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## THE PIANO

The customer entered our store with her hands in her pockets, never a good sign. She was a bit younger than me, maybe forty, pretty enough for most. Her light brown hair was combed neat and trim in the front, but her white part zigzagged near the back where the mirror doesn't show. My wife used to have the same problem. My boss issued one sharp "Leron," and I headed toward the customer in a run-walk, but she had already sat down and started playing. I hadn't sold a piano in weeks. My commissions this month, of all months, totaled zero.

Most piano buyers fall into two categories, and I was fairly good at diagnosing. With women, you can often tell from their fingernails – long or short. If long, they just want something cheap. Maybe they play "Für Elise," "Moonlight Sonata," or "Heart and Soul," or more often they can't play at all and just poke a few keys. They're buying for their children who will quit after six months, or else they're looking for a nearly useless and expensive piece of furniture, so I direct them to the unrefurbished antiques. I'll point out the tiger wood grain or filigree, and they'll stare somewhere vague to their upper right, imag-

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ining how it'll go with the coffee table. Or I sell them something with a black mirrored polyester finish ("Ebony, always a classic"), which they'll crowd with picture frames and knickknacks that would rattle and buzz if the piano were ever played.

Short fingernails are often the pianists, professional and amateur. They head over to the side of the store with the pricier pianos: the grands and baby grands, the Steinways, the occasional Bösendorfer. They play the most elaborate, overwrought pieces in and out of their repertoire – sometimes Prokofiev, Liszt, Sorabji. They want to see how the piano performs under stress and strain, and if it's capable of sustaining the weight of its relationship with them over the years. A lifetime, supposedly, when new.

This customer had short fingernails bitten to different lengths, and an engagement ring that slid around until she slipped it off and buried it in the pocket of her jeans. Sales is matchmaking, and I found her confusing. She wasn't a terribly proficient player, but she played a shitty Kimball console as if it were a reunion – stiff, sincere, discovering each note anew. I didn't recognize the music, and after eighteen years of piano sales and thirty-five years of playing everything I can find, I recognize music. Hers was a fraught tune in a tragic A-flat minor, melody-based. She played the dramatic parts exceptionally well, with sensitivity. But her fourth and fifth fingers weren't strong enough to play the difficult phrases, so the music stumbled and flew, stumbled and flew. She was rocking her body back and forth in her long-sleeve T-shirt, as if trying to eke every microtone from the flat-sounding piano. It's strange to play with such emotion in a piano store, on just a prospective piano, although some do. It feels wasteful to me. Some things are private.

When she stopped, I sidled up, bench-side. She was breathless, as if she had been exercising. I quickly extracted her name – Dagny – and offered mine. "I think you found your piano," I said and stroked the lid like it was her dog.

"Not really," she said. She then zigzagged from trade-in to trade-in on the cheap side of the store, perhaps just to rid herself of me. She dismissed a Petrov in need of regulation, and then sat at a Young and Chang, which she murmured sounded too bright. She tried an older Yamaha with a buzzing soundboard, and then an untunable Baldwin. I pretended to be busy, far away enough so she could play, but close enough so my boss wouldn't yell at me for ignoring the only customer in the store.

Finally, she stopped playing and looked up. I asked her, "What exactly are you looking for, Dagny?" My boss recently took a sales seminar and asked us to use the customer's name in every sentence.

"I want a piano that recaptures wasted time," Dagny said.

I paused, but she was actually serious, staring up at me from the bench. "If I had that, I wouldn't sell it. Dagny, is there a special occasion?"

"I'm getting married, *Leron*." I couldn't tell if she was mocking me. My boss frowned and opened a trade magazine. Dagny said, "Wedding's in three months; I just moved into his house. You married?"

"There's a wife," I said.

"Does she play the piano?"

"She sings. I play."

"Together?"

I nose-laughed politely.

"Anyway. These aren't what I'm looking for. I mean, they're good," Dagny added. "Good enough quality."

Most people don't know that the quality of a given piano depends not on the brand, but on the happiness of the people building it. Good manufacturers treat their piano-makers like master craftsmen. They appreciate them, give good wages and benefits. Bad manufacturers take their employees' gifts for granted, and you can hear it in the piano. The unhappiness breaks it, makes it age out before its time. Often it's everyday things that wear a piano down. The price of rent near the factory can make the difference between a superior piano and a shoddy one. Or even bad weather. A piano built in spring is better than a piano built in winter. Right now, in this endless winter, terrible pianos were being built all over the world.

I was about to begin pitching when Dagny said, "Whatever I buy has to be kind of cheap because I don't have much money. But I want something better than just cheap."

"How long have you been playing?"

"It's been sporadic. Complicated." Her frown made the skin between her eyebrows pucker into a tiny pillow. Then she told me, "I used to be one of those prodigy kids."

"Musical prodigy?"

