashed into my dream, and I was thrown back to being rescued by him from the Ellicott Club fire. I realized I was thrashing in bed, mumbling out loud, spiraling down into a deep hole, when all at once I became aware that something was shaking me from my sleep. I awoke with a start. My eyes flew open. My heart was pounding thunderously in my chest, threatening to escape my body. Bryanna had apparently been shaking me from my nightmare, and her hand was still on my shoulder when I yanked myself up into a sitting position in bed, sweat pouring down my face.

"Violetta, Violetta," she kept repeating until my senses took over. "Wake up, you're having a nightmare...!"

I sat there, my eyes glued to hers. Although awake, I felt in a daze. And as I looked at her, my imagination took over my thoughts. And then, as if in a trance, I began to repeat my thoughts out loud as they were occurring in my mind.

"Lenny...Leonardo...Lenny...Leo...Dee...Divencenzo...Lenny Dee...Leonardo Divencenzo...oh my God, Bryanna...!"

Bry could do nothing more than sit there and stare at me in total disbelief. After what seemed like hours later but could only have been minutes, she reached out and took both my hands in her own.

"Well, Violetta," she intoned. "I guess we now know why I was invited along on this journey, don't we?"

Bryanna and I spent the rest of the night talking, preparing ourselves for what we hoped would happen this day. We spent the hours calming each other from the shock of the realization that my Lenny Dee and her Leonardo Divencenzo could indeed be one and the same person. This could be no coincidence, we well understood. Imagine, Lenny being my appointed guardian, and Leo being hers, as well, not to mention being her uncle! It defied rationalization, to say the least. But it also served to give us insight to the special bond of friendship that we had so quickly established. *'Everything happens for a reason, though we may never know the reason,'* we reminded ourselves.

Unable or unwilling to sleep any more, we showered and headed out to breakfast. Neither of us said a word the entire time we fortified our bodies with pancakes and coffee. Words had become unnecessary to our mission. We enjoyed a lazy day filled with more conversation and conjecture, eventually driving to the Art Deco theatre. The stage door had been left ajar, as if anticipating our arrival. As soon as we entered, The Performer greeted us both with a warm smile and a hug.

"Wait here, I have a little surprise for you," he said to me with a wink.

As he turned and walked over to the dressing room, Bryanna and I looked at each other, wide-eyed, wondering what surprise could possibly top the surprises of this journey. He returned carrying something large enough to be cumbersome, yet small enough to be covered by a blanket.

"For you, Violetta," he said seriously as he removed the blanket.

And there, before my eyes, was my guitar. No, I don't mean a guitar *like* the one I had lost in the fire. I mean *my guitar*. I was sure of it. I was about to burst into tears.

"But...how..." I stuttered, unable to find the right words.

"Don't ask," he answered with mock seriousness. "Let's just say you're not alone, Violetta."

With that, he led me into the dressing room and suggested I take the time necessary to reacquaint myself with my guitar, at the same time gesturing to Bry with his eyes that she leave me alone and join him on the stage to set up for the upcoming show. She happily and eagerly complied.

Sitting down in the dressing room, I had no way of knowing if this was, in fact, my own guitar, or if it was merely another similar guitar. I reminded myself that mine had indeed burned up in the fire months ago at the Ellicott Club. But as I began to caress notes from it, any doubts as to its authenticity were quickly erased. It felt so perfect, too right in my hands and to my ears. It didn't take me long to settle into a kind of conversation with my fingers, coaxing them back to musicality and flexibility. And as my digits returned to form, so did my voice, which I had used for nothing but talking of late. I reveled in the thought that music was within me, and it would

take more than mere blood, sweat and tears to stifle this gift. I found myself thinking of Woody, Bryanna, The Performer, and everyone and everything else I had encountered on my journey thus far. And then there was a soft knock on the dressing room door. I took a deep breath.

"Ready, Violetta?" he asked in a whisper.

"Ready," I answered.

He led me to a place behind the curtain where I would await his call to join him on stage. Despite the heavy curtains blocking my view, I could hear the loud buzz of anticipation in the audience out there, on the other side of the curtains, awaiting his entrance. Before stepping through the curtains, he turned back to me for a moment.

