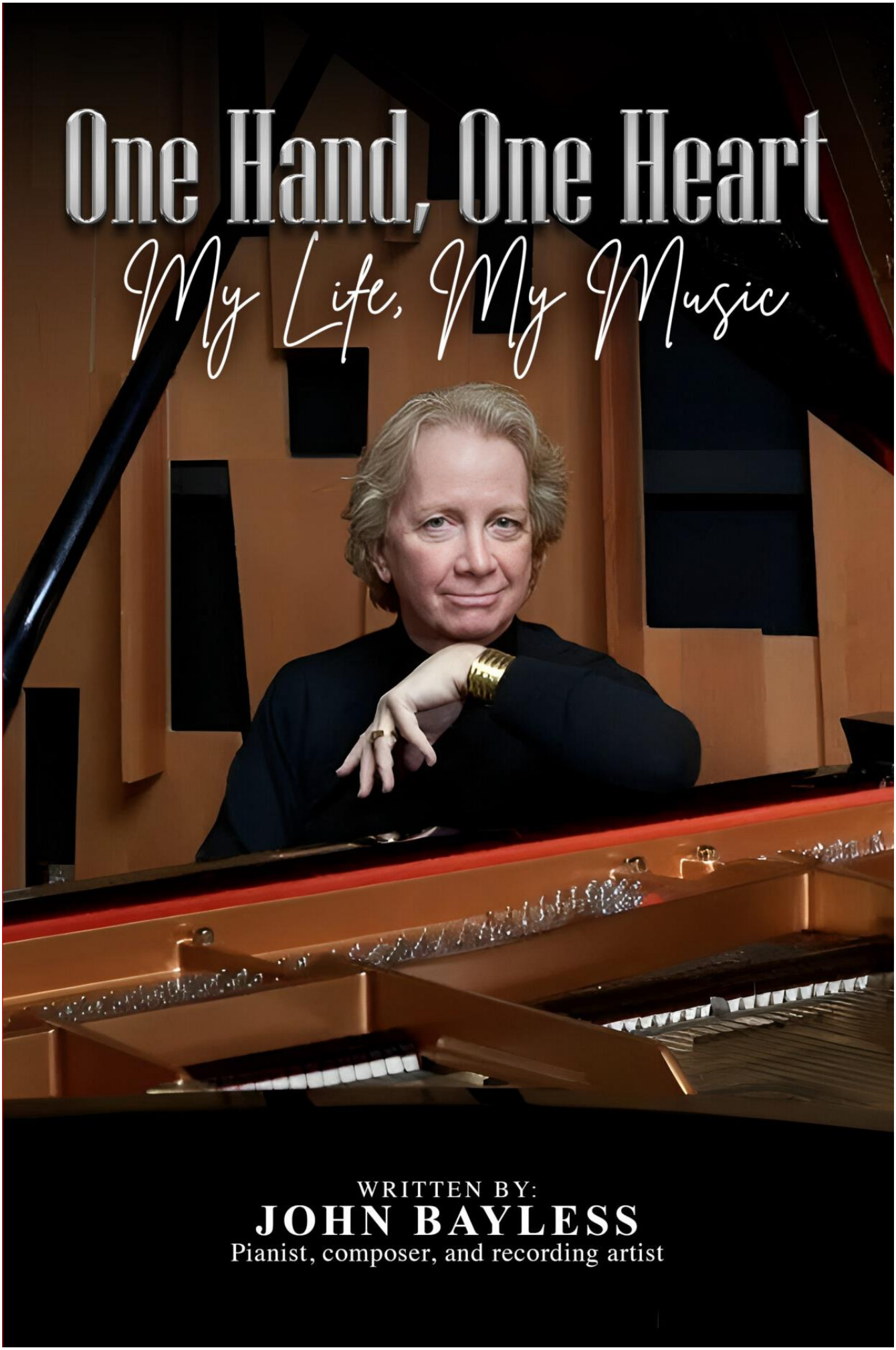
One Hand, One Heart

My Life, My Music



WRITTEN BY:
JOHN BAYLESS
Pianist, composer, and recording artist

ONE

A Texan Upbringing

"The unpredictability of weather in the Texas panhandle became a barometer of my emotions and my imagination."

Sometimes in life, in order to move forward, it's necessary to look backward first.

"I think he has a dropped kidney," the pediatrician announced meekly after briefly palpating my stomach. Though I was only five, by the gasping shock plastered across my mother's face, I knew it was a horrible revelation. Little did I know, I would be spending a substantial part of my childhood, and subsequently adulthood, in the doctor's office.