"I played Prokofiev's "Piano Sonata #2" when I was nine, in tempo. I wrote my first sonata a year later. I was just playing part of it."

She was probably lying. She had been playing a beautiful piece, too mature in its sadness to have come from the head of a ten-year-old. Dagny's fingers trickled down the keys. "My father didn't want me to become a musician. 'It's too lonely a life,' he told me. He probably thought he was being kind. He sold our piano to our landlady, and it kept us from getting evicted. I could hear her playing my piano whenever I passed her house."

"That's terrible."

"Sometimes I secretly played in churches and schools, but I couldn't afford lessons. At one point, I stopped playing altogether. I was a coward."

"No, no," I said.

"Yeah. I was." Her eyes were greenish blue in the overhead light, marred with rust near the centers. "I tried to avoid music after that. But you know, you can't – it's everywhere." She raked her teeth over her lips, upper and lower.

"But now you want to buy a piano?" I tried not to emphasize the word "buy."

"Yeah. I can have one now. First time in my life! I'm in a real house, not some dive studio apartment with mold and gas leaks. I have a fiancé and a job teaching the internet to senior citizens. And all this empty floor space." Dagny laughed again, bright. "I just don't have much money for a piano; at least, not the kind of piano I want."

"It's always a compromise between price and quality," I began, but she interrupted again.

"Yeah, but what I want is the kind of piano for the player I would have been by now, if I had been practicing all those years. All that wasted time. The piano I would deserve if I had worked harder. I know I'm dreaming. But it's good to dream, if the dream is good." She softly played another melody I didn't recognize in Dorian mode, fragmented and strange.

It was February, and snowing, and almost five o'clock. My boss flipped a page in his magazine. Nobody else was buying a piano today.

"Come with me," I said, and led her through the employee entrance to the back bay.

The warehouse was an echoey contrast to the cultivated posh of the showroom's low light, radiant heat, and lemon oil diffusers. Here, a skin of dust covered everything. The cement floor chilled the room by ten degrees. Strong fluorescent lights washed everything in cyan, and the drywall had never been painted. "This is where you take your big spenders?" she asked, but I didn't answer. We passed the used Kimballs my boss insisted on buying, the scratched Yamahas awaiting finish work, the used Schimmels with drooping keys, all waiting for our beleaguered twice-weekly repair guy with gout and a sweating condition.

Then we came to the six-foot Steinway grand. "Brilliantly maintained," I said. "Until recently."

Dagny crossed her arms and raised one fist to her lips. Then she said, "I guess this is a good time to ask about the previous owners."

"I Hate You" had been patiently and repeatedly gouged into every surface of the piano with some kind of specific tool, the kind you'd have to buy specially. Maybe from a woodworker. The gouges were a quarter of an inch thick, in places almost a centimeter. The phrase was repeated over eighty times, over every available space on the mahogany. You could see the wood grain through the layers.

"On a *Steinway*," Dagny said.

"A six-foot-two-inch Model A grand. This is a seventy thousand-dollar piano, even ten years old. I played it. It's magnificent."

The non-gouged wood was satin – old-style lacquer and a honed, cherryed brown, polished to a luster. The legs were curved, milled and sanded to silk. The case cradled an immaculate soundboard constructed from the straightest of trees, designed to absorb and reflect all the human experience has to offer.

"What the hell happened?" The overhead light tinted Dagny's skin blue, her mouth purple.

"The piano owner . . . his wife did this. Luckily, she left all the mechanics intact. Not a speck of rust, not a hairline crack anywhere. She could have smashed the soundboard, or cut the strings, or poured water into it. She could have done anything."

"Yeah," Dagny said slowly. "She was real considerate."

I cleared warehouse dust from my throat and buried my hands in my pockets. "The previous owner saved up his entire life for this piano – bought it for himself on his fortieth birthday right here in this store, slightly used. He played it three hours every day. He polished the case with paste wax and a microfiber cloth. He maintained and tuned it monthly himself. There are no hidden problems here. He didn't do anything wrong."

"He must have done *something* wrong."

"What do you mean?"

Dagny paused for an uncomfortable moment and traced a gouged "hate" with the tip of her finger. "Or maybe it's what he didn't do. Ignored her. Maybe he liked this poor piano more than his wife." She played a few notes, sustaining the middle C with her middle finger.

"Could you blame him?" I asked. "This is a *Steinway* grand."

Dagny frowned at me. Her note seemed to swell before lightening and dissipating. It's a special quality of this particular piano, defying acoustic science. Nobody even knows for sure if sound waves die, or maybe they just get smaller and smaller forever as they fling themselves from surface to surface. It's possible that the first human note still haunts us now – a vibration of love, perhaps, or rage, too small to hear.

Dagny released the key abruptly. "So the owner has to give it up? Or wants to?"

