

REAL THIS TIME

A solo play in one act

by
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SETTING: A recording studio. Night.

AT RISE: Music. Nilan Traxel holds an earphone into one ear and sings, eyes closed, into a mike.

NILAN

The rain is cold against my face,
And I'm fifty miles outside your grace,
But the thought you even might be there
Will keep me warm.

Regrets and tears are a tired dance,
But if I get my hundredth second chance,
I'm going to lift my weary face
and howl into the storm:

Chorus: I'm a new man,
I'll live this change every day.
Deal you a new hand,
Oh Lord, how I'll pray
That you'll be there,
and your eyes won't still be full of tears I put there,
'Cause it's real this time,
It's real...

On this earth I've walked some crooked miles,
I'm my daddy's boy, got my daddy's smile,
A cold Biloxi barfly's boy is all
I've ever been.

It took me so long, 'fore I could tell,
How hard you landed, girl, every time I fell.
And now it tears my heart that, Baby, you might never know,
Might never know:

That I'm a new man,
Livin' this change every day.
Dealing out a new hand,
Oh Lord, how I'll pray
One day you'll be there,
and your eyes won't still be full of tears I put there,
'Cause it's real this time,
It's real...

This cold Biloxi barfly's boy's gonna cry and pray you know it's real this time.

NILAN

Well, there you go, Allan. Just the way you used to like 'em, remember? One take. Raw. (*Laughs*) Though I don't think you ever meant *that* raw. Yeah, I laid down that guitar track last night, just for something to follow. It's kind of a departure for me, I guess, working on a song this way, but it's weird, ever since I got out of that place, I haven't been able to touch a piano. I sit down and I just... Like my instrument is the first thing I said goodbye to.

It's for you, by the way, in case you hadn't figured that out yet. You can do whatever you want with it. Electrify it or don't, I don't care. Just, Allan, no strings, okay? I don't get for a minute this strings phase you're in, but I surely do hope you get over it soon.

But other than that, it's all free and clear, owned by you. And nobody else—there's a letter on your desk that signs all the rights over. Katie's going to try and get her hands on this one, you know that as well as I do—'cause it's *there*—but she won't have shit for a case. It's my fucking signature on that letter—nobody else above the age of three writes like that. So don't you let her near it, buddy. She owns enough of me already. And you being the soft-hearted gent you are, I probably have to ask you to keep Cassie away from it, too. I mean, I know that sounds...fucked-up, but I just don't think she ought to have any easy money right now—you know what I mean? She's not going to give you any trouble, anyway, but...if you do end up talking to her, maybe you could tell her...tell her... that... Aw, forget it, there's no telling Cassie anything. Never was. Just be glad you're not a father, Allan. (*Slight pause*) Man, does that sound stupid, coming out of my mouth. You're more of a father than I ever was—you just don't have kids.

(*Pause*)

I sure hope that red light on the camera means it's on, 'cause otherwise I'm doing a hell of a lot of talking to myself. And this remote better go to that camera. Looks like it does. Sony/Sony. 'Cause I got plans for it. I'm keeping it right here, by my side, and when things get too...well, I don't want you or anybody else to have to watch anything too gruesome, so don't worry. My plan is to click this off at the right moment. Of course, I can't help wondering what you're doing with a video camera that takes a remote, you naughty boy.

(*Slight pause*)

Look. I want you to know something. I saw you on Tuesday night—Faith and Tim's release party. Don't know what the hell I thought I was doing there, but...there I was, and there you were. And I know you saw me too. You were up on that spiral

staircase thing and I was by the exit door and you looked over, and then you looked away real quick. Pretended to be doggin' the cigar chick. Nearly broke my heart. Nearly broke my heart, Allan.

And so I...I wanted to...it's important to me to talk to you now and tell you that...I don't want you to feel guilty. I don't want you to say you're sorry. I *never* felt you had anything to be sorry about. You're my friend, and you did what you thought you needed to do for me, and that's that. So I'm not mad at you. I'm not mad at anybody. Not even Katie.

