

## **...BUT THE MELODY LINGERS ON**

by **Jim Freund**

© 2009

The phone rings in our living room. It's Mom calling from the hospital.

"He's gone, Charlie. He went quietly, in his sleep."

I'd been expecting the call. The doctors had told us this morning that Gramps would soon be taking his last breath. So it was sad, but not a surprise.

"I'm sorry to hear that, Mom."

"Your grandfather cared a great deal about you, even if he didn't always show it."

Before I can reply, she goes on. "I've decided we'll just have a simple graveside service for him. There won't be many people there – none of his old friends from New York will come down. I'll read a psalm and make a few remarks like a daughter should.... Would you like to say anything?"

Ordinarily, I'd pass on doing something like that – I'm not much of a public speaker. And up to a few days ago, I really didn't have strong feelings about the man. But then, this thing happened –

"Let me think about that, Mom. I'll let you know later tonight."

"Okay – whatever you decide. I've gotta go now and make some arrangements. I'll see you for dinner."

After we hang up, I move over to the soft chair near the sofa, where I do most of my serious thinking. That facetime I had with Gramps just last Saturday – I want to go back over it in detail before deciding whether to speak at the graveside.

Right away, as I sit there, our whole conversation comes alive in my mind, like it was just happening now. Mom always says I have what she calls a "photographic memory" – just like the one my grandfather had. Anyway, here's what I remember from that day. . . .

\* \* \*

Gramps props himself up on his elbows in the hospital bed, taking care not to dislodge the IV tube in his arm. “There’s a reason I asked you to come over today, Charlie, and it wasn’t to bring me the Ella Fitzgerald album – that was just the cover story to feed your mother.”

I’m thinking – why, that old bugger, conning me over here for a phony reason.... It’s bad enough he pulled me away from the Gator-Seminole game that Larry and I were watching at home on TV. I lean forward in the folding chair alongside his hospital bed. “Then what the hell’s the real reason?”

Gramps looks first in one direction and then the other – I guess he wants to satisfy himself that the guys in the other five beds around the ward aren’t listening in. “I want to tell you a story, Charlie – a story about me.”

Oh, no – another story from the old man. I’ve had my fill of his stories. They’re always about him, they go on forever, and there never seems to be any point to them. I gotta try to get out of this. “Hey, Gramps, I’m really sorry, but I don’t have the time. Larry’s waiting for me back at the house – we had plans....

“Just stay a little while, Charlie – it’s important to me. This is a story that I’ve never told anyone else.”

It makes no sense – why the hell would he want to tell something like that to *me*, of all people? Let’s face it, my grandfather, Sidney Kass, and I have never been close. During my first 19 years, he lived up in New York while I was down here in Florida with my mother. Since he came here a year ago to live in the small room over our garage, I saw him more often – but it’s not like we’ve been exchanging confidences. Gramps and I have what Mom likes to call a “testy relationship.” He’s always giving me crap about something – my hair’s too long, I don’t shave enough, all I ever wear are jeans, t-shirts and flip-flops, etc. etc.

And now, I’m thinking, I have to listen to another of his long, boring, pointless stories. Well, maybe I can at least get him to lighten up. “Hey, Gramps, you’re not by any chance going to finish up your story by handing me a treasure map and pointing to where the Sidney Kass fortune in gold bullion is buried?”

Gramps chuckles as his eyes take in the drab, badly lit ward. A guy in one of the other beds is moaning in pain. “Don’t I wish . . . Then you could go dig it up and give these hospital people some shekels to let me die in a private room.”

Yeah, I know Gramps is in bad shape and may not get out of this bed alive, but I’m not comfortable talking about death with him. Still, after that, I’ve gotta say something. “Oh, come on, Gramps, you’re gonna walk out of here in a week and drive us all crazy for the next fifteen years.”

“Sure thing – at which point I’ll turn a hundred and get a letter from Willard Scott congratulating me on achieving the century mark.”

“Right on.”

I can’t help noticing that Sidney Kass looks every one of his 85 years. Maybe it’s seeing him in the hospital bed, but his face is gaunt, his eyes sunken – he’s got little wisps of uncombed white hair and a week-old stubble of beard. The only other body parts outside the sheet are his bony arms with their sagging flesh.

“Listen, Charlie, I know my ticker might give out any day now, so I need to get this off my chest.”

Again, I try to lower the temperature. “Is what I’m about to hear a confession? If so, just remember, Gramps, I’m not a priest and I can’t grant absolution.”

“I won’t give it a name, and I’m well aware you’re not a priest – or even a rabbi, for that matter. But you’re my only grandson. I’ve gotten to know you a little better this past year – watched you grow up some, fill out your scrawny frame, even give some thought to going into business – and while you’re still no bargain, you may yet be redeemable. So I’ve decided to tell you my story.”

I guess he means that as a compliment – sort of left-handed, though. I do have one question. “Is what you’re going to tell me something that my mother knows?”

“No, I never told her – or anyone else for that matter. And a couple of years ago – even if I’d felt as crummy as I do now – I wouldn’t have told

you. Not just because you were only a teenager, but because you seemed to have no interest at all in your old grandfather.”

I have to admit, there’s something to what he’s saying, but I feel the need to push back. “That’s not a fair knock, Gramps. Back then, I was in Florida and you in New York, we didn’t visit each other much, and you weren’t on such great terms with Mom.”

That part about my mother was true. And she was the least of his problems in the family. My grandmother – Sidney’s ex-wife – right up to the day she died, she never forgave him for leaving her. And my father had a real grudge against Sidney that he harped on all the time – until he took off for L.A. a dozen years ago, never to be seen again by my mother or me.