That day, I had awakened quite early than usual. I had barely slept; the nasty palpitations and hot and cold tremors had kept me wide-eyed all night. Once I saw the morning sun, I leaped to our front yard, drawn to the freshly blossomed tulips that lined the railings. My happiness, of course, was short-termed and interrupted viciously by a visit to the intimidating man in the white overalls. Later on, I would learn to associate the weather with my suffering at the hospital. If the weather was sunny and pleasant, I would consider it as a sign from God and think that the needles would not hurt today. On the other hand, stormy mornings were an indication that a great affliction would befall my little body, or God was unhappy with me. Down the years, my therapist told me how I used the weather's unpredictability as a coping mechanism to make sense of my perpetually devastating health condition.

Due to my health condition, I developed these niggling aches and pains, which kept my parents occupied with me for my entire childhood. On most days, they were either taking me to the doctor or to Amarillo for piano sessions. This eventually resulted in me carrying this constant guilt that my parents were not giving enough attention to my siblings because, well, I was always the sick one.

When Mom took me to Amarillo for my music lesson, she'd drop my brother, Dan, who's three years younger than me, off for his art lesson. It was back in the days when I had this tube draining my bladder into a bag on my leg – a situation I dealt with from age six to fourteen. I remember Dan and me playing on the floor, and he accidentally pulled the tube out. It was a tense moment.

My parents rushed me to Amarillo to see the specialist, and the urologist made my brother watch as he reinserted the tube into my side. As I recall the incident now, I believe, psychologically, that experience was quite impactful and possibly damaging for my brother. He was only three and a half years old when that happened. He even somberly told my mother, "I'm going to get one of those put in my weenie so I can get presents." My sister, in her own way,

frequently teased me, “Well, Mom only had one child.” I guess it was their way of expressing their emotions.

Though Dan never really talked to me about the urologist’s visit, later on in life, we had kind of a jumbled relationship with each other. It was like our brotherhood vacillated between moments of extreme tenderness and blatant rivalry. We both had an innate tendency to get into verbal diatribes, which essentially resulted in us having some quiet time away from each other.

Young John with Dad and Brothers; Daniel & Jim

Excluding the sickness, I had a happy upbringing. Growing up in Borger, Texas, presented its own unique challenges. Though naturally devoid of the grandeur of mountains or hills, the roads in Borges stretched straight for miles, and the beauty lay in the simplicity of the flat horizons, interrupted only by mesquite bushes and the occasional white rocks that stood out starkly against the barren landscape.

On many days, a road trip to Amarillo to the urologist provided me with enough time to leisurely absorb the scenery in my mind. The soil had a reddish cast, and the weather, like the

terrain, was unpredictable. The sunsets were spectacular, and the weather could shift abruptly—snowfall one day after the bliss of a sunny day. I recalled a winter when 26 inches of snow paralyzed the town, leading to a canceled school day.

Our town, with a population of around 18,000, thrived on the oil industry – an oil boom town where the echoes of rougher times lingered in the collective memory. By the time we arrived, it had gentrified, or at least become what some might call "normal."

My father was an automobile dealer, working tirelessly to sell Fords and Lincolns. The landscape mirrored the ruggedness of life there, with mesquite bushes, occasional elm trees, and the looming presence of oil plants, like the Phillips petroleum and carbon black plant, lighting up the night.

Tornadoes, a constant threat in the region, remained fortunately unseen in my childhood. Yet, the predicted storms remain a harrowing memory. I vividly remember a stormy day when my grandfather urged us to seek shelter in the cellar. "Let's go," he shouted. The wind howled through big elm trees, a sound so unfamiliar and terrifying that it added to the fear of the weather itself. We walked out through the wind and storms, and it was petrifying. Fortunately, nothing happened, but still, the rustling sounds of the big trees linger in my mind to date.

Despite the weather's unpredictability, there was a routine to Friday nights in our town—the highlight being a visit to the Buena Vista Drive-In Theater. This drive-in, illuminated in pink neon lights, was as tall as the nearby oil plant. The ritual involved piling into my Dad's brand-new Ford demonstrator, enjoying chili cheeseburgers, and sipping on my especially self-contained half-pink, half-regular lemonade. The evening reached its peak with cinnamon and sugar doughnuts, a creation of the drive-in's doughnut machine. Incidentally, the demonstrator had plastic seat covers, so if we spilled anything, he could still sell the car.