That day, I could see how miserable you were sitting around with all those people at that...what do you call those fucking things? I can't think of the word. Anyway, you know what I mean. The things you said, I could tell having those words in your mouth was like gargling Clorox, but you said 'em anyway. And I loved you for it. I did. Well, after I had a week or two to think about it, anyway. (*Laughs a little*)

You know, the same day you and Katie and all those other well-meaning souls bushwhacked me—the very same morning, mind you—two guys came up to me in the Rocky Top. I think you know these two: that percussion guy always hounding everybody for a job, you know, wears that frigging eye-patch. And that fat guy in the cowboy hat he hangs out with. And these guys, they tell me “Hey, Mr. Traxel, Mr. Traxel!” And I stop, and they tell me “You know you've just been inducted?” I hear “inducted,” and I get this little heart attack and one leg is like halfway out the door before I remember they haven't had a draft since I was nine years old, and they're saying “Yeah, that's right. Word is, you just got inducted into the NHL.” And I'm thinking “Hockey?” I mean, what the fuck? And they say “You heard right, Mr. Traxel, you are now an honored member of the Nashville Hall of La-La.” So of course, I sit down with them and ask them what the hell this is all about—which is exactly what they were after in the first place—and it turns out there actually *is* such a thing as the Nashville Hall of La-La. Yeah, these guys, and a bunch of losers like them, actually sit around and keep some kind of loose track of the amount of pussy the big stars go through, and supposedly somehow they know when it reaches a certain number. So, according to them, I am now a member of the second highest echelon of this organization, a particular ring of hell that just happens to include George Jones, Merle Haggard and at least two of today's “family values” performers who wouldn't want their names to be made public.

Oh yeah, the number. You're wondering about that number, aren't you, you pervert? Well, they're saying that, according to their estimates, it reached 400 groupies sometime last May. Now Maker's Mark always tended to throw off my arithmetic skills, but I know that's a fucking exaggeration. I bet it's off by a hundred. *At least*. But you know what, I didn't correct those two morons. Nah. I just grinned real cool and mysterious, and shook their hands. Drank a shot with them.

After, I'm heading into the studio, I feel like I need a fucking shower. Yeah, I'm so busy kicking myself for needing the respect and adulation of a couple of retards like that, I don't even stop to wonder why you needed me at this session, when all you're doing, supposedly, is cleaning up the background vocals. And I open the door, and all of

the sudden I'm face to face with the choir director of Katie's church, and I'm wondering what the fuck is she doing here? We can't be that hard-up for back-up singers. Then it's Cassie's old babysitter, and I can see my grandma behind her, and I don't think you have any idea how close I was to fainting for a second. It was like my head just wanted to shut down—'cause I felt like I suddenly walked into the middle of some kind of damn dream. Then I hear the door close behind me and I see you and Katie and Bud and Cheryl all sitting on folding chairs and then I just *knew*. I never saw one of these fucking things before in my life—read about them maybe—but I just knew all of the sudden what it was. Not a dream at all. Just a fuckin' nightmare. My worst one.

At least Cassie didn't have to see it. Thanks for keeping her out of it, at least. Not that you could of gotten Cassie within a mile of something like that. Hmm, on second thought, maybe you should have brought her—you could've done a two-for-one special.

(Pause. He looks up.)

Huh. I'm not feeling much of anything yet. Maybe a little relaxed. And my stomach is a little messed-up. Of course, it has been pretty much for the last six weeks. I think it got used to always having a little bourbon sloshing around in there—you know, help dissolve things. But otherwise, nothing. *(He checks his watch)* I don't even know what it's supposed to feel like, though. Kind of funny to think, I never even tried pills. Not once. Cassie had a pill phase there for a while—remember? Never looked like much fun to me. I—what?—I smoked a few joints now and then, mostly when those wacky session guys were around, Chuck and them. Got goofy, laughed a lot. But mostly I've been strict Nashville Rules. Oh, maybe *bent* them a little, drinking Maker's 'stead of Jack—and I still think that cost me the fucking contract at Warner Brothers. I sit down with that old fucker, ask for a Maker's neat, he looked at me like I just ordered a Pink Squirrel.

But if I'd signed with them, I wouldn't have met you, I guess, so what the hell. Did you ever realize that? We owe our friendship to Maker's Mark. *(Grins)* Hell, I owe a lot of friendships to Maker's Mark. 400 of 'em, apparently.

(Chuckles, shakes his head)

You know, buddy, I'll tell you something. Those women, I don't know what the hell they was thinking. Not a single one of them. I mean, first of all, I don't know what the...allure is in starfuckin', but if you're going to, then do Clint Black or somebody. I mean, that at least makes sense. But me? What is that all about?