"We've got some work ahead of us, Violetta. But just follow my lead. I won't let anything bad happen to you," he promised. "Leave everything to me. I'll call out each song for you. I have no doubt you'll know all of them. That's the beauty of playing the old standards...everybody knows them!"

"Okay," I agreed. "But I don't mind telling you, I'm a nervous wreck! This is the first time I'll be stepping on stage since the fire...you just might have to pick me up off the floor."

"Nervous is good, Violetta. It shows you care. Believe me, the nervousness will pass as soon as you play the first note of the first song. Most important, though, is to relax. Don't push. Just let the music happen naturally. Your goal here today should be nothing more than getting comfortable in the music again, and comfortable on the stage. Anything more is a bonus."

'And now, please welcome the 21st Century Orchestra!'

He smiled at me, winked, and stepped through the curtains to the loud applause of the audience, as if leaping into a different physical dimension on the other side. There I sat on *my* side of the curtains, feeling so totally alone and out of place.

"Thank you, ladies and gentlemen," he began. "And welcome to today's performance of A Tribute to American Music. Let me tell you, you're all in for a special treat. Because a very talented young musician will be sitting in with me for this show. And when you hear her sing and play the guitar, you'll understand just how great she's destined to become. Please, give a warm welcome to my young friend, Violetta!"

I timidly squeezed through the closed curtain to see him silhouetted in the bright spotlight at stage front, his right arm raised in my direction to welcome me to my spot on stage. But he didn't wait for me to join him. No, he walked back to me, took my elbow in support, and helped me to my chair at stage front, obviously not wanting me to have to even think about tripping as I had done that night at the Ellicott Club. As we walked, I could only wonder to myself how he could have known about that fall. When I was seated comfortably, the biggest, warmest smile on his face sure helped to calm my nerves. I looked out to see a full house of people applauding my entrance, apparently convinced that if he *said* I was good, then I must *be* good! And there was

Bryanna in the front row, giving me the thumbs up for encouragement. Strange, I thought to myself, but this would be the first time she had ever heard me perform. The band began playing the introduction to the first song before the audience had ceased their applause. Once again, as had happened on stage with Woody, Harold Arlen's '*Stormy Weather*' provided a wonderful showcase for me to display my raunchy, blues side, bending my guitar strings to the delight of all. We followed next with Cole Porter's classic '*What Is This Thing Called Love*,' Walter Gross's '*Tenderly*,' and George Gershwin's '*Someone To Watch Over Me*.' I could only wonder if the people in the audience had even the slightest idea that they were witness to a virtual repeat performance on stage in front of their eyes. Regardless, the audience sensed they were fortunate to bear witness to our creative exchanges, and he turned to me as he prepared to announce the next selection of the show, eager for me to share in the joy he was unafraid to display at our performance.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I must say, this has been a truly special evening for me. Please show your appreciation to our guest artist, a very gifted guitarist and singer, Violetta."

The audience stood and applauded enthusiastically for several minutes. Despite my attempts to coax them back into their seats, they would have nothing to do with that, serenading us with unabashed affection in the only way they knew how.

"Thank you again," he smiled, once again not waiting for them to quiet down. "With your kind permission, we'd like to perform one more beautiful old standard for you."

The Performer turned his eyes towards me, and these fateful four words floated across the stage.

"You know '*Lush Life*'?"

You can well imagine what was running through my mind as I pondered his query. My first thought was of Woody. I was overwhelmed by recollections of my last performance at the Ellicott Club, when my selfish actions ignited a chain reaction that was beyond my worst nightmare. Did The Performer have an insight that I couldn't dare imagine? Or was this yet another coincidence in a growing list of coincidences that were giving new shape to my existence?

"It's...my favorite song," I whispered while holding his kind gaze intently, oblivious to the presence of anybody other than the two of us.

"Then why don't you begin, Violetta? I'd love to hear you play and sing this song in your own way," he said softly.

With only the slightest of nods, I closed my eyes and eased into the touching introduction to '*Lush Life*' ever so gracefully, caressing the chords from my guitar while mouthing words that had been so beautifully crafted many years before. Undaunted and completely at home within the

unusual harmonic structure of *'Lush Life,'* I took us all on a meandering little ride through the wonderful mind of composer Billy Strayhorn.

