

BULLETS, BOOZE, AND

THE E-FLAT BLUES

BY

DAVID R. REMSCHEL

BULLETS, BOOZE, AND THE E-FLAT BLUES

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BULLETS, BOOZE, AND THE E-FLAT BLUES

*To my dear friend.
The Music Man, himself.
This one is for you, Chris!*

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CHARACTER LIST

FATS WALLER (M)-One of the first iconic jazz pianists

AL CAPONE (M)-The infamous mob boss

HELEN CONOLON (F)-A woman of the night with a hidden agenda

FRANK NITTI (M)-Capone's lieutenant and primary enforcer

JAMES "THE BRUTE" P. JOHNSON (M)-Fats' hero and mentor, a figment of his imagination

MR. MAN (M)-A partygoer who is not what he seems

WILLIE (M)-Fats' manager at the Sherman Hotel

OLLIE (M)-Bartender at The Hawthorne Inn

TRUMPET PLAYER (M)-An up-and-coming musician aka Louis Armstrong

Extras include goons, and as many audience members, and partygoers as you can manage.

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Bullets, Booze, and The E-Flat Blues was presented as a workshopped reading at The Hill Country Art Foundation's Point Theater on February 3rd 2024, featuring the following company:

Fats Waller: Dom Mason

Al Capone: Christopher Huber

Helen: Prari Blair Slape

Frank Nitti: Ken DeZarn

James "The Brute" P. Johnson: Bob Hall

Mr. Man: Mark Sturm

Willie/Trumpet Player: Donald Kearney

Stage directions/ Extra Characters: David R. Remschel

Board Operator: Judy Brittain

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SCENE 1

A single light shines down upon an immaculately kept Steinway piano. A middle-aged, black man steps just in front of the piano and, with a great flourish of showmanship and gusto:

WILLIE. Hey all you fellas and ladies. Listen up! Listen up now, cause Willie's got a real treat for you. Brand new to our stage here at The Sherman and all the way from New York City herself! I give you-the man with the set'a magic fingers! Thomas "Fats" Waller! *(A young, black man-dressed to the nines-arrives into the pool of light beside Willie. He graciously accepts his given applause and eventually sits down at the piano. The applause dies down.)* What are you gonna play for us tonight, heh Fats?

FATS. Well, Willie. I was thinkin' about startin' us off on a bit of a high note. Could you stand-Honey Suckle Rose?

WILLIE. *(Back to the audience.)* What do you folks think about that now, heh? *(There is more wild applause and whooping and cheering.)* Whenever you're ready, Fats.

FATS. *(Fats nods to Willie then proceeds to play his rousing and very upbeat piece. "Honeysuckle Rose". His is a performance of raw charisma and unending passion.)*

Every honeybee
Fills with jealousy

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When they see you out with me

I don't blame them

Goodness knows

Honeysuckle rose

When we're passin' by

Flowers droop and sigh

And I know the reason why

You're much sweeter

Goodness knows

Honeysuckle rose

Don't buy sugar

You just have to touch my cup

You're my sugar

It's sweet when you stir it up

When I'm taking sips

From your tasty lips

The honey fairly drips

You're confection, goodness knows

Honeysuckle rose,

(He pushes his chair aside and continues playing. Totally absorbed in the zestful energy he has thusly created. His audience absolutely loves it, as evident by their growing adulations of appreciation.)

Oh when I'm takin' sips

From the tasty lips

The honey fairly drips

Confection goodness knows

Talkin' 'bout honeysuckle rose

Yes, yes. *(He stands and bows to his audience.)*

WILLIE. *(Stepping back into the light.)* How about that, heh?

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Is our boy good, or isn't he? *(The audience roars in response. Fats modestly, beckons them settle which, eventually, they do.)*
Tell them all what you got for us now, Fats.

FATS. Well, now, I'm gonna slow it down a touch with a little piece that holds a very special and very dear place in my heart. This is Sweet and Slow. *(He sits back down and begins to play a fine, instrumental rendition of his piece "Sweet and Slow".)*
(As he continues playing, another pool of light comes down onto a man in a very impressive suit sitting at a table, alone. He looks around the place, locks eyes with Willie, and motions him to his table. Willie nods and hurries over to the table.)

WILLIE. Yes, Mr. Nitti? How are we this evening? Did your meal agree with you?

NITTI. Best cookin' I've had in a week. Don't tell the old lady, heh?

WILLIE. Of course not. *(Beat.)* How may I be of service to you, sir?

NITTI. That boy up there on the piana-?

WILLIE. Oh, that's Fats Waller.

NITTI. *That's* Fats Waller?

WILLIE. The very same, yes sir.

NITTI. Stupid friggin' name. Whatever. Call him over here for me, will ya?

WILLIE. Oh, but that's not possible, Mr. Nitti. Y'see, Fats is in his element now.

NITTI. His-?

WILLIE. His element, yes sir. It's like this, Mr. Nitti. There are only a few people in the world who've got what it takes. To move an audience with their music. To make them cry. Make them laugh. Make them smile and carry on. Fats, he has that

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power-in spades-and he knows it. Watch him now. Just-Just for a little moment. (*Fats gets to a certain part of the song where he gives the audience a mildly suggestive gesture or flourish. They eat this right up.*) Now, isn't that just the damndest thing? I'm sure sorry, Mr. Nitti but you're gonna have to wait, at least, a little bit longer.

NITTI. (*Deadly.*) Hey, I understand. He's a busy man. As are you. Why'nt you take a seat with me, Willie, heh? Have a drink?

WILLIE. Oh, I couldn't, Mr. Nitti. (*Off of the other man's "I wasn't asking expression".*) Well, if you insist. (*He sits.*)

NITTI. (*Pause as they listen.*) I can't stand music, Willie. I don't know if I ever told you that, did I? To me. To me, it's kinda like drivin' an ice pick real, real slow into the side of your fuckin' skull. It's unbearable. It's unenjoyable and, worst of all, it's a total waste of time. But my boss-he does like music. Loves it, even. And he knows Fats Waller. It's all he can talk about now. Fats Waller *this*. Fats Waller *that*. Fats Waller is the greatest Negro he ever heard play a Steinway.

WILLIE. I'll be sure to pass the message on to Fats.