Did it ever piss you off? Always wondered that. Watchin' them lined up outside the clubs for some short guy with a stupid mustache, while a debonair gent such as yourself has to earn his female attention like an honest man.

It freaked me out the first time. They're all leaning against the limo when I come out, giggling and pointing, and I was like *(Looking over his shoulder)* "Is Clint Black standing behind me?" But, nah, it was all for me. Nilan Traxel. Shit. All of that for a

guy named Nilan. Stupid name got me beat up so many times, I just couldn't get my mind around it when it started getting me blowjobs. Me. It felt like...oh, I don't know, this sounds stupid, but it was like there was something sacred about it. Every time. A holy gift. Like they...those girls...must have been angels sent down here. Offering that...to me. Every time she'd...unbutton her shirt, or slowly unhitch my belt, it felt like church. No. *More*. More like church than church ever did. God help me, but it did. Every time. From the first one, all the way on down to Miss 400 or Miss 312 or whatever the hell it was. And I never, *ever* could turn it down. Just couldn't see doing it. It would have felt like blasphemy, turning that gift away. Like Moses telling the burning bush to just shut the fuck up or something. Leave him alone.

There's one I keep thinking of. My life isn't flashing before my eyes—yet—just this one little...scene of it. Her and I are coming out of some club in the summer and it starts to rain. And then it starts to *rain*. I mean, like we were running through Niagra Falls. For six blocks. And we're just screaming, and I can't find my fucking car, can't even see it, but finally, somehow we stumble into it, fall inside, and we sit looking at each other and just start to laugh. Like idiots, 'cause it's so stupid to think we'd be any drier in there when we've got like tidal waves pouring out of our shoes. And then we started making out, and the next thing I knew, we had our clothes all plastered against the windows for privacy and we're making the soggiest, craziest love I ever had, and I don't think we ever stopped laughing once. (*Slight pause*) Johnny Rodriguez was on the radio. I can still hear him. (*Sings a phrase or two of a Johnny Rodriguez song.*) Hell of a song.

Whoa. There's the first. The first...something. It's a weird feeling. Good, though. Warm. It's like...the first gentle snowfall of brain cells. (*Smiles*) Hey, Allan, that's good. That can be the title of the album, that compilation album I know Katie's gonna make you do. You can put me on the cover in my stetson, and maybe one of those Marlboro man coats, sittin' on a horse all (*lets his eyes roll back and smiles*) and you can call it "The First Gentle Snowfall of Brain Cells."

I could almost enjoy this if it wasn't for my stomach. Man, this stomach nonsense kind of sucks. I didn't count on it.

(*Stares at the camera. Pause.*)

Nice of you to clear out all the bourbon for me. Thank you. That was dry irony, in case you hadn't noticed, 'cause there's really no point in clearing out the bourbon 'cause when I say it's my last bourbon I'm pretty damn sure I mean it. It sure would feel good to go out with that smoky burn in my throat one last time. Yeah. Feeling that burn, watching some angel slowly reveal her mysteries to me, that'd be the way to do it. But you can't have everything. Or anything, really.

So. What do you want to talk about, you...sneaky bastard? I know what. (*Chuckles*) I know what you want to talk about. All the whys...and wherefores. Right? I wish I knew, buddy. Wish I knew.

(Pause)

You know, when I was in that place, we had a group leader. Name was Brandon. Preppy guy, but he claimed to be real tough. Kept saying things like “You all are going to try and fight me at first, but don’t even bother. I’m too good at this. And you all got weak points that sooner or later I will find.”

That was actually a pretty good imitation, for someone with so few brain cells.

Brandon is an alcoholic. And he is a sex addict. Notice I said “is,” not “was.” That’s how they train you. Don’t ever start thinking about yourself as an “ex-sex addict” or a “former sex addict” or a “reformed sex addict,” because then you’re going to fall again. You let your guard down, you understand. The way old Brandon explained it, I’m a sex addict and I always will be. Every day will be a mortal struggle, he said, every day will test the strength of your soul, ‘cause the desire is never going to leave you.

Brought in a preacher one day. Skinny old guy, looked like the grim reaper. Says all that poontang...’s a false idol. (*In creaky, nasal old preacher’s voice*) “A false idol! Tear that altar down!” So I did. Sort of. A “visualization exercise.” Brandon said I did good.

