

(Oh So) Quiet Conversations

CHARACTERS:

SON

FATHER/MUSICIAN/BEN (These are all the same person, the name changes in context)

ANNA

JEN

KATIE

AGENT/CONCERTINA PLAYER

ACT I      SCENE 1: NOW. A piano bar, late afternoon. SON is sitting at a table with a spiral notebook and a pen, and a glass of scotch, as well as a picture of an older man. He writes for while when FATHER appears. Possibly, he's been there the whole time and a light merely shines on him.

SON:            (half musing) Kafka said that writing letters was like having a conversation with a ghost.

FATHER:        And?

SON:            And, what?

FATHER:        Is it?

SON:            No. Yes. Maybe.

FATHER:        Come on, son. Be decisive. Tell me what you really think.

SON:            Dad...

FATHER:        No, really. I want to know. We used to talk, didn't we? Sure, we told your mother we were going fishing, but I don't recall either of us ever baiting a hook.

SON:            No. We didn't. We'd come here, and you'd give me a couple of dollars for the pinball machine or let me blow my allowance on pool while you played old jazz songs on the piano and drank yourself into oblivion.

FATHER: Ouch.

Blackout.

SCENE 2: The same bar, years earlier. There's a crowd of college students. The MUSICIAN (FATHER without his age makeup) is at the piano and two young women are at the front table – the same table where the previous conversation happened.

ANNA: So, anyway, he's a med student at State and he asked me out, but... I don't know. I'm not sure I want to go.

JEN: You don't want to go out with a future doctor? Why not? Is he ugly? Does he have hairy thumbs? Halitosis?

ANNA: No, I just... I think I'm into him. (She points to MUSICIAN)

JEN: The piano player?

ANNA: He writes his own stuff. Did you know?

JEN: All I've ever heard him play is old jazz and lame covers of Bjork tunes.

ANNA: He plays more than that, really.

JEN: (observing) He is kinda cute, in that scruffy artsy way.

ANNA: See...

JEN: But he's a musician.

Blackout.

ACT II: SCENE 1: NOW The same bar from the opening of the play. FATHER is at the piano playing a jazzy tune that resolves into Bjork's "It's Oh So Quiet."

SON: (Walks over to the piano, leans on it.) I like this song. Mom used to play it a lot. (beat) You told me to be honest.

FATHER: So, I did.

SON: Why?

FATHER: Why... what?

SON: Why didn't you ever play music at home? Katie would have loved your music. You know she's at Julliard now? And Mom... she kept that piano dusted and tuned for

you, not for us. Why did you hide that part of you? Why didn't you come to our recitals? What closed you off from this thing that you loved?

FATHER: Life, I guess.

SON: Ironic.

FATHER: Well, life was the reason, *then*. I wanted to be the next big thing. I studied and practiced, and I was rising... I had a label come listen to me play at a high-end club. I met your mother that night. I think she was attracted to the possibility of my success.

SON: It definitely wasn't your sparkling personality.

Blackout.

SCENE 2: THEN: The bar, 30 years ago. It's another night, a different crowd. ANNA is there without JEN watching MUSICIAN's set. He leaves the PIANO and is met by AGENT. They have a brief chat in the shadows, a card is exchanged, and then (BEN (MUSICIAN)) heads toward the tables, probably looking to score. ANNA rises from her chair and intercepts him.

ANNA: Ben... hey... Ben...

BEN: Do I know you?

ANNA: Not yet. (She smiles.) My friend and I were here last week. You're really good. Better when you play your own stuff.

BEN: Boss says people buy more drinks when I play covers.

ANNA: Really? That sucks.

BEN: It's life, I guess. Eventually, I'll get more recognition and I'll be able to branch out, experiment. For now, if people want to hear covers, I'll just play them my way. (he cocks his head at her, considering). Do you want to get some dinner?

ANNA: Tonight?

BEN: You eat, right?

ANNA: Yeah, I eat.

BEN: You got a name?

ANNA: Anna. I'm... I'm Anna.

BEN: Well, then, Anna, let me take you to dinner? (he extends a hand) Hi, I'm Ben.

ANNA: (smiling, flirting, a hint of promised sex) I know.

Blackout.

SCENE 3: THEN. A cheesy Italian restaurant. BEN and ANNA are at a table and a CONCERTINA PLAYER comes over to them playing "It's Oh So Quiet."

BEN: Great, more Bjork.

ANNA: (laughing) Shut up. I love this song. (to CONCERTINA PLAYER) Keep going? (she starts to sing along. Her voice is good, but not trained)

(singing)

You fall in love  
Zing boom  
The sky up above  
Zing boom  
Is caving in  
Wow bam  
You've never been so nuts about a guy  
You want to laugh you want to cry  
You cross your heart and hope to die

BEN: Anna... really... ? (to CONCERTINA PLAYER) I'm sorry could you leave?

(The CONCERTINA PLAYER nods his head and walks off, still playing the song.)

ANNA: What was that about? I thought we were having fun. You know, just... Just being silly.

BEN: We were. We are. I just... I have something I need to tell you. (he picks up his wine glass and sips from it.)

ANNA: Really? So do I. (She also reaches for a glass, but not her wine glass. She picks up water.)

BEN: You go first.

ANNA: No, you.

BEN: The agent from a few months ago? He offered me a tour. Twelve weeks on the road and a recording contract. Opening for... (off a look from ANNA) What? What's wrong? I'm not breaking up with you! I know you still have a year of college. I thought, if I did this tour we'd be set... I could... we could...

