

The First Piano Lesson

She began feeling anxious after recess. Just there, in the back of her mind, or was it the bottom of her stomach, she could feel a little niggle, a little churning, just enough to distract her from the sums she was doing. She wondered if she was going to dread every Tuesday at this time, or just today, the first day of piano lessons.

The bell rang and she hurried out the nearest side entrance, leaving behind her giggly play mates as they spilled into the school yard, their laughter following her across the wet September grass.

This was the beginning of her second year of piano lessons, classical piano lessons, in the Toronto Conservatory of Music program. She cast her mind back to the last days of school, when lessons stopped for the summer, and tried to remember what happened back then, what former words or deeds could trigger this reflexive response now.

Was her stomach twitching like this before her final piano exam, or in anticipation of the year-end recital? She couldn't remember getting up to play in front of the other students and their parents in the teacher's living room. Did she play something from memory and her fingers freeze? Did she play a wrong note? Not the smudged slip of a single key only your teacher hears, but the clashing of chords, the kind that startles even the player and causes your younger brother to shriek gleefully from another room.

No, it wasn't the exam, and it couldn't be the recital; somehow, she knew the recital was more about the teacher's abilities than the students' talent. They performed for the two rows of seated parents, who smiled encouragingly as each child approached the bench, and nodded politely to one another as they clapped their hands between sips of punch from frosted teacups.

Having now crossed the school yard, Stacey slipped through the square cutout in the chain linked fence. She walked across the road to the residential side of the street, and continued down the sidewalk with the rounded edges. This, she discovered when riding her two wheel bicycle, the smooth-edged sidewalk, was one of the most overlooked benefits of living in a new neighborhood. If you steered your front tire at just the right angle, you could gently coast from the sidewalk to the road and back again, without having to dismount at every intersection.

She turned down her own street. Maybe she just wasn't ready to begin lessons again -- all the practicing before supper, the theory to learn and scales to memorize, the new pieces to fumble through as she tried to read the notes fast enough to keep both hands occupied. The left hand always seemed to be half a second behind the right.

She looked down at her hands and hurriedly picked away the dirt from underneath her uneven fingernails. Her stomach lurched again and, for a second, the incoming memory

caught her breath and held her step. She had forgotten about her fingernails. She moved on, exhaling deeply as she remembered that day her piano teacher had reached on top of the piano for nail clippers -- real casual-like, as if everyone keeps their nail clippers on top of the piano -- and had trimmed her nails, like you would a baby's, before she would continue the lesson.

Stacey never noticed the click, click, clicky-click of her nails on the keys -- or if she did, she thought it added something more up tempo to the classics-- made the staccato more staccato. Sometimes she thought of her nails as another instrument accompanying her on the piano. But then she would feel Mrs. Picard's body stiffen on the stool beside her, as though she'd scraped her nails across the blackboard, not the keyboard. She never told her mother about the free manicure, but made sure they were never that long again.

She held out her hands for one final inspection, spreading her fingers as if to reach a full octave. Short enough, she concluded, and left her right index finger extended to press her teacher's doorbell. Her piano teacher lived just down the street in one of the larger two-storey houses on the block. The roof was shaped like a lopsided capital A with the parent's bedroom window nested in the tip of the A. The house had several half levels connected by several half staircases, not like the simple floor plan of houses in the old neighborhood with crumbling sidewalks.

Her piano teacher lived with her husband and two small children. Mother said they were a musical family. Mr. Picard produced music. He put instruments and notes together to make songs. They spoke French, but never to her, to her knowledge, or to each other, to her knowledge, when she was present. Sometimes in the summer, when Stacey was playing outside with the kids on the block, and the Picard's front screen door was open, she could hear her piano teacher singing. It wasn't anything like the happy songs on the radio you danced to. Mother said she was singing the opera, probably in French, and no, she wasn't yelling, she was throwing her voice out the window, which was hard to do, she discovered, without being scolded by your Mother for unprovoked yelling.

The homes on this street were all built the summer before last summer and most of the trees in front of the houses were no more than tall twigs or squat Christmas trees. Last summer, we watched Father plant my little sister's blue spruce in the front yard. She brought it home from kindergarten in a box the size of a sand pail. Last winter, when it was black as midnight before supper, and the teacher's living room curtains were open, you could see Mrs. Picard, behind the shivering branches of the silver birch tree, floating back and forth across the gold shag carpet. Sometimes she'd pause, her arm reaching out in front of her face, clutching the air. It was spooky without the sound of her voice.