Then I got partnered up with somebody, we all did. “Anti-objectification” exercises. Mostly it was just talking. I had a woman—named Linda—herpes sores all over her face. She had you know, all these war stories like going into these truck stops, and not leaving ‘til she’d done like five truckers and the security guard who was throwing her out.

Linda had a way of making it all seem pretty unappetizing.

Anyway, she leaned forward and whispered to me not to listen to Brandon. It *would* leave me, she said, it *wouldn’t* torture me forever. I’d go on to focus on other things—my wife, my work, my hobbies, my...kids—and after a while I wouldn’t ever think about it anymore. Well, first of all, Linda, I wanted to say, it *was* my fucking hobby. And if it’s so damn easy, what are you doing here? But Jesus, I kept hearing her words in my head, and every time I did, I started to just...panic. I don’t know why, but she scared me worse than Brandon. We were together for three days, and she kept on playing that same damn tune—“it *will* leave you, Nilan, it *will*”—so I just had to stop listening, just smiling and nodding and keeping...like...writing songs in my head to shut her out. Wish I could remember some of those songs. I’m trying, but all I can hear is Johnny Rodriguez. See her shirt plastered against that window.

Oh, man. Now it’s coming, Allan, now it’s... Feels like...the front of my brain is falling over a cliff. Over and over again. (*Gathers himself with an effort*) But I’m going to fight it for a while longer, Allan. Like talking to you. Always have. And I can do it, too. Force myself to function. You seen me do it. Remember? (*Puffs himself up like an angry bull*) The bull head. You said I was “putting on my bull head.” That’s what it looked like. (*Laughs*) The bull head. It worked, too, my bull head. All the times you

seen me drunk, how many times you see me fall down? How many, huh? Can you answer that? How many times? Say it, goddamnit: one time!! One damn time! (*Slight pause*) Oh. Oh, man. Where's that fucking...where's that remote? (*Finds it, loses focus before he can lift it. He starts singing the Johnny Rodriguez tune.*)

I can't...get it out of there. Feeling all that cold water getting hot, turning to steam. Hearing her laugh. (*Pause*)

(*Starts to lift remote, then puts it down*)

Nah. It's not remote time yet. It's not remotely remote time yet. (*Laughs*) Bull head. I can handle it. And you can handle it. You seen me sloppier than this. This is nothin'. Nothin'. (*Falls back into his chair*)

What'd you do to me? What'd you do to me, buddy? Should've been you in there holding my hand, not that fucker Brandon. You know what he said to me? My weak spot. Easy. Made it look easy.

Oh, man. This is getting me now. Slapping me around good. Beatin' me up.

Easy. S'like beating on a child. All he had to do was say this...over and over: Cassie's a junkie 'cause she's mad at me. He got me. Got me like...a spike in the ribs. I still feel it, no fucking bottle of pills is going to cover that up. So it must be true.

"Tear that altar down!" Sure...but...but...I did that, and I saw what's behind it. You know what's behind it? I'll tell you. Nothing. Whole lot of nothing. Don't know what people think is back there, but... I can't do it, Allan. I can't go forward with it. And I can't go back.. So... Tell them... Just tell them..."Fuck You." Yeah. Fuck You. Fuck you, Brandon. Fuck you, grandma...babysitter... Tell them all a big "Fuck You" from Nilan Traxel. I'm taking back...my letter...of resignation...from the NHL.

(*He picks up the remote again, briefly, then discards it*)

Wait. One minute. One minute. Please. Tell Cassie...tell Cassie... (*He begins to cry*) There's nothing to tell Cassie. Just tell her I'm gone. She can...stop being mad now... (*He staggers, catches himself, grins dopily at the camera*) Hey, Allan. That's where you can put the strings. Right there. (*He gropes for the remote*) Goodbye, buddy.

(*He points the remote at the camera and tries to hit the button. When he can't find it, he looks down and realizes he's picked up the phone by mistake. He picks up the remote with his other hand and stares dumbly from one to the other for a moment, then deliberately punches out three numbers on the phone. He collapses to the floor, back against the chair. We hear the phone ringing. He looks back at the camera and ruefully shakes his head*)

Sorry. Sorry, my friend. *(He lifts the remote and clicks it. The stage goes black. In the blackness we hear a voice, a twangy female voice: “You’ve reached 911—are you having an emergency?”)*