NITTI. Oh, he'd like to tell him so hisself. That's why I'm here. To arrange their meeting. Presently. (*Beat.*) Well, are you gonna get him or-?

WILLIE. Oh, yes sir, Mr. Nitti. Right away, Mr. Nitti. (*Willie hops up and hurries off into the darkness leaving Nitti, yet again, alone.*)

NITTI. All this trouble for a kid that can play the piana. I will never understand it, Boss.

WILLIE. (*Returning.*) He's just finishing up the set. He'll be right over.

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NITTI. Hey, I sure do appreciate it, Willie. Here. (*Producing a twenty.*) You look like you're comin' down with somethin'. (*Fats finishes the song and goes about accepting his applause, yet again. Willie gestures him over to the table.*)

WILLIE. Fats, this is Frank Nitti.

NITTI. *Mr. Nitti, Willie.*

WILLIE. Eh, yes, of course, Mr. Nitti.

FATS. (*Reaching across the table.*) It sure is nice to meet you, *Mr. Nitti.*

NITTI. (*Looking down at the hand.*) Sure thing, kid. (*Takes his hand and gives it a slight shake.*) Take a seat, will ya? Willie? Get us a drink and a little moment alone, heh?

WILLIE. Yes sir, Mr. Nitti, sir. (*Willie exits. Nitti gestures for Fats to sit. He does.*)

NITTI. You know who I am. That part's already been established. But the more pertinent question does remain. Do you know just who it is that I work for, heh?

FATS. Everybody knows who you work for, *Mr. Nitti.*

NITTI. It's his birthday tomorrow. You may not've known that. S'alright. S'fine. I forgive ya. W'me'n the boys-we got this big to-do planned for his party. I mean-ladies, drinks, drugs, you name it. The only thing we're missin' is the main entertainment'n that's where you come in. All you gotta do is tinkle away at the piana and you'll be given one hundred big denaros for each and every song you play. (*Beat.*) So whadya think? Will you do this for him?

FATS. I-

NITTI. Take all the time you need.

FATS. I-

NITTI. All the time in the world.

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FATS. I-

NITTI. But I'm leavin' this heap in exactly five minutes 'cause if I don't I'm gonna lose my ever lovin' mind. I'm gonna need an answer before that happens, y'understand?

FATS. *(Beat.)* I'm sorry, Mr. Nitti.

NITTI. You're what now?

FATS. I said I'm sorry. But I've got a big future ahead of me and I just can't be associated with-somebody like your boss. Somebody who's done the kinds'a things he has.

NITTI. *(An attempt at amicability.)* You don't even know the man.

FATS. *(Without missing a beat.)* And that's the way I'd like to keep it. With all due respect to you, Mr. Nitti, *and he*, of course.

WILLIE. *(Who has been eavesdropping.)* Eh, Fats, could I talk wit' you for just a moment? *(Practically hoisting Fats away from the table.)* I'll be right back, Mr. Nitti. *(To Fats.)* Boy, all that gin-soaked dough in your gut must've jumped up into your thick ole head! You don't tell a man like *Frank Nitti* no. Oh, hell! Not he or his boss are gonna be happy about this. They'll probably come back here in the middle of the night and do somethin' real unnatural to me like cut my dick off'er somethin'!

FATS. My Mama warned me about people like that Frank Nitti. She said they make it seem like they are so big when in all actuality they're the smallest ones out there. I'm not afraid of him, Willie, and neither should you be.

WILLIE. I'm not scared of him, Fats. I'm *terrified* of him!

FATS. *(Beat.)* Well, I sure am sorry for putting you in such a

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state. It wasn't my intention. *(Beat.)* Would it make you feel better if I- *(Beat.)* If I talked to him again?

WILLIE. Yes! Please! Oh, please, Fats! That's all I'm askin'!

FATS. Well, alright. I'll go talk to him.

WILLIE. You've spared me an ulcer, son! Here! *(Handing Fats a shot glass of fine gin.)* For your nerves.

FATS. My nerves are fine, Willie.

WILLIE. *Then for mine, dammit!*

FATS. Oh, alright. *(He takes the glass, downs its contents, then returns to Nitti's table.)*

NITTI. Well, how about it, boy? You make up your mind or haven't you?

FATS. I have, Mr. Nitti.

NITTI. And?

FATS. And I stand by what I said before and that is no thank you to your request, sir.

WILLIE. *Oh, for Chrissakes!*

FATS. Now, these people are expecting a song and I'm gonna give it to them. W'you both please excuse me? *(He reaches a hand across the table.)*

NITTI. *(Looking at his hand.)* Keep it, kid. *(Fats turns and proceeds back to his piano.)*

WILLIE. Oh, Mr. Nitti. Let me talk to him again. Let me talk some sense into his fool head.

NITTI. There's no need, Willie. *(Nitti stands up from his table, raises a hand into the air and snaps his fingers. In an instant, a pair of goons appear just behind him.)* Put him in the trunk. *(The two move past he and a thoroughly flummoxed Willie.)*

WILLIE. *(Grabbing at one of the goons.)* The trunk!? Hey, wait a minute! *(The goon turns and delivers a crushing blow*

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into Willie's gut, falling him. Fats, who has just arrived at the stage, looks back to see what all the commotion is about.)

FATS. What's going on? Willie-? *(But the goons are already upon him, forcing his hands behind his back and carrying him through the place.)* Hey, I told him I wasn't gonna perform for him and I'm not! Hey, you creeps! You can't do this to people! *(They carry him out.)*

NITTI. *(Looming down over Willie.)* Three days, Will. And then he'll be delivered back to you. That is. *If he decides to play. For his sake and yours, I really hope that's the decision he makes. (Nitti drops another 20 onto Willie then follows his goons out of the place, leaving poor Willie crumpled over on the floor.)*

WILLIE. *(Gasping for breath.)* Bring on the next act. *(Grabbing at his belly.)* Oh, my ulcer!

SCENE 2

Over the darkness, we hear the hum of a vehicle's engine and the heavy breathing of Fats. For a while, this is all we are allowed and then:

FATS. Where am I?! Hey! Hey, Mac! I asked you a question! Would-Would somebody get me outta here! Hey, somebody!

VOICE. *(OFF.)* Cool it, wild cat. Or you won't live to play another day.

FATS. Who's that? Who are you?