The Performer in the present

On the spur of that moment, I decided not to play at all during the introduction, content to listen and watch as those in the audience were doing, taking in the full impact of Violetta's gift. As we reached the second verse, she signaled me with her eyes to assume the lead role in our duet. I had absolutely no doubt that my refusal to take the lead wouldn't upset her the least bit. Indeed, she welcomed the invitation I was about to offer before I even offered it, undoubtedly hoping that she would have the opportunity to make her own way to wherever it was she was headed.

"Take it, Violetta," I whispered from off to her side. "This one's all yours."

Violetta calmly and gratefully picked up on my cue, taking full musical advantage of the total freedom to soar as high and as far as she could have wished for, without concern for any rhythmic or harmonic constraints from me. Once she realized my plan for her cadenza, she obliged me by giving in to the moment, thrusting herself into a dazzling cascade of guitar virtuosity built upon raw emotion. As naturally as one could imagine, she soon began mimicking her guitar's melodic lines with her own voice, note for note, without faltering. I could only smile, seeing her laugh to herself as her improvisations grew in scope beyond any structured confines of *'Lush Life.'* And as she continued to find the lovely humor in this most unusual musical interplay with herself, I knew she was at the threshold of splitting her thoughts between the music and her thoughts *about* the music, propelling her even further into the stratosphere. I knew, as did she, what was coming. And I could see that she was totally prepared for the journey this time, unafraid of where it would lead her, content that she was doing it for the right reasons, at the right time, with the right people.

I saw Violetta's out-of-body ascent from the stage as her inner glow began its rise, the audience oblivious to what was taking place right in front of their eyes yet unseen to them. But looking down into the front row, I saw Bryanna's eyes open wide in amazement, following Violetta's ascent up the curtain to the ceiling above. Not surprisingly, Bryanna gasped, cupping her fingers in front of her face, looking from side to side to see if anyone else in the audience was seeing what she was seeing. When she realized that she alone was privy to Violetta's long awaited journey to The Zone, she sank back into her chair, resting her head as far back on the seat as possible. She knew what was happening before her very eyes, and she wasn't going to miss a moment of it.

As the brilliant musical improvisation continued to flow uninterrupted from her guitar and voice, Violetta looked downward, basking in the realization that Bryanna was able to visualize her ascent. And then, there was a brilliant flash of white light.

Woody in the future

As arranged, I arrived at the rear stage door that had been left ajar. As I entered, Armstrong was waiting inside. When he saw me, he gave me a pat on the back before speaking.

"How about if you take a few minutes to warm up in the dressing room, Woody, while we finish setting up, okay?"

"Sure thing," I mumbled.

This was a routine I was used to. I walked into the dressing room behind stage. I took my tarnished old sax out of its burgundy velvet-lined case and proceeded to immerse myself in a series of warm-up exercises to loosen up my fingers, not to mention my thoughts. Once comfortable, I put the sax down and did a few deep breathing exercises to give me access to a wind player's greatest asset in performance, that being breath control. Before I knew it, I heard a knock on the door. I opened it to find Armstrong and my band mates beckoning me with their gestures to the stage for our sound check. The theater's digital sound system was awesome, filling the hall with the rich sounds of our musical tests. Once we got the sound down, I stood for a few moments and looked out at the hall, exactly as I had done for the past 25 years. It's funny how the perspective from the stage is so dramatically different from that of sitting in the audience. The stage was wide and raised, looking out over the multitude of seats arranged in perfect symmetry. Unless you've ever performed on stage, I can't think of the words to describe the feeling of a concert hall you're about to perform in. It's magical. I looked up to the balcony, getting a friendly thumbs-up from the sound and lighting director, who pressed the button on his talk-back microphone.

"You guys ready?" he asked.

Armstrong and the guys all looked at me, as if asking the same question themselves. I nodded, returning the thumbs-up to the balcony.

"Okay, then, time for you to disappear so we can let the house in," the director replied.