“Okay,” Gramps says, “let’s not go into that now. I’ve decided to entrust you with my secret, and I want you to promise not to pass it on to anyone else.”

I’ve gotta move this along or I’ll be there all night. “Okay, Gramps, go ahead – your secret is safe with me.”

He looks off into the distance. “Even if I wanted to tell your mother, how could I – Sarah never comes to visit me.”

“What are you talking about? Mom was here just yesterday and then two days before that.”

We’ve been noticing this a lot lately – his short-term memory is going fast.

Gramps gives me a puzzled look. “Is that so? Well, sometimes I can’t remember what happened yesterday so well . . . but I’ll tell you one thing – what went on that day five years ago is fixed in my head.”

He reaches over to the tray near his bed and takes a sip of water through a straw. Then he leans back against the pillow, draws a deep breath, and begins his tale.

“It happened, as I said, about five years ago – just after I turned 80. I was living in that small apartment in Manhattan.”

“The one Mom didn’t like at all?”

“You remember that, do you? Yeah, Sarah was always whining about it. ‘Daddy,’ she’d say, ‘I can’t understand why you don’t get out of this ugly flat with the grime-covered window looking out on the squat building next door. Move down to Florida – get yourself some sun and warm weather, be near me and your grandson – instead of moping around up here.’ The verse may have been different sometimes, but it always came back to that refrain.”

He pauses for a few seconds, like he’s trying to recall something. “As a matter of fact, just a week before the day I’m telling you about, Sarah and I had celebrated my 80<sup>th</sup> birthday – if the term ‘celebration’ could be applied to the Chinese take-out dinner she sponsored on one of her rare forays north. She’s my only child, but I guess it’s no secret that things have never been the same between me and your mom since I left her mother 25 years ago. What’s more, I didn’t have the funds to visit Sarah and you, or to finance trips for you guys to New York. That year, though, we managed to split the cost of a special cut-rate plane ticket so she could be with me on my 80<sup>th</sup> – but she stayed only that one night, and it wasn’t exactly a joyous occasion.”

I find myself wondering why Gramps didn’t listen to Mom and come south earlier. “What did you used to say, when Mom gave you that speech about moving south?”

“I’d say, ‘The reason I’m not pulling up stakes, Sarah, as you well know, is that New York happens to be where my meal ticket lives – and without him, I wouldn’t be able to afford even this tiny rent-controlled apartment, let alone some fancy digs in Florida.’ Hell, if it weren’t for Billy Boyden, I’d probably have been living on food stamps. I barely got by on social security, but it was the occasional stipends from Boyden that made my day – that let me afford a night on the town or a new pair of trousers.”

“I’ve heard that name before – but remind me, Gramps, who was Billy Boyden?”

“You don’t remember Boyden? He died last year, but back then he was a well-known cabaret performer, sort of in the Bobby Short tradition. Every year, Billy had standing multi-week engagements at some of Manhattan’s finest clubs. He also entertained well-heeled individuals at private parties in New York, Southampton and Palm Beach. The man made lots of money – in fact, he was rolling in it. His trademark was a thick roll of hundred dollar bills with a rubber band wrapped around them – he always carried it in his front pants pocket.”

“Like in the old gangster movies . . . .”

“Right. He was a good performer, singing and playing standards from what we called the Great American Songbook – tunes by guys like Gershwin, Kern, Rodgers, Porter, and Berlin.”

I decide to yank his chain a little. “Hey Gramps, you probably think that I never even heard of any of those guys, but you’re wrong – I heard of Rodgers. You know, Mr. Rogers, the guy in the sweater with the buttons down the front who sang to kids. . . .”

Gramps snorts. “Okay, wise guy – we’ll deal with your disrespect of real talent later on. Now let’s get back to Boyden. Over the years, Billy composed a handful of songs that he liked to play – songs that, shall we say, he held in higher regard than did the general public. He also used to include in each show a recent tune by a relatively unknown songwriter.” Gramps pauses – I guess to make sure I’m listening. “For a couple of decades, Boyden’s unknown songwriter of choice was me, Sidney Kass.”

I knew that Gramps had worked up north as a studio musician until arthritis got to his fingers, and I guess I’d heard he was also a songwriter, but I never bothered to ask him for any details. He may be a pain in the ass, that’s for sure, but I gotta give him credit for being good at something. That’s my trouble – there’s nothing special I can do. I was no great shakes in the classroom, though I did manage to graduate high school – but then I dropped out of the local junior college before first year finals. I’ve been knocking around since, doing some construction work – nothing to speak of. This new thing I’ve got going with Larry, though – it may work out just fine . . . .

“Hey, Gramps, you were the man!”

“Well, I never wrote a hit song, and my compositions weren’t performed or recorded by the Frank Sinatras and Ella Fitzgeralds of the world – but then again, I didn’t compose for a broad-based audience. My songs had dissonant melodies, unusual chord voicings, and sophisticated lyrics. They were meant to be performed by a cabaret artist like Billy Boyden, in a cozy little nightclub for a discerning Manhattan crowd.”

“Which of the songs that you wrote was your favorite?”

He thinks about it for a moment. “I think it was *When the Tinsel Lost its Luster*. Boyden used that song for several years, and it was very well-received. The key to it was sustaining the Eb on the syllable “lus” over the Bb chord in the bass – like the first note of *It’s Magic*.”

“Hey, Gramps, you gotta play that one for me when you get out of here.”