ANNA: No, it's not... Ben, it's *awesome*, really, it's just. (she picks up the wine, then puts it down, then picks it up, then puts it back down and picks up the water again, and takes a large swallow.) That... really didn't help at all.

BEN: Anna, baby? Just tell me?

ANNA: Baby.

BEN? I don't get it.

ANNA: Baby. That's it. We're... well, I'm... you're not... You're not obligated to... we didn't make plans, and we were careful and... I'm pregnant.

(BEN picks up his wine glass and drains it, then does the same with hers.)

BEN: How long have you known?

ANNA: Not long. I've suspected for a couple of weeks, but I only got confirmation today, and, oh, god, Ben, your music. This is your dream.

BEN: Yeah. Yeah, it's my dream, but you... you're my reality. And dreams don't always come true.

Blackout.

SCENE 4: NOW: The bar. SON moves back to the table and sits with his head in hands. FATHER leaves the piano and follows.

FATHER: Son?

SON: Sorry, Dad. Go on?

FATHER: It's the classic story. I met your mother. We started going out. Things got serious, she got pregnant. And I had to choose. Did I want to chase a dream that might not come true, or do the responsible thing and settle down, be a husband and a father?

SON: So, you settled.

FATHER: I *chose*, son. I looked at what I had and what I might have, and I chose the sure thing.

SON: Mom would have supported your dream, you know.

FATHER: She did support it. I went on tour before you were born. I played local gigs and did some recording when you were young. But the pull of family was too strong. I'd already made my choice.

SON: There's gotta be more to it, Dad. I've heard your records. You weren't just good. You were *transcendent*. You had that thing. That spark. Why did you really stop.

FATHER: Fear.

SON: Of failure?

FATHER: Of success. Isn't that why you haven't tried to publish any of your stories?

SON: I...

FATHER: You write them in letters to your mother, to your sister, but you should be sharing them with the world. Yeah, some of them are not so flattering to me, some are not so pretty, but that's what artists do, son. We use our pain to make beautiful things.

SON: You didn't... well, you did... but you stopped.

FATHER: No, I stopped playing gigs. I made – well, your mother did most of the hard work – two very beautiful things.

SON: Dad?

FATHER: You're one of them.

Blackout.

ACT II SCENE 1: FIVE YEARS LATER: a university recital hall. A grand piano is on the stage, and photos of ANNA and SON and BEN/MUSICIAN are on it. KATIE steps to the front of the stage.

KATIE: I always knew I got my musical talent from my father, but it's a bit weird because I don't remember him playing much when I was little. Sometimes, though, rarely, he'd sit at the piano with me, and show me something, some technique I hadn't learned yet.

Dad died before I ever made it to music school, but tonight I want to dedicate my graduation piece to him, by playing one of his original pieces, which is basically Bjork's "Venus as a Boy" turned into a ragtime tune. Dad was like that... taking the familiar and making it his own.

(she sits at the piano and begins to play)

Lights fade out as the music fades with them.

SCENE 2: TEN YEARS LATER, the bar from the opening, but now it has renewed energy. KATIE and ANNA are there, though ANNA has aged a lot (obviously) and is in a wheel chair. Photos of BEN/MUSICIAN are on the piano which has been

pushed to the side of the bar's stage. At the bar's center stage there is a table piled with books and a poster with SON's photo and the title CONVERSATIONS WITH GHOSTS.

SON walks onto the stage and stands behind the table.

SON: I want to thank my sister, Katie – sorry, she's Kate now – for playing the piano tonight. And my mom, well, for being my mom. I know a bar seems like an odd place to hold a book launch and reading, but when I was a kid, my father...

(he trails off, sits down, opens his book and begins to read from it, as he read, KATIE begins to play music)

My father was a weekend musician, but I never knew it until I was ten years old. That was the year he decided I was old enough to be let in on his secret. That was the year he started telling my mother that we were going on fishing trips.

My father never caught a fish in his life.

I'm pretty sure he never even owned a pole.

Instead, he would bring me here, and give me a handful of quarters to play arcade games, and sit at the dusty old piano in the corner...

(The lights drop and then rise again, and when they do, KATIE and ANNA are waiting by the door and SON is packing his few remaining books into a cardboard box. FATHER appears behind him and looks at the photo.)

FATHER: Nice picture. So, did you figure it out?

SON: (startled) What?!?

FATHER: Writing letters? Conversing with ghosts? Are they the same?

SON: (chuckling softly) You know, I'm still not sure.

FATHER: Mmm. Well, when you figure it out, drop me a line. (he goes to the piano and begins to play Bjork's "It's Oh So Quiet") Don't worry, I'll get the message.

ANNA: Oh... I always liked this song. Your father hated it, but he used to play it for me.

(sings)

You ring the bell  
Bim bam  
You shout and you yell  
Hi ho ho

You broke the spell  
Gee, this is swell you almost have a fit  
This guy is "gorge" and I got hit  
There's no mistake this is it

'Til it's over and then...

(she trails off as the lights...)

Blackout.

SCENE 3: THEN. Lights come up on the mostly empty living room of BEN and ANNA's first apartment together. She's pregnant, but not heavily so. He's got a packed suitcase waiting by the door, and they are dancing to the actual track of Bjork's "It's Oh So Quiet."

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