With that, we walked back through the curtains to await the beginning of our performance a few minutes from now. We sat down back stage, and Armstrong patted me on the knee as a gesture of support. Fifteen minutes later, on cue, and according to plan, all of us stepped through the curtains to the hesitant applause of the audience, still not sure if they should applaud or throw tomatoes. For this performance, Bennie did something very different, addressing the audience without humor at the outset.

"Thank you, friends! Welcome to this evening's show. If you were here for our last performance, you all know what happened. Disaster. Something beyond our comprehension. Yes, Woody had a major meltdown. Since then, all of us in the band have come to understand the reason for that emotional breakdown. All I can do is assure you that Woody needs our help. Our guidance. Our understanding. Desperately. Something indescribable and vitally important is about to happen, something beyond our sensory comprehension. So, I ask you all, as loyal fans who have been amazed by Woody's surreal musical performances over the past 25 years in this band, *please*, let him know that you forgive him. Truly. For when you do, you'll be treated to an unbelievable show tonight. Enough said."

We all took our places on stage, the stunned audience waiting in quiet anticipation. After a four-count of finger snaps, the rafters of this old concert hall shook as we kicked off the show with a high-energy medley of hit songs, music that was obviously well known and loved by the crowd. Bennie paced the show perfectly, bringing the audience up, then letting them down ever so gently before bringing them back up, higher than the time before. I was feeling elated, not to mention warm, happy, satisfied, fulfilled...at home. Mostly, though, the time had come for me to test my outrageous theory about the very nature of the universe. Well into the second and final set, Bennie addressed the audience one more time.

"You've been a great audience tonight, and we've had a blast playing for you! We'd like to play this last song for Woody, and you're about to hear why! This tune was written way back before your great-great-grandparents were born! What can I tell you? We're suckers for old Jazz standards, which is what this song is."

Bennie turned his head towards me, and asked, '*You ready for Lush Life, Woody?*'

"You start, I'll jump in!" I said elatedly.

The audience began to applaud in anticipation of hearing me perform this song they had come to know so well over the years, despite my failure to complete it last Saturday night. More than ever before, I felt an overwhelming rush of emotion, and a desperate eagerness to play this song in my own way in this place on this day at this time. The band kicked it off and '*Lush Life*' naturally built in intensity from chorus to chorus, bringing the audience to its feet more than once with forceful, driving back-beats. And then, at the point in this song that had brought me to my knees, screaming to the rafters only a few days ago, I rushed up to the microphone at stage front and prepared myself to blast off into my solo cadenza, knowing full well what was in store for me. As I did, the the band abruptly stopped playing, that being my cue. As I raised my horn to my lips, I heard Armstrong's voice behind me.

"Take it, Woody!"

And I did. Those three words were music to my ears yet again. I mean, it felt so good, so right, that I just let it all hang out, as they say. I was wailin'. Without me even realizing it, the

rest of the band ever so quietly left the stage, stepping back through the curtains through which we had just entered. Under any other circumstances, I might have been jolted by such a surprise, but not on this night. Everything felt so...*right*. And I realized that this was their gift to me. There could be no more generous gesture from one musician to another. This was, after all, their audience, their show. What greater compliment than to turn both over to me so unselfishly?

As they must have suspected would happen, I was immediately caught up in the moment, offering the audience my own soulful solo cadenza. Eyes closed, I tuned out all evidence of a reality other than that of my playing. I was so intently focused on the moment that a tornado could have swirled across the stage and I wouldn't even have noticed a breeze. As I played, I could only see Violetta's eyes in my mind, pleading with me, locking onto my soul. All the while, I understood that my thoughts were once again splitting into two halves, one side concentrating on the music emanating from my mind at this moment in time, the other on the emotional impact the music would soon exert on my senses.

That realization brought with it the familiar sensation of seeing the red glow of the spotlight through my tightly closed eyelids, simultaneously feeling the tears rolling down my cheeks. I knew what was coming, as Armstrong and the guys in the band must have known I would. I even smiled to myself at the thought of them walking off the stage so purposefully, so stealthily, secure in their knowledge of what was about to happen. I didn't fight it. I just kept thinking about Violetta, how much I loved her, and how I much I needed to be with her again.

Then, it happened.