VOICE. *(OFF.)* Let me remove that blindfold and provide you with a little insight into your current predicament. *(A single pool of light appears over Fats who lays, crumpled in on himself, bound just (c). He looks about, trying to catch his*

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bearings until he finally sees his rescuer-an older black man, one James "The Brute" P. Johnson.)

FATS. Holy cow! You're-You're *him*! You're The Brute!

BRUTE. Yes and no. Y'see, I reside in your head, son. I'm an apparition. A figment of your fear-stricken imagination.

FATS. I'm not so scared!

BRUTE. Then you must be the stupidest Negro I ever saw.

(Thoughtful beat.) Look, I'm gonna lay this out for you as gentle and as sweet as I can, alright? *(Beat.)* You're fucked, kid, and there ain't no two ways about it. So, what're you gonna do to make the best of your current situation, heh?

FATS. Talk to them-? Hell, I dunno!

BRUTE. No, you're gonna *play* for 'em.

FATS. Play for them?!

BRUTE. That's right. You've gotta go into that place like it's any regular, old gig and give them the best damn performance you ever gave a white fella.

FATS. But it's against my principles to play for someone like him, Brute.

BRUTE. Then there ain't no point in my being here. Don't play for the man. G'head. And if you don't. You can be sure they will kill your ass quicker'n you can hum the ABCs. *(Beat.)* Now, you don't have to like it but you have to do it.

FATS. *(Beat.)* Just play?

BRUTE. When have you ever just played for anybody? No, you're gonna play what you feel. In one moment to the next. For example. How d'you feel? Right now, how you feelin'?

FATS. I guess. I guess I feel scarerder'n I ever felt in my whole damn life.

BRUTE. Then play *that*, son. Play the fear you're feelin' right

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now.

FATS. But I don't have any keys, Brute. How am I supposed to-? I mean-? In the trunk of a car!?

BRUTE. You let me worry about alla that. Go on, kid. Play. *(Fats reaches out and plays a note. The sound of the keys ring out in the "trunk".)*

FATS. Holy moly! How'd that happen?

BRUTE. It don't matter. Just forget about your rotten circumstances and play. *(Fats begins to play "Dinah." A fast, upbeat and most harried number.)* Thattaway, son. You keep them keys jivin'! Keep them dancin'! *(Fats continues, getting faster and faster. We hear the car come to a stop.)* Whoop! This won't do! *(Brute puts the blindfold back over Fats' eyes and all goes dark, again.)*

FATS. Wait, Brute!

BRUTE. *(OS.)* Don't you stop! You gotta keep playin' even in the dark! I'll be in touch! *(We hear the sounds of the trunk opening and then the sounds of men dragging a heavy something along the ground. All the while, Fats keeps playing until, finally, a goon removes his blindfold, bringing him back into reality.)*

FATS. What is this place? Where am I? Brute? Hey, Brute? Where'd you go, man?

NITTI. *(Approaching him.)* Who the hell is Brute?

FATS. Eh, nobody. Nobody, Mr. Nitti.

NITTI. Whatever. *(Deep and exasperated sigh.)* Play!

FATS. Sorry?

NITTI. I said play a friggin' tune for him!

FATS. Him? You mean-You mean *he's* out there!?

NITTI. Hey, Charlie, show 'em what he's got, will ya?

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(Another light comes down onto a beautiful Forte piano just beside Fats.) Don't mess this up, heh? You'll regret it if you do. (Nitti moves off of the stage leaving Fats totally alone.)

FATS. *(Reverently inspecting the instrument.) This is the most beautiful instrument I ever saw in my life. (Sitting.) (Softly.) What was it you said, Brute? Play how you feel, right? Alright. We'll do it your way. (He sits down at the piano.) Eh, if it really is you out there, right now, my name is Fats Waller, and this is-Eh-My Fate is In Your Hands. So, eh, enjoy, I guess. (He begins playing "My Fate is in Your Hands". At first, he is hesitant and most definitely terrified, but he builds in confidence until he plays with the same hutzpah and gumption that has always set him apart from his contemporaries.)*

Wanting you is my offense,
You have all the evidence,
Now I wait for you to sentence me!
Must I go or must I stay?
Will my skies be blue or grey?
Are my dreams to be or not to be?
There's no use pretending,
Love needs no defending,
What is the verdict?
My fate is in your hands!
You're my judge and jury,
What do you assure me?
What is the verdict?
My fate is in your hands!
If the charge is loving you,
Then I'm guilty, dear!
Tell me that you love me too

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And I'll have no fear!

It is you I'm needing,

For your love I'm pleading,

What is the verdict?

My fate is in your hands!

My fate, honey baby, is in your hands!

(He finishes and then. There is nothing. No applause. No cheering.) Eh, that was My Fate is in Your Hands. *(Pause.)* Eh, Mr. Nitti? *(Finally, there comes a sound. It is the sound of a solitary person applauding his efforts.)* Eh, thanks. Eh, thank you. Thank you very much. *(The applause continues.)*

NITTI. So, what do you think, Boss? He everything you hoped and dreamed he would be?

CAPONE *(OFF.) (Thunderous.)* The lights, Charlie. Up with the lights! I want he should see me now! *(The lights-all of them-turn on, illuminating a most beautiful ballroom.*

Impeccably decorated and gaudy yet impossible not to gander at. This is the main dance hall of The Hawthorne Inn. And there, sitting at a lone table in the back of the hall, is the man who continues to applaud. This is one Alphonse Capone.)

NITTI. *(Giving Fats a rather unfriendly jab in the side.)* Stand up, for Chrissakes! *(Fats does not need to be prompted a second time. Still clapping, Capone slowly, slowly begins to approach the stage. He continues clapping and, upon arriving to the stage, he stops.) (Nitti jabs Fats again.)* Say hello!

FATS. *(Deep gulp.)* Hello, Mr. Capone.

CAPONE. *(All smiles.)* And hello to you! Thomas! Fats! Waller! *(Deep gulp.)* You have *no* idea how long I have been waiting for this moment. *This* very moment. Fats Waller! *The* Fats Waller is here in my very own place! *(Gesturing him off*

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the stage.) Would you-Would you like take a walk with me around the hall?

FATS. Eh-*(Looking to Nitti.)* Should I-?