“If I get out of here . . . .”

And if I can find a house with a piano. Maybe Larry knows of one – I could bring him along. Gramps met Larry at our house a few days before we checked the old man into the hospital. Larry’s the guy I’ve been talking with about opening a burrito stand in that empty lot over on the state highway near the gas station. Larry knows a lot about running fast food joints. He says he can teach me – that I’ll pick it up fast. I get the feeling, though, that Gramps is a lot more skeptical about the whole thing. After meeting Larry, he said he wanted to talk to me about the idea, but we never got around to it before he went to the hospital.

Sidney shifts his rear end around in the bed. “Anyway, Boyden realized how good my songs were and paid me \$1,000 for each of them – on the understanding that I wouldn’t have the sheet music printed for the general public or encourage Billy’s competitors to perform the tune.”

“Hey, a grand each . . . not bad.”

Sidney shakes his head on the pillow. “In the good old days, I turned out a half-dozen songs per year, but it dwindled over time. A few years back – the year of *Luster* – I only managed three tunes. And in the year I’m talking about now, I hadn’t produced a damn one. My health was okay, but at 80 my creative juices seemed to be drying up. I was just out of inspiration.”

I’m thinking to myself, hey, the old man is getting more . . . what do you call it . . . more *candid* with me than he usually is.

“I felt like everything that was any good had already been done. My fingers would play around on the keys, and all of a sudden I’d recognize the chord progression of Vernon Duke’s classic, *I Can’t Get Started*. That was my problem – I couldn’t get started. . . . And every lyric I tried out began to

sound like *When Sunny Gets Blue* – I’ll tell you who was blue, and it wasn’t just Sunny!

“I don’t know that one, but I know Bobby Hebb’s *Sunny*. . .”

“That’s enough, you ignorant boy,” Gramps says, but with a smile.

Just then, a nurse walks over to his bedside. “Hi, Mr. Kass,” she says in a cheerful voice, “how are you doing? And who is this handsome, blonde, sun-tanned young man by your bed?”

“Well, if it isn’t my favorite nurse coming in early for the night shift. Let me introduce you to my grandson. Charlie, I’d like you to meet . . . uh . . .”

“Marlene,” she says. “It’s a tough name to remember unless you can think of Marlene Dietrich – but her legs were a lot better than mine.”

“Marlene, Marlene – how could I forget? I know how – for at least the last week, you haven’t been here to take care of me.”

Marlene gives me one of these looks that says she’s been here on duty every night, but Gramps just doesn’t remember.

While Marlene is taking Sidney’s temperature and doing some other hospital stuff, my mind wanders back to Larry and our burrito stand. Larry’s five years older than me – tall, dark hair, good-looking to the girls. He’s a very savvy guy, that Larry, and since I know next to nothing about business, I figure he’ll be a good partner for me to have. Yeah, I know that the carpet-cleaning business he had went belly-up, but he ran into some bad breaks there. And it’s not just doing business together – I really like the guy. He could become a good friend – and I don’t have too many of those.

I remember some of the ideas Larry was talking about the day he came over to my house and met Gramps. Like the one about how you can make a lot more money by buying ingredients dirt cheap from those bozos down by the railroad station, instead of from the big farm outside of town. And how you can find guys down there to hire for way below minimum wage, and they’re so happy to have a job, they work their butts off.

My favorite, though, was when I asked Larry something about paying taxes on the income we make, and he answered, “At the end of the day,

Charlie, we take all the cash we've made and throw it up in the air. Whatever sticks on the ceiling, we pay in taxes – the rest we keep for ourselves.” I got a good laugh out of that, although I don't think Gramps thought it was so funny. The old man's so goddamn straight – always giving me lectures about doing “the right thing” and all that crap.

After Marlene finishes with Gramps and leaves, he picks up his story where he left off. “Anyway, on the day in question, I remember sitting at that battered Baldwin spinet in the living room of my apartment, my arthritic fingers forming chord progressions, trying out several possible melody lines in my right hand. After a few minutes of this, I banged my hands down on the keys – so hard that it hurt. ‘Goddammit!’ I yelled out loud, even though I was alone in the room. ‘I'm blocked! I've got songwriter's block.’ Funny, I can recall the moment just like it was yesterday.”

“Pretty strong memory, huh.”

“Yeah, not a good feeling to have . . . . Then I got up from the piano, walked into the kitchen, and took a beer out of the refrigerator. I went back to the living room, flipped on the stereo, and settled back in my old lumpy easy chair to listen to one of my favorite discs – Ella Fitzgerald singing the Duke Ellington songbook – the same CD you brought to me today.”

“Oh, so that's what made you think of it . . . .”

“I remember, she was singing Ellington's *Solitude*. I shut my eyes and thought, oh, how that man could write, and oh, how that woman could warble. And then I thought, hey, as good as this is, imagine how much better it would sound with those new hi-tech surround sound speakers that I'd seen in an ad the week before. They cost about a thousand bucks, though, which I didn't have, and could only dream of latching onto if I was able to write another song and sell it to Billy Boyden – which I obviously wasn't up to doing.”

I know that feeling – when you really want something but can't afford it. So I ask him the obvious question. “Didn't you have any other way to make money?”

“Yeah, I did – although it was less profitable. To make up for my lack of new songs, I'd developed an alternative source of income from Boyden. I would scour through old sheet music and fake books to come up

with little-known songs written over the years – some by obscure composers, others by bigger names like Gershwin or Berlin. Once a month, Billy would come to my apartment to hear some of these gems I unearthed. Boyden had been around a long time and knew his stuff, but if he didn't know the particular song, or had forgotten it existed, and if he liked it enough, he'd pay me a hundred dollars for each discovery. Then, if he decided to use it in a performance, I'd get another hundred."

