

The Boy with the Magic Fingers

“Stop!” he screams. “Stop right now! How dare you come and play to me in this fashion!”

I stop, clapping my hands together in my lap to prevent myself from gripping the sides of the piano, and stare at the floor, at the space under the pedals where the carpet is worn smooth.

He starts speaking again, spitting the words, a rain of icicles down on my head. “I cannot believe that after all the hours I have sacrificed to teach you, you have the audacity to come and play like this to me. Like a statue, like a piece of wood.”

“I am sorry,” I say, though I can hardly force the words past the bones of fear in my throat. “I was trying to do it as you showed me.” And I was. I had played the music exactly as he had shown me, with the right weight and length on every note, the right amount of breath for every rest. I had lifted my wrists, relaxed them, just as he had always insisted.

There is another silence, but I know he is still staring at me, from thin slices of glittering eye, flabby lips pressed together as he searches for the cruellest words.

And I can do nothing but wait, gazing at the carpet.

I think of the day I first met him: remember how excited I had been, to come into the City on the train with just my parents and my teacher. I remember how my younger brothers and sisters, along with the rest of the village, had cheered as we boarded the train and run alongside, waving and calling as it pulled out of the station.

I remember how we sped away from them, till the roofs of the station were out of sight, till the church spire and the clock of the town hall, the sentinels of my childhood, had disappeared.

Then my father sat back in his seat and smiled at me. “Well this is fun, isn’t it?” he said, but I could see the sheen of sweat on his forehead and where his skin bulged, red like a cooked prawn, over his shirt collar. My piano teacher sat next to him, with his hands between his knees, humming to himself in a thin nasal tone, his legs jiggling up and down. My mother, in her best blue dress, was twisting her handkerchief round and round in her hands, checking her bag every few minutes, smoothing her hair.

I was the only one who was not nervous. After all, why should I be? I was only going to play the piano for someone - and playing the piano was the thing I loved doing most in the world!

And for now, it was adventure enough just to be in the train, watching the sweep and swoop of the wires past the window, the rush of strange fields and towns and mountains, feeling the thrumming of the engine through my bones.

But even I started to feel the sweat on my palms, as the banks beside the track grew taller and dirtier and greyer, only the occasional twisted, stunted bush, struggling out of the ground. I thought that we must be about to arrive in the city, but we continued to speed along, passing more buildings, more and more of them, more than I had ever dreamed could exist in the whole world. Big blocky buildings, grey with soot, buildings that towered into the sky, or stretched for the length of twenty houses, spreading out on and on and on along the side of the tracks.

But, at last, the train slowed and my father whispered to us all that we were arriving in the main station, in the centre of the city. And then, with a screech and hiss of brakes, the machine had drawn to a halt and we got to our feet, none of us talking, all of us looking and looking and looking. We descended a few steps onto a vast platform that was only one of many, all with heavy, heaving trains, all spilling out or sucking in crowds of people. We had to push and pull and weave our way through all those people, up the highest flight of stairs I had ever seen, to a huge grey concourse full of even more rushing people and booming announcements and a clock that hung in judgement

above us. Then down more steps and at last we were outside in the real city - a place of noise and smells and grim purpose.

I couldn't believe the adults would ever be able to find their way through the crowds of strangers, let alone through the myriad grey streets with their churning, grunting traffic. But they did, though it was a miracle they didn't lose me on the way; for it was almost too much for me to keep on walking when my eyes were stretched to bursting point at the sight of all the grand, high buildings, unable to believe that there were so many faces in the whole world; my nose sucking in strange smells of food I had never tasted, petrol fumes, perfumes and odours I had never imagined. I remember looking up at the sky with its haze of grey cloud and wondering whether it was really the same sky that hung above the red tiled roofs of my village.

I didn't even think about the coming audition until we reached the steps of the Academy and then I looked up at the curlicues and gargoyles carved into the great stone facade, at the tall windows lined up like so many eyes looking down at me with glassy indifference. And my heart quailed for the first time. But not enough. Not nearly as much as it should have done.

And we walked up those steps and through the mouth of the Academy together.

A drooping young man emerged from behind a desk in the entry way and, with a thin smile, he ushered us up several flights of echoing stairs to a large room, bigger than the ground floor of our house at home and full of the scent of music, where he told us to wait for the professor. There was a piano, a grand piano, crouched in the centre of the room, shiny and black and more beautiful than anything I had ever seen before. It had a complete set of keys, with none of the gaps and decay that I was used to, but I was too nervous to touch it. We all sat down, instead, on the straight backed chairs against the walls of the room and gazed at the high ceilings with their moulded plaster cornices, the thick carpet that covered the whole floor, the vast windows with their sparkling clean glass.

And then we heard footsteps in the corridor outside. My mother straightened my father's tie again and looked over at me with a smile so bright I felt as though I was going to the guillotine.

The door swung open and a man walked through and we all stood to attention. A big man, dressed in a linen suit with a silk scarf and waistcoat and I was suddenly embarrassed by my mother's dress, at my father's tight collar and my piano teacher's worn brown suit. Even my own suit, hired new at considerable expense, now seemed too short in the leg, the material too thin and cheap.

But when the man moved closer, came to stand right in front of me, looking down with hooded eyes from an immobile face, I could smell the stench of alcohol and sweat underneath the strong perfume.

He stood for a while before speaking, then: "So you are the boy with the magic fingers," he said.

I wasn't sure whether it was a question or a comment, or an accusation, but I nodded, gulping, and felt the heat surge in my cheeks.

"Well, play for me then," he said, waving at the piano, before turning and walking over to the window. There he stood, his hands clasped behind his back, his back towards the room. I looked over at my mother and she nodded and gave me the guillotine smile again, so I went and sat at the piano.