NITTI. *(Giving him a kind of shove.)* Get your ass down there and walk with him! *(Fats steps off the stage. Capone puts an arm over his shoulder and pulls him away from the stage. Nitti remains a couple feet behind them. Always just within earshot.)*

CAPONE. How was the trip over here, heh? My boys-they treat you alright?

FATS. Eh-

NITTI. We were very nice to him, Boss. Weren't we, boy?

FATS. Eh, well-

CAPONE. Frankie, come here a minute, will ya?

NITTI. *(Coming forward to Capone.)* Sure thing, Bo-*(Before he is able to finish, he is violently grabbed on the neck by Capone.)*

CAPONE. You ever call Fats Waller *boy* again-I'll rip your gawdamn tongue out of your head and serve it to you on a bed'a spaghetti. Are we clear on that, *boy*?

NITTI. *(Almost a whimper.)* Yes sir, Mr. Capone. Crystal clear, Mr. Capone, sir.

CAPONE. Now give us a little space, heh? You're crowdin' my guest of honor. *(Nitti does so.) (Back to Fats.)* I'm sorry about Frankie. I'd like to say he knows better but, in all actuality, he's just a raging bigot against-well-against pretty much everybody. I can't live like that. So much animosity built up inside of ya towards your fellow man. It ain't healthy. It ain't right. Me. I wanna love-everybody just the same. It don't matter-eh-what you look like. Who you love. Who you voted for. You work for me and you are gonna be treated with total

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equality. That means there ain't gonna be no-no Mr. Capone t'you, y'understand? From here on, you're gonna refer to me as Al, alright?

FATS. Al?

CAPONE. S'right. Just Al.

FATS. Alright. (*Still trepidatious.*) Eh, Al.

CAPONE. Don't hurt yourself. You'll work on it, and you'll get used to it and it'll be like we was two brothers. Now, I understand your given Christian name is Thomas, but celebrity has rendered you Fats. One or the other, heh? Which do you prefer to be called?

FATS. Eh, Fats is fine with me.

CAPONE. You're sure?

FATS. Sure? I mean-yes. Yes. I'm sure. Call me Fats-eh-Al.

CAPONE. Then, I will call you Fats. Not that you are-you know-fat, yourself. You're comfortable. I mean just look at who you're talkin' to. We are big men. Healthy men. But, more than any of that, we are successful men. Hell, in the old country, it was a sign of great importance. To be heavy set.

FATS. I'm close to three hundred pounds, Al. I guess that would have made me a kinda king or somethin' where you were from.

CAPONE. (*Exuding a ginormous guffaw.*) Y'know? You're a funny kid. And you play better'n the best of 'em. Is there anything you can't do?

FATS. Can't seem to stay with the same woman for any extended period of time.

CAPONE. Eh, you'll worry about that later. But not this weekend, heh? Cause my birthday party's this weekend and what I want more than anything else is for Fats Waller to play

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for me and play for me better than he has ever played before. And if that means he gets whatever he wants then, dammit, he will get absolutely whatever he wants, capeesh? So, tell me, Fats? What can I get for you this very moment? A bit to snort? A broad to screw, heh? Somethin' to drink, heh? Come on. Hit me. The sky's the limit. What can I get ya?

FATS. Eh, just somethin' to drink-right now, please.

CAPONE. Gin, right? Straight up?

FATS. Eh, that'll be just fine.

CAPONE. *(Snapping his fingers.)* Make it happen, Frankie.

NITTI. Right away, Boss. *(Nitti goes to the bar across the hall and begins to prepare Fats his drink.)*

CAPONE. So? Whadya think? Is this the gig of your dreams or isn't it?

FATS. Eh, it is pretty spectacular-

CAPONE. *(Beat.)* There was some hesitation there. At the end of your-your-your sentence just now. You're not happy. Oh, FUCK!! What was it, Fats? Something I said? Something I did? Too much pageantry at the opening of my pitch to you, is that it? Tell me. Oh, please. Tell me what did I do wrong, Fats!

FATS. Nothing, Al-!

CAPONE. You're lying'. I know you're lying to me right now. Don't lie to me, Fats. Not you. Please.

FATS. I don't know-! It's just-*(Nitti pushes past Fats, carrying two drinks. Two Southside Fizz's.)*

NITTI. *(To Fats.)* What in the hell d'you do to him?

FATS. Nothing! I mean-I dunno-

NITTI. Boss! Boss! Hey, Boss! I brought you your drinks, heh? G'head! Take 'em both! *(Capone does just this. One, drinks it, tosses it to the floor, then the other, with which he*

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does the same. His face is beet red, and he continues to sob.)

FATS. *(Not so quietly.)* What in the actual hell!

NITTI. *(Turning to Fats.)* I outta kill you where you stand, you black-!

CAPONE. *(Practically wheezing.)* Frankie!

NITTI. *(Willing himself to turn back to Capone.)* Yeah, Boss?

CAPONE. You brought me-brought me my drinks. Where are Fats'? Bring him his drink. Bring him his gin.

NITTI. But, Boss-!

CAPONE. I SAID GET IT NOW! NOW! NOW! NOW!

NITTI. *(Seething.)* Sure thing, Boss. One gin. Straight up. Right away. *(He sulks back to the bar where he continues to prepare Fats' drink. Capone, weakly, motions Fats over to him.)*

FATS. I'm real, real sorry about-well-whatever it was that I did just now, Mr. Capone.

CAPONE. Please, Fats. Call me Al.

FATS. Alright-Al.

CAPONE. S'alright. I forgive you, Fats. Hell, you could butcher my family with me forced to watch and I would forgive you. Each and every time.

FATS. *(Thoughtful pause.)* Mr. Capone? Eh? Al?

CAPONE. Yes, Fats?

FATS. I think I've made my decision.

CAPONE. Oh, be gentle, Fats. I'm beggin' ya. Please be gentle.

FATS. I would like-to play-for your birthday party.

CAPONE. *(Sniffle.)* You mean it? No lies?

FATS. No lies. I would be honored.

CAPONE. *(Back to smiles.)* Oh, Fats! Oh, the honor is all

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mine! (*Wiping the tears away from his face.*) I was wondering. Could you- Would you play for me? Right now? You know, out of the goodness of your heart? Would you do that for me?