"Did he buy many of them?"

"Yeah, quite a number found their way into Billy's repertoire. It wasn't big money, but for me, every dollar counted. Even more important, it kept me as a valuable resource for him. Otherwise, given my pitiful output of original songs in those later years, Billy might well have ended our relationship."

"I get it."

"So that day, I go back to the piano, and on the music stand there's a dog-eared bootleg fakebook from the '40's, before they became legal. I'd gotten it right after World War II ended, under-the-counter, at a music store on West 52<sup>nd</sup> Street that's now defunct. Just the day before, I'd dug it out from an old trunk that had been sitting under my bed for years. I was pretty sure it would produce some good stuff."

Gramps reaches for another sip of water. This story is going on a long time now, and I'm getting impatient – I want him to move along. "So did it?"

He puts down the cup. "Just hang on, Charlie, *I'm* telling the tale. So I thumb through the dilapidated pages of the fakebook, some of which crumble around the edges at my touch. When I spy a candidate, I stop and play a few bars, check the lyric, decide the song doesn't make the grade, and move on. But the book – which I'd guessed would be a winner – was proving to be disappointing.

"The songs were listed alphabetically by title, so I'm nearing the end of the book – into the V's – when a song catches my eye. Its title is *A Very Different Love*, and I can't recall ever being aware of it before. The music and lyrics were both written by the same person, whose name was partially obscured by a crumbling page. It looked like "Jack Sprat," but even going

way back in time, I didn't know of any songwriter with that foolish nursery rhyme moniker."

"Jack Sprat / would eat no fat / his wife would eat no lean / . . ."

"Yeah, that one." Gramps pauses to yawn.

I decide to let him go on without interruption, so I can get the hell out of here in time for dinner. Maybe he'll even fall asleep before he finishes. . . .

"Well, I play the song through once, a little tentatively, and then a second time with more feeling. I scan the lyrics to make sure I can integrate the words into the tune. When I play the song a third time, I mouth the lyrics silently while becoming more comfortable with the melody and chord changes. Finally, I do a fourth runthrough, this time singing the words in my scratchy voice.

"At this point, I stop and just sit still for a few moments. The song is a marvel – much better than anything I've uncovered in years. The melody, with its long line, has a real Jerome Kern feeling, but with some surprising intervals that make it distinctive. The harmony isn't complex, but some of its chord sequences are actually modern. And the lyric is masterful – some appealing turns of phrase, unforced rhymes, and one of the most distinctive reflections on the subject of love that I've encountered.

"I think to myself – how could I never have heard this great song? I take down from the shelf an anthology of popular music that I frequently consult – an exhaustive listing of every popular song known to man – but this one isn't listed. There's the Sammy Fain – Paul Webster hit *A Very Precious Love*, and also *A Very Special Love* that Debby Reynolds recorded, but nothing coupling the words "very," "different" and "love". I check in my reference book on composers and lyricists for the name "Jack Sprat" or something close to that, but no dice. The song, and seemingly its author, appear to be orphans.

"Well, this was a no-brainer. I knew what Billy liked, and I was sure he'd love this one. That means I get a hundred bucks this afternoon, and I bet he'll use the song at that private party he's playing later this month, meaning another hundred will be on the way. I remember congratulating

myself – good work, Sidney Kass, you deserve a little rest from your labors for this discovery.

“So I get up, stretch, and do a couple of laps around the apartment. I’ve shaken off that despair I felt earlier in the day. Music can have that effect on me. Like my first piano teacher told me – there are only a dozen notes, but the combinations of melodies and chords and rhythms you can put together from them is infinite.

“Then I return to the piano and start flipping the remaining pages of the old fakebook. Maybe there’s another lost winner in there, among the “W’s”. If not, well, I remember seeing another relic of a book in the trunk that might bear fruit.

“And then – and then, it hits me.” Gramps pauses for a long time, closing his eyes.

I can’t wait all day. “What hit you?”

His eyes blink open. “In all the years, I’d been dredging up forgotten gems, this was the first time the temptation ever entered my head. But there it was, tugging at me, trying to bypass my conscience.” He pauses again, like it’s hard for him to get the words out. “Should I claim that *I* wrote *A Very Different Love*?”

Lemme tell you, I’m really shocked to hear that come out of his mouth – him, with all his talk about doing the right thing ... Hey, I’m thinking, maybe this guy isn’t so straight after all .... I decide not to comment one way or the other until I hear more.

“My first reaction to this temptation was violently negative. It was a terrible thing to contemplate – it went against all my ethical principles. How could I live with myself? Forget about it. . . .”

Well, this sounds more like the Gramps I’m used to hearing.

“But back then – on that day – I couldn’t shake that inner voice, like a siren or temptress, urging me on. Sidney, the voice said, you *need* the thousand dollars for those great speakers. You’ve given your whole life to music – you *deserve* them.”

I recognize that voice – it’s the kind I often hear, too.

“And then the voice went on. Sidney, it purred, this song is so obscure that even *you* – the expert on all such matters – don’t know it. It’s not in any of the other fake books and standard compilations. No one even knows the author’s name. And since it was written in the forties or some earlier decade – or it wouldn’t be in this particular book – the composer is probably dead, so he couldn’t possibly care.”