"With his divorce and all, he has to move into a studio apartment. We took the piano on consignment, but can't display it on the floor, of course."

"It might ruin the piano-buying mood," Dagny said.

"Anyone who buys this piano would likely be stuck with the, the cosmetics, to some degree. It's too difficult a fix. For a replacement case, you'd have to ship the entire piano to a *Steinway* factory."

"Could you replace it with a case here?"

"Not really. They call those kinds of pianos 'Stein-Was,' or 'Frankensteinways.' It would never sound like *this* again. And it would still cost a fortune." I pretended to think about it. "I can let it go for four thousand dollars. Five percent of its worth. You could set up a three-year payment plan, a hundred and change each month."

Dagny's hands rippled over the scarred surface. "A person could fill the words in with wood glue and . . . paint it."

"You can't paint a *Steinway*," I said gently. And any other finish work would likely just highlight the ruptures in the grain, color, luster. There was nothing you could do to this piano without humiliating it further.

Dagny sat down at the bench anyway, pulled by the gravity of the instrument. In the zigzag part of her dark hair, one gray wire shone amid thousands of strands of burnished brown. She lifted the fallboard and began to play.

The warehouse instantly filled with big chords from a big, buttery instrument that forgives weaknesses rather than exposes them, that searches for intentions rather than actions, that soothes the ear, no matter how grave the technical error. The piano made her better than she was, maybe even better than she could have been if, if, if. She played that piano.

This is what happens when you press a piano key: each individual key has fifty-six unique parts. The key acts like a seesaw, engaging all those parts in eight consecutive mechanical actions so smooth they seem instantaneous. Through the microchip, the internet, and the major inventions of the era, this design has not changed since 1880. Because important things demand loyalty. Eight actions for every note, twelve thousand parts in a piano, thousands of notes in a piano piece. And we're not even counting the individual sound waves, each heard by an ear, or more than one, triggering the multitude of physical, electric, and neurological responses that create what we understand as sound, music, beauty, art.

So if you look at it this way, "She played that piano" is not a sentence, but a story of an infinite number of relationships forming, colliding, and dissolving in real time, before the last harmonics die and fade from the walls.

"Don't cry," Dagny said.

"No," I said. "I'm, I'm not –"

"She'll come back."

"You're making a –"

"And if she doesn't, fuck her. Really. I mean, look at this piano."

I removed my wire rimmed glasses and wiped my eyes. Dagny touched my arm and I jumped, half-blind. She gazed at me, at my hair that always shows the comb's toothmarks no matter how recent the shampoo, my faded polo shirt tucked into my shiny khakis. Dagny said, "I'll take it. I'll buy the piano. I'll practice a lot. I promise."

"Sure. That's fine."

"You're a good person," she said. "It's not over for you."

I played piano at my own wedding, accompanying my wife as she walked down the narrow aisle. She had asked me to hire a musician instead, but I was relieved to use my fidgety hands, to stare at the music instead of at her, a white blur in my periphery. It was the only time I was ever sure of myself. Those were the notes before me. That was the score. Here were the directions to guide me through time.

Now what's left at home is an empty carpet, scarred forever by the heavy feet of my piano, and the dirty, matted place to the right where my wife stood to shout in my ear, "Notice me, you selfish prick!" while I hunched my shoulders and banged hard at Rachmaninoff, but I didn't want her to leave me, just to leave me be, or rather to go back to the way she was in those early years when she used to stand in that very spot to sing as I played with abandon, back when her voice was in harmony with my fingers, back when she was the second-best place in the world to lay my hands.

Saturday, my piano will arrive at this woman's house. Our moving guys will unpack it from its bubble wrap, attach the legs, and heave it into place like the object it is, noticing the scarification but not paid to care. They'll rub it down before leaving, the gouged splinters catching on their rags, the piano's inner flesh flashing hate, hate, hate. Dagny's fiancée will look at the seven-hundred pound wreckage in his suddenly crowded home and think, *What am I getting myself into?* He'll think, *Wood putty*. He'll think, *Ruined*, just as she's thinking, *Music*.

Kirstin Allio

## TWELFTH NIGHT

The after-work crowd is clannish, naked dress shirts, bagpip Liver heat in hearts and vessels, jackets passed back to the coatroom, tossed ties, a few featherweight v-neck sweaters. They all know the same jokes, and they all shake the bar peanuts like dice in lo before funneling them down their gullets.

Bartender! they call him. A G and T Sapphire!

Two Absolut martoonies!

He can take a drink order in each ear. Gin in one hand, the other – he's ambidextrous.

Do you have any other bar tricks, Matthew Evans?

Who doesn't have a duality inside him? Not to mention a multitude.

Although in his headshots, he's unassuming. Easy on the eye, he's under six feet, just under forty. A casting agent once told him he was the only male in the Western hemisphere who didn't suffer from height inflation. Who knows how it worked in Asia?

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