

Ode to Gloria

With an idle finger, the piano man taps one of the ivory keys. The sound resonates through the empty concert hall, echoing in the stillness of the vast space. It's nine o' clock on a Saturday, light rain drizzling outside and the sound of traffic barely audible through the walls of the auditorium. In a few moments, he knows, the seats will be alive with faces and bodies and eyes all on him, all around him. Watching him, judging him, waiting for...

Him—the piano man—alone on the stage.

With a baby grand that smells of polish and sounds like a cocktail party.

He sighs now, straightening the noose around his neck as he thinks in the silence, his mind muddling through music and sound, going over the songs for the night. The concert hall is more than a little different than his usual setup, and the piano looks like it only recently got out of the packaging. He's afraid. He's afraid, and he's wearing a tux and a tie and pants that are actually ironed for once.

Gloria would have laughed, seeing him like this—uncomfortable, uneasy, dressed up.

"It's just not you," he could hear her say. *"And I bet you refer to that tie as a noose, too."*

She always knew him so well.

A click echoes in the hall and he feels his skin go cold, a clammy sickness growing in his body and spreading to the tips of his fingers.

The wide doors open and he disappears backstage.

From behind the curtain, he can hear the chatter.

Voices.

Beautiful and low and gruff and polished like the piano.

“Hey piano man, you want to be famous?”

That day, George Hoffman had smiled at him with glittering teeth, and the piano man couldn't help but wonder what a guy like that was doing in *Moonlight* in the first place. But he had merely shrugged, cigarette squeezed between his teeth as he smiled. *“Don't we all?”* he had laughed. Laughed because fortune was never something he was seeking, but something that everyone else had always managed to get.

And now he's here, three months later, walking out on to the stage to applause from people he's never seen before. His hair is brushed and trimmed, his facial hair shaved. Even the bags under his eyes have finally disappeared.

Their faces are a blur in the lights and the movement of hands and just the *amount* of them, and he finds it hard to distinguish one set of pearls from another. Each blinding, bright smile, glows at him out of politeness or eagerness or enjoyment or he doesn't know what. He's afraid, but he smiles anyway, nervous and shaking with a weak sort of dread as he sits down on the bench. He had been introduced moments before, his name sounding unfamiliar in combination with the setting and the announcer.

Who is he?

He's just a piano man from a bar who somehow got a lucky break.

He begins to play, surrounded by the mass of impersonal faces, judging eyes watching him from underneath well-manicured eyebrows and glittery eye shadow. Music to these people is enjoyment, a way to entertain and to be entertained.

But to him...

His fingers dance on the keys and the sound fills the hall and possesses the silence, destroys it. It quietly crescendos and he closes his eyes because he knows the music by heart and sound and the feel of each individual key resting under his fingers. He closes his eyes and he remembers.

Smoke-filled rooms.

Nights of rain, rain, rain.

The smell of Central Park, cold and dead.

Gloria.

"Piano man, play me a memory," she mutters in his mind, singing a line she can't remember completely, resting against the piano that's tattered and worn, stained by smoke and beer and late nights all alone. Shadows sit around him, at the bar, drinking and drowning in beer and wine and the bitter taste of regret and sorrow, and he plays the piano because that's what he's paid to do.

And the music is the sound of her laugh—the sound of *Gloria*, walking and living and existing, singing off-key and just being *her*. It's a twinkling tune that's beautiful and harsh and lonely, and it hurts—hurts in his heart and his mind—but he plays on anyway. What's a song if it can't touch you? If it can't grab you, tear your heart, hold you in comfort and pain and wrench salt and water from your eyes?

Falling eighth notes and gentle melodies create the scene of Gloria in the moonlight, leaning against the window, golden hair trailing down in the diminuendo, eyes fluttering in the trilling

of a key. She's beautiful and he's just seen her for the first time and somehow it's love because the music is suddenly beautiful and raw and alive.

"Why do you play in a place like this? You could go somewhere with talent like that, if you got the right music." She's whispering—a memory, her voice ringing out in a soft melody, the opening of the long song he's playing. Life began the day her soft face turned his way, and he tries to tell the world, dedicate just *one more* moment to Gloria.

"Because it's not just music that I'm playing," he had told her, eyes closed as always because it was easier to *be* the piano that way. *"I'm playing myself."*

Her voice fell to barely a breath. *"It hurts."*

And he's lost somewhere in the rising and falling of the voice of his fingers, away from the crowd of people shifting in their seats—mouths open with amazement because something's happening to them, deep inside, and it's grabbing them and pulsing within—while he's falling through light and sound and memories.