Now, for maybe the first time, I’m getting more interested in what my grandfather has to say. “Hey, Gramps, I know that voice – it sounds like the snake in the Garden of Eden . . .”

“Right. And here’s the worst part, Charlie. The voice then started calling the composer and me ‘soulmates’. Sidney, the voice said, this is exactly the kind of tune and harmony and lyric that you would have written if your well hadn’t run dry.”

I know, I know just what he’s talking about. “Sort of like you would be doing the original composer a favor – paying him a compliment – by stealing his long-forgotten song?”

“Yeah, just like that. . . . But it wasn’t all one way – there were plenty of arguments on the other side. Some of them were moral, since what I’d be doing was clearly unethical. I recall thinking that this was even worse than being an art forger – at least there, the forger creates an actual image, even though the original idea isn’t his own. Here, I wouldn’t be creating a damn thing.

“Other arguments against it were practical. Will Billy – who’s even older than me – know the tune? What happens if I get caught? Are there criminal penalties for this sort of thing? Would I be booted out of ASCAP?”

“You’d be taking a big risk, that’s for sure.”

“Right. Well, this pro and con went on inside me for a while, back and forth, and then, as suddenly as it erupted, the internal wrestling match ended, and I knew what I was going to do.”

“Let me guess. I think. . . well, knowing you, Gramps, I think you decided *not* to do it.”

“Close – but wrong. I decided I was going to claim the song as my own. The lure of the stereo speakers that the thousand dollars could buy was just too much.”

Wow, how about that? I didn't know the old man had it in him. . . . I'm... uh... impressed.

“Then I found myself rationalizing the decision. You know, ethics are for younger, more affluent men. Practical fears are just fears – the chances of my actually getting caught are minimal.”

Sidney pauses, stifles a yawn and takes another sip from his water glass. When he starts in talking again, it's as if he's right back there in his living room that day.

“Now, if I'm going to do this, the smart way is to make some changes to the original song. That way, if someone links it to Jack Sprat's tune, I can always say, ‘Well, I may have heard it a zillion years ago, and I guess part of it must have stuck in my head.’ You know how it is – in so many popular songs, you can detect traces of melodies and chord progressions, as well as snatches of lyrics, from other songs – it's done all the time.

“So I start to tinker with the melody – repeating a note here, going up a third there. I try out some alternative chord progressions to give the tune a little different flavor. I pull out a thesaurus and rhyming dictionary and play with some word substitutions for the original lyric. I work hard to pull all these changes together, and after several hours, I'm able to play through my new version of *A Very Different Love*.”

A disgusted look comes over his face as Gramps recalls the moment. “When I struck the final chord, I yelled out ‘No!’ to the empty room. ‘No, I don't like it one bit. The original was perfect; this version is ordinary. If I'm going to present this to Billy as my work, I have to go with the original....’ The old man's expression returns to normal.

Using somebody else's stuff – that's something I know a little about. There's a fancy word for it... uh... plagiarism. So I interrupt. “Wait a second, Gramps. At least you had to change the title.”

He shrugs. “Yeah, I know it would be smart to change the title, in case it resonates in some old-timer's ear, or shows up in another listing, or is heard by someone who owns the same fakebook. So I experiment with

several names, but they don't do it for me. And the way the rhyme scheme was set up – with 'love' set off against 'wings of a dove' in the first eight bars, a 'tender shove' in the second, and the preposition 'of' in the last line – make it even tougher. I can call it 'A Different Kind of Love,' but that sounds too ordinary. *A Very Different Love* says it all. And so I decide, what the hell, I'm going to stick with the same title."

"Bad move," I mumble under my breath.

"Now I look at my watch. Oh, God, I realize, Billy is due here in another hour. If I'm going to play the song for him today, it obviously can't be from the fakebook. So I get out several sheets of music paper and copy the song onto them in my own handwriting. To make it look more spontaneous, I cross out some wrong notes and mediocre words, scribbling in the good ones – even adding some erasing and smudging, to make it look like I'm deep in the throes of a very creative project. I tell you, it was a tense hour to get it done in time. I was sweating.

"I'm just finishing the last touches on my forged masterpiece when the buzzer rings from downstairs, announcing Billy Boyden's arrival. I put down my pencil, go to the door and buzz Billy in. And then, suddenly, I remember that the fakebook in which I found *A Very Different Love* is still sitting right there on the piano."

"Uh, oh. . ."

"The next few moments are like a scene from a Keystone Kops two-reeler – did you ever see one of those? I grab the book, dive under the bed, open the trunk – hear the bell, call out 'Wait a minute, Billy' – stick the book in the trunk underneath some other sheet music, close the lid, crawl back out, dust myself off, and open the front door."

"Whew!"

"Well, Billy greets me with genuine warmth – we are, after all, old friends. He's a heavy-set man with a large head, bushy eyebrows, and the corners of his mouth turn up a little – making him look like he's always smiling. We chit-chat briefly before going over to the piano – me at the keys, Billy in a pull-up chair alongside.

“When we’re settled, he says, ‘Well, Sidney Kass – my favorite musical archeologist – what forgotten gems have you unearthed for me today?’ – and he gives me a big smile.”

“It’s the moment of truth – or actually non-truth – and I pause for a moment before replying to Billy. A wave of trepidation comes over me. What if he recognizes the tune, is furious that I’m trying to pass it off as my own, and stalks out, never to return. . . ? Then the wave passes, and the words just come out of my mouth. ‘I do have a few of those, Billy. But more importantly, I also wrote an original piece for you – one that I like a lot, and I think you will, too.’ There! – I think to myself – I did it.”