FATS. I'd be happy to. Al. (*He gets up, meets Nitti, takes the glass from the tray, shoots it down in a single swig, then makes his way back up onto the stage and sits down at the Forte.*)

FATS. Eh, anything in particular you'd like to hear, Al?

CAPONE. Play. Play something new. Something special. Something. Something just for me, Fats. Would ya do that for your old buddy Al, heh?

FATS. (*Deep sigh.*) Something new. Something special. (*Beat.*) What the hell, heh? You got it! (*He begins playing a piece which, at that time had yet to be published. Its title is "Ain't Misbehavin'"*.)

No one to talk with
All by myself
No one to walk with
But I'm happy on the shelf
Ain't misbehavin'
I'm savin' my love for you
I know for certain
The one I love
I'm through with flirtin'
It's just you I'm thinkin' of
Ain't misbehavin'
I'm savin' my love for you

(As Fats continues to play and sing, the hall becomes filled with partygoers. Dancing, talking, drinking and enjoying the hell out of themselves. Al Capone sits at his usual spot with Nitti positioned just behind him. Instead of schmoozing with the

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other lavishly attired members of his party, Capone is focused solely on Fats Waller at the Forte piano.)

Like Jack Horner

In the corner

Don't go nowhere

What do I care?

Your kisses are worth waitin' for

Believe me

I don't stay out late

Don't care to go

I'm home about eight

Just me and my radio

Ain't misbehavin'

I'm savin' my love for you

(Fats directs the final note at Capone who graciously accepts it. The people in attendance applaud. Nitti gestures to the goon standing behind Fats who inserts a one-hundred-dollar bill into Fats' shirt pocket. + This will happen each time Fats concludes a song. +) Thank you, Moe. This really is some gig, heh Brute? Hey all you fine ladies and fellas out there! I am Fats Waller, and this is a very special party for one very special cat! Let's liven the joint up a bit now with a personal favorite of mine! This is A Handful of Keys! Y'all enjoy! (He begins playing an instrumental rendition of his "A Handful of Keys". This time, he is back in original form. Confident. And loving every bit of the playing.) (Everyone else in the place dances and jives wildly to the beat. Capone leans back in his chair, hands held just behind his head, and takes in a deep breath.)

CAPONE. You really outdid yourself, Frankie.

NITTI. *(Quite touched.)* Yeah, Boss?

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CAPONE. This is the best birthday I ever had! And it's just gettin' started! (*Beat.*) Get me somebody to dance wit', will ya?

NITTI. Sure thing, Boss. (*Nitti proceeds out into the ocean of people and searches for just the right someone. He goes so far as to pulling a young lady from her partner and inspecting her before moving on to the next one. He finally lands on a very attractive woman, who is dancing with a man insanely out of her league. Nitti places a hand on the small of her back.*) Come with me.

HELEN. I'm busy, or can't you see?

NITTI. (*Wrenching her away from her partner.*) I wasn't asking, ya dumb broad!

HER PARTNER. Hey, what gives, Mac?! (*Nitti stares at him for a moment then leans over and whispers something into his ear. We see a kind of horror enter the partner's eyes the more Nitti whispers to him. He takes a giant step back.*) Apologies. Please, my compliments to Mr. Capone on his birthday. (*Nitti, roughly, leads the woman back to Capone's table.*)

CAPONE. Hello, Helen.

HELEN. Al.

NITTI. That's Mr. Capone, to you.

CAPONE. Hey, Frankie. We're all old friends here, ain't we? She wants to call me Al-let her call me Al. (*Gesturing to the floor.*) Care to dance? (*She hesitates a moment then takes his hand. He leads her to the middle of the floor. Those, initially in their way, instantly part, thus opening a wide enough berth for them to get through.*) Fats, y'think we could get a slow number next, heh?

FATS. Sure thing, Al. I've got just the one. This is *When Somebody Thinks You're Wonderful* to all you out there. (*He*

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begins playing “When Somebody Thinks You’re Wonderful” as Capone and Helen dance.)

HELEN. How’d you manage to get this one, Al?

CAPONE. He was a birthday present from Frankie.

HELEN. A gift from Frankie. How romantic.

CAPONE. It isn’t like that.

HELEN. Whatever you say.

CAPONE. *(Awkward beat.)* You look-terrific!

HELEN. Heh.

CAPONE. The place lights up now that you’re in it. It’s been too long. I’ve missed you.

HELEN. I’m sure you’ve gotten on well enough without me.

CAPONE. I haven’t wanted to get on. *(Beat.)* You ain’t still sore with me, are you? I mean. It happened so long ago.

HELEN. Two years, a month and five days. But who’s counting, am I right?

CAPONE. It ain’t healthy to hold on to such animosity towards your old buddy, Al.

HELEN. *(Scoff.)*

CAPONE. Tell ya what. How much would it take to clear all the bad feelings between us, heh?

HELEN. Hmm. Your life would be sufficient payment enough.

CAPONE. Oh, you don’t mean that!

HELEN. Don't I?! He was the one person I ever *truly* loved, and you killed him like he was nothing!

CAPONE. He was a shine boy. That’s about as close to nothin’ as a fella can get.

HELEN. *(Slapping Capone.)* Sonofabitch! *(Nitti and several others abscond to the two and grab at Helen, pulling her away from Capone. Fats stops playing and all goes instantly silent.)*

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NITTI. What you want we should do with her, Boss?

CAPONE. *(Deadly pause.) (Suddenly, all smiles.)* Ah, get her a stiff drink and send her on her way.

NITTI. Boss?

CAPONE. Do it. *(Returning to his table.)* And find me someone better to dance wit'.

HELEN. *(Pulling away from Nitti's grasp.)* I can get my own drink. Thanks for nothin', Mac.

NITTI. You're lucky the boss is so nice. F't were up to me you'd be sinkin' to the bottom of the Chicaga river right now.

HELEN. It must make you real envious, heh Frankie?

NITTI. What's that?