I felt myself...*rising*...from the confines of my physical body still tethered to the stage floor; *floating*...up the curtains to the ceiling, the hall so far below, over an audience completely unaware of what was taking place in a dimension obviously beyond the scope of their sensory recognition or spiritual comprehension. I was looking down at myself as my body maintained the necessary physical posture of a saxophonist wailing both on and through his instrument. I sensed a rectangular-shaped glow straight ahead of me, shimmering in my vision. Of course, telling you this is so difficult, because there is no such thing as rectangle, or straight ahead, or shimmering. The best I can do is try to explain to you that it didn't appear as a two-dimensional box, but rather a three-dimensional cube, with infinite depth, and no apparent end in sight. Eyes closed, despite the fact that there was nothing here to see anyway, I willed my thoughts to propel me forward. Sure enough, before I knew what had happened, I believe I must have successfully passed through a doorway, because it disappeared from my thoughts in a brilliant flash of white light.

I felt myself propelled at unworldly speed through time and space, vision a mere blur. The first time I had experienced this sensation after my ascent from the Ellicott Club's stage that fateful night, I was terrified, lost in the fear of my unknown direction and destination. But this time, I fully embraced the moment, convinced I was on my way to the place and time in which I

belonged. As my aura began its descent, I realized with a start that I was returning not to the present, but to the Ellicott Club's stage, 25 years in the past, where I saw Violetta's beautiful green eyes below me. To my surprise, her arm was still raised in search of my return. But as soon as she caught sight of my eyes, her demeanor changed, and once more she immersed her soul into the performance of her own music on stage, focusing solely on the moment. My descent slowed dramatically and suddenly, the blur in my peripheral vision emerging into clear focus. There, on the stage next to Violetta below me, was my physical self still wrapped up in the cascades of emotion emanating from my saxophone. As I hovered close to the ceiling, I saw Lenny Dee, standing off to one side of the audience. His look of panic upon my earlier departure was now overwhelming joy as he saw my return, his arthritic hands once again steepled in front of his face, his eyes following the slow descent of my aura down the curtain. Then, as suddenly as it had begun, I was back on stage in the moment, Violetta at my side.

Violetta in the present

I felt myself floating above the stage. As my aura began its descent, I realized with a start that I was returning not to the present, but to the Ellicott Club's stage. Oblivious to any fear I might have felt...indeed *should* have felt at such a realization...I fully embraced the moment, convinced I was on my way to finding Woody. To my surprise, my arm was still raised in search of his return, as it had been that fateful night. But as soon as I saw Woody, still immersed in the performance of his music on the stage, I lowered my arm back to my guitar, whereby my descent slowed dramatically and suddenly, my vision emerging into clear focus. For there, on the stage next to Woody, was my physical self, once again immersed in the cascade of emotion emanating from my guitar. And there, standing off to the side of the audience, I saw Lenny Dee, his panic stricken expression replaced by a look of thankfulness, his arthritic hands now steepled in front of his face, his eyes following the slow descent of my aura down the curtain. Then, as suddenly as it had begun, I was back on stage in the moment, Woody at my side.

Woody in the present

Back in real time, in this moment, with Violetta at my side once again, there was no gasping for breath down on my knees. There was no desperate searching for where I was, how I'd arrived here, and what had happened. No, I knew exactly where, when, why, and with whom I was now sharing this stage. Past confusion was replaced by the security of feeling that I had arrived at my destination in the right way, at the right time, with the right person, and for the right reasons. Much to my own surprise, I was calm, able to fully absorb the richness of it all.

Looking at Violetta seated next to me on stage, her eyes told the same story. The music complete, she lifted herself from her chair with a sense of wonderment on her face, and we embraced, she managing to hold her guitar in her left hand, me holding my sax in mine. All the while, our audience applauded and cheered incessantly, eager to show their appreciation for the performance they had just witnessed, yet could never fully comprehend. She and I continued our embrace for what must have seemed like years to some! Finally, we turned towards the audience, each of us with one arm around the back of the other, our instruments held out on each side of us. We bowed once, slowly and most appreciatively. We retreated from the stage, but could not escape the adulation of those in the audience, walking back out several times to acknowledge their continuing applause. We both knew we should perform an encore. But we also realized all too clearly that we had traveled long and far to reach this destination. The oppressive need for the restorative and recuperative sleep was particularly strong, draining our energy reserves by the moment.