“Hey, Gramps, the fat’s in the fire now.”

“At first Billy looks surprised, but then I can see he’s really pleased. ‘Hey,’ he says, ‘that’s great, Sidney. Frankly, I was beginning to wonder if your well had run dry. It’s not easy for composers of our age – geezers, everyone calls us – to come up with new stuff. So I can’t wait to hear your latest. What do you call it?’ That’s the way Billy was – he always came right to the point.”

“Here comes your second moment of non-truth.”

“Yeah, I realize this is my last chance to change the title to make it less discoverable. Or at least I could have punted and said, ‘I’m still working on that. . .’ And then I think, oh, what the hell. . . ‘I call it *A Very Different Love*, Billy. It is different – not only the message but the melody and the chord structure.’ So now I’m all the way in.

“I’m looking at Billy as I speak. I notice his brows knit together upon hearing the name. My mind goes to work – does that mean he knows this song? Or is Billy thinking about the other ones – the very ‘precious’ or ‘special’ love songs?

“Billy repeats the title, ‘*A Very Different Love*,’ then he goes ‘hmm,’ his brows relax, he smiles and says, ‘Sounds like it’s right up my alley, Sidney. Okay, let’s hear it.’ So, at least I’m over the first hump.”

For the first time, Gramps has gotten my attention with one of his stories. I’m not thinking about dinner any more, or about Larry and my burrito stand – I’m listening to the old man. I’m really into it – I even find myself rooting for him to pull it off.

“So I put the sheafs of paper on which I’d copied the song up on the stand and begin to play the tune, but without singing the words. During the second eight bars, I glance over at my meal ticket. Billy seems to be listening intently, but without any facial expression that indicates his reaction one way or the other.

“I complete the 32 bars and say, ‘That’s the tune – now here’s the lyric.’ The second time through, I add the words. When I near the end, I see Billy half close his eyes and nod slowly up and down. To emphasize the closing lyric, I slow down the tempo for the final eight bars, as I know Billy would do if he were performing the song.

“As I play the final note, I can feel the tension. How is Billy going to react? Will he say, ‘Well, Sidney, that’s a nice tune, but it ain’t yours – and I’m not going to do business with a thief and cheat’ – and then leave in a huff? Or maybe it’ll be, ‘Good effort, Sidney, but your composing chops have seen better days. I’ll pass on this one.’ I’m just not sure what he’ll say.

“I don’t have to wait long to find out. Billy, whose chair has been tilted back as he listened, leans forward to speak. ‘I love it!’ he says. ‘I’m going to learn it right away and play it at that big private party next month – and then at the Carlyle gig after that.’ There’s a big smile on his face.”

“Hey, Gramps, you pulled it off!”

“My face glows. The whole thing has worked perfectly. I think to myself, was I naïve to experience such doubts before going ahead with it? And now, bring on those stereo speakers. . . .

“Without another word, Billy stands up, takes out the large roll of hundred dollar bills that he always keeps in his pocket, undoes the thick rubber band that holds them, counts out ten big ones with a flourish, and hands them to me.” Sidney pauses to sip some water, closes his eyes briefly, and stifles a yawn.

“Hey, you didn’t even have to send him an invoice.”

“I say something bland like, ‘I’m glad you like it.’ and then – because I’m anxious to get off the subject before he asks any questions – I quickly switch gears. ‘Now, Billy, let me play you a few forgotten gems I’ve uncovered. This first one, *My Best Love*, was written by Richard Rodgers

with Oscar Hammerstein back in '59 but cut from *Flower Drum Song*. It's got a Sondheim-esque feel.' And I turn back to the keyboard."

"You were smart to get off the subject fast."

"Billy takes his seat next to the piano. I start to play *My Best Love*, but I can tell that Boyden isn't really listening. His lips are pursed together like he's giving something serious thought. Before I finish the tune – which Billy waves away with a, 'Nah, I know all about that one' – a decisive look suddenly comes over his face. He stands up again, reaches in his pocket for the roll of hundreds, peels off five more bills, and holds them out to me.

"This comes as a complete surprise. I'm wondering to myself, what's this all about? Now, I ask you, Charlie, what do you think Billy then says to me?"

This really comes out of left field, and I'm thinking, what can it mean? Did Billy like the song so much that he decided to pay Gramps more than the usual amount? Or was he giving Gramps an advance – sort of as an incentive payment – to write another song? The truth is, I don't have a clue what the reason was, and I tell Gramps so.

Gramps is now smiling at the memory of that moment. "Billy says to me, 'Sidney, I'll give you this additional five hundred bucks if you let *me* claim that I wrote *A Very Different Love*.' That's what he says – can you believe it?"

"Wow, I never expected that. . . ."

"Me neither. I was dumbfounded. You have to understand, Billy had never suggested anything like that for any of the songs I actually did write. And then I remember thinking, why, Billy's even worse than I am – at least I found the song! His composing well must really have run dry – just like mine. And then I began to wonder whether some of those other songs Billy claimed to have written over the years might also have been purchased or pilfered from someone else. . . ."

"It opens up a lot of possibilities . . ."

"But back that day, I realized that such thoughts were beside the point – the only question on the table was whether to accept the five hundred, and

I had to decide fast. It was money I could really use, and my mind began running through a number of smaller purchases I'd been putting off."

"I think I can see where this is heading. . . ."

"And, of course I started rationalizing, justifying – you know, the whole nine yards. It's just a straight commercial transaction, I told myself, the way business people sell software or license patents. . . ."

"Strictly business . . ."