A pivotal moment that I can naturally recall goes back to 1962 when I was nine. The sundown unfolded into a poetic and foretelling chapter of my life, casting shadows of what lay ahead. The air resonated with the lingering echoes of a heated and fiery performance, the Tchaikovsky concerto, delivered by none other than the newfound sensation and Texas-born virtuoso, essentially "my hero," Van Cliburn. In my humble opinion, he had already outshone and outgained popularity compared to the sanctified Dallas Cowboys—imagine a pianist achieving such acclaim!

Without hesitation, we seized the opportunity and secured tickets for what would become the most exhilarating night of my life. The venue: the civic auditorium in the metropolis of Amarillo, approximately 50 miles from the principality of Borger. Accompanied by my parents, we embarked on an early journey to Amarillo, envisioning a true night out, including dinner and the concert – an exception in those days. The weather cooperated, offering a beautiful evening with clear skies and moderately blustery winds, hinting at a chill that was foreshadowing something more ominous to come.

Following the romantically charged notes of the Tchaikovsky concerto, the elegance of the Amarillo Symphony, and Mr. Cliburn's captivating performance, I found myself floating on cloud nine—or, more accurately, cloud 1009! Exiting the hall, however, reality collided with us in the form of a Texas-sized northeaster, bringing blinding snow and tempestuous, freezing winds. This unexpected change in weather, reminiscent of the last movement of the Tchaikovsky marked "ALLEGRO CON FUOCO" (a quick, brisk pace with high energy), caught us off guard.

Understandable anxiety gripped my parents, realizing we had to traverse the 50-odd miles back to Borger in whiteout conditions. The two-lane highway resembled more of a desolate farm-to-market road, untouched by any vehicle due to the relentless storm and the capricious nature of Panhandle weather, compounded by the late hour. Dad could barely maintain a speed of 30 mph, if that, and the journey stretched to a grueling 2 hours. The front seat played host to a live commentary of cautionary exchanges between Mom and Dad: "Watch out, John, that's a slick spot! Black ice! Please, please, slow down!"

Meanwhile, in the back seat, I orchestrated my own internal movie—a dreamscape filled with the lingering melodies of Tchaikovsky, the majestic grandeur of the 9-foot concert grand, the enchanting Mr. Cliburn, and the allure of that life. In the midst of the treacherous journey, I found myself transported to the Russian Steppes, riding in my own troika, imagining the post-concert journey home—immersed in the beautiful melodies and consumed by the enchanting moment. I was there. I was truly there. Those nights at the drive-ins and recitals shaped my understanding of music.

***

The Texas landscape and community were integral to my upbringing, providing structure and support. The Baptist church was not just a place of worship but a community that cared deeply for its members.

However, amidst the outward joy and celebration, a silent struggle persisted. As a child, I grappled with the awareness of my own sexuality, a secret I carried within me. The church, a source of joy and celebration, also became a dilemma—a place where societal expectations clashed with my internal conflicts.

Reflecting on those early years, the town's flat horizons and neon lights mirrored the dichotomy of my life—simplicity and complexity, celebration and dilemma.

Our house, a typical representation of its time, lacked the luxury of a dedicated room for me. Instead, I shared a room with my brother, and the living room housed the family piano—a five-foot-six grand piano that accompanied me from the age of six until the ninth grade. Though my musical journey started at four with my mother's upright piano, I loved the piano ever since I was a preschooler. I still have the photo of me playing a toy piano that my parents bought me when I was four. On one side, there's a set of chimes, and on the other, I'm standing composed, hands on

the piano, and looking right at the camera. Bruce Franchini, my future lifetime partner, the first time he saw that picture, teasingly exclaimed, “Oh my God, you had an attitude even back then.”

A few years later, the piano tuner, who regularly told my Mom, “You’re holding him back with this piano; he needs something more,” became one of the reasons my Mom made this impressive replacement.

My early encounters with music are vividly painted with the vibrant presence of Dorothy Smith. She had red hair, but it wasn’t real. She could play the old Baptist hymn, “Standing on the Promises,” faster and louder than anyone I had heard in my life and chew gum at the same time. She was, precisely, outstanding. She played the piano with such an infectious energy that I could see her practically jumping across the keys, all while chewing gum in a peculiarly fascinating way.

Post each church service, I couldn’t wait to claim the piano for myself. Pushing Dorothy off the bench, I’d eagerly exclaim, “Let me play those songs, Dorothy!” In those moments, the piano became mine, and I would try to enthusiastically recreate Dorothy’s flair and musical aura around me.