There would be no encore this night. Rather, we gave one final wave to the audience, helped each other walk off the stage, and signaled the director to close the curtains. We retreated to the dressing room back stage, nearly collapsing as we entered. It took all our strength and endurance to pull the two couches together to form one large enough for us to sleep on. With no gas left in our tanks, we crawled under an afghan blanket, fully dressed, literally passing out in each other's arms within seconds.

Violetta in the present

I woke up to the realization that my eyes were searching for something, anything familiar about my surroundings. It was pitch black. Yet I didn't have the sense that it was nighttime. I felt wide-awake. But there was something else. There was an arm draped around my shoulder. Indeed, I felt that I was in bed with someone, which startled me to a full sitting position in an instant.

"What?" he muttered in confusion.

At that moment I realized I was with Woody. I couldn't see his face in the dark, but I knew it was him. I felt him get up, and after a stumble or two followed by a couple of grunts of frustration, he had obviously managed to find the light switch, for we were now both bathed in bright light from the one overhead fluorescent bulb in the middle of the ceiling. We looked at each other, then around the room at our surroundings.

"Good morning, Violetta," he said softly as he had done each morning leading to today.

"It certainly is, Woody," I answered, trying to hide the confused look on my face, for I had no idea where we were or how we had ended up here.

Woody's eyes did a quick turn around the room before he returned his gaze to me and pushed his hair out of his eyes with his right hand.

"That must have been one heck of a show last night, Violetta," he half kidded. "'Only problem is, I can't remember a thing about it!'"

Although my eyes remained glued to his, my *mind* turned inward. I spoke before I even had a thought about saying anything.

"The Ellicott Club," I whispered. "We're in the dressing room, Woody."

"That we are," he agreed, not at all convinced of the fact.

Woody opened the door, and peered out into an empty hallway. Only as he began to close the door did he see the note taped to its front. He removed the note, closed the door, and read the written message aloud.

Great show last nite, youse two! You really out dun your last show by a mile, and dat's sayin' sumptin'. Talk to youse later. T'day is Sunday...sleep late, da place'll be empty all day. Maybe youse could even go to church, ya know? Couldn' hurt...

Lenny

The clock on the counter told the story. It was 1:45, PM, that is. It was only then that we looked at each other...*really* looked...to notice that we were both fully dressed in clothes rumpled from sleeping in them. A quick mental calculation on my part indicated that we had slept more than sixteen hours, since we had concluded our show at about 9:30 last night.

"We must have traveled far and long last night, Woody," I said, attempting to piece together what neither of us seemed able to remember.

Woody had a confused look on his face, as if he was trying to focus on something that was just out of touch.

"What do you say we head over to the Toad Lagoon for a cup of coffee, Violetta? And, maybe even a slice of pie ala mode?"

Woody in the present

In the car, on the way to the Toad Lagoon, I turned on the radio, which was tuned to the local 24-hour Jazz station. I caught the host's voice in mid-sentence.

'...goes back a few years! This is one of my all time favorite Jazz standards, written so many years ago by the great Cole Porter: It's All Right With Me.'

Something inside me just hung on those words, and I felt a chill run up my spine. But when the song progressed beyond the introduction into the main verse, I felt suddenly paralyzed.

'It's the wrong time, and the wrong place...'

I barely managed to pull the car over to the side of the street. My whole body started shaking uncontrollably. Violetta grabbed my arm.

"Woody! What's the matter?" the terror evident on her face.

I just sat there for a minute, unable to gather my wits. Slowly, I reached down and turned the radio off before answering her as best I could.

"I don't know, Violetta...that song...something about it just...I don't know," I mumbled, shaking my head at the absurdity of my reaction to a song I knew well.

The two of us reached out to each other at the same instant, and we held hands in the car for a full ten minutes without saying another word. I sure couldn't explain what had just happened. But there was definitely something there beyond my reach that associated the words of that song to something very unpleasant. As we sat in silence, the feeling subsided, until I felt in control of my thoughts again.

