

Mark G. Malvasi



**YOUR  
SECRETS  
ARE SAFE  
WITH  
ME**



*The story of a brief music career, "Your Secrets Are Safe With Me" is much more a narrative of the quest for meaning. At once funny and sad, poignant and absurd, it is not the exploration of one life. Rather, it marks the convergence of many lives linked by music--lives that became intertwined on a journey to discover what it means to be human. For most, the end of the journey came much too soon. It is left to the one who remains to speak for those who can no longer speak for themselves, to express gratitude for all they gave and love for all they were, to show that their lives mattered, to insist that they not be forgotten, and, finally, to recall the music that they made together.*

# **Your Secrets Are Safe with Me**

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***Your Secrets Are Safe with Me***

***Mark G. Malvasi***

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## *Preface*

Proust believed that all men have their secrets, those pieces of their lives and themselves that they conceal from the rest of the world. My exposing some of them here is an act of affection and remembrance, and is in no way an attempt to injure, embarrass, humiliate, reproach, or settle old scores, if, indeed, any old scores need settling. To protect my subjects, I have not used their names. Rather than employing pseudonyms, I have relied on initials only, except in those rare instances when a name is essential to understanding or when I'm certain that the person in question is beyond mortal reach. I hope this method of identification will at once offer the intimacy and anonymity of a diary. And if any whose (mis)adventures and exploits I describe in these pages should happen to take up this book, they may rest assured that their secrets are safe with me.

## *Born Under a Bad Sign*

Like all parents, mine had a genius for stating the obvious. I wasn't old. I wasn't black. I wasn't blind. From these premises, my parents' logic moved inexorably to its conclusion: the prospects of my becoming a blues musician, or a musician of any kind, were limited at best and likely non-existent. To their way of thinking, I didn't meet the qualifications for the job, and that, as they say, was that. I had failed in utero. It was all over for me before I had even begun.

It was one thing to play an instrument and to sing. Such activities harmlessly passed the time, kept the mind occupied (or at least kept it less preoccupied with unwholesome and dangerous thoughts), and perhaps cultivated a discipline of the soul. It was quite another to make one's living as a professional musician. Even classical music was no career for a gentleman and, in their immigrants' quest for respectability, my parents' hope and aspiration was to make a gentleman of me—an American gentleman. For all his brilliance, Mozart, my mother reminded me on more than one occasion, had been a vulgar, degenerate ruffian and libertine. Beethoven was a pathetic madman, Wagner a cruel reprobate who didn't pay his debts. His

father-in-law, Liszt, had at last seen the light and abandoned his career as a composer and a concert pianist to become a priest. Not among my mother's more subtle moments.

The history of blues, jazz, rock 'n' roll, and country music offered even fewer prospects for success and worse examples of depravity. Gene Krupa was a drug addict. Jimmy Dorsey was a drunk who choked to death on his own vomit, or so my mother told me. The Beatles were untalented rogues who, as my father was wont to remind me, without perhaps recognizing the gender-bending implications of his analysis, grew beards, "combed their hair like girls," "took dope," and embraced weird, unholy religions. (Translation: Any faith that wasn't Roman Catholicism. The Beatles might well have been devout Anglicans and received the same condemnatory judgment from my parents.) Even Frank Sinatra, whom my parents might have accepted, if not embraced, from feelings of ethnic pride and filopietism, was, in my house, considered a drunken malefactor who had been divorced multiple times, who had cheated on his wives (thereby contributing to the aforementioned divorces), and whose singular contribution to the English language, according to my mother, was "ring-a-ding-ding-ding."

“Do you want to end up like Frank Sinatra?,” she once admonished me. End up like Sinatra? Was she serious? Rich? Famous? Influential? Sought after? How could I endure it? I couldn’t even get a date to go to the movies if I paid for the tickets and bought the soft drinks, the pop corn, and the Good ‘n’ Plenty. Frank had two or three women every night who did exactly what he told them to do when and how he told them to do it. They did it his way. Jesus Christ, did she really have to ask?