HELEN. The fact I once fucked Al Capone and you never will. *(Nitti raises his hand to strike her but is stopped by the crowd's applause.)*

FATS. That was *Somebody thinks You're Wonderful* and I am Fats Waller. Now, before I take a break I'd like to pay a little tribute to the guest of honor. You know the tune and the man it's for. *(He plays the opening key to Happy Birthday.)* And a-one and a-two and-a-*(He leads the partygoers in singing to Capone. Capone eats every bit of it up.)*

NITTI. *(Hand raised.)* Get your damn drink and get outta here. *(He returns to his place behind Capone's table. Helen watches him go, then directs her attention to Fats finishing up the birthday number. When they finish singing, the party attendees erupt in wild and lavish applause.)*

FATS. Happy birthday to you, Al. And to all you beautiful fellas and ladies, I am Fats Waller. I'll be back after a little break, heh? *(He leans back from the keys and cracks his fingers then gestures to the goon standing nearby to come to him.)*

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GOON. Yeah, Fats?

FATS. Think I could score another drink, heh Moe? *(The goon looks to Fats already large collection of empty glasses.)* Eh, it's for later, you know?

GOON. Sure thing, Fats. *(The Goon goes to comply with Fats' wishes as a Trumpet Player takes his place in the middle of the stage and readies his instrument.)*

TRUMPET PLAYER. Heya, Fats.

FATS. Louis. *(The Trumpet Player begins to play his instrument (+which should be canned as a real trumpet would be deafening+) The Goon returns with Fat's drink which he promptly downs in a single sip. Fats then steps out into the ocean of people. Some congratulate his efforts. A particularly intoxicated woman grabs at him and plants a very large kiss on the mouth. Fats, eventually, finally, pulls himself away from her and continues on until he runs into Helen or rather, she has found her way to him.)*

HELEN. Only the best for Al Capone, heh?

FATS. Sorry?

HELEN. You heard me.

FATS. Eh, I like what I do, ma'am. Makes me-happy, I guess.

HELEN. It's nice to be able to do things that bring you joy.

FATS. How about you? Do you enjoy what you do?

HELEN. What can I say except-hey-it's a livin', heh? *(Spying Capone watching them.)* Dance with me?

FATS. Eh, alright.

HELEN. You're not scared to dance with me, are you?

FATS. I've never been scared of sharing a dance with a lady before in my life. Only this time *Al Capone* is watching. And I saw you dancing with him before'n-

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HELEN. D’you see how our little dance played out at the end?

FATS. W’sure. I doubt anybody missed that.

HELEN. *(Looking to Capone again.)* I’ve got an idea that’s really gonna make him envious!

FATS. I don’t know if that’s such a good-*(But before he can finish, Helen grabs him by the collar and pulls his face against hers, giving him one hell of a kiss.)*

CAPONE. *(Instantly up on his feet.)* ENOUGH! *(All goes silent and all eyes fall onto Fats and Helen who remain directly center. Capone begins to approach them with Nitti trailing just behind. Fats tries to yank himself away from Helen, only succeeding when she allows him to do so.)*

FATS. *(To the just arrived Capone.)* Al-Eh-Mr. Capone, I didn’t-! *(Capone raises a hand cutting him totally silent.)*

CAPONE. *(To Nitti.)* Frankie?

NITTI. Yeah, Boss?

CAPONE. Who is the kid on the trumpet?

NITTI. Eh, Louis Armstrong is his name, I think.

CAPONE. Right! Bring his ass down here to me, will ya? I wanna talk to him. *(Nitti sharply gestures the trumpet player down to them. He complies instantly.)*

TRUMPET PLAYER. Yes, Mr. Capone? Sorry, Mr. Capone!

CAPONE. This is my birthday party, isn’t it, Frankie?

NITTI. It sure is, Boss.

CAPONE. I get the best for my birthday parties, right Frankie?

NITTI. Only the best for you, Boss.

CAPONE. What happens, Frankie? What happens when I don’t get what I want, heh? How does that make me feel?

NITTI. Not too good, Boss. Not too good at all.

CAPONE. S’right. It makes me mad. Worse than mad, even. It

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makes me downright furious. What happens to somebody that makes me feel this way, Frankie? Somebody that takes advantage of the hospitality that I have so graciously bestowed upon him? What happens to him then?

NITTI. You teach um a lesson, Boss.

CAPONE. A lesson. That's right. What do you think I should do-*(Slowly turning to Fats.)-Fats?*

FATS. Al? Eh, Mr. Capone?

HELEN. Look, Al, he didn't have anything to do with-

CAPONE. Shut up! You know music, Fats. I know music. This man played a bum note just now, didn't he?

TRUMPET PLAYER. Oh, Mr. Capone!

CAPONE. *(No response.)* DIDN'T HE?!

FATS. Yes, Al. He played a bad note. *(Off of the musician's terrified expression.)* Sorry, man. But you did.

CAPONE. So, whadya suggest I do, Fats? To really make this lesson stick fast into his thick, no-talent head?

FATS. Take away his pay for that particular song. *(Nitti sniggers openly.)*

CAPONE. You disagree with Fats, Frankie?

NITTI. Well, it just seems kinda small potatoes. I mean compared to how you normally handle his kind, Boss.

CAPONE. Yeah. Yeah, you are right about that. I wonder.

NITTI. About what, Boss?

CAPONE. Somebody in his line'a work would benefit from having alla his fingers, right? Thattaway he could play alla the little valves on his instrument. Alright. I'll take a finger.

NITTI. Sounds fair to me.

TRUMPET PLAYER. Oh, please, Mr. Capone! Please! I swear to God! It will never happen again!

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CAPONE. Oh, you're damn right about that! *(Reaching out to Nitti.)* Frankie, gimme your knife.

NITTI. *(All too willingly complying.)* You got it, Boss!

CAPONE. Thanks.

TRUMPET PLAYER. Oh, God! Oh, God!

CAPONE. Frankie?

NITTI. Yeah, Boss?

CAPONE. Hold out your hand.

NITTI. *(Beat.)* Eh, Boss?

CAPONE. Your hand. Hold it out. Whichever one. You decide.

NITTI. But-But-why?

CAPONE. Because you was in charge of arrangin' alla the entertainment for my birthday, wasn't you? So, this is on you, capeesh? G'head. Stick your hand out before I jam this dinky, little toothpick into your friggin' eyeball.

NITTI. *(Holding out his shaking right hand.)* Please, Boss-!

CAPONE. Don't whine. Be a man, heh? This will all be over before you know it. *(Capone grabs his hand and proceeds to cut off his right index finger. Nitti bellows in agony but, ultimately, knows better than to offer up any resistance. Fats and The Trumpet Player and everyone else are frozen where they stand. In absolute dismay and horror. Capone finally finishes.)* Pick it up, Frankie. *(Nitti bends down, still shaking and whimpering, and complies.)* Now, put it in your shirt pocket. You know? For safe keepin'n all. *(Nitti complies yet again.)* Now, whada we say?

