

My Deal With The You Know Who

By Lawrence Martin

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I entered Jake's Deli on Cleveland's west side and, as instructed, took a seat in one of the booths. The waitress came over and I told her I was waiting for someone, and we would order together. A minute later he walked in. From a distance, he seemed to be just another guy coming from the parking lot. Though we had never met, he seemed to recognize me right away. He walked straight to the booth, sat opposite me.

"Hello," he said, in a deep baritone voice that sounded affected. I was still skeptical at that point. We shook hands. His hand felt cool, almost clammy, and his grip quite strong.

"Hi," I said, rather meekly. "Why did you choose Jake's Deli for this meeting?"

"They have great pastrami, of course. Good enough reason."

I searched for some sign of his identity and think I found it in his face. The angles were sharper, more unnatural-looking, and his eyes were deeper into the sockets than normal, as if he was made up for some horror movie. He wore a felt hat and I am certain there were two protrusions, one on either side of his head, poking up the felt. This was no imposter, or if so, a very good one.

Our waitress returned and didn't look twice at the new arrival. "What'll it be?" she asked, after depositing two waters.

He ordered pastrami on rye. I ordered lox and a bagel.

"Are you paying?" I asked, sort of joking.

"Yes. You'll pay later." He was not joking.

I cleared my throat.

"So," he said, in a somewhat haughty manner, "what exactly do you want?"

"To play the piano. Well."

"You play now, but not well?"

“Hardly. I am a beginner. An adult beginner. Still at level one. In fact, my current instruction book says it’s written for seven- and eight-year olds.”

“Ummm,” he said, suggesting some interest. “And how old are you?”

“Just turned fifty-five.”

“And playing for how long?”

“Lessons for a year. No prior musical experience.”

“But you’re an accomplished writer,” he said.

“Thank you. How do you know that?”

“Ah, Howard Greenleaf, New York Times best-selling author. Murder mysteries, private-detective thrillers, I believe the genre is. Yes, I read the papers. In fact I read everything that’s printed anywhere, every day. I focus on the obituaries, I must admit.”

“Funny.”

“Death is not funny, my friend. That’s my business.”

“I am aware,” I said.

“Just what level of piano playing do you wish to achieve?”

“A higher level,” I replied. “Much higher. To play classical. Beethoven, Rachmaninoff.”

“Impressive,” he said. “Ludwig, I had nothing to do with, a true non-believer. But of Sergei I am familiar. Almost had him, but in the end he changed his mind. Brilliant composer, pianist. This will take some doing.”

“And to play like Barenboim.”

“Ah, a true prodigy. You ask a lot.”

“I wouldn’t ask if you couldn’t deliver. Just tell me the terms.”

“The usual. Your soul, plus.”

“Plus? Plus what?”

“A time limit. I am patient but there are limits.”

“I won’t accept an early death, before I can enjoy the fruits of my new talent. We must agree on that date, and you must honor it.”

“Of course. I honor all my promises. That’s more than you can say for the other fellow.”

“I don’t want you to pull a Robert Johnson on me.”

“Ah, poor man. He couldn’t keep his hands off another’s wife. Such talent. Only after he met me at the Crossroads, of course.”

Quicker than expected, the food arrived. It looked delicious, and I felt hungry. We both began eating.

“Best pastrami in your town,” he said.

“So, how much time would I have to enjoy my new talent?”

“This change will be a lot of work,” he said. “First you must sustain some brain trauma, which I can arrange. Nothing serious, but it must be a medical event, or you will not be believed. There are many cases of sudden musical genius following head injury, so that will give you some cover. It also makes my job easier. Then, I think a decade would be fair.”

“Just ten years? I die at sixty-five?”

“Mozart died at thirty-five, and I had nothing to do with that.”

“That was over two hundred years ago,” I protest.

“Just a minute ago, in my book.”

“Yes, but he had a head start. Even with his early death, a thirty-year career. How about fifteen years? I could live with that.” What an ironic statement, I realized.

After a brief pause while eating, he said, “I can do fifteen, with a caveat.”

“Which is?”

“To the extent you are successful in your new career, you are unsuccessful in your current one.”

“You mean as a writer?”