By the same token, Hank Williams, whatever talent he may have possessed, was a hopeless alcoholic who had died in the backseat of an automobile.

“Yes,” I retorted, “but it was a Cadillac, and he owned it.”

My mother was unimpressed.

Her real fear, I later surmised, wasn’t that I’d turn out to be like Frank or Hank or even like John, Paul, George, and Ringo, though such a fate would certainly have dimmed the prospects for my immortal soul. No, my mother’s real, and more realistic, fear was that I’d become Mr. Y, who for years taught flutophone to the unwashed masses of fourth graders throughout the Diocese of Youngstown.

Poor Mr. Y, even his young, flutophone-wielding charges mocked him. It must be terrible for a grown

man to be made fun of by children, especially by children whom he's been hired to teach and over whom he thus exercises some authority. Mr. Y didn't deserve the treatment he received, but his hapless demeanor invited it. Like predators, children sense fear, ineptitude, and vulnerability. Mr. Y exuded all three in abundance.

He was a *nebbech*. He was a *putz*. He was a *shmatte*. He was a *shlepper*. He was a *shmo*, a *shnook*, a *shlump*, a *shmegegge*. Imagine for a moment if he'd actually been Jewish. He was a *shlemiel*. Worse, he was a *shlimazel*. An expert linguist once explained the difference to me: "A *shlemiel*," he said, "spills a bowl of soup or a drink. A *shlimazel* is the guy he spills it on." Judging by the ubiquitous stains on his shirts, Mr. Y occupied both roles.

Mr. Y was a loser in any language, in any tradition. You must be desperate in the first place even to consider taking a gig to teach flutophone to fourth graders. That is one bad gig. It didn't end there. At Christmas time, we'd see Mr. Y playing carols on a small, portable electric organ in the concourse of the Eastwood Mall. He wore the same food- and drink-stained shirts, with part of the tail invariably untucked in back, while the front stretched over a protruding stomach, with one or two of the buttons undone. His glasses slid so far down

the bridge of his nose that they served no purpose; he peered over the top of them to read the sheet music that he had assembled on the organ. He was a sorry sight, with bulbous, bloodshot eyes and a round face that presented no visible chin. For years, he tortured shoppers and dampened the Christmas spirit.

I imagine him *shlepping* his little organ to the mall, setting it up, plugging it in to his amp, turning it on, and playing the requisite three or four hours of Christmas music to bring gloom to the season. He took two fifteen minute breaks during which he bought something from the food court to spill down the front of his shirt. Finally, he collected his \$25 (which was probably closer to \$100 or even \$200, but \$25 makes the story sound more ghastly and hopeless), before packing everything up and *shlepping* it home again.

He squeezes his gear and himself into his tiny car; no doubt he drives a brown AMC Pacer or a Gremlin, which he has to park outside in the cold and snow since his apartment building provides no garage. He collects his gear, climbs the icy stairs, and unlocks the door to his dull, grim, one-bedroom flat. He sets the organ and the amp down just inside, closes the door, tosses his keys and his clip-on tie onto a table, and collapses into his uncomfortable chair (the only one in the room), after pouring himself a glass of wine. No, nix the wine.

That's too prosperous and sophisticated. Even if it were *Night Train*, *Boone's Farm*, or *Ripple*, wine adds a touch of elegance that the scene does not merit or possess. Make it a beer instead. Cheap beer. He opens a can of *Milwaukee's Best*. It's slightly warm because the refrigerator is on the fritz again. Of course it froths when he pulls back the tab, and some of the contents oozes down the front of his shirt and splashes onto his trousers.

It was Mr. Y's life that my mother imagined for me should I pursue a music career. The vision scared her to death. To tell the truth, now that I think about it, it's beginning to scare me, too.

