

The more he thought about it, the more uncomfortable he became. Maybe he should leave. They were going to ask him to sing, and he was being naive to think his excuses would fly. He should have thought it through before he joined them. They had been so welcoming, so much fun, and he would seem like a straitlaced bore. He shouldn't have come. He didn't know what time it was, but he should have hit the road long before.

"Pablo!" came a voice through the speakers, catapulting him from his reflections to center stage, the microphone now pointed at him. "You might have forgotten how to talk, but it's time to reclaim your voice and sing!"

Once again, Pablo missed a beat. Time stopped, and the bar was silenced. His expression went blank. It felt so direct, so deliberate, as though Eva realized full well the implications of what she had just said. Pablo looked at her, a question in his eyes. She smiled knowingly, a divine messenger sharing his secret.

With an embarrassed smile, he got up and went onstage. A song had already been selected. One of the women had chosen an emotional ballad she never would have come close to mastering, even if she were still sober. It would have been a perfect disaster. But not only did Pablo know it well, for his voice it was ideal.

Now relishing an opportunity that mere moments before he'd resisted with all his might, as though granted permission to do the unthinkable, encouraged to break a taboo, he took a deep breath. Not exactly sober himself, after a monumental day and the revelation just before, his heart was wide open. He shut out the bar and turned all his attention to the song.

His new friends continued their banter, their drunken voices initially drowning out his own, as he eased his way into a delicate intro. But then came a shift. Something was happening at the front of the room, and it wasn't just another comical performance. The stranger from nowhere was about to take them somewhere, each note he sang, every phrase he enunciated creating more tension, generating more expectation. He was genuinely feeling it. And he really could sing. It was as

if he'd duped them all by downplaying his talent. No one had seen it coming, and soon the whole group was hanging onto his each and every word.

But Pablo wasn't thinking about them. Whereas ordinarily he'd be playing to the crowd, presently he didn't care if they listened closely or ignored him completely or sang along to every lyric. This wasn't the festival. He hadn't even expected to be onstage. What he was doing had nothing to do with impressing strangers at a bar.

As though using a broken appendage for the first time since removing the cast, he reengaged with his voice tentatively, paying careful attention to its cues and respecting its limits. When he felt his cords begin to constrict as he went into his upper register, he pulled back. Faltering slightly when he went to belt out a powerful note, again, he eased up. Otherwise it was like riding a bike. Once more he was quickly attuned to his instrument.

The emotional intensity of the song notwithstanding, it felt good to sing. It was empowering to reclaim an essential part of himself, one that gave him such joy. He relished it. As visceral as cerebral, it was a literal rush. His mind, body, and soul, each and every part of himself engaged. Breathing life into the melody brought him more to life, too.

Indeed, though ostensibly singing the lyrics to the song, it was his own story to which Pablo gave voice. The deep well from which he drew the profound feelings expressed through the music was his own experience. Fire. Death. Silence. Relationships ended and new ones begun, including with himself. So much in so little time. It still didn't seem real, and it still wasn't over, evolving so fast he could hardly keep up.