About a half-hour later, we pulled up in front of the Toad Lagoon. Given the late hour on a Sunday night, I wasn't surprised to find a parking spot right in front of the restaurant. Looking through the front windows, it was obvious we would have our choice of places to sit. I didn't say this to Violetta, but I felt like what I really needed was a stiff shot of whiskey to calm myself. Indeed, I wouldn't be surprised if she was thinking the same thing!

We walked into the restaurant. I saw Brian cleaning a table in the back. He looked up, saw Violetta, and smiled broadly as if she were a long lost friend. He abruptly threw down his dishtowel and virtually ran towards the front entrance, arms out inviting an embrace from Violetta. This worried me! I thought I had already nipped this little game in the bud. Sure, Brian and I were friends, but as far as I knew he had never actually hugged Violetta before, and I was real nervous that she would wonder about that. I glanced down to Violetta at my side, preparing an excuse for this unexplained behavior on Brian's part. You can imagine my shock when Violetta opened her arms to welcome his warm embrace. Apparently, I was the odd one out. When had these two become such good friends, I wondered to myself in that instant.

"Violetta! It's so great to see you!" Brian exclaimed loudly.

"Great to see you, too, Brian!" Violetta answered as they hugged.

I just stood there in total surprise, not knowing what to do or say. And suddenly, in an uncomfortable moment of confusion, they stepped apart from each other, looking absolutely mortified by what had just taken place. I looked at Violetta's face first, then at Brian's. The expression I saw on each of their faces looked strangely like the way I had just felt my own face must have looked in the car a short half-hour ago. I sure couldn't explain it, but it was as if the same thing that had happened to me in the car upon hearing that song had just happened to Brian and Violetta in the instant of their embrace. If I were a mind reader, which I'm certainly not, I

would swear that both of them were thinking the same thing at the same time, *'what just happened?'* They were both blushing mightily, looking awfully confused, as Brian finally managed to turn and walk back to his table-clearing duties while Violetta and I continued to stand near the door. Violetta stood facing the front of the restaurant. I faced the back where I could still see Brian's red face, trying to hide behind his awkward motions of wiping the table clean. I returned my gaze to Violetta, noticing that she was shaking like a leaf. She was a million miles away.

"Violetta?" I whispered after a few moments of not knowing what to say.

She turned her eyes up to mine as she answered.

"I don't know, Woody...something...I...I can't explain what just happened," she said softly, trying to make sense out of the nonsensical. "The last time I saw Brian was with you, and we didn't exchange more than a greeting!"

"Violetta...that's just how I felt in the car a little while ago," I offered. "Your face looks exactly the way I felt!"

Her eyes told me it was time to leave. We walked out the front door as unobtrusively as possible under the circumstances, not even turning to look to the back of the restaurant.

The Narrator

Well, well, well! It was some time ago that I warned you all is not as it seemed. It never is. Didn't I tell you that strange things were about to happen? Suffice it to say you must have experienced some disorientation as this tale unfolded, much the same as Woody and Violetta did, not to mention Brian and Bryanna! Indeed, Woody's journey was simultaneously one of confusion and salvation. You have come to realize the answers as he has. After all, Woody has been living the story in real time with no means of narrating to you what he himself couldn't yet have known.

Haven't you ever been in a situation where you felt that you'd already done something, already experienced an emotion, already lived a moment, already uttered a word, but couldn't quite put your finger on where, why, when, or with whom? Woody and Violetta seem to have returned to where and when they belong. And they are together again. But one can only wonder if this time is precisely the same instant as the one they had departed. Can we ever return to an exact moment again? Or is any return merely an approximation of our own recollections, a flicker of our shared experiences and feelings?

And what of Trumpet Man, Thomas, Lenny Dee, Uncle Leo, and The Performer? Has Armstrong found *his* time's Woody? Has Bryanna found Thomas, then or now? How will this shift in the nature of one reality affect their own existence within the scope and realm of what they perceive to be truth? You've discovered that each new answer raises yet another new

question. And when you get right down to it...do we ever really know the answers to our own questioning thoughts? Is our journey one over which we have any control, or is it merely predetermined, ours but to act out? All things happen for a reason.