NITTI. *(Softly whimpering.)* Thank you.

CAPONE. I didn't hear you, Frank. You're gonna have to speak a little-a little louder.

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NITTI. THANK YOU, BOSS! THANK YOU! THANK YOU!
THANK YOU!

CAPONE. Good boy. Would somebody get him a pitcher of ice'n get him outta here before he bleeds all over my nice marble floor? *(Nobody moves.)* Somebody? Today?! *(A goon quickly hurries over to Nitti with a pitcher of ice and places Nitti's hand into it then leads him out of the hall.)*

(Approaching Fats.) I respect you, Fats. More than I respect an awful lotta people'n it's because of this that I believe I can tell ya. Stick to the piana and-*(Gesturing to Helen.)*-stay away from spoiled fruit, heh?

FATS. I understand, Al.

CAPONE. *(All smiles.)* I had fun tonight. How 'bout you all? Yes? No? Fats?

FATS. Loads of it, Al.

CAPONE. Good. That's-that's good. This is my birthday party. I want everybody to have a good time. You especially, Fats. But it is possible for a fella to have *too* much fun. So, you all-Eh-Get some rest. We'll pick back up later, heh? Yeah. Yeah, pick back up-later. *(Without saying another word, Capone turns to Helen, gives her a less than genial glance, then exits the hall leaving the place filled with silent confusion.)*

FATS. *Could somebody get me a drink?! (A goon hurries him his drink. He takes it down instantly but sputters at its strength and hacks it all up-taking great care not to soil The Forte. Upon finishing, he looks up from the ground and sees Helen standing directly in the center of the place. Staring right at him. She wipes the lone tear from her face then slowly begins to approach him. As she does, she snags a bottle of gin and continues to him.)*

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HELEN. What is it like? *(Handing him the bottle.)* Bein' at his every beck and call?

FATS. *(Past heavy breathing.)* Lady, I'm just doin' it for the money!

HELEN. Alright. *(Producing a bill.)* Here you go.

FATS. What is that for?

HELEN. I have paid you. You are a performer. So do your damn job and play something for me.

FATS. Eh, what would you like to hear?

HELEN. Keepin' Outta Mischief. For your fingers, heh?

FATS. You know my music?

HELEN. I love your music, Fats.

FATS. Alright. Let's see what I can whip up. *(He begins playing "Keepin' Outta Mischief". It is indeed typically a slow piece, but he makes it even slower-like a kind of lullaby. Helen sits beside him, and takes a long swig from the bottle in her hand. He stops playing and looks to her.)*

HELEN. Don't look at me.

FATS. Heh?

HELEN. Look at your keys.

FATS. Oh, sorry. *(Continuing to play and sing.)*

Don't even go to a movie show

If you're not by my side

I stay home by my radio

But I'm satisfied!

All my flirtin' days are gone

On the level from now on!

Don't go for any excitement now

Books are my best company

All my opinions have changed somehow

BULLETS, BOOZE, AND THE E-FLAT BLUES

Old-fashioned as can be!
When you really learn to care
There's a thrill in solitaire!
Keepin' you of mischief now
Really am in love, and how!
I'm through playing with fire
It's you whom I desire!
All the world can plainly see
You're the only one for me!
I've told them in advance
They can't break up our romance!
Living up to every vow
I'm keepin' out of mischief now!
All the world can plainly see
That you're the only one for me!
Say I've told them, told them in advance
That they can't break up our romance!
Living up to every vow
I'm keepin', keepin' out of mischief now!
*(He continues to play and sing and as they pass the bottle back
and forth between them, we fade, slowly, into:*

SCENE 3

*Everyone in the place is fast asleep. It should read as both
deeply humorous and perhaps even a touch chilling. Seeing the
exhaustion exhibited by these people. Helen has fallen fast
asleep against Fats who does nothing to wake her or move her
away from him as he begins to play a different song. “Two*

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Sleepy People". Slower, much, much slower than his previous number.

FATS.

Here we are

Out of cigarettes

Holding hands and yawning

Look how late it gets

Two sleepy people by dawn's early light

And too much in love to say goodnight

Here we are

In the cozy chair

Pickin' on a wishbone

From the Frigidaire

Two sleepy people with nothing to say

And too much in love to break away

Do you remember?

The nights we used to linger in the hall?

Your father didn't like me at all

Do you remember?

The reason why we married in the fall?

To rent this little nest

And get a bit of rest

Well, here we are

Just about the same

Foggy little fella

Drowsy little dame

Two sleepy people by dawn's early light

And too much in love to say goodnight

(Unseen by Fats, Capone, in a long and flowing red sleeping-

BULLETS, BOOZE, AND THE E-FLAT BLUES

robe, slinks onto the main stage and leans against the piano as Fats continues to sing to, who he thinks, is just himself. Fats slows the song and slows it and slows it until, eventually, he is only playing a note at a time and then, finally, he finishes. He stares down at the keys, then takes the gin bottle and makes to drink it but it is empty.) Heh, where'd all the gin go off to?

CAPONE. *(Snapping into action.)* Here! I'll get you another!

FATS. Oh! You scared me! *(But Capone does not respond for he has already gone to the bar and retrieved another gin bottle. He returns it to Fats who gulps down a hearty swig.)* Well. S'about time to tuck in, I think.

CAPONE. Not just right now, Fats. Stay up. For a little bit longer, heh? Keep me company?

FATS. Alright, Al. Sure. Alright.

CAPONE. *(Finally sees Helen asleep against Fats' shoulder.)* She's awful beautiful, isn't she?

FATS. Eh- *(He helps her head down onto the Forte.)*

CAPONE. No need to worry. That little incident earlier. It's all water under the bridge, as far as I'm concerned.

FATS. She's sad, isn't she?

CAPONE. *(Almost a complaint.)* Somethin' like that.