“As a writer.”

“Okay, I can handle that. Writing’s a chore anyway. And my agent is a pain in the ass. The publisher’s no bargain either. They want my books, which are all best sellers, and they only give me fifteen percent. I’ve even thought of self-publishing. Everyone wants to nickel and dime you. Hey, wait a minute? What will I do for income? My wife doesn’t work.”

“People are always worried about the minor details,” he said. “You’ll still receive book royalties, at least for a while. At some point you may find your thrillers, shall we say, out of style. But you can make it with your music, that’s how good you will become. Though I have a disclaimer, which I give to all talent seekers.”

“Talent seekers. You make it sound like a category.”

“It is. One of my largest. Second only to those seeking sudden wealth.”

“All right, I’m listening.”

“I will give you the talent. I will not control what you do with it. How you handle the notoriety, how it affects your personal life, will be up to you. Handle things poorly and you may come begging for less time than the allotted fifteen years. I’ve seen that happen before.”

“Fair enough. I understand. Say, what exactly does it mean to give up one’s soul?”

He looked hard at me, took one last bite of his pastrami and said, “Trade secret.”

Then he let out an eerie-sounding laugh that sent a chill down my spine. I looked around and no one seemed to notice. Perhaps only I heard it.

“Do we have a deal?” he asked.

I was desperate. Tired of playing *Mary Had a Little Lamb*, *London Bridge* and *Alouette* like a kid still wetting his pants. Tired of struggling through the F and G scales with both hands, while trying to memorize their numerous chords and inversions. At my rate of progress, I would be able to play Beethoven’s *Für Elise* in another fifty years.

“Yes!”

“Then we shake hands,” he said, “and there is no turning back.”

We shook hands. He took out a \$50 bill from some pocket, placed it beside his empty dish and walked out of the deli.

“Call 911!” I heard someone yell, just outside Jake’s Deli. “I think he’s alive.”

Of course I was alive. A Toyota Prius had just come over the curb, aiming right at me. Were it not for the light post between us, I would not be what the bystander said. The car wrapped around the post, hit me broadside. I fell to the pavement and conked my head. I saw stars and darkness but could hear.

Minutes later I lay in Memorial Hospital’s Emergency Department. Then came the CT scan, the elevator ride to the neuro ICU, the endless stream of doctors, and explanations.

“A severe concussion, small subdural hematoma, he’ll recover. He’s lucky. No loss of motor function.”

That’s good, I thought. Wow! So quick. Didn’t expect it. I began thinking of the keyboard. Do I know anything? The C-major scale, what is it? C-D-E-F-G-A-B-C. Good. I still know something. Probably no more than before.

They released me from the hospital three days later. Cynthia, my wife, drove me home. Our one son had visited me in the hospital and, assured of my full recovery, was back in college, a thousand miles away.

“Do you want to lie down?” she asked, as soon as we entered the house.

“No, I want to play the piano.”

“Really? When is your next lesson?”

“I have to call to reschedule.”

“Well, I hope you haven’t forgot everything,” she said.

Cynthia went to the kitchen to prepare dinner. I sat at my Yamaha 650DX electronic keyboard and pressed the ‘on’ button. Played the C scale, then the F scale and G scales. Nothing different! No more fluidity than before. Same hesitancy. I wanted to cry.

I opened up the piano book, Level 1, to *London Bridge*. Right hand treble clef, left hand base clef. I could read the simple notes, as before.

London Bridge is Falling Down



I began playing, and humming. ‘London Bridge is falling down, falling down’.

“Sounds good, honey,” Cynthia called out from the kitchen.

I decided to go faster. And faster.

She came in to the living room. “When did you start playing so fast?” she said. “I don’t think you missed a note.”

“Really? I don’t know. Just tried it faster.”

Could it be? I went to another piano book, with more complicated songs. Must be careful, I thought. Didn't want to alarm her. I put on earphones, so only I could hear the notes, and opened to *Scarborough Fair*. Always had trouble with that one.

I zipped through it effortlessly. Not possible! Can't be. I did it again.

I ran to my computer, printed out *Für Elise*, Beethoven's simplest melody, a piece any conservatory student could do half awake but was forever beyond my reach. So many sixteenth notes! Impossible.