"And, I'm thinking, one real plus is that letting Billy claim authorship would take the onus off me. I'm not really comfortable with Billy telling his audiences that *A Very Different Love* came from *my* pen. This way, if there are any repercussions, it's Billy who'll have to take the heat. . . ."

"Wait a minute, though . . ."

"I know. I know – Billy doesn't realize that this additional risk exists. So then I'm thinking, is it fair to Billy to subject him to that happening? If someone were to call him on it, he'd be mad as hell at me – not only for pawning the song off as my own, but also for not alerting him to the possible problem. . . ."

"Then you'd really be up the creek without a paddle."

Gramps fidgets around, as if trying to find a comfortable position. "Well, my internal struggle doesn't last too long. Sure, there's a risk, but what the hell. . . . I nod my acceptance to Billy's proposition, take the five bills, and stuff them into my pocket."

"You're getting in deeper and deeper."

He yawns again and, closes his eyes. There's a long pause. Is the story over? "Hey Gramps, what happened then?"

The old man shakes his head, like he's getting rid of some cobwebs. "I then go on to play two more forgotten gems for Billy, neither of which he buys. After the second one, Billy looks at his watch and says he has to leave.

"I walk him to the door. A good day's work, I'm thinking. Then, as we're saying goodbye, again much to my surprise, Billy reaches into his

pocket, takes out the big roll, and peels off five more hundred dollar bills.”

“Five more – what’s that for?”

“That’s just what’s going through my head – what’s up? Try to guess.”

I’m baffled. Maybe now that Billy knows he can buy songs from Gramps, he wants to encourage the old man to write him another one. So I tell that to Gramps.

“Nope,” says Gramps, “try again.”

But I don’t have anything else to offer and say so.

“Okay I’ll tell you. ‘Here’s another five hundred for you,’ Billy says, handing over the bills and giving me a big wink, ‘if you promise not to mention anything about this to either of Jack Sprat’s kids. . . .’ Can you believe it?”

“Wow – he knew all along! Sonuvabitch. . . . Well, did you take it?”

“What do you think?”

“Let’s see, before this latest five hundred, you thought you were putting one over on Billy. Now you realized he was on to you all along. So he’s sort of bribing you to be a . . . what do they call it on the TV crime shows? . . . a co-conspirator. But he does it with a wink . . . I have to guess you took it.”

“That’s just how I analyzed it, and I took the damn money.” Gramps leans back into his pillow and yawns more deeply than before. It looks like he’s trying to tell me something else but it’s not coming out.

“So what happened then?”

Gramps doesn’t answer right away. His eyes sort of close half-way as he breathes in and out.

“Gramps,” I say, louder now, “what happened then?”

He opens one eye and says softly, “Well, I bought the stereo speakers, which were great, as well as a new TV, a blender and. . .”

“No, no, I mean with the song.”

He’s speaking very quietly now. “Well, Billy put it into his next show as his own composition. I know that because I was there opening night – the headwaiter was a friend of mine and comped me. The audience liked it, so he used the song a lot from then on.”

“Yeah, but what I want to know is whether he got away with it. Did anyone ever accuse him of stealing the song?”

His voice is very low now, hard to hear. “Not that I know of.” He closes his eyes again.

“Wait a minute, don’t go to sleep. What about you and Billy?”

His eyes stay closed as Gramps speaks, softly and very slowly. “It was the end of our relationship. He never came up to my apartment again, never bought another forgotten gem – we just lost touch. That’s why I finally had to come to Florida.”

“He didn’t trust you any more.”

“That partly – but more the fact that I knew *his* dirty little secret. That’s not the kind of thing that bonds people.”

I sit there quietly, and a lot of thoughts go through my mind. Why did Gramps decide to tell this story to me, and at this time? Was it just because he liked to tell stories, and this was a really good one – like telling someone a favorite joke? Or was it something he wanted to get off his chest before he died – like making a confession? But if that was the reason, why did he tell his secret to *me*, of all people?

I’m puzzled. Did he want the story to change my feelings toward him – that maybe I’d like him better because he had some weaknesses, too? Or was he trying to teach me a lesson – and, if so, what was the lesson? That crime pays? Or maybe something about taking risks? Or that today’s gain may be tomorrow’s loss. . . ?

I’ve got to find out, so I go to the source directly. “Hey Gramps, that was a hell of a story. But why did you decide to tell it to me?”

There is no answer from Sidney Kass, who has fallen fast asleep.

Just then, the door to the ward opens, and my mother walks in. When she sees that Gramps is sleeping, she suggests that we go down to the hospital's cafeteria for some coffee.

After we're seated, Mom says, "You were in there with Sidney a long time. What did you guys talk about?"

I'm mindful of the promise I made to Gramps not to pass his story along to others. "Oh, mostly he was just telling me some stories from his earlier days."

"You were there so long – I bet he told you the one about Billy Boyden and *A Very Precious Love*."

"Wait a minute, Mom. . . He said that no one else – not even you – knew about that story."

"Yeah, well, it's true I'd never heard it until recently – but in the last month, he's told it to me at least three times. Each time he cautioned me not to repeat it to anyone else. And you know that friendly night nurse, Marlene? She said he told it to her. . . ."

The next day, Sunday, I have to go out of town all day. When I return, Mom tells me that her dad's health has gone downhill a lot. We ride over to the hospital. Gramps is in the same ward, but he looks completely different now – like the life has gone out of him. I think he recognizes me, but he isn't able to say much more than whisper "Hello." The doctors say he's going fast, and it's only a matter of days, if not hours.