There were other impediments besides my mother's fears that hampered my efforts to become a blues musician. Some of them, such as my name, were seemingly insurmountable. There were plenty of examples of Italian and Italian-American musicians and singers, but who had ever heard of an Italian blues man? There could be no doubt about it. Acceptance, recognition, and success required me to change my name. But to what? What were my options? Ohio, where I'd grown up, wasn't exactly a hotbed of the blues, and even had it been "Ohio Mark Malvasi" somehow didn't carry the same élan as Mississippi John Hurt or Mississippi Fred McDowell, Texas Alexander

or Kansas City Joe McCoy, Tampa Red, or even Kokomo Arnold.

I wasn't "Big" or "Fat," nor was I "Little," "Peewee," or "Slim." I was average, ordinary, and unexceptional. "Reverend" was also objectionable for too many reasons to recount. Since I didn't weep, jump, or dance, "Weepin'," "Jumpin'," or "Dancin'" created unrealistic expectations in the minds of potential audiences, and I didn't want to disappoint them before I had even played a note. To my knowledge, I didn't ramble at all, and wasn't quite sure what it required. I moved too slowly to call myself "Flash" or "Lightnin," and I wasn't loud or boisterous enough to pass for "Thunder." Besides those monikers, like "Howlin'," "Muddy," "Boz," and "T-Bone," had already been taken. Mostaccioli, Marinara, or Meatballs Mark Malvasi didn't even sound like something you would want to eat. In any event, I had grown to hate alliteration.

I made a valiant attempt to identify a fruit that I might adopt, and experimented with "Apple," "Orange," Grapefruit," "Strawberry," "Cherry," and "Banana" before abandoning the quest. The good fruits, it seemed, such as "Lemon" or "Watermelon," like the good cuts of beef, had all been picked over, and so I didn't bother to investigate the other food groups. And

did I mention that I wasn't black or blind? Or bald, so "Clean Head" was also out of the question.

Uncertainty about my antecedents or the place and date of my birth might have proved an immense boon to a music career. Alas, good fortune again eluded me. When asked about his origins, Leon Redbone, if, indeed, that is his name, replied that "he was born to Paganini and Jenny Lind in Bombay, India during a monsoon." Why didn't I think of that? Better yet, why couldn't I have sprung from a questionable background and identified at least three or four different locations and multiple years of birth with equal plausibility? Not only do I have a reasonable assurance about the identity of my parents, not only do I know the date and place of my birth, but my mother also had a baby spoon engraved with a clock face that indicated the day, date, and time down to the minute at which I had come into the world: 2:37 A. M., Saturday, November 23, 1957 at St. Elizabeth's Hospital in Youngstown, Ohio. Nowhere in the long history of the blues is there mention of a baby spoon. I had again to admit that I was finished before I had the chance to get started. Why, I asked myself a thousand times, why had my life been so comfortable, so happy, and so easy? Why hadn't I suffered more? It wasn't fair.

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It was different with my parents. They had seen enough of the world to tighten their stomachs and break their hearts. They knew that there were so many ways a soul could be lost, and it could happen so subtly, so easily, so imperceptibly. Then it was gone. And once it did happen, it could not be undone, all that nonsense about mercy, forgiveness, and redemption notwithstanding. Mistakes mock repentance. Music was but one of the ways to lose your soul, perhaps not the worst one, but nonetheless the results were the same. An age-old question haunted my parents--a question of which for a long time I was blissfully unaware. How does a man keep his soul in a world gone vile, sordid, and mad? It wasn't easy, they knew. Far easier to lose a soul than to save one, and they were going to do everything in their power to make certain that my life didn't miscarry, even if it killed them. . . or me. Better dead than lost.

It must, then, have been with a dreadful fear—again a fear that was indiscernible to me--that my parents watched as I embarked on a career in music from the time that I was fourteen years old. The circumstances, of course, will surprise no one who is not themselves fourteen. I thought I knew and understood more about the world than they ever had or could, and that I was prepared for the worst but by no

means expected it. The worst, when it came, always happened to other people. If we're fortunate, and I was, we live and learn. Others weren't so lucky.