But as soon as I ran my hands over the keys, the excitement shivered down my back. All the keys worked, they were in tune with each other and they sang when I pressed them so that I felt as though I was in heaven.

I played and played in that room, glorying in this wonderful instrument, bringing out all the colours and shapes of the phrases, adding layers of wondrous texture, and the sun came out while I played, sparkling through the tall windows and lighting up the dancing dust in the corners.

When at last I finished, I placed my hands in my lap and waited, but there was no response. I glanced sideways at my parents and then at my piano teacher but they were all looking at the great man, their faces taut, awaiting the verdict.

For a full three or four minutes there was silence and the sun faded behind a cloud again and it was only then that, very slowly, he turned to face us. He crossed the room and looked down at me from under those hooded eyes and again I smelled the alcohol and sweat breathing from his skin.

He still didn't speak, but continued to look down at me, his face impassive, for another minute or so.

Then he turned to my piano teacher. "He has a lot to learn."

My teacher inclined his head. "Yes, yes, I know that, but he is very young, only ten years old and very willing – a good student."

The professor grunted and was quiet for another further, agonising, minute. Then: "I will take him if he promises to work very hard," and now he turned and looked right at me and I saw, for the first time, the full icy depths of his eyes. What could I do but nod? And so I nodded and he turned and walked out of the room.

"Oh darling, that is wonderful!" my mother said and came over to hug me, but I could feel her arms trembling.

I don't really remember much else about that day. I remember my father asking if I was sure, did I really want to stay here in the city without them? And I remember looking at the pride in their eyes and thinking of what it had cost them to bring me here, the efforts of the whole village in this last month - the church fete and the concerts in the hall - all to raise money for *me*, their star. And I remember knowing that there was no other way to answer but to lie. But I don't remember how or when they left, or for how many months afterwards I cried myself to sleep every night.

I do remember writing to them and lying again. Telling them how much I loved my lessons, how much I still enjoyed playing the piano. I didn't tell them about the bruises on my cheeks and hands, of the terror I felt if I played a wrong note, or a wrong rhythm. I didn't tell them about the silences, those terrible silences. Silences which reduce me to a lump of servile jelly, silences that leave me feeling raw and wincing.

Silences where I can do nothing but wait, as I do now.

At last he speaks and I think he must have guessed, somehow, the direction of my thoughts. "I wonder what your parents would think now," he says. "I wonder what all those peasants back in that squalid little village you come from, would think if they could hear you now? Do you remember what they used to call you? The Boy with the Magic Fingers! And, peasants that they were, they seemed to believe it! They used to say that you could charm the very birds from the sky with your playing! Do you think they would be proud of you if they heard you now? Do you think they would be proud to hear such spiritless, dull playing?"

And, with the memory of my audition fresh in my mind, the memory of the joy I had felt as I played in the sunlit room, I take a deep gulp of air and grip the piano again. "Sir, please, you have taught me for so long – taught me so much - that I think I know enough – I should be able to interpret a piece on my own. And then, maybe, if it is my own interpretation, I will be able to play with more expression."

There is silence again, but this time it is different. This time I know I have shocked him into speechlessness. For a moment I feel a surge of triumph until I look up and see his eyes, for once wide and staring with utter hatred at me.

“Play then!” he screams the words across the room. “Come on now, let me hear the boy who plays like an angel. The boy with magic in his fingers, the boy who is so much better than the rest of us, the boy who thinks that he knows so much more than his poor old professor who has thirty years experience performing in the best music houses of the world. Play for me then – please let me hear all this expression, these wonderful powers of interpretation you think you have.”

I bow my head, in habit, as the words sear across the room. With the words come the familiar smells of alcohol and sweat, but then I look up and am astonished by what I see. For I see a man stamping his foot in rage like a young child, a man with spittle on his chin, and yes, he is nothing more than a poor old professor who had his thirty years experience playing in the best music houses of the world, but has not played in any of them since I have known him.

But, because I have always obeyed him, always done exactly what he asked, whenever he asked it - to the best of my ability - I start to play.

I do not play like the boy who tries so hard to place every note correctly. I do not play like the boy who loved the piano so much he put all his joy into his sunlit playing.

I do as he asked. I put all my own expression into the music – all my feelings for this man who has intimidated me all these years, this man who has sucked my childhood from me and trampled on it. I fill the music with my disgust for his heavy, sarcastic eyelids, for his flaccid, flabby lips.

For I hate him. I hate his long hands, with their too smooth skin, the tobacco stains on the tips of the fingers, the heavy rings that must be taken off and piled on top of the piano whenever he plays – the heavy rings that have so often cut open my scalp when I have displeased him. I have always hated him but not till this moment, as I pound the chords out of the piano, have I known the full savagery of my hatred.

He is turning to look at me now, he is saying something, but I continue to play because I am enjoying playing the piano, enjoying it for the first time since I was a little boy. *He* thought that this passage should be played with full grandeur, but it is not grandeur that I use to colour my chords. These chords are filled with fury – a fury that flows from the piano, through my fingers and up my arms and into my heart where it manifests as pure joy. And with that joy comes a freedom I have not known since I was a child; freedom to put every last drop of my feelings, my expression, into the music. I see him, from the corner of my eye, coming, staggering towards me, arms out in front of him, commanding me to stop, *now!* But I play on, regardless. I will not let him stop me, I will not let him take this away from me.

I continue to play my wild song of revenge, on and on and on, my fingers running hard on the keys, churning out chords of bitterness and I see him drop to the ground, I see him writhe, gasping and choking, I see him, at last, lie still.

And only then do I stop playing.

The Boy with the Magic Fingers, they called me and he taunted me for it, he laughed at me. He never believed in me.