Now the screen door opened and she looked up into the tanned face of her piano teacher, whose red lips broke into a wide, white smile. It took her a moment, but she figured out what was different. Instead of the long red hair swept back by a side clasp, exposing one hooped earring, her hair was hanging down in golden waves. A butterfly brooch held the scarf draped casually over the shoulders of her red sweater. She had forgotten how nice her teacher smelled.

“Stacey, my dear, do come in, come, come, downstairs, this way. You remember where the piano is, don’t you? Did you have a fun summer? Are you glad to see your friends again?”

Stacey nodded three times in answer to each question as she followed her teacher’s black flowing skirt down the back set of half stairs to a little library alcove where a low, shiny black vertical Baldwin sat beneath the window. The grand Steinway occupied the middle of the living room and was only used by the musical family and Mrs. Picard’s students at recitals.

But the piano was no longer under the window. It was on the opposite wall, facing the half stairway, meaning the bookshelves and sofa were on her right instead of her left when she sat down. A stand with pages of sheet music was under the window and a ruby-lined violin case lay open on the sofa. Mozart’s pale face was still attentive on top of the piano, his unblinking eyes staring over her head and out the window.

She slid up onto the piano bench while Mrs. Picard pulled over her stool and reached for a brand new blue scribbler next to the metronome. Oh yes. The theory notebook. She crossed her ankles and began swinging her legs underneath the bench. You’d think she’d been away from here for a year not two months. Each lesson would start with a review of the previous week’s theory, and depending on how well she did, a coloured star would be pasted onto the lesson page of her notebook. The stars came in different colours and sizes although she couldn’t recall the reward system. She was running her index fingers lightly across the gleaming keys when suddenly it was showering silver and blue, gold and red stars.

“Goodness me,” exclaimed her teacher; obviously forgetting she put the reward system on top of the scribbler. Or maybe she disturbed them when reaching for the clippers.

Instinctively, Stacey reached out and caught a large silver star in the palm of her hand. She closed her hand, palm up, over the star and saw her nails again, their uneven length, the peeling pink nail polish tips pointed accusingly towards her. Were they too long? How short were they supposed to be?

She let her hand drop, close fisted, into her lap, unwilling to draw attention to her hands by returning the star. Mrs. Picard pulled Stacey’s wrist towards her and turned her hand over.

“Why Stacey, I see you’ve cut your nails. You remembered,” she smiled, in her sing-along voice. “Coming prepared for a lesson is almost as important as the lesson itself,” she added, opening Stacey’s cupped hand. Her fingers were long and slender, but her nails were short and red. She picked up the star from her palm and pressed it down on the cover of the blue lined scribbler, above her name. “I think you’ve earned the first little star today.”

Having put all the remaining stars back on the piano cover, she took her yellow HP pencil from the piano ledge, creased open the scribbler spine, and wrote the date in her familiar large looped letters. The first lesson had begun.

Half hour later Stacey opened the front screen door of her own house. She placed the blue scribbler with the silver star on the cover on the bottom step going up and kicked off her shoes.

Her mother called from the kitchen above, "How was the lesson?"

"Okay." She took off her sweater and hung it over the other jackets on the railing going down the stairs.

"What did you do?"

"I caught a falling star." As she said it out loud, she knew that her mother would be now picturing a star streaking across the night sky.

"You what?"

And as she started to repeat herself, two half thoughts collided. She wasn't prepared for her piano lesson -- hadn't cut her nails, but she got a star for appearing to be so. Now she was telling her mother something that actually happened, and it didn't appear to be so.

In today's piano lesson she learned that the black keys were called accidentals because when played instead of the white key, they altered the musical note slightly. That's why you say something is off key when it isn't what it seems to be, or when it seems to be what it isn't. Or something like that.

Her mind was connecting the new pieces of information like dominos falling. Click, clack, clickety-clack. Now a picture was forming in her mind of little people living on a giant keyboard, hopscotching through life; some experiences were plain everyday white, like school, while others, like summer camp and chocolate chip ice cream, were the black high notes.

Her mother appeared at the top of the stairs, wiping her hands on the apron tied around her housedress.

"How was your first lesson?" She tried again.

Stacey looked up brightly, knowingly. "It was pretty sharp actually."