My parents wanted a different kind of life for me than the life I had planned for myself. They believed, with a touching credulity, that education would provide it, not so much by creating better opportunities for future employment, as we tell students nowadays, but by making me a better person. For them, education not only cultivated the mind, it also gave meaning and purpose to life. It improved manners and morals. It created gentlemen. I had, or rather, in time, I acquired, a different, and more humble, view of what it meant to be an educated man. But they approached the mystery and power of learning with a mixture of anxiety and reverence, like almost everyone else I've known who was embarrassed about their own lack of education and their own supposed intellectual deficiencies.

During the 1960s and 1970s, when I was growing up, my parents were troubled by, and pessimistic about, student radicalism and unrest. They (and, in particular, my father) thought the student protests taking place at such universities as Columbia, Berkeley, and, much closer to home, Kent State, emblematic of the immaturity, conceit, and disdain of a generation that no longer wished to learn anything, respect any authority,

or obey any rules. Perhaps my parents were right to be pessimistic, but if they were, it was for the wrong reasons. Student radicalism and unrest, although hardly intellectual in origin and purpose, were mere symptoms of a more serious ailment: the death, or at the very least the dissolution, of learning itself.

My parents (and, in particular, my mother) believed that the pursuit of knowledge was the noblest calling a person could undertake, and they (again, principally, my mother) wanted me to pursue it. She reserved a place for me among her fancied intellectual elite. How surprised, disillusioned, and appalled she would have been to learn that so many members of this revered aristocracy turned out not to be cultivated men and women at all, but little more than narrow-minded technicians and specialists. If, that is, they were not persons of stunted character and limited courage who were mere opportunists and charlatans interested primarily, if not exclusively, in their own professional advancement. Some of them may have been intellectual giants, but many, at the same time, were moral dwarfs.

The main problem, though, did not arise from the intellectual and moral deficiencies of the intelligentsia, however regrettable those have been. Of greater moment is the change (we might better call it a “mutation”) that has taken place within our minds: the

inability to pay attention. The cause is at once an indication of the complexity and superficiality of modern life. The dull student who is apparently incapable of learning or retaining any information used to be the bane of a teacher's existence. That is no longer the case. Now it is the nervous, restless student who cannot sit still and who cannot concentrate at all. This phenomenon results not from a lack of discipline or an excess of energy, but rather from a disease of the imagination. The inability to concentrate or to pay attention for long periods of time is a sign of a deepening intellectual immaturity, which many never overcome even as they grow older. Should this trend continue much longer (and it will) we will have to revise not only how we teach but also how we communicate. Every idea will have to be briefly stated, which can often be a virtue and a blessing, but it will also have to be immediate, abrupt, and shallow.

I hadn't an inkling of these developments when, as a dim-witted sixteen-year-old, I announced to my parents that I would not be attending college, and that, moreover, I was not even going to finish high school. I had already been a professional musician and singer for two years, earning the astonishing sum of \$200 a week playing with a band at The Landmark. Education was for chumps. I didn't need it, especially since I had

already amassed a fortune beyond the dreams of avarice. And this was only the beginning. I was going to be rich. I was going to be famous. I was going to be a star.

I didn't understand then that the game really was over before I had the chance to play it, and not because I was a white kid from a small town in northeast Ohio or the son of Italian-American parents who aspired to bourgeois respectability. It was over because along with learning, communication was also breaking down. I struggled for my entire career as a musician to communicate with audiences using sound and emotion just as much as I've struggled as a teacher to communicate with students using words and ideas. Our external communications are technological wonders, not only the movies and television, but more so now the Internet, smart phones, tablets, Ipads, and the entire panoply of digital media. Paradoxically, the development of these forms of external communication is attended by the failure of interior communication. Teachers and students, parents and children, husbands and wives, colleagues, neighbors, friends, and lovers no longer pay attention or listen to one another, which, among other consequences, means a pervasive loneliness, not just for the unfortunate few but for everybody. I've felt it my entire adult life. Although

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I've battled it and refused to yield, I know now that in the end I will lose that fight. We live in isolation. We are alone. If that's not a description of the blues, then I don't know what is.