Für Elise – Beethoven

The image shows the musical score for 'Für Elise' by Beethoven. It consists of three systems of piano and bass staves. The first system is marked 'poco moto' and 'pp'. The second system has a first fingering '1' indicated above the right hand. The third system has a second fingering '2' indicated above the right hand. Pedal markings 'Ped.' and '0' are present throughout the score.

Zip! No problem. Before the accident I could read and tap out the notes but never play them with any hint of musicality.

Cynthia put a hand on my shoulder. "What are you doing with the earphones?"

"I don't want to bother you," I replied and continued playing the tune.

"You're not bothering me. I'm glad you can still play. Who knows what that injury could have done to you?"

With some trepidation I went for my next lesson, in the home of Mrs. Esther Marples. She is a nice middle-aged woman, always patient with my piano klutziness. I didn't know how she

would adjust to what I could now do. Did she even teach at the higher levels? Most of her pupils were kids.

“I heard about your accident,” she said. “I’m happy you seem fully recovered. Have you had a chance to practice?”

“Yes, and I’ve tried something a little harder.”

“Oh? Let me hear it.” She expected to hear something from the Level 1 book, but instead I removed from my folder the Beethoven sheet music, and placed it on the piano.

“*Für Elise*? Really? My, you are ambitious.”

I begin playing. Flawlessly.

She let me finish, then said, “That was nice.”

“Thank you.”

Her smile then turned to a frown. “But that is not you. I’ve worked with you for some time, I know what you can and cannot do. Have you been hiding this from me?”

“No, honestly, after the accident...”

“Accidents don’t make people better players,” she said. “I don’t understand. Why have you come here week after week, struggling with the notes, if you can really play like that? Here, play *Alouette* for me. That is so ingrained in my mind, I know how you handle it.”

I could not fake my old way. I played like a virtuoso.

She closed the piano book and stood up. “Howard, I cannot instruct you. Something strange is going on, some type of change that is beyond me. I have no experience with pupils like you. I suggest, no really, I insist you find another instructor.”

We were cordial. I thanked her and insisted she take the check I had in my pocket. I did not ask for the name of another instructor. If I was to find another, I would prefer they not know each other.

I needed validation and did find an instructor in a distant suburb, a highly recommended professional pianist. I used an alias: Howard McGuffin. I felt thankful my fame as a writer was by name only, unlike, say, a movie star whose face anyone might recognize.

I explained my playing history as starting in childhood, and that I worked as an accountant. Under this guise I progressed rapidly, and was playing Mozart and Beethoven sonatas in less than a year. My instructor said I should qualify for Juilliard

except for my age, and asked if I'd ever performed in public. I said no, I didn't want to. He said I had to give a recital, and that until one performs in public, one never knows if they have the stuff to be a good pianist. He would program me into his next one, a semiannual event for his most advanced pupils.

The recital—a local for-charity concert—took place in the community's high school. I was the oldest performer, but there were several young adults and the rest teenagers. All quite talented, I must say.

The event sold out. I played a Mozart sonata: sixteenth *and* thirty-second notes! Here's a few of the opening measures.

Mozart: Sonata No 3

Abbreviations cfc. P.T., Principal Theme; S.T., Secondary Theme; Close; M.T., Middle Theme; T., Transition; Ep., Episode. R., Return; Coda.

Abkürzungen: HS, bedeutet Hauptsatz, SR, Seitensatz, MS, Mittelsatz, ÜG, Uebergang, ZWS, Zwischensatz, RG, Rückgang, Anh, Anhang, SchlIS, Schlußsatz.

Allegro. (♩ = 132.)

P.T. HS.

Someone recognized me, and afterwards a suburban newspaper reporter sought me out. I could not lie. Yes, I play under the name McGuffin. Yes, I wrote under Howard Greenleaf. Yes, *that* Howard Greenleaf. The next day, in the suburban newspaper, the headline read: **Once-famous author debuts at recital under alias.** Then the sub-headline: **Developed sudden talent after hit by car.**

The “once-famous” hurt. I had done no writing since the accident, held no book signings and given no interviews. I was beneath the literary radar. Worse, my last manuscript, submitted

just before the accident, had been rejected by the publisher because “it’s too much a copycat to your previous book.” The editor had suggested a rewrite, which of course I could not do: too busy practicing. Actually, that’s only partly true. I did try to rewrite one chapter and but had no interest in finishing it. No, that’s not true either. I didn’t know how to do it. I had lost my writing skill and my desire. As predicted. It was now music or...senility.