Though my penchant for music primarily arose in my home, with my Mom being the drill sergeant, making sure I took this business seriously from a tender age, then there was Betty, my first piano teacher, and later my step-grandmother, who fine-tuned me for good three years, from eight to eleven. A conservatory-trained singer from Chicago, Betty foresaw my future in New York, planting the seed early on.

I would take my lessons at Betty’s house. To this day, I can practically feel the moments when I was standing outside and hearing another student playing Rachmaninoff. It was so intense, so beautiful, and so passionately played that it drove me crazy. I couldn’t resist. I played by ear the middle part of this exquisite Rachmaninoff Prelude in g minor. When my Dad came home from work, he would just lay down on the sofa and listen. He would request me to play that part for him repeatedly.

Thinking about it now, Rachmaninoff had a significant impact on me. Not just because of that mesmerizing piece I overheard but also because of the Prelude in C sharp minor that Betty’s students played during recitals. Four of them playing the same piece created an incredibly beautiful experience, which eventually brought me to produce my transcription of Moon River paired with the Rachmaninoff Second Concerto.

At the age of 13, I unexpectedly became the organist at our church. First Baptist Church in Borger. The opportunity arose when the regular organist fell ill, and my success in that impromptu role led to a permanent position. However, this transition strained relationships, particularly with the former 38-year-old-or-so organist, whom we never saw again. Naturally.

Moving from playing a grand piano to becoming the youngest church organist in Texas at the age of 13 marked a significant turning point in my musical journey. While the circumstances were

somewhat accidental, the experience laid the foundation for my evolving relationship with the organ and church music, albeit with some lingering tensions.

When I was fifteen, my father, witnessing my sheer affection for the piano, invested in a Baldwin concert grand piano, an impressive nine-foot-long instrument. Its arrival transformed our modest home, making other furniture appear miniature. As my brother humorously noted, "All the other furniture looks like doll furniture now."

Unsurprisingly, the high school provided a nuclear surge of energy to my already soaring musical aptitude. At Borger High School, students would repeatedly ask me to play the popular song of the day, "My Way," until I graduated in May of 1971. To their amazement, I played by ear rather than following any printed music. During those days, there was a choral maestro named Claude Bass, who produced romantic anthems that'd make Chopin nod in approval. Mom religiously loved his music and made me practice it every week until I really started to like reading the notes. Otherwise, my Mom had reached her limit by teaching me the notes. Why? Because I was one of those who played by ear—I could repeat anything she played for me almost instantly. But she was adamant about me learning to read music. She told me, "You'll never play any better than you do now if you don't learn to read music." Sure, I could play whatever I wanted, bask in applause and love, but there was a different level of seriousness needed. After all, knowing how to read those damn notes was crucial.

Mom would drive me fifty miles to Amarillo every Saturday to have piano lessons with Robert Hoffman, who was a professor at Amarillo College. I stuck with him until 10th grade. Regrettably, Mr. Hoffman might've had the fancy title, but he failed to teach me the basics like a C major scale. Nevertheless, I got the opportunity to work with some incredibly talented individuals who knew their craft. We had opera singers, a violinist, a cellist—real gems. It was surprisingly rich for the area.

These musicians were part of the Federated Music Club. They were instrumental and recognized my potential and subsequently awarded me a scholarship to attend the Aspen School of Music during my time in high school. So, after I received a scholarship to Aspen School of Music at 15, I had the privilege of meeting Adele Marcus, the legendary pianist of the 20th century, who gave me the much-needed push I needed. She casually told my Mom, "Either Johnny needs to come to New York and study with me, or I'm going to find him another teacher because you're wasting your money and time with this man."

Adele Marcus, Roger Englander, John, my 30th birthday
Photo by Robert Freedman

Rightfully, Adele saw the problem I was facing. I could tackle these incredibly complex pieces—Chopin, Scherzos, Beethoven sonatas—but oddly enough, I struggled with something as basic as a C major scale. The technical aspects of playing the piano were challenging. My hands needed stretching and strengthening. Moving to New York to study with Ms. Marcus wasn't in the cards just yet due to my lingering physical issues.

So, Ms. Marcus, ever resourceful, found a teacher for me in Houston. Now, Houston is quite a haul from Amarillo, about 700 miles south. I flew there twice a month, weather permitting, for sessions with my teacher. Her name was Moreland Roller—a Juilliard alum with a quirky name but an impressive pedigree. She knew Adele well and was based at the University of Houston, where her husband served as a conductor. It became a routine – one that I thoroughly enjoyed.