## *There's a Little Janis in All of Us*

Life never seemed so sweet, and I never appreciated it quite so much, until a lesbian tried to shoot me in the parking lot of the Black Horse Tavern. She was an angry woman.

Fortunately, at least from my perspective, she was also a bad shot. Her poor aim, and my instinct for survival (call it cowardice) saved my life. Gravity did the rest. I dropped the guitar case that I was carrying, fell to the ground, and crawled beneath a parked car until the patrons, who had also heard the shots, called the police and the danger passed.

I'll be the first to admit that this sequence of events was unusual. No one had ever shot at me before (An old man firing rock salt from a double-barrel shotgun doesn't count, does it?), and no one has done so since. Sometimes once is enough.

A sensible person might well ask why a lesbian was shooting at me in the first place. It's a valid question. The answer is obvious: love. More specifically, a love triangle involving C (she with the smoking pistol in her hand), DD (her girlfriend, who's supposed infidelity had initiated the gun play), and me (the bewildered fellow wiping the dirt from his trousers, gathering what

was left of his wits, wondering what just happened, and thanking God that the outcome wasn't worse). Except there was no love triangle. There was no triangle of any kind; C's geometry was confused.

Her chemistry was better. I liked DD and I want to think that she liked me. DD, who was a few years older than I, was intelligent and learned. She had, after all, taken graduate courses; I was still in college. She had a caustic wit and did not suffer fools. We could talk books (mostly those she had read and I hadn't), baseball (mostly players I had seen and she hadn't), and music (mostly what we both liked or didn't). We could make each other laugh. Sex never intruded to complicate or ruin the friendship.

C was the opposite of DD. C could be caustic, but she wasn't witty. She had no sense of humor. She couldn't tell a joke to save her life and misunderstood those that others told to her. C almost never laughed or made anyone else laugh. On good days, she was pensive, on bad, remote, brooding, and depressed. She was also a talented musician with the voice of a fallen angel. She sounded so much like Janis Joplin that people commonly accused her of lip-syncing to Joplin's recordings, but it was all C all the time. She had been my musical partner for nearly two years when she brought a .38-caliber end to our collaboration.

It was all because she thought I was having an affair with DD. I wasn't. DD had tried to explain that I wasn't, that we weren't, that we didn't want to, that she had no interest in what I had to offer. Her efforts came to nothing. They were not, in the end, enough to stop the hail of bullets. All right. It was more like a drizzle or a mist of bullets, but even under those conditions one can sometimes get wet. I was fortunate to stay dry.

I watched the police lead C away in handcuffs. She didn't resist. One of them shielded her head as he put her into the back of the cruiser. She never looked up or glanced in my direction. If memory serves, she received a year in jail, with her sentence reduced to time served. She got so many hours of community service that she may still be serving them. I refused to press more serious charges, such as, say, for the sake of argument, assault with a deadly weapon or attempted murder, and so all the authorities could do was to get her for reckless endangerment and the unlawful discharge of a firearm. They could not prove intent, just unreasonable carelessness.

Yet, for all the confusion, fear, and rage that C felt, and all the suffering and heartbreak that she caused, taking a shot at me in the parking lot of the Black Horse Tavern was not the strangest thing she ever did. That

had occurred a few weeks after we started playing together, nearly two years earlier.

We had finished rehearsal, and I was sitting in the living room of C's apartment, sipping a beer and flirting hard with her Gibson Hummingbird, which, at the risk of repeating myself, was the only thing of hers with which I ever flirted. My God, that was one magnificent guitar. C allowed me to use it during our performances. I wonder what became of it. I wish knew. I wish I had it now. Almost idly, C asked whether I wanted to listen to something. I nodded, and between swigs and swallows, said:

“Yeah. Sure. Whacha got?”

“C'mon,” she replied. “Let's go upstairs.”

I dutifully followed C as she climbed the stairs to her bedroom, putting down the Hummingbird and picking up the bottle.

“Have a seat anywhere,” she said, when we reached her room. “The floor is best.”

