College. Freshman year. High school had not prepared me for this. The moment I arrived at Bemidji State University, I knew for the next four years that this would be my home, and I was ready to embrace it. What I didn't know was for the next four years, I would also have to embrace some terrifying, wonderful changes.

I encountered professors who were truly passionate to teach and students who were eager and determined to learn. I experienced my first numbing break-up with a love I had dated all through high school, and found my first college sweetheart. I received my very first set of straight A's.

I owe these and many other terrifying, wonderful changes to the many people I have crossed paths with in and out of the classroom. They are teachers, students, and people I am fortunate enough to bump into on the sidewalk. Inviting these individuals into my life and letting them share a bit of themselves with me, and sharing a piece of myself with them, has had a huge impact on my sense of self. They have challenged me to be more strong, confident, and independent. These people have touched my life and continue to do so in the most subtle ways.

One individual who comes to mind is a student I see everyday on my walks to and from classes. He often stands outside Hagg-Sauer or Pine Hall, smoking a cigarette in quiet contemplation or reading the *Northern Student*. Sometimes he sits around a crowded table, enlightening the minds of fellow students with deep philosophical discussions. His name is Jordan, and his presence over the years has been a comfort and a blessing to me.
I first met Jordan my freshman year. He just happened to be hanging around the Oak front desk when I stopped by to request the key to the piano room. “Oh, you play piano,” he stated in his friendly, matter-of-fact way. “What's your name?”

“Loretta.”

“Pleasure to meet you, Loretta,” he said, extending a hand. “I'm Jordan.”

In the midst of our handshake he asked, “So Loretta, what do you play?”

“Uh, a little bit of everything,” I said.

“Like what?”

“I dunno.”

“Oh come on, what do you play?” he urged.

“Well,” I mumbled, “I play some classics and I've been working on a couple pieces by U2. They're my favorite band.”

“Ah ha!” he exclaimed as if he had just stumbled upon some amazing discovery. His hazel eyes had become two bright spheres of excitement.

“Do you play?” I asked.

“Of course.” He smiled, holding up some Elton John and Billy Joel books. Apparently he had just come from where I was headed.

“Hmm, I don't think I know Billy Joel,” I said.

“What?” Jordan tilted his head back in a thunderous, delighted laugh – one so full of zest and energy that it surprised me. I took a step backward. He continued, “Don't know Joel? Come on now, I'm sure you're familiar with him but aren't aware of it.”

“Maybe,” I said. “Well, I'm going to get down there.” I turned, eager for the quiet
solitude of the basement, but I stopped when a voice asked, “May I accompany you?”

This was an odd request from someone I hardly knew. I hesitated.

Jordan laughed again. “Don't worry, I'm not a stalker.” His twinkling eyes behind a pair of black framed glasses told me I could trust him.

“Uh...okay then, I guess,” I said, shrugging, and we descended to the basement.

“Why don't you play a little something?” he asked once we were crammed into the tiny room.

“That's okay,” I said, looking into my lap. “I'm not that good.”

“Oh come on,” he pressed. “Why did you come down here in the first place?”

My cheeks turned a vivid shade of red. “I guess you're right.” We sat down – he on a chair and I at the piano bench. Then, placing two trembling hands on the keys, I began to play Joplin's “The Entertainer.” Jordan's booming laughs covered the sounds of my intense giggling as I fumbled my way through the song. “I'm nervous!” I laughed.

“It's okay,” Jordan said with reassuring eyes. “Just take a deep breath. Take your time. Try it again.”

I did, and the second time around sounded considerably better. I heaved a sigh of relief, wiping two very sweaty palms on the front of my jeans.

“Why don't you play something?” I asked, ready to give my nerves a break.

“What do you want to hear?”

“That Joel person? To see if I've heard of him.”

“Certainly,” he said. We switched places. I watched as he placed himself at ease in front of the piano. He paged through to “She's Always a Woman,” carefully rested his fingers on the
keys, cleared his throat and began to play. What I heard was simply...beautiful. It made every hair on my arms and neck stand at attention. Jordan played and sang that song with such power, life, and inflection. He put all of himself into that single song. It is as if he gave himself over to it and just let it take him.

A number of emotions hit me all at once: an overwhelming sense of awe and appreciation for music, a hard and heavy sadness, a kind of euphoria I imagine some have only experienced on drugs, and just a tinge of envy. In that one glorious moment I was inspired and challenged to work harder at everything: college essays, short stories, and piano pieces – so I could look back on it all and have something to truly be proud of – so in some way I could be just like Jordan.

One afternoon in the piano room taught me so much. Jordan made me realize letting my guard down sometimes and just going with the flow can be a good thing. I know now that stepping out of my comfort zone and trying something new despite embarrassment can be healthy and even exhilarating. I have developed an intense hunger to learn and to give my best to everything – because I know it makes things far more satisfying. I have learned how to grab hold of those rare, elusive moments of excitement and make them a part of me. I am also one of Billy Joel's biggest fans.

Some days when I'm walking across campus, an occasional animated laugh cuts through the quiet of the afternoon. I don't have to look up to know it's Jordan. That burst of energy is his trademark. Each time I hear it, it never fails to bring a smile to my face, a skip to my step, and a fond memory to my mind. For a brief second I'm back in the piano room, laughing, smiling, and being inspired as Jordan the “piano man” sings a Billy Joel song.