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Life Ain't Kind

Nelson Edward Donley

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Nathaniel Cosgray is a musician with oodles & oodles of talent. There isn't anything he can't play on either the piano or the violin. He just can't make a career of it. Carnegie Hall is about as far away as the moon, but Nat is ready to take on the challenge, hoping for some lucky break along the way. The journey begins in the late 1970s. Fresh out of college, he sets out to make a loud noise in the musical world, but soon discovers that musicians, highly talented or not, are a dime a dozen. Most of his gigs are playing for mourners at funerals. He gets so caught up into the realm of death that the music of Gustav Mahler becomes the incidental music for much of his life. Right after graduating from high school, Nat finds himself completely alone in the world. His parents had died unexpectedly and his big brother, Herbie, had been killed in Vietnam. He sells the farm he grew up on and goes off to college where he meets the first major influence of his adult life; his philosophy professor, Dr. Bloom. From him he learns a new word; entelechy, a Greek term that signifies the potential versus the actual. It is a concept he often ponders. Prior to entering U.C. Berkeley, he allows himself to be sucked into a seemingly never-ending cycle of menial jobs having absolutely nothing to do with music. Having failed at selling such things as vacuum cleaners and encyclopedias, he goes to work at Dave's Coffee Shop; the kind of place that's very popular with bikers and other dregs of society. The owner of Dave's is a very eccentric man named Wally. Not much is known about Wally except that he is a strikingly paranoid, private and impervious. His motto, never trust anyone, unfortunately, never quite catches on with Nat, who has to learn his lessons the hard way. While working at a boiler room, he becomes friends with a Jewish man from Brooklyn named Phil. Next to Dr. Bloom, Phil is the smartest man Nat's ever known. Mainly educated in the streets, Phil is sagacious and crafty. He is a salesman by trade, but not a very good one at that. He is also a workaholic with a lot of personal troubles that he refuses to talk about. He moves in with Nat in order to get away from his nagging girlfriend; a woman who is also his second cousin. His main interest in life is Beethoven, whom he practically worships. Phil becomes a father-like figure to Nat and his influence has a profound effect on him. Ultimately, he gets lucky and is hired as a high school music director; i.e., the school's band teacher. Teaching music at a public school was never one of his ambitions, but at least it was a start and paid the bills. As a music teacher, he becomes very involved with his students. One of his students, a highly talented and sophisticated Italian girl from France, develops a fatal crush on him that forever changes the course of his life. Nat is a young man who bears a slight resemblance to the great baritone Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau. He is impecunious and is constantly seeking affection from pretty girls, which eventually leads to trouble-- big trouble. In order to turn his upside-down world back on its feet again, he must muster all of courage and stamina within his own being. Otherwise, he will have to live out the rest of his life in shame and persecution. To complicate matters, he is also plagued by an addiction to drugs and alcohol. He is far too cynical to seek rehab except from within himself. Instead, he is determined to deal with this monkey on his back on his own terms. The novel ends in a strange twist of fate and Nat and the reader sees Nat like a man falling without a parachute. His story is accurately recalled from a series of diaries that he kept throughout his life and encouraged by the one woman who made life meaningful for him. It ends in a way that is, perhaps, more profound than you will find in any piece of existentialistic literature. This is an unforgettable book that you will want to read more than once.

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