At one point, Mom leaves me alone with Gramps while she goes to get a sandwich. I'm sitting by the bed, and I take his hand in mine. It feels limp and cold.

What I want to do is ask the questions that were on my mind at the end of our last visit. Why did you tell me that story, Gramps? Was I supposed to learn some lessons from it? But looking at him, lying there so helpless, I can't bring myself to grill him.

Even if I could, I don't think Gramps would have been able to reply – except maybe if I made it into a yes-or-no question, so he could just nod one way or the other. But then I'd have to decide what's the right question to ask, and also whether I could rely on his answer. Like, if he nodded "yes" to

my asking whether he was telling me to grab as much as possible while it's available, could I depend on that being what he'd wanted to pass along when his mind was in better shape?

So I say nothing, except – I have to admit, but don't tell anyone – I mumble, "I love you, Gramps," a few times.

The next day – Monday, which is today – Gramps passes away quietly in his sleep, I get the call from Mom, and I spend the past hour (and the next) in the soft chair recalling what happened last Saturday. . . .

\* \* \*

By the time Mom gets home for dinner, I've made my decision. "I will say something at the graveside, Mom."

"Good for you, Charlie."

The only thing is, I'm not sure what I want to say. The story Gramps told me – that's the key, but I'm still not sure what he was trying to get across, or even if it meant anything at all.

Gramps had made two friends in town here – old guys like himself who used to shoot the breeze with him sometimes. I thought about asking them if they could help me out. But that would have required me to tell them the story, and Gramps had asked me not to tell it to anyone, so I didn't think it would be right.

I know, I know, Mom said he told it to her and even to the night nurse, so maybe that took off the restriction he'd put on me. But telling it to Mom and the nurse were choices that Gramps made – not me. He might not have wanted just anyone to hear it. . . . So I decide it didn't cancel my promise to him.

As far as trying to get some guidance from Mom, well, I have to say her attitude toward the story turned me off – and I didn't want my own views colored by her cynical take on things. As for the night nurse, I just couldn't see how she could help. So I realize I'm on my own.

The next day, Tuesday, we gather at the local cemetery to put Gramps into the ground. It's just Mom and me, a few of Mom's friends, the two old guys, and Larry, my new partner.

Before the service starts, the two old guys come over to tell me how sad they are about their buddy dying. “What a man,” says one of them, “and a terrific storyteller. One of these days, we’ve got to tell you the last tale Sidney told us in the hospital, all about a song. . . .”

Larry comes by to pat me on the back. “Sorry about your grandfather, Charlie. But life goes on, and we should get together tomorrow and move ahead on the burrito stand. I’ve just been down talking to those bozos near the railroad station, and I got some terrific new ideas I want to run by you. . . .”

When everyone’s settled, Mom starts things off by reading a psalm and speaking a few words to the group about her dad. Then she looks over at me. “Charlie would like to say something now.”

I don’t have any notes or anything, and although I’ve been thinking about this a lot, I’m not really sure what I’m going to say until the words come out of my mouth. Well, here goes nothing.

“Just before he died, Gramps told me a long story about himself – a story that didn’t put him in a good light. Now, you all know that he liked to tell stories, and he may just have wanted to tell one more good one before passing away. Or it might have been more like he was making a confession, and since there was no priest or rabbi around, I was the next best thing. Or maybe he meant there to be a lesson in it for me, although he never came out and said what the lesson was. I asked him about it when he finished the story, but by then he’d gone to sleep. Afterwards he got sicker, so I never had another chance.

“I’ve since found out that Gramps told the story to some other people. And, you know, I think each of us might have taken away a different lesson from his story – that crime doesn’t pay, or that it does, or that sometimes it does, and so on. Maybe Gramps had a different lesson in mind for each person he told it to, or maybe no lesson at all for some.”

I stop for a little bit and look out at the other people by the grave, my eyes staying a little longer on Larry.

“Anyway, for what it’s worth, here’s what I got out of it. It was like Gramps was saying to me, ‘Charlie, when you and someone else do something bad together – and deep down, you both realize it’s bad – then

that's gonna be the end of your relationship. But it's not because the first guy thinks less of the second guy for doing it. No, it's the other way around – the first guy realizes that the second guy thinks less of the first guy, and the first guy just doesn't want to be around somebody like that. So, Charlie, if you want to keep a good relationship, don't do a bad thing.' Now, Gramps didn't use those exact words, but that's what I think he wanted me to hear.

“If he had just told me that without the story, I'm sure it would have gone in one ear and out the other. He had to tell the story, and let me figure out what it meant – or at least what it meant to me. And now, it's something I'll never forget.

“You know, I was never much for morals or ethics or such, and I've done some bad things along the way. When I did them, sure, I knew I could get caught, but that wasn't a strong enough reason for me not to do it. What Gramps was telling me was that even if you don't get caught, there are other reasons – not just morals and ethics – why doing something bad may be a lousy idea. I can really see that now.”

This next part is the hardest for me to say – and I'm thinking it might sound a little sappy. But what the hell – it's how I feel, even if it makes me mist over and choke up a little.

“Gramps made me promise I wouldn't pass along the story, and I'm going to honor his wish. But I will tell you this much – it was about a song called *A Very Different Love*. And that's just what Gramps and I had for each other. I'm gonna miss that man . . . .”

Then we each drop a few pebbles on top of his coffin, and the graveyard people begin to put the earth back into the ground. As we leave the cemetery, I wave to Larry but don't speak to him – I'll deal with the burrito stand later this week....