Happiness. Those days when wealth had nothing to do with money, but more to do with moments that could be spent in the sun, eyes squinting in the light but open anyway because every second needed to be seen, needed to last. Smiling lips and cold lemonade, warm blankets smelling of perfume and not loneliness—fragments of a few years, perfect because they weren't perfect, happy because love was there in laughs and comfort and daylight.

And the music is a meadow, a field of flowers under a bright blue sky.

The aristocrats close their eyes in the audience, some smiling, some lost.

Ahh...to them, the piano is made for this. Good feeling, fortune.

Love.

But the music changes as he remembers, steadily growing heavy and lower, darker. In his mind, the rain is pounding harder and harder, and his fingers are going south on the keys as the thunder rumbles inside of him and outside, and it's suddenly night, suddenly cold and lonely and his house is quiet and Gloria's sleeping on the floor without breathing or moving at all.

And it's painful and terrible, and the days before had been full of crashing and falling. Full of sobbing, Gloria's voice finally breaking under the unfairness of their lives. His fingers slam on the keys, hitting flats and sharps in a rhythmic motion, as he hears the golden haired beauty hate herself and everything, happiness slipping away in the dripping water on the window panes.

His heart tears in two.

Distantly, he can hear the crowd murmuring, confused—what's he playing? Where's the theme and the mood and the melody? Where's the rhythm, the beat? What *is* this supposed to be?

"It's life," the Gloria from his past whispers, rain dripping on her hair, cigarette flickering out in the damp, damp air of Central Park. *"You're a penniless piano man and I'm a 'lady.'* And *that's life and all there is to it."* And life is the pits when you really look at it—it's not Beethoven's 4th, not always joyous and triumphant. It's not entertaining. It's living and breathing and hurting and loving and hoping to God that one day you won't ache anymore and falling on your knees because there's nothing left to hold you up.

"Your music...is..." That day, Hoffman had seemed to grab at the air for words to describe it, though the piano man could see the water in his eyes without much difficulty. *"Your*

music...speaks to me. I don't know how or why but somehow...It makes me want to cheer and cry and hate you at the same time, and...People need to hear it."

That had confused him. He played what he felt and the people at the bar toasted him in their loneliness and depression—his music was their peace of mind, his own voice mingled and mixed with the memories of anyone and everything around him. New, lost, costumers came into *Moonlight* sometimes, not looking for anything in the bottom of a bottle but looking for the bottle itself, and they requested songs—songs that were uplifting or depressing in the way that wasn't really depressing at all—calling out for "Margaritaville" with a smirk on their faces that told him that his music was too painful for them because their lives were nothing like it.

People don't want to hear it, he remembers thinking.

And tears fall from his closed eyes, eyebrows creasing from passion and overwhelming emotion building up inside him.

The song is nearing its finale, and he can hear the large doors opening again. Murmuring voices whisper in distaste, snipping about harshness and lack of taste and "too dark" and even, "too painful."

The cocktail party is leaving.

But the piano man just continues playing, because it isn't over yet.

Life for him was painful and dark and terrible, real and raw and open and *wonderful*. Life was beautiful blonde girls who should be innocent, *innocent*, who should never be so desperate that they lose themselves in weary lives and late nights with strangers, alone. Life was unfair and bitter and unforgiving, taking everything and only giving a little back. Life was moments of sun, cotton candy clouds, twinkling, tired laughter.

Life was happiness.

Pain.

And everything in between.

Life was Gloria—before her, and after her.

It was the piano and the smell of beer and the eyes around him that know, that understand, that hear his pain and feel it too. It was passion and strength and fighting to go on and feeling release and relief when you finally get a break. It was remaining standing, even when you want to fall down and die—living on through the pain, listening through 'till the end.

Life was...*is*...

Living.

By now, the song has returned to the meadow, smelling of new rainfall and green, growing grass. Quietly, a twinkle of keys remembers the fluttering of thick eyelashes beneath golden hair, and the piano man completes his tune.

A hushing silence greets the end, the last note echoing through the now empty concert hall, until...

He opens his eyes to the sound of clapping, loud and alone. Triumphant.

One man stands, the last left of all the aristocrats and pearls.

And he cries.

It's ten o' clock on a Saturday, and the piano man stands with George Hoffman outside a lonely theater in New York City. There's a companionable silence between them, a silent bond coming from some shared secret that's never been put in words.

The piano man stares across the street. “The man said he was a reviewer for the newspaper,” he finally says. “He was the last one left, but I guess it’s no surprise.”

“Last man standing, eh?” Hoffman chuckles a bit, flicking his cigarette. “Maybe I was wrong, thinking that any of *them* could understand you—us.”

The piano man studies the lights of the buildings around him—the apartments with more than one room, the balconies and the hanging plants—and he shrugs. “*He* did.”

And it’s the start of something, though neither really knows *what*.

He thinks of Gloria again, one last time.

And he moves on.