FATS. What happened? *(Has he overstepped?)* Sorry. I didn't mean to-

CAPONE. She was married to a real loser, Fats. A big grade A loser and she was in love with the man, can you believe it? I paid for her services, you know? I mean. She is a whore. It's her job. What did I do wrong, heh? *(Beat.)* I liked her, Fats. I mean. I really, really liked her. In my mind, nobody deserved to be with such a fine woman even if she was a whore. He

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disagreed quite adamantly with me about that and-well-you can probably guess what happened to him then.

FATS. Yeah.

CAPONE. I tried to apologize to her. Bought her-musta been thousands of dollars worth of flowers'n candies'n little, cutsie, friggin' bobbles that ladies like'n-she never thought to forgive me. S'funny, heh?

FATS. Eh, sure, Al. Funny.

CAPONE. You don't think it's funny at all? Do ya?

FATS. I just know why she'd still be sore with you, is all. She loved the guy and you took him away from her.

CAPONE. Still. She shouldn't have brought all of her bad tidings up into my place. Not on my birthday, you know? It's sacred. It's a holiday. No bad thoughts or ill intentions allowed here on this day, heh?

FATS. *(Beat.)* I guess not. Not for you, at least.

CAPONE. S'right. 'Specially not on my birthday. *(Beat.)* I'll bet you didn't know I keep a piece hidden in my night-stand, heh? I bet you didn't know that.

FATS. I didn't know that, no.

CAPONE. And there are nights I wake up'n I take it out'n hold it up. *(Gesturing to his head.)* Right here, y'know? An' I think, every time, I think "This is it, Al. Tonight's the night you're gonna pull that trigger." But I never do it. I dunno why I don't. Maybe. Maybe it's because I have a destiny, ya think? Like I'm here to make the world a better place'er somethin'. *(They stare at each other and then, almost simultaneously, they begin to laugh. Dry, very ugly, very drunken guffaws that continue under the following.)*

FATS. Oh, that's-That's rich, Al.

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CAPONE. I almost couldn't finish sayin' it wit' a straight face. I really almost couldn't.

FATS. I mean *you* makin' the world a better place! That's the single craziest thing I ever heard! *(His laughter begins to die down-especially when he realizes that Capone has ceased his laughing altogether and appears to be crying.)* Hey? Hey, Al? You okay?

CAPONE. Would you kill me, Fats?

FATS. *Would I what?!*

CAPONE. F'somebody paid you enough-I bet you would pop me right off'n in a heartbeat too. Wouldn't you?

FATS. If this is some kinda sick joke-er somethin'-

CAPONE. I'm not jokin' with you. Not anymore. *(Beat.)* Would you kill me, Fats?

FATS. Why would I wanna kill you, Al? I mean. We're friends. *(Beat.)* Aren't we? *(Capone stares daggers into Fats for a long moment then he erupts into another loud wave of laughter. Fats does not reciprocate the laughter.)*

CAPONE. It was a joke, Fats.

FATS. It wasn't funny.

CAPONE. I thought it was-at least-kinda funny, heh?

FATS. No, Al. No. It made you look like a real jerk.

CAPONE. Oh, Fats. Fats! I didn't mean to-! *(Now it is Fats that bursts into laughter.)* Who's the jerk, heh? Who's the friggin' jerk now?

FATS. I had you! I really had you there, man!

CAPONE. You did! You really did! *(They clap each other on the back, still wheezing and gasping from their bouts of laughter.)* Y'know what I did to the last fella what called me a jerk?

BULLETS, BOOZE, AND THE E-FLAT BLUES

FATS. Do I really wanna know?

CAPONE. Eh, probably not.

FATS. (*Thoughtful pause.*) Here's what-what I'm gonna do for you, *Mr.* Alphonse Capone.

CAPONE. What're you gonna do for me, Fats?

FATS. I'm gonna learn you to play a song.

CAPONE. What?

FATS. Yeah. Yeah, I'm gonna learn you a song.

CAPONE. Oh, I dunno, Fats!

FATS. Hey, don't worry. It'll be easy.

CAPONE. Yeah?

FATS. Sure. We'll do-Eh-We'll do *Chopsticks!* How about that? Easy. Nothin' to it, heh?

CAPONE. Just me'n you?

FATS. Just us. Come on. Let me learn you.

CAPONE. Alright. Alright. You talked me into it. What do I do first, heh?

FATS. Well, first you pop a squat in front of the keys. Come on'n sit. Just here. (*Capone complies.*) Now, put your fingers on the keys.

CAPONE. Which ones? Which keys, Fats?

FATS. Those keys just there. (*Taking Capone's hands.*) Here. I'll guide you.

CAPONE. Just like this?

FATS. That's right. Now, with one finger you're gonna press this key. (*He shows him.*)

CAPONE. That's it?

FATS. Well, now you have to go to the next. Here- (*Fats guides Capone's hands to the next key. They continue. Fats*

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guiding Capone's fingers from key to key until they are really, actually performing a squeaky rendition of Chopsticks.)

CAPONE. Hey-! Hey, Fats! I'm doing it!

FATS. Keep it going, Al. Keep playin'. *(Capone complies and continues to build in speed and confidence. He finishes several rounds of the song.)* Now, big finish! *(Capone slams his index fingers onto the two main keys and sits back on the piano bench. They look to each other. Both grinning, quite genuinely.)*

CAPONE. It's no Mozart but-Hey, it was pretty friggin' good, heh?

FATS. I'd say it's a start.

CAPONE. *(Deep pause.)* I have an idea. Now. Promise you won't laugh, heh?

FATS. Okay. I won't laugh. *(Beat.)* What's up, Al?

CAPONE. I think I wanna play, Fats.

FATS. Sure. Okay. You just did, you know?

CAPONE. No. No. I mean. I want to play. To everyone-here. I want you to learn me to play Chopsticks like you would so I can play for everyone't came to my birthday party. You think you could me get to that level of skill in that amount of time, heh?

FATS. Honestly?

CAPONE. Always.

FATS. I think we've got a hell of a lot of work to do. *(Off of Capone's disappointed expression.)* But, hey, anything's possible!

CAPONE. Yeah?

FATS. *(Beat.)* Sure. But we need to get started. So. Hand me that damn bottle and let's get down to business, heh? *(Capone eagerly does so. Fats takes a long drink then, leaning down*

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above Capone, he proceeds to help him play the first few notes of Chopsticks as we fade into:)

END OF ACT 1

***THE PLAY IS NOT OVER!! TO FIND OUT HOW IT ENDS--
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