Soon, I was making around 130 or 150 dollars a month playing the organ, and naturally, I handed the check over to my Dad. Of course, sending a 15-year-old on a plane alone? That was a bizarre idea even back then. But there I was, shuffling buses and taxis to the Galleria in Houston and other important points. Looking back, it's kind of surreal to think I did that, but at the time, I was just thrilled. "I'm a big shot now," I thought.

Nonetheless, I had my fair share of troubles, not with the piano, but with Algebra. I would wake up at 6:30 every morning to practice before school and return home around 2:30, spending four more hours at the piano. That was pretty much the routine. It may sound intense, but for me, it was just another day in the pursuit of my passion.

My parents, already dreamed of sending me to Juilliard, had my priorities set just right. Therefore, I was told to be more focused on the piano rather than succeeding academically. Who needs a high GPA when you're headed to Juilliard anyway? Their ambition crystallized when they actually went to the principal and asked, "What's the bare minimum he needs for a diploma? He's going to be spending most of his time at the piano."

Expectedly, I took the easiest route possible, even if it took me four years to get through Algebra 1 and Geometry 1. It was utter embarrassment, to say the least. The subjects were a recurring nightmare because the purpose of stuffing my brain with a repertoire of useless formulas seemed obscure to my innocuous mind that was, by then, overflowing with all kinds of arpeggios.

***

The initial realization of my own sexuality came during a sermon by Minister Dan Cameron at the church and later, during his personal visit to our house, where we shared the same couch. Aged barely seven, it was an overwhelming moment, intense and unfamiliar, making me question my reactions. I felt oddly hot and, simultaneously, snug around him. There was a sense of punishment from God that intertwined with these feelings. The church's weekly bulletin, featuring the minister's picture, became a secret memento that I would cut out. It was a solitary ritual that I carried out religiously for a few months. Confessing this truth to someone was a formidable task that necessitated tremendous courage.

Reflecting on those moments, the impact of my physical condition and the isolation it brought became apparent. With tubes and medical concerns, I avoided the gym and communal spaces. I had the privilege of using the principal's private bathroom, a situation that made me feel both special and secluded. Exposure to male energy and interactions with men was minimal, creating an unconventional and sequestered upbringing.

This lack of male interactions persisted until around the age of 18, contributing to a sense of abnormality. It raised questions about how I would react in the presence of men and how these experiences might have affected my behavior and confidence.

Most importantly, I was hesitant to show my scars to the outside world. The scars that were etched across my body were not the result of mere happenstance but rather the aftermath of a relentless struggle with kidney and bladder problems. I recall a later relationship in my life, particularly with Ellis Rabb, the renowned Broadway director. He once remarked, "What's wrong with your scars? Those are badges of courage." It was an eye-opener for me because, before that, I was severely insecure about displaying the marks on my body, which made me quite cautious in pursuing love, especially during my teenage years and beyond.

I did eventually confide in my brother, Dan, who I realized was in the same boat as me when he washed away my anxieties with his classic reply, "It's about time."

Unbeknownst to me, my father was in the know, but he never talked about it because, apparently, the 70s was not compatible with the idea of exploring one's sexuality. It was assigned by birth, as they said.

Daddy and I used to play golf together, and he had plenty of opportunities to bring it up, but thank God he didn't. My mother knew, though she didn't fully acknowledge it until I met Bruce Franchini. That relationship, the love of my life, forced me to confront my actual identity. Surprisingly, my Dad had no problem at all.

We never openly discussed it. It was just there, unspoken. You're going to hell. It's wrong. It's so shameful. It's just awful – were some of the words I expected from them if we ever got into this conversation. Yet I tried to subtly communicate with my parents, especially my Mom, with whom I was really close. I dropped hints and mentioned finding a man attractive on TV, and she'd agree, but it wasn't enough relief. She knew, but it took her to swallow the bitter pill when my brother, Dan, revealed his sexuality. It brought everything to the surface, and it was chaotic, awful – precisely, as anticipated.

One Hand, One Heart

My Life, My Music

This book is an autobiography of pianist John Bayless, chronicling his musical journey from childhood prodigy to acclaimed performer, his struggle with a stroke that paralyzed his right hand, and his resilience in continuing to make music and find meaning through spirituality and reinvention.

From prodigy, to mentoring by Leonard Bernstein, to paralysis, to perseverance: World-renowned pianist John Bayless shares his extraordinary journey of musical triumph making his Carnegie Hall debut at age 25, devastating loss, and spiritual rebirth. After a stroke robbed him of his right hand, Bayless defied the odds to reinvent himself and his art, proving that true passion knows no limitations. This inspiring memoir offers a backstage pass to a life lived in harmony with music, faith, and the unbreakable human spirit.