I sat on the floor, which, except for the bed, was the only place in the room to sit, and tried to shift into a comfortable position. I couldn't.

C went to the closet and pulled down a cassette tape recorder.

“Comfortable?,” she asked.

“Reasonably,” I answered.

“Good. Get comfortable, ‘cause you are in for a shock my man.”

“Mind if I dim the lights?,” she asked.

I shook my head.

“This works best in the dark.”

I felt my eyes narrow. I tried not to think about what might be coming next, and found myself suddenly wishing that I had stayed downstairs with the Hummingbird across my knee and the bottle of beer at my feet.

C placed the cassette player on top of her dresser and plugged it in. Then she turned down the lights and I sat for a moment—a long moment—in almost total darkness until my eyes adjusted and I could make out vague shapes in an unfamiliar room. I heard C open a drawer, put in a tape, and push the play button on the machine. Then she sat down beside me.

“Listen,” she whispered.

I leaned against her bed and closed my eyes. I felt nervous as C moved closer.

“Listen,” she repeated.

“I am.”

I heard nothing but the soft hiss of the tape moving across the playback heads.

After a while, I asked:

“C, what is it that we’re listening to? What am I hearing? Am I missing something? You’re not. . . .”

”Quiet and listen!,” she scolded.

“. . . secretly taping us, are you?,” I said, determined to finish my sentence.

“No. Why the hell would I do that?”

I shrugged, even though it occurred to me that she couldn’t see me very well in the semi-darkness.

“Shhhhhhhhh! It’s coming.”

“C, I don’t hear anything except. . . .”

“Are you here?,” she asked. “Are you among us?”

I started to answer then stopped, realizing that C wasn’t speaking but that I was listening to a recording of her voice on the tape.

“Are you here?,” she asked again.

Nothing.

“Do you hear it?” This time it was C’s voice and not Memorex.

“C, I don’t. . . . What am I supposed to be hearing?”

“Janis.”

“Janis?”

“Yes.”

“Who’s Jan. . . ?”

Then I realized the answer to my own uncompleted question. I was supposed to be hearing the voice of Janis Joplin. In one of those preposterous thoughts that come

into the mind and exit just as quickly once their absurdity is apparent, I wondered why C would bring me to her bedroom to sit in the dark so that we could listen to a tape of Janis Joplin. My mind rejected the analysis. I wasn't going to listen to music. I was supposed to listen to Janis—Janis from beyond the grave.

“Hear it?” C nudged me.

“Maybe if you turn up the volume.”

“It is up,” she countered, “it’s all the way up. Hear it?”

I didn't.

After a pause, I asked the obvious question.

“You do know that Janis is dead, right?”

“Of course I do,” she answered, making no effort to conceal her annoyance with me. “Of course I do. DD and I had some friends over one night last week and we summoned her back.”

“A séance? You held a séance?”

“If you want to call it that, then, yeah, we did. I taped it.”

“Oh.”

I considered inquiring about copyright and other such legal niceties, but under the circumstances thought better of it and kept my own counsel.

“Listen!”

“Janis are you here?,” C was asking again on the tape.

Then I heard it. At least I heard something. It began as a low rumble. Then the rumble became a hiss. The hiss at last came to approximate the clamor of the wind during a storm.

“I hear what sounds like wind,” I said at last.

“Me, too,” C replied.

Her response was oddly reassuring.

“Janis are you here?,” C’s voice repeated on the tape.

“Here,” came the reply. “I’m here.”

The words were distinct this time, no rumble, no hiss, no clamor. And the voice was strained and raspy, just as you’d expect of someone who was speaking from beyond the grave, especially if that someone smoked and drank to excess in this life. See, it’s all perfectly reasonable I told myself. I lied.

“Are you Janis? Are you the spirit of Janis Joplin?,” C was asking.

I guess that when summoning spirits it’s important to know whether you’ve summoned the one you wanted. It avoids later misunderstanding and embarrassment.

“Yes,” said the raspy voice. “Jannnn-isssss. Here.”