Book sales fell off and my income plummeted. Fortunately, the recital proved a success and I was approached to do piano gigs. The first and best offer came from an unexpected source: Majestic Cruise Lines. They were looking for a no-name but accomplished pianist to play in one of their ship’s lounges, short classical pieces preferred. Their clientele were the ultra-rich and ultra-sophisticated. Free room and board for two weeks, for Cynthia and me, and a stipend of one grand to boot. I jumped at the chance.

The route included several ports of Asia. The cruise was exhilarating. I only had to play two hours a day, so we were able to enjoy most of the sights and shipboard activities like everyone else.

Mid-cruise, while alone on the deck looking out over the Pacific, I heard that same deep baritone voice from Jake’s Deli. “Enjoying yourself?”

I turned and faced him. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“Ah, Howard, watch your language, please.”

“I have many more years to go.”

“Of course, of course. Just checking up. It’s our first anniversary. Just making sure everything is working as promised. I have delivered, have I not?”

“Yes, now let me be, please. I want to enjoy this trip.”

“As you wish,” he said, and then disappeared. Not literally—he just walked through the revolving glass door leading to the starboard cabins. Strange, though, I never saw him on the ship again.

As luck would have it, one of the ship’s passengers was a professor from Oberlin Conservatory of Music, only forty-five miles from our home. This professor taught music theory and played piano himself, but did not perform professionally. He

came up to me one evening, praised my playing and offered some unexpected insight.

“You are very good,” he said, “but if I had to guess, I would say you came to the piano late in life, probably in your twenties.”

“Oh? Why is that?”

“I can tell. There is a difference between prodigies who start as kids, and those rare adults who learn to play well after full maturity. Tell me if I am wrong.”

I wanted to tell him ‘age fifty-five’, but knew he wouldn’t believe me.

“You are correct,” I said. “Started in my late twenties.”

“Ah, so. Once you start late, it is very difficult to acquire the skills of someone who started at five or six or seven. I believe Barenboim was six. Mozart only four.”

I knew he spoke the truth. And despite my new-found ability, its limitations pained me. He must have seen the pain in my face.

“I can help you,” he offered. “I think you should come to Oberlin, let me work with you to see if there isn’t some room for improvement. Just a suggestion, nothing guaranteed. If you commit, there will be no fee. You will be part of my research.”

I agreed instantly. Was it just a coincidence that this professor taught near the very city in which we lived?

Later, in our cabin, Cynthia had some doubts. “Are you going to commute? It’s over an hour from our home, more if there’s a lot of traffic. And what about your gigs?” she asked, concerned about our plummeting income.

“I can still do gigs but not as many. Maybe I can stay in Oberlin during part of the week, come home on weekends.” We agreed I should give it a try.

I stayed in Oberlin Monday through Thursday, and came home for long weekends. The professor secured a dorm room for me, as a hotel was too expensive. One night, alone in bed and lonely, I called home but Cynthia did not answer. I called her cell and got a voice message. Where could she be at 10 p.m. on a Tuesday night? Obviously a concert or something, but I got worried. No, really, I got suspicious, so I drove home right then, arriving around 11:30. She was not home.

She returned to the house at midnight and was shocked to find me waiting. At first, she feigned disbelief that I would

question her, but then she cried. Yes, she was with another man, she admitted. “I’m lonely,” she said. “It’s got to either be me or the piano.”

Then I remembered the conversation in Jake’s Deli. *How you handle the notoriety, how it affects your personal life, will be up to you.* I had no notoriety, but my personal life was suffering by devotion to the art.

I did not want to risk losing Cynthia. That had not been part of the bargain and did not have to happen. And I had no intention of giving up the piano.