“Where did you come from?,” C asked.

“Texas.”

“I mean where did you come from to get here?”

Silence.

“Are you in heaven?”

Silence.

“Are you in hell?”

More silence.

“Do you need anything?”

“Comfort,” rasped Janis.

“Are you in pain?”

“To drink. Comfort to drink.”

“She wanted some Southern Comfort,” C explained. I nodded, though I realized again that C probably couldn’t see me doing so. I thought it was a blessing she couldn’t see my face at that moment.

“Do you have any advice, any wisdom, for us?” C asked.

“Get bent.”

“That’s it. That’s all,” C was saying as she rose to turn on the lights and rewind the tape.

I blinked and stretched when the lights came back on, trying to sort out what in the hell I was going to say. I had nothin’.

There was nothing to say. I didn’t believe for a moment that I had heard the voice of Janis Joplin come back from the dead, speaking from southern bank of the

River Styx or wherever she might be spending eternity. The tape was so obviously a fraud; C's voice was so easily identifiable. It was embarrassing. It was frightening. It was sad.

People have always been fascinated by ghost stories, I suppose. They love to be frightened when they know the cause of their fear is unreal and that no harm can come to them. It's as safe as it is delightful. I couldn't then have explained why—I'm not sure I can do so now—but what C had done was different. It seemed to me a sickness that I couldn't name. Perhaps it was akin to drug addiction, the root of which I've long suspected is a feeling of emptiness inside and the desire to fill it, to eradicate it, and the belief that it can only be filled or eradicated by some external, artificial means, some stimulant to enliven dead souls. Perhaps C was just a ghost of a different kind.

The image of C that now dominates my mind is of an explosion. One day, C just exploded and sent parts of herself hurtling through space in all directions, scattering into the darkness. When she returned to earth, she found the world in ruins. Only the wreckage was in her mind.

C's interior buildings had crumbled, and yet she was condemned to live in them still. There was no escape. All her life, she had been well-fed, well-housed,

well-clothed, well-educated. She was intelligent and talented. It meant nothing. Amid these gifts and this abundance, amid the shining city of her past, she was lonely, bored, depraved, and hopeless. Her freedom to be herself and to do as she pleased was meaningless. Like the abandoned thoroughfares of a once majestic city, her mind was littered with refuse that swirled about in the wind.

“Wudja think?,” C asked, delighted with herself.

“I don’t know what to think, C. It was. . . .”

“I know what you mean.” For once I was grateful for the interruption.

“I mean I couldn’t believe it when I played back the tape and realized that we had actually recorded Janis’s voice. Jesus Christ! Her voice, her real voice! She’s dead and she talked to us! It’s incredible!”

“Incredible,” I repeated.

“So?”

“So?”

“So, wudja think? Cool, huh? I mean it really bridges the gap, I mean the gap between life and death. We summoned Janis back and she came!”

“Hmmm,” I nodded, trying my best to sound thoughtful. “Are you sure she wanted to come back?”

Things were certainly blurred for C, approaching incoherence. Is that a form of madness? The

convergence of life and death, light and darkness, health and illness, sadness and joy, civility and barbarism, elegance and vulgarity, all in the same mind, all in the same life until one couldn't be distinguished from the other.

“So? Wudja think?”

“I don't know C. I don't know what to think. I guess,” I hesitated, “I guess there's a little Janis in all of us.”

“You are so right, mister!,” she said. “You are so right!”



*The story of a brief music career, "Your Secrets Are Safe With Me" is much more a narrative of the quest for meaning. At once funny and sad, poignant and absurd, it is not the exploration of one life. Rather, it marks the convergence of many lives linked by music--lives that became intertwined on a journey to discover what it means to be human. For most, the end of the journey came much too soon. It is left to the one who remains to speak for those who can no longer speak for themselves, to express gratitude for all they gave and love for all they were, to show that their lives mattered, to insist that they not be forgotten, and, finally, to recall the music that they made together.*

# **Your Secrets Are Safe with Me**

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