I professed my love for her, vowed not to let her transgression interfere with our relationship (though I did think of killing the guy), and in the end convinced her we should sell the house and move to Oberlin. With the money from the sale we could easily live in an apartment, and she could enroll in college courses she’d always thought of taking, mainly art history.

And so we sold the house and relocated.

The professor turned out to be something of a taskmaster, determined to prove that late starters could learn to play as if they had begun in childhood. I was the oldest adult player in his research project. Somehow I managed to avoid discussing my “early years” of playing since, of course, they didn’t exist. Later, he did hear that I became a pianist only after a car accident, at age fifty-five, but I don’t think he ever believed it. In any case, it never became an issue. The important thing is that, under his tutelage I played better and better, until one day he asked me to perform with the Oberlin Symphony.

The fiend had delivered on his promise. I knew the day of reckoning would come, and I’d have to deliver on mine, but tried not to think about it.

Time passed and I became somewhat famous on the second-tier concert market. After Oberlin I played with the Toledo Symphony, then had gigs with orchestras in Columbus, Louisville, Indianapolis and Little Rock. I played mostly the easier piano concertos. Before my accident, these concertos would have been unthinkable.

Now I must fast forward. Life was good until it wasn’t. I was diagnosed with prostate cancer and underwent surgery that curtailed my performing career for several months. The doctors

were optimistic but I was less so. How could I live fifteen years if my life was cut short by cancer? After all, we had a bargain.

He showed up in the hospital the day after my operation. “Just want you to know, I had nothing to do with this,” he said.

“What?” I was incredulous he would make an appearance at this time *and* disclaim responsibility.

“I get you at fifteen,” he said. “Sooner if the other fellow chooses to interfere. So don’t blame me.”

As if he had a conscience.

“I don’t blame you,” I said. “Just make sure my talent isn’t affected. It damn well better not be.”

He smiled and then, as he is wont to do, exited quickly, without another word.

I did recover, and my talent wasn’t affected. Still, I was living from day to day, always practicing but never making enough to get by comfortably. Meanwhile, I concentrated on Beethoven’s Piano Concerto No. 5, the magnificent *Emperor*—my ultimate goal. Anyone who can play the Fifth has arrived.

The years went by, and I won’t bore you with the life of a second-tier concert pianist. But Cynthia stayed with me. And never once did I think of ending my bargain earlier than the allotted fifteen years. Nor did I ever wish for the old days of writing bestsellers. I let music be my passion.

Then one day I was invited to play with the famed Cleveland Orchestra, in a children’s concert at Severance Hall. Their pianist had taken ill, and I was the closest good one around. It also helped that I was available on short notice—one day. The program included brief selections from Mozart and Tchaikovsky. My playing must have impressed, because the conductor asked what I could play at full length with the orchestra. Without thinking, I said “Beethoven’s Fifth.”

“Let’s see,” he said, and arranged a rehearsal. I passed, and he programmed the piece. But not in Cleveland. In Carnegie Hall, New York City. The Cleveland Orchestra performs there every two years or so, and they were delighted to feature Ohio’s ‘newest musical prodigy,’ as one trade publication later put it.

Cynthia and I traveled to New York two days before the concert. There would be only one rehearsal. I was so involved with preparation that only when we arrived in New York did I

realize the concert night was the fifteenth anniversary of my handshake.

So the big night came. I scanned the audience and didn't see him. You may not believe me, but I did not feel nervous. I played my heart out and the audience loved it. From the opening multi-octave notes Beethoven wrote in 1811, I was transfixed, transformed, in another world. It was as if I had transcended the stage, the hall, the city, and was no longer of mortal flesh but with Beethoven. Yes, *with* Beethoven. Forty-one minutes later we were done. A moment of silence, then the audience stood, clapped and cheered. They were, it seemed, rooting for me. Not just for my musical ability but *for me*.

The performance over, the orchestra members began drifting away. Just then a tall man in tuxedo entered from the left wing. He stood out because he wore a bowler hat. Of course I knew it was him but, still elated by the performance, played dumb.

“What do you want?”

“It is time.”

“I suppose so,” I said, ready to meet my fate. I just didn't think the end would arrive at the very pinnacle of my career, on the threshold of becoming, if not famous, at least financially secure.

“However,” he said, “I must admit, I was so impressed with your performance tonight, I am truly reluctant to call in the chit at this time.”

“What?”

“If you continue to give performances like that, I am willing to extend the term, with no further conditions.”

What could I say? He was giving me more time. And no conditions!

“I don't have to do anything else?”

“It would be a pity to snuff out this talent, and where you would be going, sadly, there are no pianos. Continue to play well, my friend.” And with that he left, as abruptly as he had appeared. I felt excited and elated. Now I could continue playing, what I loved and wanted most.

By this time I was alone on the stage, with the vast auditorium nearly empty. I walked to the front of the stage, to take one last look at the vast space. Carnegie Hall! Magnificent.

Suddenly, all the stage lights came on at once, blinding me. I lost my footing and fell forward, head first. On the way down I heard an eerie, high-pitched laugh—vindictive and horrifying in its meaning. His laugh.

I started screaming. “No! No! No! No!” Then everything went blank.

I woke up in the ambulance with a severe headache. Oh, not again, I thought.

Yes again, only this time to New York’s Central Park West Hospital. Same routine as fifteen years ago: exam in the Emergency Department, followed by head CT scan and hospital admission.

“You’ve suffered a concussion, and because you blacked out we need to keep you overnight for observation,” said the ED physician.

When I reached my private hospital room, there were already messages from the Orchestra’s conductor and concertmaster, wishing me well, and stating my performance had been great. The conductor said to call him when fully recovered. Very encouraging.

Cynthia did not want to go back to the hotel alone but, being assured by the doctors that I would survive, left the hospital around one in the morning. She was told she could pick me up around noon.

So I am now sitting in bed, updating this whole saga on my portable PC. For the record, I am a fast typist.

Of course you want to know if I can still play the piano. You’re perhaps thinking that with the new head banging I might have lost the ability.

Well, I wonder also. I can envision the notes for Beethoven’s Fifth in my head, but can I play it?

I needed to find out, and just after Cynthia left went searching for a piano. All sizable hospitals offer music therapy and keep a keyboard that can be wheeled to patients’ rooms. So I got out of bed and walked to the nurse’s station, demanding access “to the hospital’s keyboard.”

I might as well have demanded a double dip butter pecan ice cream cone. The night nurse told me, “It’s the middle of the night. Everything is locked up. I’ll leave a message for the day

shift to see what we can do then. Now get back to bed.” Okay, she did say “please.”

Rebuffed, I have just returned to my room. I want to sleep but can’t, still excited by the night’s events. What you are reading now I typed at two in the morning in bed, on my laptop computer.

What’s this? Someone has just wheeled in a portable keyboard! My request was honored. Wait. That someone is a tall male nurse. It’s him! Dressed in nurse’s garb.

I must record everything, not get excited. Will type and save as long as possible.

I am typing, he is speaking. He says I asked for the keyboard, here it is, he will be happy to listen. And he has my medicine, he says.

“What if I can’t play?” I just reminded him I’ve suffered a concussion. I want to ask if he pushed me off the stage, but sense the question would serve no purpose. Now I remember his words back at the Hall: *If you continue to give performances like that, I am willing to extend the term.*

“We have a bargain,” he says

“How did you get in? You’re not really a nurse, are you?”

“We made a deal,” is his reply. “Do you not want to play? Just a few opening measures of Beethoven. That will be fine. Then your medicine.”

I can say no. I want to say no. I want to go to sleep. But there is the keyboard. There is my salvation. Could the concussion take away fifteen years of musicality? I am curious. I am scared.

I am getting out of bed. For the record he is dressed in a nurse’s uniform and I see the Central Park West Hospital logo. So a male nurse from this hospital. He won’t give his name. He just says to play. I am scared. But I want to see if I can still play.

If you don’t hear from me again, goodbye.

* * *

EXHIBIT 15

Above certified and submitted in toto and without alteration, Case #27633, New York City, NY January 8, 2---

- **Cynthia Greenleaf, Executrix of the Estate of Howard Greenleaf vs. Central Park West Hospital, in the wrongful death suit of Howard Greenleaf...**

- END -